

The “And Then” Narrative

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It is cold. The late November wind battles fiercely against my tightly protected body, cutting through the many layers of jackets. “You may only point your camera forward to take pictures.” Orders the voice of the US soldier tour guide behind me, his tone telling of the hourly repeated tour. Across from me are the distinctive blue U.N. buildings of the DMZ. I am standing in an active war zone, a forgotten war still raging in silence. This is Korea.

“And then in 1950 North Korea invaded.” That was how our tour began. That was how all my textbooks in school began. That is how all conversations about The Korean War start; “And then the North invaded.” Before I spent a year in Korea this was my understanding of the conflict. Poor little South Korea was invaded by big evil communist North Korea. Upon spending time in South Korea, learning their history, talking to people alive at the time and really listening I began to question “the before” part of the story. That mysterious time that can turn the safe black and white assigned values of mortality into the scary opaque grey. I wanted to know how a North Korea that wanted to invade their own people came to be in the first place. By starting a narrative with “And then...” we run the risk of paving over any other view and possibility, disregarding the chain of events that led up to the “And then moment” and shift a shared blame and responsibility to rest solely with one party. It becomes a narrative in which everything before is irrelevant, forgotten and replaced with one accepted story. Thus is the fate of Korea, both North and South and the War to follow.

I never learned that a single Korea spent the three decades before WWII brutally occupied by Japan. I was unaware that their liberation after was shortly lived for a few mere months before different global powers, The US and Russia (vying for power in Asia) divided control of the country, removing Korean chosen leaders in favor of old Japanese supporting leaders. I never learned that the people of Korea, united for thousands of year, seeing themselves unnecessarily divided and occupied yet again

protested the separate elections to prevent further cementation of their division and that those protests led to violence that sparked years of massacres of South Korean citizens by South Koreans in fear of unproven Communist involvement. Or that the North, watching haplessly, felt the only way to free their brothers and sisters from oppression was to invade. Why did I never learn any of this? Empathy. Finding and knowing reasons behind actions lead to empathy. Empathy is a building block to understanding and a move away from power. Empathy is the tool to peace and the fear of hate fueled power.

Of course, it is hard to start any story at the beginning because the beginning is an illusion, the beginning always being one step before the start and another step behind that. My beginning in Korea began twelve months ago. But the beginning stretched back before I was there, before the war, before the US, Joseon Dynasty and further still. There is simply not enough time to go back to the beginning of any one story. And so we abbreviate, skipping to the most important parts for convince and in consequence losing parts of the story with each cliff note edition. Learning the beginning before “And then” is the very first step into empathy and in turn the first block into building peace. Peace takes work. Hard work. Violence is easier. It is simpler to hate and chalk off actions as evil and without reason. It is harder to work through the hurtful and painful past to reach reconciliation and peace. It is a scary task to look beyond the pain that has flavored your life and try to see the reasons why. That is not to say that actions should be excused simply for the want of forgiveness and reconciliation but as a stepping stone to discourse that will begin to address the problems and unbuild the walls of hate.

In Korea I saw a country that has been torn into two, ravished and beat. I saw a country whose people’s families were forced apart and told were evil until it became truth. I heard the stories and saw the scars of a war torn country; the silent sadness etched into the lines of age on Grandparent’s faces, their eyes a window into a time not so long ago. And yet I saw people who refused to believe the “And then story.” People who spent their lives proving that peace was possible, people trying to rebuild tragedy into hope.

I have only been home to the United States for a short while and I find the narrative the same. “And then the North attacked our way of life.” “And then the Liberals tried to take away our history” “And then the South succeeded” “And then Trump was elected.” We are telling our own story from the middle, rewriting the beginning in favor of our cliff notes. A division born hundreds of years ago has been growing with every “And then” story. The narrative is the same, a narrative to encourage hate and build power. A narrative to obscure empathy, silenced in the screams of unheard pain. No one benefits from the “And then” story. No one wins when we refuse to silence our own fears for a moment to listen to those of our neighbors. We are afraid that if we listen to North Korea we might find a scared country of people who suppressed itself in order to feel they could remain safe from a threatening global power. We might find a country who still feels threatened and unheard so they make more noises and bigger guns in hopes that someone might listen. We are afraid to be the first to offer peace, to step down for fear of being seen as the weaker side. Empathy does not equate weakness. To truly hold empathy with another is to dive into the darkness, the pain and hurt and find the light together. “Love thy neighbor.” That is the hardest task of all. Empathy, peace and love is not complacent in a world of hate, a world of division and the “And then” stories. Empathy is having the strength to ask what happened before and why, then to listen to the stories that come spilling out.