

## Dark windshields, island living

My hope is that the desire for change goes deeper than politics

Apr 22, 2016



I couldn't figure out why, but it really bothered me. Why are there so many cars in Korea with dark windshields? The occupants drive around shut off from the eyes on the streets around them. I thought dark windshields were only for security reasons — hiding important persons inside and all that.

Another Korean mystery has hit me. I was born in Korea but emigrated to the United States as a youth. I have traveled to Korea often in the decades since but only for short visits. Recently, I have been staying longer, for a few months at a time. The longer visits mean I am seeing things with new eyes.

While wondering about the dark windshields, I had a few other experiences which finally coalesced to give me what I think is the answer to my puzzlement.

First, I spoke to an old friend, who is a pillar of the conservative establishment. He told me of being disillusioned about members of the elite being increasingly out to “get theirs,” by making sure they monetize their positions or get some sinecure at a government-owned institution. There seems to be less and less interest in what is good for the general public.

Second, I had a wonderful meeting with the president of Yonsei University, Kim Yong-hak. He related his vision for his university and its place in Korea and the world. I cannot say it better than how he writes it in his welcome to Yonsei on the university's website:

"In the future, empathy and sharing will be just as important as creative thought. Yonsei will drive the effort to address such an 'empathetic society' by raising leaders who practice sharing. For in this society of the future, the pursuit of personal gains will be replaced by mutual respect and the sharing of joys and sorrows with others; society will shift away from its 'survival of the fittest' mentality and look toward self-expression, and individualism will turn to collectivism."

Third, like everyone, I was struck by the results of the National Assembly elections. There is clearly a deep dissatisfaction with the status quo.

And finally, it all came together to give me my answer when I was shopping and looked up to see the magnificent bell tower of Myeongdong Cathedral. It brought to mind one of my favorite poems, by the English poet John Donne. Christian churches often ring their bells at funerals. Donne begins: "No man is an island, Entire of itself. Each is a piece of the continent, A part of the main..."

Donne ends by writing that when you hear a church bell ring, "...send not to know For whom the bell tolls, It tolls for thee."

The dark windshields are part of a melancholy trend in Korea, it seems to me, as individuals try to cut themselves off from their fellow man, try to "get theirs," think they are living in a "survival of the fittest" world in which they have to think of themselves first and seek isolation and protection from the outside, to try to live on their own secure island.

It looks like I am not the only one to witness this. The voting public seems also to have sensed that there are discouraging trends and have put some of their hope in new faces for change.

But my hope is that the desire for change goes deeper than politics. The Korea of my youth seemed to be more about the connectedness of people, Donne's "no man is an island." In the future, when we see a bell tower, or hear bells ring, I hope we can be reminded that for whatever reason a human is ringing those bells, that person is also ringing for us, because we, too, are human.

\*The author is CEO of CBOL Corporation, a California-based aerospace firm. He is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations, a co-founder of the Pacific Century Institute, and was a 2012-13 fellow at Harvard University's Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation.

Spencer H. Kim

▶ 다른 뉴스 더보기