

Dealing with tragedy

May 21, 2014.



As a young man in the 1930s, I remember being taken by my parents to hear a Methodist minister named E. Stanley Jones give a talk on life and how to live it. His theme has stuck in my mind, all these years. It was "It's not what happens to you, it's how you take it that matters." When I heard Jones speak, I was dealing with tuberculosis, and did not feel very good about myself. Jones's thought helped me a lot.

Donald Gregg

That same theme comes strongly to my mind today as I watch how differing countries are dealing with sudden tragedies that have taken the lives of hundreds of innocent people: Malaysia's loss, "into thin air" of a fully loaded modern jet aircraft; South Korea's loss of an overloaded, mishandled ferry boat; Nigeria's loss of hundreds of young women, stolen out of their school by Muslim fanatics; and Turkey's loss of hundreds of coal miners trapped below the surface of the earth.

No government measures, or heroic individual actions taken in the wake of tragedy, can fully compensate or console the families who have lost loved ones. But life goes on, and how it goes on is shaped by actions taken by those in authority. As I apply the Jones yardstick to the four tragedies mentioned above, Korea comes out relatively well.

Malaysia still seems baffled by its loss, reluctant to admit incompetence, and fearing the possible revelation of culpability on the part of the jet's crew.

The Nigerian government's reaction to the stealing of its girls is revolting. The Nigerian military is fearful and incompetent. The corruption that suffuses Nigeria has produced human trafficking on a staggering scale. This week's Time magazine says that the UN Office on Drugs and Crime calls Nigeria "one of the top countries of origin for human trafficking," and that "some estimates suggest that 60 percent of the prostitutes in Italian brothels come from Nigeria."

Turkey's troubles today remind me in a way of South Korea in 1987, when massive political protests forced the despotic Chun Doo Hwan to allow a direct presidential election to take place. The late and great Kim Kyung-won, often referred to as "Korea's Kissinger," put it this way in a 1994 speech in York, Ontario: "Democracy comes only if the bricks are laid one at a time, and are accompanied by economic modernization. Eventually it becomes inevitable, the only possible choice. In South Korea, authoritarian government became untenable because the Korean bourgeoisie would no longer tolerate being treated like children." How Turkey's

authoritarian government reacts to today's massive protests is not at all clear.

In Korea, steps are being taken to hold those directly responsible for the sinking of the ship, its captain and crew, fully accountable. Next will come those responsible for the overloading of the ship, causing it to founder. Finally, and most importantly, steps need to be taken to restore those safety regulations, removed by the Lee Myung-bak administration in response to pressure from the "chaebol," that contributed directly to the ferry's loss.

Dr. Kim's terminology is helpful here: Lee removed some of the regulatory foundation for economic modernization in Korea, ("bricks laid one at a time") and took Korea back toward its authoritarian past. Park Geun-hye needs to put those regulations back in place. If and when she does, Korea will move on, still wounded, but healing.

*The author is a former U.S. ambassador to Korea.

By Donald Gregg

AD

