

Where peace is a matter of imagination

Joan Chittister | Nov. 7, 2007 From Where I Stand

There are some things in life which, if we want them badly enough, we simply have to do ourselves. I was in Korea last week, in tiny Hwacheon (Wa-shon) County, and I saw the proof of that with my own eyes.

The temptation, of course, is to wait for someone else to do something.

But if we wait long enough, it finally dawns: there's no use expecting someone else to do what everyone knows must be done. They have other interests, or other priorities, or other agendas. Or maybe they even have other reasons for keeping things just the way they are.

So, we find ourselves with choices to make: We can simply forget the whole thing. We can say, "That's the way things are." Or we can go on year after year, business as usual, accepting things as they are but hoping for something else. Or we can say, "Well, it will surely happen some day. It's a matter of being patient."

Or, possibly, hopefully, maybe we decide that it's better to die trying than not to try at all.

No doubt about it: It's a dilemma. Imagine this one, for instance.

Korea is involved in the longest unfinished war in modern history. Caught between the interests of the Four Great Powers -- China, Japan, Russia and the United States -- the Korean War, an appendage to World War II -- a by-product of World War II -- broke out in June 1950 to stop the spread of Communism in the region and, at the same time, to secure a foothold for the West in Asia. "We never went to war ourselves," the Koreans say. "We have only fought surrogate wars."

By 1953, 37,000 U.S. soldiers had been killed in the Korean War, 350,000 Koreans, and over 100,000 Chinese -- in The War that Simply Will Not Go Away.

But military statistics do not really tell the story: As a result of the Korean War, two million civilians died or were injured and 10 million were displaced.

Families as well as the land were cut in two and talk of reunification was considered treason. The psychological and intellectual effects of the Korean War persist to this day. "Our children have been indoctrinated to hate their brothers and sisters in the North," the professor told us. "Our young intellectuals are 'disabled.' They cannot think beyond international barriers. They cannot even think of reading Karl Marx. There is no intellectual freedom. They are disabled and isolated."

Fifty-seven years later, the two Koreas remain in an uneasy cease-fire and separated by the longest militarized border in the world. A No-One's-Land, the DMZ or Demilitarized Zone, symbolizes the psychic distance between two parts of the same country and the division of families it imposes on a family-oriented culture. To this day, two million armed troops -- brothers, cousins and uncles -- stand face to face against each other, on one side or the other of the four mile Nowhere between them.

Politicians have spent the years railing at one another, playing Cold War games in the middle of what people there call a "Cold Peace," and setting up observation towers to watch one another's troops plant crops or rumble their trucks up and down the mountains while nothing else happened.

And no one did anything.

Enter one man and one small county to change the situation.

Hwacheon County borders the DMZ. It is a county of 27,000 citizens and 35,000 troops. Living in Hwacheon is like living in an armed garrison waiting, waiting, waiting for who knows what? Or when? Or where? Or why?

Hwacheon County is a narrow valley strung from one end to the other with small rice paddies, ginseng plots and vegetable gardens. There is in that place, as well, one army base after another and, oh yes, the "Peace Dam."

Built only to protect the area from flooding in the event that North Korea's Imnan Dam, 36 kilometers above it, should ever break or, heaven forbid, be deliberately opened, the Peace Dam is, in fact, a war dam. It holds no water, gives no electricity, and has no secondary function. It is simply a \$40-million-dollar bowl that is empty. Just in case.

The Peace Dam is, in other words, a metaphor for a country suspended in a war that has for long been domesticated but will not disappear. It is a distant, ever-present war cloud that hangs just over the border from Hwacheon County that to this day remembers the pain and fear and fury of it all and wants it over.

But then, one day in 2005, in a casual meeting on a village street, the local mayor, Jeong Gap-Cheol and the local philosopher, Professor Kim Yong-Bok, Chancellor of the Asia Pacific Graduate School for the Study of Life, determined that if peace would not come to Hwacheon, Hwacheon would become it themselves. (www.peacebell.co.kr[1]) "Peace begins in Hwacheon," they decided, "in Hwacheon, the Peace Capital of the World."

To prove it, they would create a World Peace Bell out of spent cartridges from around the world. They would begin to turn the DMZ, a monument to death, into a Wildlife Preserve. And they would become a center for the study of the relationship between ecology and peace, with the otter, an endangered species in their midst, as the symbol of it.

"After all," they tell you, "bells can be heard across borders and otters swim freely on both sides of the DMZ because they cannot be stopped by wire and dams."

The metal peace bell is now being fabricated and will be hung next year about this time. For now a wooden bell - which does not make a sound - marks the place.

The whole project feels almost surreal. It defies political separation. It redefines freedom as more than cease-fires. It celebrates the life that war threatens, both human and natural. But, most of all, it calls the attention of both North and South Korea -- of the entire world -- to the desire, the demand, for peace by those who refuse to go on participating in prejudice and political war games.

From where I stand, it is a very bold project. Impossible, some may say. Even foolish. But oh, so beautiful, so rational, so clear.

And, by the way, just as they thought, people are beginning to come from all parts of the globe to stand there with them at the border of 21st century insanity where a mayor, a professor, and a tiny county are saying no to war and yes to human community.

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[1] <http://www.peacebell.co.kr>