

A Call for 4.3 Reconciliation

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Abstract

As I became familiar with how pervasive 4.3 tragedies affected Jeju people, I was struck how the need for mourning is far from over, even after more than 60 years after the tragedy. Wasn't President Roh Moo-Hyun's apology on behalf of the Korean government enough? Not even close; it simply opened the opportunity to bring the truths of 4.3 to the open, and to finally let the needs of the victims be publicly known, and discussed, and to be acted on. Broadly speaking, my awareness, and education and listening to historical accounts of 4.3 lead me to believe that there are three levels of understanding and interaction between all involved actors of 4.3 for reconciliation to be successful; for the victims of 4.3 to have a sense of closure..

The three levels of possible involvement for the victims and families are at the personal, community and international levels. Without all three being present there will be no closure, no reconciliation, for the victims, or the next generation of their families.

Key words :

awareness, education, listening to historical accounts of 4.3, three levels of understanding and interaction, all involved actors of 4.3 for reconciliation

Introduction

I arrived in Jeju Korea in 2002, just in time for the amazing spectacle of the FIFA World Cup hosted by South Korea and Japan. Swayed by the idyllic picture of the paradise I'd stepped into, it wasn't a stretch for me to picture myself staying here indefinitely. Gorgeous beaches, the volcanic geography, extracurricular activities and the Jeju culture called me to reconsider my return to Canada. How had this island escaped the mainstream, foreign, tourism market?

I would later ask this same question about how the world had missed hearing about a terrible massacre that had occurred in a darker period of Jeju's, and Korea's 20th century. But for now I was content to dwell in the present; with the pleasures of my new tropical home. By 2004 I was married to my Jeju wife and began to learn more about Jeju, and Korea, in earnest.

Earlier in late 2003, then President Roh Moo-Hyun had apologized for a massacre on Jeju Island that had occurred at the hands of government forces from 1948–49. It was known as "Sa-Sam", or 4.3 (in English). This was the date of a major catalyst for a year of prolonged violence on Jeju that claimed the lives of (very conservatively) 14,000 people and possibly up to 30,000. My first real lesson about the reality of 4.3 was from my new Jeju family.

Just a month into my new marriage and I was invited to join a memorial ceremony for a family "tragedy" that had happened. It turned out to be the annual memorial for 4.3 victims; my father-in-law's family had victims. My father-in-law's father and sister had died, the former violently, and the latter by disease, in a detention center. Although I was still confounded how I couldn't have known about a massacre of such size, I was at a loss as how to sympathize or empathize with my new father-in-law. He was haunted by 4.3.

Personal Ghosts

I've come to the conclusion that he felt the pain of losing his family members most because there was no closure. He felt guilty, unable to change or accept how and why they had died. Perhaps he felt guilty that he had lived. How can one person process the immense number of factors that resulted in his own family's tragedy? Local, national and international politics, the Japanese occupation, then World War 2, then the Korean War and the ensuing politics that forbade even mentioning 4.3 until the 1990's.

It appears that no public discourse was allowed by successive Korean government administrations until the democracy movements after the 1980's. No

one had come forward to accept responsibility, or to forgive, or to talk about my father-in-law's family members. American soldiers had been stationed on Jeju at the time of 4.3. Did he harbor resentment towards them?

He took his ghosts to the grave with him a couple of years ago, may he now rest in peace. Thankfully, his great pleasure was to see the success of his children and the potential future of his grandchildren before he died. I, however, remain haunted by the fact that without some form of conclusion to a tragedy like this, there will be enduring suffering to one's human condition. How do the other thousands of families feel? If there are similar circumstances for other 4.3 families, then we have a problem.

Reconciliation Please

As I became familiar with how pervasive 4.3 tragedies affected Jeju people, I was struck how the need for mourning is far from over, even after more than 60 years after the tragedy. Wasn't President Roh Moo-Hyun's apology on behalf of the Korean government enough? Not even close; it simply opened the opportunity to bring the truths of 4.3 to the open, and to finally let the needs of the victims be publicly known, and discussed, and to be acted on.

Broadly speaking, my awareness, and education and listening to historical accounts of 4.3 lead me to believe that there are three levels of understanding and interaction between all involved actors of 4.3 for reconciliation to be successful; for the victims of 4.3 to have a sense of closure..

The three levels of possible involvement for the victims and families are at the personal, community and international levels. Without all three being present there will be no closure, no reconciliation, for the victims, or the next generation of their families.

"The practice of peace and reconciliation is one of the most vital and artistic of human actions..."

Nhat Hanh

The Personal Level

At the most intimate level, at a personal level, individuals affected by 4.3 deserve inner peace from this tragedy. They need to be forgiven, and to forgive those who were against them. They need a forum to express their experiences with their previous enemies, and to listen to the other side's experiences too. They need to let go of their guilt, of their loved ones' deaths. Although it comes so long after the tragedy, a sense of inner peace in the "here and now" will help achieve personal

reconciliation.

Such reconciliation efforts may require long overdue medical attention to injuries or disabilities, trauma & psychological counseling, and feeling the sense that their family honor is restored. Compensation would not be unreasonable.

The Community

The personal reconciliation of 4.3 families cannot be fulfilled without recognition and support from the community that 4.3 was, and is, real. The importance of the provincial government and the national government in declaring the truth of 4.3 is critical for national consensus. The history and significance of 4.3 cannot be disputed. The “guilt by association” (of being related to communists) should be let go; in other words Jeju citizens are Korean citizens in every sense.

With 4.3 being agreed upon and resolved in the historical sense, it provides opportunity to focus on what can be learned from the tragedy and used as a foundation for peace initiatives that can affect the future, and set an example for other parts of the world recovering from conflict. With recognition of 4.3, national pride can be restored; we can talk about the tragedy without shame. With national consensus a unified voice can now be made at the next level, internationally.

The International Community

Having a unified national South Korean voice will greatly increase the chances for international dialogue between the states that had some connection to the 4.3 tragedy. Thousands fled the violence in Jeju and resettled in Japan. The American military was in administrative control of Jeju (South Korea) at the time 4.3 happened. There is a lot of potential information that could be learned from each other at the state level. The individuals’ stories and voices must be heard at this level too. They must be seen.

The willingness of the United States to participate in the dialogue would greatly lead to reconciliation between the two nations and particularly the survivors. With acknowledgement and dialogue, perhaps the opportunity exists for collaboration on learning and sharing information to help victims understand what happened. The forum for such dialogues leads to the possibility of forgiveness and closure. Peace initiatives and learning from research, collaboration and historical aspects become possible.

A Call for Reconciliation

As with most change, it must begin within ourselves. For those who may come into contact with some aspect regarding the 4.3 Massacre, please take a moment to think about the significance of how such a loss of life would affect your own home village, or even country. How could you endure the suffering of not being able to grieve the dead openly for more than 50 years? Reconciliation is long overdue and most deserving for these people: personally, nationally and internationally. They don’t deserve to be victims anymore.

I hope their voices are heard. I hope they can feel inner peace.

Endnote : Kenneth McLeod is President of SCI Education, and Director of Language Friends; a youth leadership & volunteer organization. He manages The Cambodia Project, supporting education in Cambodia where reconciliation is also desperately needed. He seeks inner peace through developing young people’s potential in life.

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