

A Better Life

by Chris Winston

A Meaningful Meeting

On November 30, 2002, I was given the wonderful opportunity of meeting Gwang Moon Na in Mokpo, Korea. I had asked to meet a young man who had grown up in a Korean orphanage and was willing to share his story. Gwang Moon did so readily. Gwang Moon and my son, Korean name Sang Moon, share part of their name in the way that Korean brother's share a name. They also share having spent time in a Korean orphanage - my son only for 2 1/2 years, Gwang Moon for much longer. They are not brothers by birth or adoption and have never met each other. But, there is something about Gwang Moon that is enticing, that reminds me of my son, Sang Moon.

I think the thing that links Gwang Moon and Sang Moon in my mind is a sense that they have a core of steel, some inner strength that you don't mess with. I was drawn to Gwang Moon. He told me that many years ago, when he was nine years old, he had a possibility of being adopted in Switzerland. He even said that I reminded him of his Swiss sponsor. She was sponsoring several children from Gongsangwon Orphanage at the time and chose one of the others to adopt, perhaps because Gwang Moon came as a package with his older brother and sister. He said that he does sometimes wonder how his life might have been different, but he does not romanticize.

He said, "I might have had a lot of conflicts and troubles adjusting to the language and culture." He said that the adoptees from Europe that he has met seemed confused. He wondered if he would have been that way. Yet he really felt that if that had been his life, he would have made the best of it. Adoption is not something he longed for or wishes had been. He is intelligent and thoughtful enough to know it would have been challenging in its own way.

Some how I also have the feeling that he would have made the best of what life offered him, either in Korea or in Switzerland. While talking with him, I had the most compelling feeling to tell him that had I met him when he was nine years old, I would have wanted to adopt him. When it was translated to him, he misunderstood. "No no no no," he said. "No, not now, when you were nine," I replied. Now, I realize the inappropriateness of my remarks to him. He was not wanting to be rescued. My comments were really about working out issues within myself and had nothing to do with him. He is content with his life. It made me think about all who work in adoption agencies and/or who are adoptive parents, who ever feel even a tinge of righteousness for "rescuing" kids from orphanages.

My son, Sang Moon, has the same compelling, intelligent, spine of steel quality that I saw again in Gwang Moon. That survivor skill challenged us quite a bit in the beginning. Our son had a difficult adjustment to our family and to the United States. Learning English was something he wanted to avoid. Even several years later, despite his clear intelligence, his report card in sixth grade was abysmal. It didn't stay that way, yet struggles with written English persisted even into high school. We went through a lot while connecting as family. Yet, we did connect. Still he often challenged me about our adoption of him. I remember the

following conversation with him when he was around the age of 12 and was dealing with racism at school.

As he pestered me, I asked him, "Do you think Caucasian parents should be adopting Asian children?"

"Didn't you even think about racism?!", he shouted back.

"I didn't know how to think about racism, David, I have always been in situations where my ethnicity was the majority." Would you like to move into Sacramento where there are more Asians?"

"It wouldn't help mom, YOU'D still be white."

Yet, as with Gwang Moon, I also have the feeling that Sang Moon would have made the best of what life offered him - even had he stayed in Korea. He voiced this once to a reporter at the first KAAAN conference when he was 14.

He said, "If I had stayed in Korea it might have been better or it might have been worse, but this is my life. I've got new parents now." He takes what life has to offer and makes the best of it. Like Gwang Moon, he is not wanting to be rescued, loved and understood perhaps, but not rescued.

Gwang Moon's Life In His Own Words

(Gwang Moon Na wrote his life story himself in Korean. It was translated into English by Da Hee Son of InKAS)

I was born as the youngest of three children in a small fishing village. My mother, having suffered too much from poverty and my father's mental illness, ran away. I remember making a big fuss asking my grandmother to breast feed me when I was four. It was when I was six years old that we had my grandmother's funeral. Knowing that my father was unable to take care of my siblings and me, my mother sneaked into our house one day and took us to our uncle. After my father came looking for us at our uncle's home, we had to leave. She made a desperate effort to support us, but it was too much for her to take all the responsibilities. She finally asked her grandfather's sister to take us to an orphanage. That was when I was in grade 2.

I started to learn how to live in an orphanage, but it was hard. Older kids from the orphanage constantly beat me up. These horrible experiences caused me to run away from the orphanage three times. These unforgettable experiences created personal problems for me. I had a difficulty building personal relationships and was always wearing a worried look on my face. I didn't have money to buy school supplies whereas other kids didn't have to worry about that. My self-esteem fell lower. On Thanksgiving day, when I was in grade 6, my mother made a visit to the orphanage to see my brother, sister, and me. I had such enormous anger toward her that I ran from her sight.

I remember I spent many sleepless nights worrying to death about getting art supplies when I was in junior high. It continuously floated around in my head that it would be so much different if I lived with parents. I entered a commercial high school since I had no interest in academic studies. Soon after I got into the school, I started sleeping over at a friend's house because I hated going to the orphanage. I was in the school rock band and typically started drinking and smoking. I was sinking into all sorts of social vice. My grades that used to be high in grade 10 were gradually dropping. The teachers worried and scolded me. Once when I was in grade 12, I stayed in school late practicing for the concert and fell asleep at school. When my homeroom teacher found out, he stormed at me for staying overnight in school. His scolding was eventually focused on the cause of the dramatic fall of my grades.

Completely unexpectedly, I got accepted into a local public university. It was after I entered the university that I started having symptoms of mental problems. Suffering from insomnia, I used to stay up all night and just managed to get to sleep by 7:00 the next morning. Having severe anxiety attacks, I began to take tranquilizers. I eventually had to quit school. I felt really sorry to the director of our orphanage, who had helped me.

I asked the pastor, who is the son of the director of our orphanage, for help to treat my mental illness. I was tempted to commit suicide so many times in the past. Now, looking back on those days, I do feel God was guiding me and protecting me from the temptation of suicide. After I received Jesus Christ in me and tried to live in his words and prayers for a year, a miracle happened: my mental illness disappeared. I was so grateful to God. Living as a new-born Christian, I got a call from a mental institute one day. I heard that my father was in critical condition in a hospital and needed a caretaker. My father, whom I had never called a father since I was young, was waiting for me in the Intensive Care Unit in a hospital. It had been 17 years. He was lying there like that. I was speechless. It was too challenging for me to accept that this man lying there helplessly was my father. While I took care of him in the hospital, what really comforted me was this thought, "I have so many friends in our orphanage whom have never met their fathers. Compared to them I am a happy person." I really tried my best to take care of my father. He passed away 6 months later. That was a hard time, but made me mature mentally and spiritually.

Currently I am working in Mokpo Nursing Home for the Severely Handicapped. At the same time I am attending a night college for my future. My girlfriend also works there. When I'm off the work, I help my mother who's running a small restaurant. Actually, I thank God for my life as an orphan. It has given me the insight I will need to be a therapist for people with mental illness and for orphans. I work hard today, so that potentially I may even be a pastor in the future.

Korean Children in Need of Social Welfare Services

At one time we had a universal set of children needing social welfare services in Korea. At Gongsangwon I learned that even among themselves kids in the orphanage in Korea have already subdivided themselves into subsets. There are "real orphans", "half orphans" and "false orphans." In other words some have contact with birth family to varying degrees and some don't. Most are from poor families. Sometimes though, regardless of income level, kids

are in an orphanage because of having divorced and remarried parents, single mothers or physical or mental handicaps.

Among adult Korean American adoptees there are also subsets. They were adopted at different ages. Some have contact with birth family and some don't. They come from the same variety of background circumstances as the kids who were raised in orphanages in Korea. Some have had exposure and connection to other adoptees and some haven't. Some have had connection to their Korean heritage and fellow Asian Americans and some haven't. Some have had wonderful experiences in their adoptive families, for some it has been a nightmare. Some continue to have good relationships with adoptive families and some don't. All have been raised in a country other than Korea.

It is not my intent to glorify life in an orphanage or the life of poor or families anywhere in the world. When you read Gwang Moon's story, you see that he has not had an easy time. If you lived in our house for the first six years our son, Sang Moon, was with us, you might also feel that he did not have an easy time. Yet, both Sang Moon and Gwang Moon are accepting of what life has brought to them. Both of them even have similar goals, sharing an interest in psychology. Of course, I know that we could just as easily find both someone raised in a Korean orphanage and an adoptee who have not found happiness or acceptance in their lives, because the challenges that they have faced were simply too overwhelming. The point is that no one can know whether staying in one's native country, even while living in an orphanage, or going overseas for adoption will result in the greatest happiness for any particular individual. There is too much diversity among orphans in Korea and adoptees in America to even begin to answer the question. In addition to all the other factors causing diversity in our original universal set of children needing social services in Korea, we have the inherent uniqueness of each individual and their differing reactions to life's circumstances.

Another Example

One of my best friends is a Korean American psychologist in his mid sixties, too old to have been a candidate for adoption system in Korea. He was one of eight children raised by his single illiterate mother in Korea after his father died when he was five. During the Japanese occupation they ate tree bark, grasshoppers, grass and millet. He had one outfit he wore and told me that the sleeves got shiny from wiping away snot from numerous colds in the winter when he was a little boy. Two of his siblings died of infectious diseases. One night just prior to the Korean war when he was nine, he was walking home from a school meeting with his ten year old brother and two other boys from their village. They were shot by soldiers. His brother and one of the other boys was killed in front of him before he ran for his life.

Yet, he says to me, "I am so grateful that no one ever told me I was poor. I wonder how it would have been had someone come in and taken the struggle away from me and rescued me. Who would I be?"

Instead, he found a way to get himself eventually into Seoul National University before making his own decision to immigrate. He is one of the strongest people I know and I believe that strength comes from his ownership of his own survival. Yet, it seems to me that many people

and perhaps countries have their strength sapped when they are in the position of needing to be rescued.

A Better LifeBR> Once as my daughter was adjusting to the finding of her birth family. She made the statement that by allowing her to be adopted her birth family had ruined her life.

I asked her, "Did they really make it worse, or better?"

Her answer was, "both."

In the beginning, having been given the awesome responsibility of raising someone else's child as my own, I had a strong need to believe in the rightness of what I was doing. I did believe that by adopting my children I was giving them a better life. It kept me from being wrong about wanting to be a mother so much. It kept me from feeling too sad that my gain might be someone else's loss. But, what does better mean? Better implies an alternative between two choices. Life is not that static. There are many times when our lives branch and go in different directions, making a comparison difficult. Usually a better life seems to mean educational and economic opportunities. What happens when because of reasons of emotional or intellectual limits or even because of personal choice adoptees do not take advantage of those opportunities, have we given them a "better life?" Must they succeed to prove us right? Or can it be more about their own individual struggle as a human being? I do believe that the onus of adoptive parents needing to provide and adoptees needing to succeed sits heavily on the relationship. Happiness and being better off are very subjective things.

Once someone said to me, "Had your daughter stayed in Korea, the best she could have been was a vendor in a market."

Given the love that her married birth parents show her two sisters despite their economic challenges, and the endless garage sales our daughter loves to hold in our driveway, would that have been such a bad thing?

"Giving Back"

It is for all the reasons I have stated that both adoption agencies and adoptive parents need to avoid a rescue fantasy and approach their role with humility. It is not about feeling guilty or wrong, but about accepting our own humanity. The children who left Korea and joined adoptive families in other countries did not do so by their own choice. Adoptive parents wanted them and adoption agencies in Korea were placing them as the primary means of dealing with the universal set of children needing social services in Korea.

Unquestionably in many cases, perhaps even most cases, adoptive parents and adoptees have entered into a relationship bringing joy and love to both. The meaning of Sang Moon's and our family's adoption experience is not derived from the computer in his room, the college education we can fund for him, or his red Toyota Camry in the driveway. Instead, we find meaning in the struggle we have walked through to come together as family. It is in our, his parent's, admiration of his ability never to give up and to keep on striving. It is also in his

appreciation for our continued efforts at understanding. Together it is this bond that makes our experience meaningful.

Any relationship is not well founded when one is seen as always the giver and the other always the recipient expected to be grateful. The need to be grateful gets in the way of relationship. Even in the parent child relationship, the parent gains as much or more in personal growth than does the child. Relationships work best when both parties benefit. So I wonder about those people who sometimes express the feeling that adoptees need to "give something back." Why adoptees? Is it for being rescued? Who decides that they have been rescued? To Whom are they owing? They have no reason to feel a need to "give back" any more than anyone else in this life.

It is not those who are rescued victims expected to pay back who have the most to give. The joy of community service, of making a difference in the world, is felt by every human being regardless of his circumstance, when he feels that something within himself is meaningful to others. It is those who from the strength within themselves, find something valuable to give, who gain from giving back. Perhaps part of Kwang Moon's motivation to become a pastor is to help others as he has been helped. My feeling is that it is more that his life experience has strengthened him, giving him something of value that he can be proud to share with others. For both Kwang Moon and Sang Moon, "giving back" is a demonstration of their strength and not their weakness, the timing of which is theirs to decide and should not be expected of them. "Giving back" is, as the word giving implies, a gift.

Feelings About Adoption

I believe in interethnic relationships and I believe in adoption, knowing full well that the outcome for any particular child, placed even in the best of circumstances, will remain unknown, clouded until the future arrives. As adoptive parents, we don't have to justify the validity of our experience. We do not have to prove that our children are better off with us than they might have been somewhere else. To think that way, I feel, is a detriment to a good relationship. It has helped me that whenever I have had thoughts about my own children's probable fates had I not adopted them, that I have not stayed in that space. I don't apologize for adopting my kids, because I am not all knowing. I adopted them because I wanted more kids, they were available and it seemed right. I do my best to give them the brightest lives I can. I feel lucky to have them and I just value our relationships.

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