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"A Curious Scientist's Approach to Understanding Others as People"

Hi, I'm Joe Terwilliger. I felt it a bit strange when I first got the request from Alexander Mansourov to speak on theology and Pacific Rim culture, since I'm a human biologist and I don't claim to know anything about theology, except what I've gleaned from these conferences. This is my second time attending and I've learned a lot by just being around everybody here.

As Alexander said, my work is mainly in human genetics. In this field we're really interested in studying the variation among human beings. What makes us different; what makes us the same? I work with human beings. When you want to study biology you cannot do experiments. Alexander, I'd like you and Cheryl to give me ten babies so I can put them in cages and feed them different foods to see what happens to them. We can't do that.

Instead we have to look for situations in the world or historical experience that have led to a kind of end, like an experiment you would want to do. When I see the world, see people, or work with different cultures and different populations, I try just to observe, learn, study, try to understand what makes people as different as they are; and then I try to figure out what's going on in terms of biology or in terms of other areas. I am a very curious person as a scientist; but in fact I don't know anything about international relations, politics, theology, or any of this. I just know that I'm curious and I see a question. I want to answer the question, I want to understand it.

I started my career doing a study; the first study of this type I did was in Venezuela, as Alexander mentioned. We found an interesting population of native people all living in one community, with 5,000 people in one family. I, like everyone here, love families. Families are also great for our research, because we want to study what makes families similar. Why are people in the same family more similar to each other? Are people in the same culture and ethnic group? What makes them the same or different? Those 5,000 people were all exposed to all kinds of nasty things in Venezuela. There are all kinds of pollution from the oil industry. They all have worms in their stomachs. All kinds of problems there. There's a lot of violence: if somebody wants to kill someone he can rent a gun for an hour. He does what he has to do and then gives it back, so the same gun is used in every crime, and they never can find out who did it. It's not like on CSI, where they can trace the gun. Then one might conclude this is a terrible population with terrible health; but what we find is that if they live to the age of forty they live to be a hundred. Their brains look perfect. Their health is good. They have no cardiovascular disease, cancer, or anything else.

To me that poses a great question. Why is it that they live in such bad conditions yet are still so healthy? One answer was that, in this case, it might be the worms. We were appalled when we saw a defector who had run across the DMZ last year. They found worms in his stomach and, although that is horrible, do you remember in South Korea perhaps 20 years ago when everyone took pills for worms? It was common; there were everywhere in the human species. The immune system we have grew up together with the worms. Like an army, they had an enemy too, and humans lived in symbiosis. There was a stable relationship between the two. What happens if one removes the worms and the system attacks itself? Then a big uprising takes place.

Here is an interesting question that is only answerable if you can just look at it like this: We find some unusual thing in society that looks bad. Then you look at it closely, you realize our concepts of what's good or bad for health or anything else aren't always what you think they are.

When a question arises, I always want to look. We think this is something bad, but I want to go look at it and see if it is really bad for people. You look at it and you ask the question. You take advantage of what occurs by chance in nature and you inquire into it. This is how I studied.

I started studying Korean language in college. During my course I found a book on Koreans in Central Asia. I wondered, "Why are Koreans in Central Asia? How did they get there? Why are they so out of place? What are they doing in Kazakhstan with no end in sight?" I'd never heard of Kazakhstan. I was curious: here's an odd quirk of reality. This becomes a question I want to find the answer to: "Why are they there?" As a geneticist I thought, "Hmm… These two populations have the same genes yet they live in entirely different environments."

Here's how it happened: in northern Joseon in the 1800s there was a series of floods and famines. Not all calamities are due to oppressive regimes; nature plays a big role in the turn of events. They had a big problem long before the division of North and South was an issue, and they fled to Russia because there was plenty of land in the Russian Far East where they could cultivate the soil and grow crops. Then in 1937 Stalin deported the entire Korean population of the Russian Far East to Kazakhstan, taking them from their ancestral homes near the ocean to the farthest place on earth from the sea. The Soviets erased all the Korean culture in these people. Eventually their culture changed and their language was lost. It's similar to agriculture. When you study corn you grow the same breed in different soils with different fertilizers and different crops, and watch what happens to them. That's how it's done in science.

I was fascinated by Korean history, particularly the sorrow of the fifty years (1904-1954) that led to Koreans being spread all over the world, isolated from each other in these widely separate places. It makes for a fascinating scientific experiment. No one would ever want to do that to people, but when it happened because of history you can go and ask the questions.

Well, what's the difference? How do genes and environment both contribute to who we are? They certainly do. So we asked the question. I looked at Koreans in Kazakhstan and in China, who until about year 2000 were mainly connected to North Korea and very little with South Korea. Now it's the opposite, but that changed very fast. There were these separate groups.

Another interesting group was the children of Swedish soldiers stationed at the DMZ. After the war some children were born, but they didn't fit well into South Korean society. So many of them were adopted internationally to Sweden. The program worked so well they started doing that with ethnically pure Korean children born to families suffering in poverty following the Korean War. Here you had a whole group of people who are completely Korean, but your parents are adoptive. It becomes an interesting question of how they are different and what makes them so.

I got very curious and wanted to use this to answer a question. I was working in China and Kazakhstan and met people from North Korea. They were nothing like the stereotype I had imagined. You may have read about North Korea and heard what it's like. You might get a concept of brainwashed people walking around in a certain way, all wanting to kill the world and destroy everybody. But when you meet them you find they're surprisingly friendly.

They said, “Hi, how are you?” very innocently, in Korean. They would say a phrase, “*sobaka da*” which pretty much describes it. They have a simple, naïve, child-like manner. I reflected, “This isn't at all what I expected.”

Being a scientist, I'm curious, so I asked a question and talked to them. The more I talked to them and tried to understand them, without making any judgments, I learned a lot about what makes them tick, why and how they are different. It is a different society from what we live in.

I had my first chance to visit Kazakhstan in 2010 as a curious tourist. Again with an initial introduction, I thought I knew everything because I had read books about the place, but when I arrived I found nothing was like I expected. It was very different; but not in the way I supposed.

For me personally, if I just think of my own political views, I'm libertarian or conservative. I don't like being told what to do by anyone. I like to think freely; that's how I always imagined everything should be. The more freedom you have the better. North Korea is about as opposite from that as you can possibly get. That makes me curious. I'm fascinated by the organism of society and how it functions. “How do people live in this society? Are they really different?”

I returned a couple of years later on my own, spending ten days touring North Korea. That's how I met Dr. Mansourov. I became more and more curious. Each time I thought I understood it, something else happened that I didn't quite understand. I’m no political expert, cultural expert, or politician. I have no government role, and as such I'm not threatening. I just go and talk with people, build bridges, and make connections. It was a fascinating, eye-opening experience.

I had the chance a couple of years after that to visit Young Gun in China. Again I worked with Chinese Koreans. There was a summer class on North Korean dialect and I was fascinated. I wanted to learn about this. A professor from North Korea taught Korean to foreigners, so I joined the class and just listened. As a scientist I am always thinking of my role. When I visit different countries and cultures and interact with people I try to think of it in different ways.

Did you see the TV show *Star Trek*? Captain Kirk said the prime directive is to not interfere in foreign civilizations but simply observe and learn from the experience. That was my approach. When I went to North Korea I had the chance to teach at Pyongyang University of Science and Technology. Most of the faculty are evangelical Christians from the USA of Korean descent who go there to teach science, business, and capitalism. They want to learn about capitalism, English, business, biology. I think, “That's great!” You teach them things they want to learn. We can expose people to us and learn about them. To me it was a fascinating opportunity to really get to know people and build bridges. You talk to them and begin to think about them. The more time I spent the more I realized that they're exactly the same as us, with the same concerns as everyone I know. I have a lot of friends now in the North and all they care about is, “What's going on with my children; the child's misbehaving at school; he didn't do his homework, I’ve got to punish him, he went behind the school and was caught smoking, he was drinking.” Like that.

It’s the same as in America; it's not different. This is not the way North Korea is depicted. My people think they're all in cages running around, not living as normal people, but life is surprisingly normal. It's almost boring. There's not a lot to do. You're just with your family and friends. I've had a lot of really interesting experiences that have been very positive, as a result of dealing with people as people and just trying to learn.

Whenever I talk with experts in politics or anything else, they approach the problem with a model in their mind. “This is how they think and this is how we think.” They never reach a point

of understanding the other because they go on thinking these guys are good and those guys are evil. We wear white hats and they wear black hats. People don't try to understand or talk to one another. But that's what I've always tried to do when I've been there.

I had a chance to go there with Dennis Rodman, organizing his trips and helping translate for him when he met with Chairman Kim. He was very friendly, open, and frank with us. We treated him like one of the guys and he treated each of us like normal people. It wasn't anything like you might imagine. Just two people talking to each other. It is an interesting story.

Dennis' agent wrote a book about the trip, explaining how Dennis ended up going there. He said, "Well, he got a contract offer from *Vice* magazine asking if he would go to North Korea to play basketball with the Harlem Globetrotters. His agent said, "Sure," thinking, "K-pop and Psi. Wonderful." He had no idea there were two Koreas! He just went there with the attitude, "Yeah, sure. God wants to meet me. Sure, I'll meet him." When he was there at the game I translated for him and Kim Jong-un. Dennis asked Kim, "Can I meet Psi?" and Kim Jong-un replied, "I would like to meet him. Can you help me?"

The point is, when you treat people as people, they treat you as people. You talk to him as a normal person, he talks to you like that, and you build a relationship that you can go forward from. That's how it is with all human beings. That's what this conference is about from what I see. People here disagree about more fundamental things than Kim Jong-un and Deng Xiaoping disagree about. Religion is an intimately personal thing; it's what you believe. It's the centerpiece of one's life and ideology. People here are Muslims, Jews, Christians, everything. They disagree about things far more significant, yet they come here because they find a commonality between them, a common shared experience. Isn't that kind of what's missing in international relations?

We know what we want: we don't want North Korea to have nuclear weapons. Well, if you were Kim Jong-un, what would you want? He told Dennis and me personally, "You Americans made a deal with Qaddafi from Libya. You said, 'If you get rid of your nuclear weapons we'll give you a guarantee of security.' Then you killed Qaddafi." He continued, "You made Saddam Hussein allow weapons inspectors into his country. The weapons inspectors said there were no weapons of mass destruction there. You didn't believe the weapons inspectors and you killed Saddam Hussein. Why would I trust the security guarantee when America is putting forth an active policy saying, 'We don't have any intention to invade. We will always honor our treaties. We will not make first use of nuclear weapons,' while off the table they say, 'We want to change the regime.'" That's no secret — no one's pretending otherwise. He said, "I'm not that stupid. I don't want to blow anybody up. I don't want to do anything like that, but what should I do?"

The point is that those two worldviews contrast diametrically, and neither one is trying to understand the other guy's perspective as people are doing in this room and at this conference. You're trying to understand the other guy and get along with him. Reverend Moon went to North Korea to talk to Kim Il-sung, and also met with Gorbachev. He didn't like what they believed in, but he talked with them. Why do you talk with someone? You can find common ground, you can build a bridge, you can go somewhere, build a hotel, start a car company in the North. Isn't that a way to start interacting with people so they don't see you as the bad guy? Students talk to me openly about things I'm surprised they would be open about. You build trust through interaction. You show people that you're not trying to kill them; you're just like they are.

Dennis Rodman went to North Korea with a team of African-Americans to play basketball with the North Korean team. The first half was us versus North Korea. The second half, each team had half North Koreans and half Americans playing together. The basketball was much more interesting because the North Koreans were short but fast and they could really shoot. The Americans were tall and slow, old and fat, but they were big. It was a boring game when they played against each other, but when they played together it was wonderful because they each contributed to it. The images we all wish came out to the world from that game were these African-American guys and these North Koreans arm-in-arm playing a game and cheering for each other. To me that's what it's about.

You've got to start somewhere. I'm just a scientist. I go to different countries. I was in Libya working with Libyans last week because my university and University of Tripoli were trying to start academic collaboration so we can help them recover their academic culture after the civil war they're caught up in. The president of University of Tripoli was an old colleague of mine as a graduate student. We worked together to find the gene for lactose intolerance. We build these connections and stay in touch. We try to use that to do something positive there.

You can work in any of these countries. You can build a relationship with people only if you're a private person, it seems. I'm not a threat. I'm not government, I have no issues. I'm not judging people. I'm not telling them how to live. I'm just listening to them. I think that goes along with the theological way of viewing the world. The religious way is to embrace other people, love your enemies; talk to them, treat them with respect, and seek some way to get along.

This is just the view of a dumb scientist, a tuba player who knows little about theology, who knows nothing about foreign relations or diplomacy. I want nothing to do with government; I don't want to be part of it. I don't like being there if they tell me what to do. I want to get along with people. If they are someone like Kim Jong-un it can be a good thing. You build a friendship and show him there are Americans he can trust. Likewise, we're hoping someone picks up the ball from Dennis. He can catch the rebound, run with it, and score something.

After we met Kim Jong-il in 2013 we returned to the U.S. No one in the government knew we were going because we kept it quiet. We just went to play basketball. The administration was unhappy, and no one wanted anything to do with Dennis. They disowned him, and he suffered enormous consequences for going there even though he didn't understand. Because the guy likes me, we started a conversation. I started by explaining how I came. He likes me so maybe we can do something, build on that, and open the door. There's only one person who called us wanting a conversation, and that was Donald Trump. Dennis Rodman and Donald Trump are old friends because Dennis was on his TV show "Celebrity Apprentice" during the '80s and '90s. He called Dennis to his office and said, "What you did is wonderful. Anything you do to start a conversation with these people and talk to them is better than shooting at them."

That's President Trump. I think this is something to be said for him. He honestly wants to solve the problem. I don't think he or anyone knows how, but at least steps are being made to get over it and build a peaceful future. I'm optimistic. Things haven't gone as well as we hoped. For me it's tragic that I'm no longer allowed to go there. We now have travel bans like the USSR had, preventing us from leaving. Let's hope that is eventually lifted and something can be done before it's too late. Let's go to meet our counterparts and reach out to them in any way possible.

Thank you for your time and for listening to an idiot who knows nothing about theology!