

Heart, Seoul and peace

My journey as a Korean adoptee into peace and activism | BY JACQUELYN WELLS

On June 12, the very day I flew home after a month long stay in Seoul, Donald Trump met with Jong Un Kim in Singapore and started what we hope will be an end to the Korean War.

As I turned my phone on airplane mode and drowned out the tweets regarding the summit, I let out a sigh of relief. Here I am, 70 years after the two Koreas were divided, part of a movement to end the war that played a major role in my life story. As a child growing up in America, my father said I would break his heart every night when I would pray for blonde hair and blue eyes at bedtime. My mother told me I used to voice my surprise to see a non-white face staring back at me every time I looked in the mirror.

That surprise turned into self-hatred in my 'tween years, and brought on some serious hardships well into my 20s, followed by incredible healing and transformation. Flash forward to my 31st year: I am a thriving artist/musician and a peace activist for Women Cross DMZ, living my dreams out in New York City. Women Cross DMZ (WCDMZ), a feminist peace organization, brought me to Seoul in late May for a whirlwind experience of historic events revolving around women's inclusion in the peacemaking process and major actions to end the war with a peace treaty.

Only a few days after the peacemaking events in Seoul ended, my birthmother agreed to meet me for the first time in my life, and I bonded with my biological father and two brothers in an epic course of events I could have never imagined. As I reflected on the plane ride home, I started to realize that all the moments and choices I have made in my life led to these events of the past month. Everything collided on this life-changing journey to my birthplace.

The 1950-53 Korean War sparked international adoption, with over 150,000 Korean children being sent to western countries since then. I was one of them. Like many millions of Koreans, the war permanently changed the trajectory of my life.

On May 26, 2018 I walked three



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miles along the DMZ with over 1,000 Koreans who want an end to the Korean War. A delegation of 30 international women peacemakers led by WCDMZ and The Nobel Women's Initiative traveled to South Korea from Guam, Columbia,

Russia, Hawaii, and many other countries to help shape the peace process between North and South Korea using their knowledge and expertise on peace and security.

I protested with them outside in Gwanghwamun Square after Trump initially canceled the Singapore Summit, live-streamed their press conferences, met with officials inside the U.S. Embassy in Seoul, and held candlelight vigils at night. Amidst a week of nonstop action and stress, I somehow felt that everything was falling into place. I was here to amplify the voices of these incredible human beings, many of whom had dedicated their lives to working for peace. One was even a Nobel Laureate who with another woman had forged peace in her own country.

The journey I've been on, starting when I found WCDMZ one night in 2015, up to everything that my life encompasses this very moment, has also been a path of self-discovery and an awakening. It is only now that I am starting to become aware of the connection between all the themes that have touched the world around me: Adoption, repression, oppression, shame, patriarchy, militarism, compassion, empathy, self-love. And it is only now I can see the rippling effects these forces have on us all, whether in or out of conscious awareness.

As a part-time activist and full-time feminist for the better part of my life, I always rooted for and felt intense compassion for the underdog, but never found one cause that would drive me to action until I attended a talk given by Christine Ahn, the international coordinator of WCDMZ, just after the group's inaugural Peace Walk in 2015. As Christine's tears fell on the floor of the university room where she spoke that night, something awakened inside of me.

I felt so much passion and drive to



Sung-Eun Kim, Board Chair of Women Making Peace; Nobel Peace Laureate Mairéad Maguire; and Jacquelyn Wells at the Women Cross DMZ symposium last May.

PHOTO BY STEPHEN WUNROW

help their mission that night, and that was before I truly understood why it affected me on such a deep and personal level. Specifically, I knew very little at that time about how the Korean War carried with it an immense part of my life story. Looking back, I believe I connected with Christine Ahn and the women of WCDMZ subconsciously, and on a spiritual, empathetic level. We all have our own stories of what brought us together and though they are vastly different, there is a common thread that links up our stories and bends them to this peacemaking trajectory.

The woman who gave birth to me hid my existence from my father for 31 years. What would cause her to do that? How could a woman feel that much shame in her country, where my story is just one in 100,000? Hundreds of thousands of family members were separated by the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) after World War II, and many of these families still remain divided.

The Korean family I was separated from is just one of those many thousands of family divisions that took place. From the historic peace walk along the DMZ, to the moment when I touched my birthmother's hands for the first time, I see these events as all connected. Learning about the repression caused by the Korean War and those social institutions we are forced to embrace and knowing how pain trickles down generations before someone is willing to feel it, led me to see the connection between my birthmother's repression and mine, and feel immense compassion for her.

I had been to Korea twice before. I traveled there 12 years ago in 2006 when I first learned of her exist-

ence via letter and 10 years after that in 2016. Both times, she said she could not meet me and did not feel it was the right time to tell my brothers or father about me. Why did she agree to meet me this time? Why now?

One thing my Korean mother and I both said, in our own languages, is how we believe everything in this life happens in its right time and place, perhaps even for a reason. She said that this way of thinking was the only way she got through life, by believing everything happens the way it is supposed to be, even the most painful things. Anyone who knows me would agree that this is the same doctrine by which I live my life.

She was surprised when I told her I never felt one bit of anger towards her and that I have worried about her happiness throughout my life. She said she thought of me every day and wondered often how it would have been if she had kept me. With the stigma against single mothers in Korea, she said it would have been very hard. She told me of the heartbreak she felt after she let me go and her sadness each time I left Korea when she could not meet me.

I started to understand the panic she must have felt every day of her life, not knowing where I was, how I was, or if I was I even alive. That panic likely washed over every aspect of her life, her marriage and her raising of my two brothers. In the same way, the un-ended war and separation of the two Koreas has washed over and colored the lives of generations of families it touched.

The patriarchal way of the Korean society is at the route of this repression and I learned of even more personal aspects of this repression within my family later on. As I looked into her eyes I told her, "Please do not be sorry. It was meant to happen today, not then," and I definitely feel that truth, because so many moments led up to that moment. As I held her hands, hands that looked like mine, she told me a weight had been lift-

ed off her shoulders that had been holding her down for 31 years.

I gave her jewelry I made, and the colorful *jogakbo* peace scarf worn by all the women on our Peace walk, but I assumed she would need to hide it from her (my) family as they did not know about me yet. But 20 minutes after I left her in the hotel room and waited for my car ride outside, not knowing if I would ever see her again, I saw her back as she got into her own taxi — she was wearing the peace scarf and the earrings I made her were glimmering under her hair. I knew then that I would see her again.

I believe that ending the Korean War is one step towards ending generations of pain and suffering. I am slowly releasing the shame I unknowingly harbored inside my own body from being an adopted woman of color in a white patriarchal world. I have never felt more at peace in my life and in what I am doing.

I am honored to contribute to the mission of WCDMZ, but my true love is connecting on a deeper level with the people who come into my life, whether it be with best friends, a chance meeting with a stranger, or my own family. The journey to peace is a difficult one, especially for those of us vibrating on a higher and at times more painful empathic frequency.

Knowing how my birthmother feels about everything happening in a divine way, this woman, who held me for 24 hours before a stranger took me away, made me see her connection to all the people around me, especially my boss, my own mother, and myself. My mission now is to go deeper within myself in my search for my own inner peace and to help bring peace to those around me who are needlessly suffering from shame or repression of any kind. The compassion I see for all beings affected by war and by many forms of trauma drives me to continue on this journey, because whether personal or political, we are all connected. ●

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