

Seeing myself in the eyes of a North Korean

## **As a child born in South Korea, I was taught that every North Korean is evil. As an adult, I found myself face to face with one.**

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Fence of the military demarcation line, South Korea (Getty images).

Like any kid, I was fearful as a child. I was afraid of the dark, spiders, and the monsters I was convinced were under the bed waiting to find me. As I got older, some of my childhood fears disappeared. But one of them didn't.

I was born in South Korea and immigrated to Canada as a young child. Attending Korean school and church, I was taught that North Koreans are evil and inhumane and should not be regarded as human beings. South Koreans called them "bal-gang-i," which means "commies." I learned by osmosis to fear North Korea and anyone

from North Korea.

Fast forward to 2014. In the beginning of that year, I began working with the Rev. Jesse Jackson for the release of Kenneth Bae, a Korean American who was being held prisoner in North Korea. We worked with Bae's family and government officials to try to secure his release. As our work progressed, we were able to secure a meeting with Jang Il Hun, ambassador of the Permanent Mission of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea to the United Nations.

After my initial excitement about the meeting, fear came upon me. It wasn't a small childhood fear of spiders or monsters under my bed. It was the mind-numbing fear of North Koreans that had been instilled in me as a child and stayed with me into adulthood.

For weeks before our meeting with Ambassador Jang in New York, I had tremendous debilitating fear. It was an irrational fear, based on the enduring perception that North Koreans are evil people and they will "come to get me," as I was told as a young child. A part of me worried that the North Koreans now had my phone number and could easily find my home address. They would come in the middle of the night and take me away. It was an unfounded fear, but it kept me awake at night in the weeks leading up to the meeting.

The day of the meeting came, and I was shaking. I thought that the meeting would result in North Koreans putting me on their list and that my family would be in danger. I was hyperventilating and fearing the worst as our car drove up to the building. With great trepidation, I entered the room where Ambassador Jang was standing.

Then our eyes met. In that moment, all of the imagined terrors that had been circulating in my head subsided. As I looked at him, I recognized that whether we are enemies, neighbors, or friends, we are all created in the image of God. And this particular image of God who stood before me looked intimately familiar. He spoke the same language as me, and we shared the same culture and history. We were both Korean. Instantly, all my anxieties cleared and I sharpened my attention on what the ambassador had to say.

What ensued after that initial moment was something I could never have imagined through the haze of my fears: we had a meaningful discussion. No longer anchored by the dark weight of our preconceptions of each other and the subject at hand, we

were able to be affable and sincere. We talked about North Korea, its people, and Kenenth Bae. We exchanged good feelings, proposed changes, and even laughed together. Throughout the meeting, I kept asking myself: Why was I afraid?

North Americans are now in the same situation as I was before my meeting with Ambassador Jang. As Kim Jong Un reaches out to President Trump to plan a summit and work toward a peace process, it's easy to be skeptical of Kim's intentions. We have been told how evil North Korea is, and we believe that we should not cave to its demands. We are afraid. Our fear of [the other](#) immobilizes us, so that we begin to demonize those we fear. A part of us may think that it would be easier if North Korea were wiped off the face of the earth.

Our history tells us that these kinds of fears can lead to atrocities. During World War II, the United States rounded up Japanese Americans and put them in internment camps. We were at war not only with Japan, but also with Germany and Italy. Yet we interned only Japanese Americans. Because Asian Americans were visibly different from the white dominant society, it was easy to view them as the other, the enemy.

Trump's "Muslim ban" also has its roots in U.S. history. In 1882, Congress adopted the Chinese Exclusion Act, which prevented the entry of any more Chinese immigrants. Those who were already here were not allowed to vote, and they had to carry identification cards to avoid deportation. Today it's Muslims, refugees, and migrants we fear the most—those who are visibly different from us. And of course, North Koreans.

As the world watches to see what the next moves will be between Kim and Trump, Koreans are waiting in hope that peace will come to the peninsula. On July 27, 1953, the Korean Armistice Agreement was signed to cease fire between the military forces, but it was not a peace treaty. The Korean War has never officially ended.

Today more than 10 million families remain separated by the Demilitarized Zone at the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel in Korea. Many family members fled to the South, expecting to return back North in a few months. That never happened. Members of families still separated long to see each other and be united, particularly those in the older generations who hope unification might happen in their lifetime. Some members of the younger generation who want unification are at the same time worried about what will happen to the Korean economy, which is currently strong in the South. Even with these worries, Koreans on the peninsula and in the diaspora want to

become one nation again. We are one people, one culture, and one nation. We want peace.

But peace won't come if we remain afraid. It's hard to overcome the kind of prejudice and cultural bigotry that perpetuates a vicious cycle of fear and hatred across generations. I experienced how hard it can be as I prepared to meet with Ambassador Jang. But when I saw myself in him, I was able to see both of us as reflections of God's love for the world. This moment was the beginning of a fruitful conversation. Embracing our neighbors is not a voluntary act but something that God requires of us. Why are we afraid?