

**Myths of the Hermit Kingdom:
A Sojourn of Truth to North Korea
by Eric Sirotkin**

It seemed like a dream. I found myself, along a crystal clear river in the serene mountains of North Korea surrounded by groups of picnicking Koreans from the “axis of evil.” People were relaxed and laughter filled the air. After learning that a group of Americans was there, a huge plate of clams was sent over from a group upstream to welcome us. We exchanged hopes for peace and relayed greetings, through our interpreter, from the millions of peace-loving Americans.

As we walked down the trail another group we met wanted to take our photos with them and asked us to sing them a song. A disharmonious, but well-intentioned “We Shall Overcome” ensued, as the Koreans clapped and smiled. When we finished they surrounded us, joyfully filling our pockets with apples, our eyes filling with tears, as our hearts were touched by their expression of acceptance and love.

It was no dream. I had just spent a week north of the infamous Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) with a small delegation of lawyers opening dialogue, building bridges for peace and practicing a path of understanding, in the spirit of *To Kill a Mockingbird's* Atticus Finch, that says you can't “really understand a person until you consider something from his point of view...til' you climb inside his skin and walk around in it.”

Amidst all the rhetoric of governments, we often forget our universality – that by nature human beings are loving and sharing. I assumed North Korea would challenge my heart, but in embarking on this journey of peace to an alleged dangerous and starving nation, I was not prepared, to have *our* pockets stuffed with food, our hearts filled with kindness and our pre-notions of this land utterly shattered.

For 1300 years or more the Korean peninsula was one nation – one people. Although having suffered through the humiliation and tragedy of numerous violent invasions and occupations, it was not until the mid 20th century that a foreign power, the United States, unilaterally divided their country. This division exemplifies an American foreign policy still trapped

in the failed practices of the 20th century that favors walls over bridges, threats over dialogue and conflict over peace.

Our National Lawyers Guild delegation was invited to North Korea by Pyongyang lawyers in order to climb in and look through the eyes of one's alleged enemy. Having worked with the South African Truth & Reconciliation Commission, participated in mediations and practiced therapeutic legal approaches, I have seen such approaches greatly reduce conflict. When we actively listen and understand the feelings and experience of the "other side," we deepen our connection and put into practice the essence of human relations – compassion.

I set off to Pyongyang with an open mind, intent on lifting the "axis of evil" cloud, but having been inundated with the media's stories of oppression, starvation and Stalinism, I was uncertain about what to expect. Would I be safe? What if I was imprisoned or unable to get home? Would we be able to break through the resentment toward us as Americans? These fears proved as exaggerated and unfounded as the story we are being fed by the media and the U.S. Government about the "hermit kingdom."

We traveled hundreds of kilometers across the country, touring sites of national pride and beauty, the infamous Demilitarized Zone, and places of sad struggle, death and lingering despair. We talked with as many people as possible about peace and the opportunity to forge a new way of relating in the 21st Century. Through meetings with lawyers, government officials, military officers, tourists, and everyday North Koreans painting or picnicking in parks, our eyes were opened to the power of people reaching out to people.

But more importantly we awoke to the deception that is being perpetrated by the United States and the Western press: that North Korea is an "evil empire" starving its own people, determined to isolate itself, the ultimate "hermit kingdom," bent on perpetrating war and violence in the region. Our experiences in North Korea, known as the Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea (DPRK), shattered these myths.

• MYTH #1 - North Korea is isolated from the rest of the world.

Many countries, including the European Union, Italy, Canada, Britain, Australia, New Zealand, Sweden and others have formal diplomatic relations with the DPRK. On our flight over we

met a Canadian Saskatchewan farm consultant, a Swede who helps Korean farmers with cows, Congolese diplomats, British journalists, a Russian establishing art exchanges with the DPRK, a teacher from Liverpool and, heard multiple languages and accents from many other countries throughout the short plane ride from Beijing.

During our stay we saw large Chinese tour groups and ran into South Korean tourists at a circus in Pyongyang. We met a Scottish businessman from Edinburgh who was enthusiastic about the country and was hoping to get in on the ground floor, a British journalist who was teaching internet web techniques and training journalism students and government officials on international stock markets, and a Finnish nurse who had been there for three years. All had positive feelings for the country and its people, none wanted war and all hoped that the people of America would learn the truth. The Congolese officials confirmed our observations, that the standard of living appears greater than many places in Africa, the Caribbean or other parts of the world.

•MYTH #2 - People are being Starved to Death by the Government

While officials we met admitted to food shortages and hunger during the floods and natural disasters of the late 1990's, this is really old news. At that time it was the DPRK government who reached out to the international community for disaster food assistance. Today they are still in need of some imports, as are most countries, but everywhere we traveled we saw crops growing – even on rooftops. Rice was laid out to dry without guards. Small fruit stands existed and people looked healthy and active. Many others we met who traveled around the country supported our observations. Even in the countryside, housing is provided free to all DPRK residents.

Sadly, the U.S. push for economic sanctions, and its pressuring of Japan, South Korea and other countries to cut off their food exports to the DPRK, exemplifies the inhumanity of using food and starvation as a political tool. With the emerging false justifications to start the war with Iraq, it is incumbent to set the record straight and base our decisions on up to date information.

•MYTH # 3- The U.S. Military can't cross into North Korea without being shot or killed.

Remarkably we encountered U.S. soldiers, not only along the DMZ, but in our guesthouse in Pyongyang. A small unit was there to travel into the countryside and look for

remains of Americans who died in the Korean War. Apart from their startling presence, they also provided the best corroboration for our observations of conditions in North Korea. Having traveled extensively throughout the country, they admitted to not having seen any starvation, that people appeared well-fed and they too, observed crops everywhere. They acknowledged that everyone was very friendly to them and admitted that the DPRK was not as they had been led to believe.

• MYTH #4 - North Korea has one of the largest most frightful armies in the world and uses its military to threaten and intimidate its people.

One of the greatest surprises from our trip was the failure to see soldiers or policemen carrying guns, clubs or other weapons of intimidation. There were many soldiers, but they were often working in the fields assisting with the harvest or working on roadways. Nowhere except at the DMZ, or an occasional rural roadstop, did we see a rifle or sidearm of any kind. This was in sharp contrast to my past travels to Central America, where military dictators supported by the U.S. held sway, or even the police presence in U.S. urban areas. Having just experienced the helicopters, gas mask, weapons, tear gas, horses and attack dogs of the Albuquerque Police Department during recent anti-war protests, the police presence in the DPRK was minimal and very low key.

Yet, it was our personal contacts with soldiers that proved the most moving. When we arrived at the DMZ we were met by Major Kim Myong Hwan, the officer in charge of negotiations between the north and south in the DMZ. When he recognized Peter, one member of our delegation, from a previous trip, they embraced, laughed and a beautiful smile spread across his face. "Welcome, my old friend," he said. He and Peter then held hands as they laughed and reminisced about a short, but meaningful connection from two years prior. The exchange obviously had touched both of their hearts.

Major Kim later shared his dreams, of having wanted to become a writer or journalist after graduation, but in more somber tones described the story that led him and his five brothers to "walk the line in the DMZ" as soldiers. He said he wanted to tell us his story as Americans and as lawyers. "Lawyers," he said "bear trust and justice in their hearts" and Americans must understand what happened here. "I am lonely for my family lost at Sinchon," he said. We knew

Sinchon was a town in the North known for extreme war atrocities by U.S. forces. He described how his grandfather was strung up a pole, tortured and killed by Americans, while his grandmother lay dying from a bayonet to her belly. Tears welled up in his eyes as he described his father being orphaned at six years old and his father's inability as a young child to defend his family. "So, my brothers and I have to do it," he said. Astutely, he declared "We do not oppose the American People. We oppose U.S. hostile policy and its efforts to exercise control over the whole world and inflict calamity on other people."

That afternoon we met a Colonel further along the DMZ who urged us to help people see what is really going on in the DPRK, instead of basing their opinions on misinformation. He told us "We know that, like us, the peace loving people in America have children, parents and families." While staring out at the majestic terrain, oft-called the "most dangerous place on earth," we told him of our mission to carry to America a message of peace and that we hoped to return someday to Korea and "walk with him together freely in these beautiful hills." He paused and said, "I, too, believe it is possible."

On another evening, we found ourselves attending a circus performance in Pyongyang. It was a Cirque du Soleil type performance, with acrobats, ice-skating, and a live orchestra. The breathtaking spectacle was made more remarkable by the presence of a large number of soldiers and sailors in the audience who laughed loudly at the comedians and oohed and aahed like the rest of us at the high wire acts. The army of the DPRK is often described in the western press as monolithic, robotic and cutthroat. This simplistic exaggeration unraveled before us as we shared joy and laughter, rather than our governments' cascade of threats and rhetoric.

International relations often appears more based in performance than reality. We realized that politicians often forget that the alleged "enemy" is really made up of people with hearts and feelings, and that armies are primarily teenagers and young adults caught up in a deadly drama. I sat in the circus thinking of how our governments, like the performers, are walking a tightrope in a dangerous nuclear standoff. Yet, for a moment, all differences faded, as we all smiled together at the folly and splendor of humanity. I've since asked myself what if peace could only be this simple? The only reply I keep getting is, "Perhaps it is."

•MYTH #5 - North Korea wants to be a nuclear power

The DPRK has given mixed signals on whether or not it has nuclear weapons. It refers to a “nuclear deterrent force.” One officer told us that they do not have such weapons and other officials indicated that they did. So one can conclude that a nuclear deterrent force may exist, though it may be bluster to make the U.S. government think twice about an attack.

Nevertheless, the question is not simply whether the DPRK has such weapons, but whether the U.S., which has nuclear capability on the Korean peninsula, and at one point had over 700 nuclear missiles in South Korea, is willing to enter a peace treaty. In the end, the cat and mouse game of “do they or don’t they” begs the question. We found North Koreans avid for peace and not attached to having nuclear weapons if peace can be established. However, in this age of “regime change” in Iraq, Bush’s pre-emptive war doctrine, the U.S. efforts to develop low yield nuclear weapons and its abandonment of international treaties, it is not surprising that the DPRK would play the nuclear card. Everyone we met said they would, as they promised in the 1994 Agreed Framework, give up their nuclear program in exchange for peaceful relations with the U.S.

Learning to stand in the shoes of others involves more than letting go of myths. The reality of the experiences of the Korean people must be acknowledged and our nation must take responsibility for the current and historical role it’s played in maintaining the standoff. As the events of September 11th brought forth so poignantly, we must come to understand why people of other nations resent us.

In 1905, in what the Koreans call “the first betrayal,” the U.S. government gave secret approval to Japan to occupy and rule Korea, something that led to millions of deaths and the exportation to Japan of Koreans as “comfort women” and slave labor. Division of the country by Washington at the end of World War II took place without consultation with Koreans. The Korean War of 1950-1953 was one of the most barbaric and brutal in the history of the world and no peace treaty was ever signed, making our nations technically still at war.

Across the country we noticed that no buildings appeared older than 50 years. During the Korean War, U.S. planes had relentlessly bombed the country, obliterating virtually everything until, according to the American military, “nothing worthy of a name” was left standing.

Carpet-bombing of civilian urban areas violates international law, but is rarely prosecuted as a war crime. In light of the descriptions and clear photos of the devastation, the leveling of North Korea stands as a heinous act equivalent to or greater than the relentless bombings of civilian in London, Coventry, Rotterdam, Dresden, Hamburg, Tokyo, or even, Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The New York Times reported that 17,000,000 pounds of Napalm were sent to Korea in the first 20 months of the war. In Washington we have monuments to the 53,000 U.S. soldiers who died, but little is said or taught in our schools about the more than 3.5 million victims of the war in the North, that resulted in one in ten Koreans being wounded or killed.

A 1951 international women's delegation reported U.S. bombers shooting fleeing civilians in the North Korean countryside, while the 1952 International Association of Democratic Lawyers investigation in North Korea, substantiated the use of chemical and biological weapons by American Forces. We visited Sinchon, in the province of Hwang Hoe, where many of these atrocities were documented, It was here that troops from the South and U.S. soldiers engaged in egregious war crimes. Thirty five thousand people died during the brief occupation of this province.

In the Sinchon memorial building we walked past rows of photographs and depicting the attacks on civilians and photos of charred and decapitated bodies. Documentation had been posted around the province by U.S. and South Korean forces calling for the hunting and killing of Communist party members "and their families." We saw evidence of the over 500 people who had been forced into a ditch, doused with gasoline, and set on fire and left to burn to death. Nearby we entered an air raid shelter where over 900 people, including, women and children huddled during the onslaught. U.S. soldiers were observed pouring gasoline and placing dynamite down the air vents of the "shelters" and setting them aflame. Its walls were still blackened from burning flesh. Standing in the shoes of such horror, as in my visit some years prior to Hiroshima, I could feel the visceral imprints of cries for help piercing through my heart.

As we emerged from the shelter, feeling quite shaken by such atrocities committed in our name, there were hundreds of North Korean soldiers being told a heartfelt story from a woman whose family had died at Sinchon. Her voice shook with emotion and the soldiers watched us

carefully as we solemnly walked to the memorial and mass grave site of Sinchon. We placed some flowers there, leaving also a piece of our hearts.

Shame does not even begin to describe the feelings we experienced at Sinchon. Such acts of terror leave us with a choice. We can either close off our hearts or use it as an opportunity to open them further. The tragedy of Sinchon bolstered our commitment to work for peace and is a powerful reminder of who really suffers when governments sound the drums of war.

Add to this war experience the failure of the U.S. to live up to its 1994 Agreed Framework agreement with the North, something Clinton officials admit they never planned on complying with because they felt the DPRK regime would collapse, and we can easily understand why the North Koreans have trust issues...might seek a nuclear deterrent force.

The Bush Administration also has its own motivations for maintaining this nuclear standoff. It is no secret that the U.S. is determined to keep a strong military presence in Asia. The policy papers underlying the administration's foreign policy, such as the *Project for A New American Century* or *The Clash of Civilizations*, calls for our military to become the "cavalry of the new American frontier." The premise adopted by the administration is that we must have the strongest military in the world available to fight two or more "theatre wars" simultaneously, and to "discourage" any other nations from "challenging our leadership or even aspiring to a larger regional or global role." They proclaim that the next struggles and wars will begin against Islam, then move to Asia, and are a clash of cultures know as the "the west against the rest."

For many of us, especially those who live in the West, the notion of our military returning to its 19th century "cavalry" roots, fails to conjure up positive images based on building relationships or peace. A glance at the world of today sadly sees this military march toward madness unfolding across the Middle East. Being driven by such policies of conquest, it wasn't surprising that while we stood on the northern border of the DMZ, that we heard U.S. troops in the South blaring through loudspeakers across the DMZ the William Tell overture- better know as the theme from the Lone Ranger- "High Ho Silver Away."

Peace and a stability in Asia runs contrary to these plans and they will render the need for our troops in Korea superfluous. A flourishing peacetime Asian trade and manufacturing alliance

presents a great economic threat to U.S. dominance and control in the region. Already most countries are looking to China, the largest manufacturing nation in the world, for trade and support. South Korea, our closest ally that we claim to be defending, now trades more with China than with the U.S. How the Bush Administration will “discourage”, consistent with its New Century and frontier objectives, this increasing “challenge to our leadership,” or China’s increasingly “larger regional or global role” is unknown. What we do know is that a war in Korea is estimated to damage the economies of the surrounding nations to the tune of \$1 trillion dollars, not to mention the ensuing human suffering of millions in Korea. Frighteningly, the Administration may believe that the U.S. military and a war in Korea could be their only option toward securing their domination of this important part of the world in the coming century.

The major method of maintaining instability and generating support for war has been a concerted campaign to demonize an entire nation. We see it everywhere. Recently in a local grocery store checkout line a headline caught my eye: “Noah’s Ark Found in North Korea...but Kim Jong won’t let the world near it.” The article quotes a recent defector as having seen the ark and that this “powerful symbol to Christians” is the trump card of “a man whose sanity is very much in doubt.” The article ends with a plea that “The U.S. must move quickly to save this priceless treasure.” Admittedly this was a supermarket tabloid, but it’s not too different from the extremist views put forth in the media about North Korea and its alleged “porn leader” dealing with drugs and flesh trades around the world.

The portrait of an Orwellian, totalitarian, impoverished and starving society, which is far from the reality we experienced in the DPRK, along with the allegations of “weapons of mass destruction” has all too familiar a ring. With our President labeling the country as evil, its President Kim Il Jong as a “pygmy” dictator, and talking about regime change, we can see the writing on the wall. These have been the types of allegations used by the United States to justify all its recent military acts of aggression against Iraq, Afghanistan, Yugoslavia, Panama, Nicaragua, Libya and on and on. At a minimum, it serves as a false justification for maintaining a strong military presence in Asia consistent with its plan for a *New American Century*.

George W. Bush ironically says that “Our nation is chosen by God and commissioned by history to be a model for the world.” But actions speak louder than words. We must ask whether we end up modeling dialogue, peace and disarmament, or force, aggression and the advantages of having nuclear weapons. It takes more than promises to be non-aggressive and just. A nation’s actions must reflect their words.

Demonizing another country as “evil” pretends that our nation is pure. As Aleksandar Solzhenitzn, the former Soviet dissident, knew so well:

If it were all so simple,
If only there were evil people somewhere
insidiously committing evil deeds,
and it were necessary only to separate them
from the rest of us and destroy them.
But the line dividing good and evil
cuts through the heart of every human being
And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?

THE GLASS HOUSE OF AMERICA

Each country has its ghosts and demons. Are we in a position to label and judge the DPRK from afar based upon innuendo, faulty intelligence or even past mistakes or present shortcomings. He who casts stones had better make sure he does not live in a glass house. From outside the Glass House of America looking in, we see a blurred “line dividing good and evil” traversing through the heart of a nation. The following doses of self-reflection remind us that hurling stones merely mask our own evils.

First, the American government has been barbarically killing its citizens at an astonishing rate. In Texas alone, Governor George W. Bush oversaw 150 executions, including executions of the mentally retarded. Five methods are used in the glass houses of America: hanging, drugging, shooting, gassing and electrocuting. The Glass House remains the only NATO country that executes its citizens...and even some non-citizens too!

Second, people are dying in America from preventable causes because they did not have access to healthcare. Healthcare is a commodity according to one’s ability to pay, rather than based on medical need. Over 42 million Americans have no health insurance at all. And tens of millions,

according to the Physicians for a National Health Program, are not having their medical needs met by a system “in shambles.”

Third, I am happy, or perhaps unhappy, to report that I have found the Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). As Pogo once proudly proclaimed “I have met the enemy and it is us.” Here, in the Glass House, tens of thousands weapons of mass destruction, chemical weapons depots, and other military nightmares are stored. In my city of Albuquerque, New Mexico we found out that we have two thousand of them at Kirtland Air Force Base. Signs are now cropping up on lawns saying “Weapons of Mass Destruction Iraq 0 , Albuquerque 2000. Would this justify an invasion by someone bent on destroying such weapons?

Fourth, the government of the Glass House, from which we hope to escape from come November 2004, has set in place policies more reflective of a “police state than a democracy. . . The Homeland Security Department’s actions are exempt from any whistleblower laws and binding internal audits. Prohibitions against the CIA engaging in assassinations have been lifted. The FBI and police can infiltrate churches and political organizations and spy on any US citizen for “intelligence purposes,” even if there is no evidence of any criminal activity.

Detention camps have emerged where even US citizens can be declared “enemy combatants” and held indefinitely, with no right to an attorney or access to Courts until the endless “War on Terrorism” is complete. The Inspector General of the Justice Department found that detainees are facing a pattern of “verbal and physical abuse.” Over 700 such prisoners, including some children, are interned in the prison camp on the base at Guantanamo, Cuba. Libraries and bookstores are now forced to provide lists of books we buy or borrow. “You’re either with us, or you’re against us,” proclaims the President of the Glass House. The “line dividing good and evil” is not so clear.

Fifth, in our “democracy” we have a president who didn’t win the election, but did receive a whopping 24% of the eligible voters. G.W. Bush boasted before the election that “If this were a dictatorship it would be a lot easier – just so long as I’m the dictator.” He told his National Security Council “I do not need to explain why I say things. That’s the interesting thing about

being president ...I don't feel like I owe anybody an explanation." His spokesperson at the Glass House, Ari Fleisher, announced people should "watch what they say, watch what they do."

Sixth - Someone stole the peace dividend. Despite the collapse of the cold war, the military budget, rather than being reduced to meet social needs, has increased from \$270 billion to over \$400 billion and going up. We spend \$20-30 billion a year to allegedly defend South Korea from its own people in North Korea, despite both parts of the fractured country wanting reunification. These expenditures have occurred at a time in which American homelessness and hunger have increased nineteen percent and millions of jobs have been lost.

Seventh – Corporate thievery and sweetheart contracts are endless. Even the Pentagon Inspector General admits that the Defense Department can't account for 25% of the funds it spends. And why did we believe that Saddam Hussein still might have had chemical weapons, like those he used on the Kurds years prior? Simply because the Glass House sent the weapons to him and continues to be the major exporter of deadly weapons around the world.

Eighth – Our government has declared its right to make pre-emptive strikes against nations that could someday be a threat. This violates international law and the UN Charter and is an attack on the whole world order established in response to the Nazi's march over much of Europe.

Ninth- The Glass House possesses and appears to support biological weapons. Why won't our government approve and join an international plan to ban biological weapons?

Tenth- The largest per capita prison population in the world is in the Glass House, where more is spent on prison building, than public housing and higher education combined.

Eleventh- The policy to sanction Iraq over the past ten years before the war, according to UNICEF in 1998, resulted in over 500,000 deaths to children. Might someone think America was evil for starving and blocking medical assistance to children?

Twelve- More than 9 million people are unemployed in the US and many are under employed. The majority of Americans work for businesses that can fire them for no reason, called "employment at will," and are not bound to follow constitutional guarantees of free speech, due process or equal protection.

No wonder Michael Moore asks, "Dude, Where's my Country?"

Conflicts are an opportunity to see our own reflection. The line within a nation between good and evil is thin. The DPRK and the U.S. have much that is positive to share with each other, as well as struggles to overcome, and it is only through the open exchange of ideas, trade and relations that we can grow and secure the peace.

I worked for several years coordinating an international monitoring project of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. Through such a process, we observed people listening to each other's truth and, while not forgetting the past, forgiving it and moving forward. I have seen the same results in restorative justice victim/perpetrator mediations and at the Navajo Peacemaker Courts.

These experiences have taught me that without truth, there can be no reconciliation. Yet, they also exemplify that human beings have an innate desire and capacity to forgive. It is this deep knowing that keeps hope alive that even the U.S. and North Korea can forgive the past and forge a new relationship if we can awaken humanity in the hearts of our leaders. This is where the people must lead, and the leaders will follow.

But it takes understanding. It takes truth. And most importantly it takes an unequivocal declaration of Peace and non-aggression with North Korea, not military threats and name-calling. Gandhi once said that the "goal of reconciliation is not to bring adversaries to their knees, but to their senses." The world is waiting for us to assume the responsibility that goes hand in hand with power – to model a new way to relate in the 21st century - to institute Ben Franklin's vision that "America's destiny is not power, but light."

The U.S. could bring the world together by modeling humanity and leadership. Where is our creative spirit? There is enough for everyone in this world to be taken care of, if only the heart would open and see a new possibility. We are at a crossroads. It's clear where our government is marching. Each one of us can choose to continue to feed the march to war, conflict and name-calling, or to make a stand for peace.

An ancient story reminds us that it's time to reject war, and feed the peace. Grandfather tells his grandson that there are two wolves battling inside him; one ferocious and destructive, the

other gentle and powerful. The grandson looks up and asks anxiously, "Which of them will win, Grandpa?" Grandfather replies "Whichever one I feed."

Eric Sirotkin
National Lawyers Guild
Korean Peace Project
529 Montclair SE
Albuquerque, N.M. 87108 U.S.A.
505-266-2753
sirotkin@igc.org
www.nlg.org/korea