

I. “Garlic-Over Easy”

Life in Seoul, South Korea

After Mary and I honeymooned in Malaysia, we got a phone call from Chicago telling us that we were reassigned back to Chicago. So, off we went. On the way back we stopped in Taipei, Taiwan, where we just happened to receive another phone call that kept us in Asia another six years and established our lifelong ties with the Korean people. While in Taipei, we decided to visit the Taipei Ecumenical Institute (EI) after a long tour of the National Museum of Chinese Art. While there, another call came through from Chicago asking us to stop in Kobe, Japan, in case we were needed in Korea. So off we flew to Kobe.

We stayed several months waiting in Kobe teaching some English classes. It was a delight to be back in this beautiful, mysterious country of Mount Fuji, the bullet train, sashimi, rice paper, bowing, rock gardens, huge department stores with girls in white gloves greeting you at the end of escalators, stories of samurai, tatami mats, scalding hot water baths in wooden tubs, sleeping on mats on the floor, and a real emperor. After our sojourn in Japan and following assignment instructions, we reported to Seoul . . . and we lived there for six wonder-filled years.

In a traditional Korean home in winter, the house is heated by yon-ton, a coal briquette that is lit and pushed under the floor of the house. The hot floor provides both contact heat for sitting and sleeping and some radiant heat. This popular system provides needed heat but can be somewhat dangerous. The gas from the coal briquettes is poisonous. Experience demands no cracks in the floor. The first night we slept in the Seoul EI house, the yon-ton gas leaked into our room. The next morning, we were two very sick people. We threw up. A doctor hooked us up to IVs to ensure adequate hydration. Flat on our backs and quite nauseated, we met our esteemed leader, Rev. Kang Byoung Hoon. He came over to welcome us to his country, to inquire about our health, and to apologize for our condition. We survived and were soon up and ready in the Land of Morning Calm. In Korea we grew up, had our two children, became leaders, and took risks that now we look back at in amazement.

After some 900 invasions by foreign powers (the Japanese, Mongols, and Chinese being the most frequent), South Korea had produced in the past forty years before our arrival one of the economic miracles on our planet. And at that moment, it appeared that South Korea was also creating a political miracle with its own brand of democracy based in a Confucian sense of solidarity. Korea's strength of character comes from its 5,000-year-old culture. For centuries, Koreans developed their own culture, learning from Chinese Confucian and Buddhist culture, and passing this culture on to the Japanese, who have in turn developed it as their own.

Korea developed its own language, a part of the Ural-Altic family of languages and related to Turkish and Finnish. This language can be written in Chinese script or in Hangul, Korea's own alphabet, fashioned by the court scholars of King Sejong so that the common people could learn to read and write. Korea exalts the scholar and education within the society and has one of the highest literacy rates in the world as well as institutions of excellence in higher learning.

From being the "Hermit Kingdom" to its rapid modernization and world trade position in just a few decades, South Korea's unique blend of loyalty, creativity, pragmatism, orderliness, vitality, solidarity, individualism, and sense of honor produced highly visible, dramatic results. For many nations, a lesson could be learned here, not so much from the particularities of Korean culture, although these were important, but from the strategy Korea followed in basing its economic and political development on its rich culture. This sense of continuity with the past, combined with the necessary discontinuity of the modern era, remains Korea's hard-earned lesson.

As in Malaysia, I set about recruiting and teaching religious and cultural studies courses. I worked with Methodist and Presbyterian pastors in this endeavor—Revs. Kang Byoung Hoon, Lee Jae Joon, Kim Chong Man, Sung Chul, Chae Jong Shik, and later my dear colleague Rev. Park Si Won and many others. Mary taught in the International School of the Sacred Heart along with other of our colleagues, including Mary Ann Wainwright, Phyllis Mielke (now Hockley), Richard Sims, and Bruce and Sue Williams. The Korean Christian Academy, which was led by Dr. Kang Won Yong, sponsored our visas. I discovered that my great-uncle, Dr. Moorman Robertson (after whom my father and I were named), had been a medical missionary with the Presbyterian Church in Korea many years earlier.

In Korea, I had many humiliating experiences. One of my most memorable took place in a PLC with a group of distinguished Presbyterian pastors wearing three-piece suits. For one of the meals, I decided to use some of my Korean language to honor the participants.

So, I said, "Po ma gra."

Some of the men's faces expressed surprise. Some laughed. I thought to myself that they were pleased that I had used their language saying: "Let us feast."

Later after the session, I asked Rev. Kim, with whom I was doing the seminar, what the participants had thought of my use of Korean.

"Mr. Work, do you know what you said?"

"I thought that I said, 'Let us feast.'"

"No, no, Mr. Work, you said, 'Stuff it in your mouth' or 'Shovel it in!'"

"But, but . . ." I had picked up this expression in my mixed Korean American household thinking that it meant "Let us feast." Mortified my face turned blistering hot and red.

Christianity thrives in Korea through efforts from China. The movement of church renewal that Rev. Kang Byoung Hoon led developed both with the Ecumenical Institute and the Methodist Church. It was growing by leaps and bounds. We conducted many seminars all over Korea. My days became very busy and challenging as I learned a lot about RS-I, South Korea, and myself.

Many things in Korea prove very strange and difficult for a Westerner. For example, the practice of sitting on the floor and bending your legs in ways that are quite painful during the first several

months. Also, much Korean food has an unusual taste, appearance, or smell, especially the famous kimchi, a pickled side dish of radish or cabbage served at every meal. Kimchi comes very spicy and smells strongly of fish and garlic. Matter of fact, everything in Korea smells of garlic because everyone eats garlic every day. My journey with kimchi followed my progression of hating it, tolerating it, liking it, loving it, and finally craving it. However, the total process took several months.

Koreans possess very strong personalities. They can be very polite, but they can also be very direct and forceful, especially when they feel that they have not been honored. I remember many occasions with Rev. Park Si Won, especially, when I was reminded that I or another of my American colleagues had not honored him. Many times, Park Si Won and I played an unacknowledged game of cultural competition. I remember one incident in the airport at Jeju City of Jeju Island. We had arrived early in the morning and were waiting to be picked up and taken to the village project site. While we were waiting, Park suggested that we have a little breakfast. I knew that I could get a Western breakfast in the airport. Park was aware that right outside the airport terminal was a little restaurant that served typical Korean breakfast—rice, seaweed soup, kimchi and fish.

"Why don't we just have breakfast here in the terminal?" I spoke up.

"Why don't we just go over to the little restaurant outside." He volleyed.

Neither of us said what we really wanted was a particular type of breakfast. We only argued about where we should have it. This was a game that Park and I played. I usually lost.

II. "The Shock of Living in Rural South Korea"

Kwang Yung Il Ri and Kuh Du I Ri Human Development Projects

It was in 1974 that our family doubled in size. We decided to adopt a child in Korea. The Holt Adoption Agency agreed. We then discovered that Mary was pregnant (surprise, surprise). We decided to go ahead with the adoption. Stopping now would have been like an abortion to which we did not subscribe. So, we told the Holt Agency about Mary's pregnancy. Our social worker said that it was against their policy to adopt in that case. They felt that the first child should be the "natural" child and the adopted child the second. I told them that we intended to adopt a two-year-old boy before Mary gave birth. Again, our social worker said that was not possible.

"Who makes the final decision about this matter?" I asked her.

"Well, I do."

"Then I am asking you to decide to let us do this."

She finally agreed. We first met Kim Tae Il at the White Flower Orphanage in Taejon in July. He was sitting on the floor crying surrounded by toys. We named him Benjamin Kang, Benjamin after the Old Testament tribe and his maternal grandfather, and Kang representing his Korean

ancestry and particularly after General Kang, Dr. Kang Won Yong, and Rev. Kang Byoung Hoon. Five months later Christmas Eve, his brother, Christopher Edward, was born. He was named Christopher for the New Testament "Bearer of Christ" and Edward to represent his Anglo ancestry.

Benjamin was a cute two-year-old with straight black hair, dark brown eyes and a button nose. Christopher was a big baby with straight blond hair and green eyes. From the moment I first saw Christopher, I could sense his independent streak. It took me a few hours of processing the fact of his birth before I picked up the phone at the hospital and called my colleagues at the EI house and the Sacred Heart Convent. Since it was Christmas Eve, the Sister with whom I spoke ran through the convent shouting, "Christ is born!"

After Christopher was born, I accepted an assignment to Japan for a few weeks to teach the Global Language School in Sendai with our colleague Kaye Hayes (Kaze Gadway). Suddenly, sharing my life and our one room with these two little creatures had become a psychic strain on me. When I returned home, I was better able to take up my new role as a dad with gusto. How could I have let Mary deal with all of that without me? Fortunately, there were many colleagues in the house who also helped.

In the summer of 1975, the four of us returned to the US for one month. Mary had to have an operation for cancer of her eyelid; we also visited our families, and Benjamin became a naturalized American citizen.

In addition, we attended a Global Research Assembly in Chicago that summer in which the Institute decided to launch the three campaigns of Global Community Forum (awakening), Global Social Demonstration (engagement), and the Intra-global Movement (fulfillment). This was our "turn to the world" to show the historical church what it looked like to care for society. Increasingly, we worked under the name of the Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA), a new legal entity we created, rather than the Ecumenical Institute, to have a secular rather than a religious face. Several years later, ICA received consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council.

After a few years of teaching religious and cultural weekend courses, including RS-I and PLC, and six-week-long International Training Institutes (ITIs) in Seoul and Hong Kong, the Institute staff began talking about the necessity of "demonstrating the love of God" to society. After many years of attempting to awaken the church to its profound task of caring for the world by recruiting people to attend our religious and cultural courses, we began to shift gears. We had never been missionaries trying to convert people to Christianity.

Finally, the Institute decided that we ourselves must show the way. We must go out into the world and demonstrate "human development" among the poorest of the poor. For this, we decided to initiate projects at the village level in each of the twenty-four time zones of the world. In Korea, we decided to begin a project on Jeju Island, the poorest, most remote province in South Korea.

Many of the villagers of Jeju lived twelfth century lifestyles, complete with pig toilets, thatched roofs, mud floors, rock walls, and the local version of animism. We first conducted an ITI in Jeju

City and then a consultation to create the project plan. At the time, we thought that we were creating a project for the entire Island. But after the consult, Joseph Mathews visited, and we heard the words, "You must find a village." The words shocked us. No one had any experience in or with villages at that time. We had read Schumacher's book *Small Is Beautiful*. We knew that the most abject poverty was found in rural villages. But we had not thought of locating the project in a village. But we found a village, Kwang Yung Il Ri, on the slopes of Mount Halla, overlooking fields of yellow flowers, that swept down to the sea, where white waves crashed on the black volcanic rock. Joseph's advice to us was, "When you live in the village, you will experience a spiritual crisis." He was so right.

I will never forget the day I moved our few belongings to Kwang Yung Il Ri, into our rough rock walls and thatch-roofed house. It was raining lightly. The road from Jeju City to the village included lots of rocks and bumps. Later when Mary, Benjamin and Christopher arrived, I think I remained in shock. I had never lived without the sights, lights, sounds, comforts, and conveniences of modern urban life, whether in a small town in Oklahoma or a great city like Seoul or Chicago. I felt as if I had died. The sensory deprivation was so great, the disorientation so complete. Living in a bizarre landscape, seascape, and cloud scape, in a strange culture, we faced an impossible task of assisting the villagers in transforming their village within two years. The Kim Chong Man family suffered from shock also. Even though they were Korean, they were urban Koreans.

Nevertheless, we set about working in various guilds. I was in the agricultural guild. I knew nothing about agriculture. I was not fluent in the Korean language. But I catalyzed socio-economic change with my very being and that of my little family.

The high point of each week was riding the bus over the bumpy road to Jeju City to have our one hot bath of the week. Once, Christopher developed mouth sores and could not eat or drink. We rushed him into the city and returned to the village greatly relieved that he was much better. Both boys fell on the rocky land in the village so often that cuts, bruises, and scars marked their little legs—we feared permanently. Once, Benjamin fell and chipped his front tooth. Winter days turned bitterly cold. We failed to ever get entirely warm. Later we lived in a little house with two other families, each family of three or four members in one room with sliding paper walls between us. We learned to respect each other's privacy—which became a matter of decision rather than a physical reality

I participated in many rituals of birth and death involving much food, fruit, and drink, not only for those of us present but for the spirits as well. When we were building our training center in the village, the villagers conducted a ritual using chicken blood to cleanse and protect the space.

As I remember these days, I find that I am surprised that I did this. What sustained me during so much discomfort and disorientation was that I lived out of a most powerful story. I was part of a global servant force creating signs of human development in the twenty-four time zones of our planet. Surely, this was worth all the difficulties and doubts. But what is even more shocking is that I did this with two small children and a wife. I did not do it as a solitary monk but as a missional family. My family will always be a family that lived in Kwang Yung Il Ri.

The year after the project began, new assignments sent us to Seoul, as the directors of the Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA) in Korea. Rev. Kang served as Area Tokyo director for Japan and Korea. Although everyone thought it was impossible, a fundraising I launched was able to raise several tens of thousands of dollars for the project from Korean companies. I joined the Seoul Rotary Club, where I met heads of major Korean companies such as Gold Star. Joseph, Kang, and our team decided to host a World's Fair of Human Development in Kwang Yung Il Ri. This task seemed overwhelming at the time. But Kang, Park, I, and many others worked to make it a reality. Joseph Mathews had worked unflaggingly to make the "Band of 24" a reality. This event symbolized that victory.

After the celebration and the following Global Research Assembly, Joseph was diagnosed as having terminal cancer of the pancreas.

We received a phone call from Chicago that he had died. Following Korean custom, we immediately set up an altar with his picture draped in black and with incense and candles. House members and colleagues came to pay their respects at this shrine. Then Kang, Park, Mary, and I flew to Chicago with our sadness and grief to attend his funeral. What an awesome event. His body was cremated, and his ashes were put in an unmarked box, no name and no date, with the Order cross on it. Into this box were placed his silver ring and blue shirt, symbols of the Order, and his cross, a symbol of the historic church.

Those of us gathered celebrated his life and death in the context of the Daily Office, the institute's great, ecumenical liturgy. For me (and for many others), Joseph embodies the most powerful, spirit-filled person I had ever known. I will always be grateful for his life, his message, his passion, his vision, his compassion, his very being. I suppose that I feel a special responsibility for having known him, a responsibility to continue in some fashion his work, his vision, his mission. I believe that now it has somehow become my very own vision and mission.

In the last year that I lived in Korea, we launched a second Human Development Project near the demilitarized zone north of Seoul in the village of Kuh Du I Ri. Now, Rev. Park Si Won served as project director. He did a magnificent job of leading the project team. This village became an outstanding example of local development with its credit union, community center, piggery, green houses, museum, preschool, and health center. The project and its participating people embodied the theological mandate of addressing suffering through new social structures as those who care.

My family lived in one room behind the village store in the newly constructed community center. Park's family of four lived in one room on the other side of the center. Every morning, Mary and Benjamin rode a bicycle from the village to the town and caught a bus to Seoul, where Mary was a teacher at Sacred Heart International School and Benjamin was a student. Christopher and I stayed in the village. Once, Christopher got lost. Rev. Park made an announcement over the village loudspeaker, and we located him in no time. On another morning, a filmmaker was in the village to make a documentary on the project for IT&T, which had provided a large grant. Benjamin was playing in the rice paddy and suddenly began to cry and shout. He had stepped on a large piece of glass, which had gone up into his leg. Mary walked into town with Benjamin on her back while the cameras rolled (we had no vehicle).

I learned how to plant rice in the paddy fields. In water up to our ankles, we walked along the rough, muddy field bending repeatedly to insert shoots of rice plants down in the mud. This was also the time when Mary and I began to talk about needing to return to the US. We had been in Korea about six years. We felt a great love for Korea but an even greater loyalty to our Order. We felt that if we stayed any longer in Korea, we would never leave. We left for Chicago in July 1978. I remember how much I cried when we left. I was still bowing to people two years later. So much growth, so much learning, so much pain, so many thoughts, and feelings, I will always be part Korean.