

We keep our distance, too often . . .

I have witnessed the aftermath of horror at Dachau and I've read about the evils of Pol Pot, Idi Amin, Boko Haram and others. I've seen scarifying poverty in India, Africa and America's inner cities.

But nothing has horrified me more in recent years than the book *Escape from Camp 14: One Man's Remarkable Odyssey from North Korea to Freedom in the West*. It tells the story of the only known prisoner born in a North Korean labor camp who's ever managed to escape -- but, more than that, it describes an environment in the camps (and in North Korea as a whole) that is truly almost beyond my comprehension. A world of isolation, brainwashing and dehumanized men, women and children.

Shin Dong-hyuk was raised in a slave labor camp where almost all prisoners remain for their entire lives without possibility of release. His parents were prisoners allowed to sleep together a few nights a year as a reward for good work. He lived with his mother until he was 12, rarely saw his father. North Korean officials and camp guards told him his parents had committed crimes against the state and if he failed to work hard or disobeyed the guards he'd be punished or killed.

He witnessed dozens of executions every year. His supervisor chopped off part of his middle finger to punish him for accidentally breaking a sewing machine. He watched adult prisoners and children beaten every day and saw many prisoners die of starvation, illness, torture and work accidents. He survived by eating rats, frogs and insects -- and reporting on fellow inmates for rewards.

When he was 13 he overheard his mother and older brother planning an escape attempt, then told the custodian of his school, since "informing" was something he'd been taught to do from an early age.

But instead of being praised and rewarded, he was arrested and tortured for four days by guards who believed he was part of the plot. The guards lit a charcoal fire under his back and forced a hook into his skin so he couldn't struggle (large scars are still visible today). After seven months in a tiny concrete prison cell, he was forced to watch the public executions of his mother and brother.

At the time he was so brainwashed he felt they "deserved" their fates.

The story of Shin's escape ten years later is a harrowing one and he is now a human rights activist and international spokesperson for a nonprofit that provides aid to North Korean refugees. He's been featured on *60 Minutes* in an interview with Anderson Cooper, testified before the United Nations, and moved to South Korea to continue his work. But all that came later.



I have not been shaken this way by a book in decades. I read Elie Wiesel's *Night*, about his experiences in the Nazi concentration camps, more than 40 years ago. It was heart-breaking. *Escape from Camp 14* has bludgeoned me . . .

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Sometimes the reality of the plight escapes us. We work on our business plans, talk earnestly with investors, forge partnerships with like-minded entrepreneurs, re-fuel our Kiva accounts and attend countless conferences where we struggle with our friends and colleagues to do good in the world.

And still . . .

We keep our distance, too often. We *know* (or think we know) the burdens being borne by the people we're trying to help. But how easy is it, really, to get inside their skin?

The story of Shin Dong-hyuk has ripped away any emotional distance I had from what is happening in North Korea -- and I suspect there are people everywhere whose stories would give even the most hardened or compassionate among us pause.

So how do we do it? How do we truly understand what life is like for the people we serve in our social enterprises?

Well, my friends, most of us can't.

We're the lucky ones, the privileged ones. We can live with them, get down on the ground with them, weep with them -- but we cannot *be* them. Only those who have clawed their way out of their prisons can truly empathize with those who are still trapped. We may have helped them get out, and for that we can be grateful. But even more important is the role they play today as they speak for the ones they left behind, the ones who still need our help. Are we listening?

When the European immigrants flooded into America between 1850 and 1950, many came alone. A family scraped together enough cash for one person to book passage to the tenements of New York or the prairies of North Dakota. Then, when the first arrival had saved enough, he paid for another member of the family to join him. It continued that way for decades as families gradually re-assembled. Nobody who has ever seen Elia Kazan's film *America, America!* can ever forget the closing scene as "Joe" hustles his shoe-shine business on the streets of New York: "Hurry! Hurry! Get your shoes shined! Hurry! People are waiting!"

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Those of us who discover the power of social enterprise are constantly inspired by entrepreneurs who start programs or businesses that ease the pain and open the doors of opportunity for hundreds, thousands and sometimes millions of people. But do we spend enough time trying to genuinely understand those multitudes? Is it even possible? People in the social enterprise and nonprofit sectors, good people, still slip into a "we know what's best for you" attitude. How many of us truly *listen* to what the people we serve are saying?

Sometimes we need to be thrown up against a wall before we hear anything at all. I was a white-bread suburban boy from Minneapolis when I joined the Peace Corps in the spring of 1968. We were bound for India but did three months of training in Southern California. During our stay we were driven into Watts for “sensitivity training” at Operation Bootstrap.

Watts had nearly burned to the ground during the race riots that hit dozens of American cities in 1965 and Operation Bootstrap rose from the debris, a self-help social enterprise that rejected grants and government subsidies. Equipped with stores, factories, night schools, and a fine arts theater, the organization was pursuing what we now call sustainability.

A few weeks prior to our visit, Watts conducted its annual Summer Festival, a Bootstrap innovation to show other communities the fruits of its work, inviting others to come and take a look. “You know,” one of the leaders told us, “we’ve been doing this for three years and not one of the white communities has turned around and done the same for us.” And in ’68 it was even worse: Violence simmered again and blacks were slain. All of which provided added fuel for the violent wing of the Black Power movement, whose leaders wanted to ignite a bloodbath between blacks and whites.

Operation Bootstrap practiced a different kind of “Black Power”; it didn’t embrace the violence of the Black Panthers and other radical movements. Instead, co-founder Lou Smith and his colleagues held out hope that there *was* a way for blacks and whites to communicate and live together. Smith himself spent a lot of his time trying to get those of us with paler skins to listen. But he didn’t feel many of us did, and to him that was the greatest tragedy in our system. We’d lost the *ability* to listen.

It was a *loong* evening that night in Watts. There were about 200 people in the room. Smith and half a dozen other Operation Bootstrap staff members went nose to nose with us and screamed at us about the racism they knew lived inside us, despite our denials. Screamed at us, then mocked us. Challenged every assumption we’d been holding about ourselves for all our young lives, revealing the prejudice we’d been denying, *forcing* us to *listen*.

I wrote a five-part series about Smith and Operation Bootstrap and sent it to the newspaper I’d been working for back home in Minnesota. The editors refused to run it.

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During a visit to Japan in the early ‘90s, I met Aichy Tamori, Vice President of the country’s International Cooperation Agency, and asked him why Japan would want to be involved in overseas development work. “I am a Buddhist,” he said, “and being an ‘enlightened’ Buddhist means you strive to feel the pains of other people as your own . . . ”

Few of us in the United States are Buddhists. But if we listen, really listen, to the people we serve, perhaps we can momentarily hear what they’re saying. And then, despite the arrogance ingrained in our nature and our inability to fully empathize, maybe we can help them and others like them. Maybe.

“Hurry! Hurry! People are waiting!”

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***Escape from Camp 14: One Man’s Remarkable Odyssey from North Korea to Freedom in the West*, by former Washington Post journalist Blaine Harden, was published by Penguin Books in 2012.**