

Humanity in the Enemy's Eyes

Video transcript

[TedxIndianaUniversity logo and words appear: ALL TOO HUMAN]

[Image of Euna Lee and words appear: EUNALEE]

[IUSA, IU Grand Challenges, Hutton Honors College, Indiana University Foundation logos and words appear: IU Research]

Euna Lee speaks: I recently read about what the young generation of workers want in Harvard Business Review. One thing that stuck out to me was don't just talk about impact but make an impact.

I'm little bit older than you, maybe much older than you but this is exactly the same goal that I had when I was in college. I wanted to make my own impact for those who live under injustice. The reason that I became a documentary journalist, the reason I became the prisoner in North Korea for 140 days.

It was March 17, 2009, it was Saint Patrick's Day for all of you but it was the day that turned my life upside down. My team and I were making a documentary about North Korean refugees living below human life in China. We were at the border. It was our last day of filming.

[PowerPoint slide appears: Image of frozen river winding between the mountains]

There was no wire fence or bars or signs to show that it is a border but this is a place where a lot of North Korean defectors use as an escape route.

It was still winter and the river was frozen. When we were in the middle of the river, on the frozen river, we were filming about the conditions of the cold weather and the environment the North Koreans had to deal with when they seek freedom. Suddenly one of my team members shouted, "Soldiers."

I looked back and there was two small soldiers in green uniforms with rifles chasing after us. We all ran as fast as we could. I prayed please don't let them shoot my head. I was thinking that if my feet are on Chinese soil I'll be safe. I make it to Chinese soil. Then I saw my colleague, Laura Ling, fell on her knees. I didn't know what to do at that short moment but I knew that I could not leave her alone there when she's said, "Euna, I can't feel my legs."

In a flash we were surrounded by these two Korean soldiers. They were not much bigger than us but they were determined to take us to their army base. I

begged and yelled for any kind of help, hoping that someone would show up from China. Here I was being stubborn to a trained soldier with a gun. I looked at his eyes. He was just a boy. At the moment he raised his rifle to hit me but I saw that he was hesitating, his eyes were shaking and his rifle was still up in the air. I shouted at him, "Okay, okay, I'll walk with you," and I got up.

When we arrived at their army base my head was spinning with these worst case scenarios. My colleague's statement wasn't helping. She said, "We are the enemy." She was right, we were the enemy. I was supposed to be frightened too but I kept having these odd experiences. This time an officer brought me his coat to keep me warm because I lost my coat on the frozen river while battling with one of these soldiers.

I'll tell you what I mean by these odd experiences. I grew up in South Korea. To us, North Korea was always the enemy, even before I was born. South and North have been under armistice for 63 years since the end of the Korean War. Growing up in the South in the eighties and nineties we were taught propaganda about North Korea. We heard so many graphic stories such a little young boy being brutally killed by North Korean spies because he just said I don't like Communists.

[PowerPoint slide appears: Cartoon image of a boy thrusting a spear at a fat red pig]

Or I watched this cartoon about a young South Korean boy defeating this fat big red pig which represented the North Korean's first leader at the time.

The fact that we're hearing these horror stories over and over instilled one word in a young mind, enemy. I think at some point I dehumanized them. The people of North Korea became equated the North Korean government.

Now back to my detention. It was the second day of being in a cell. I had not slept since I was out at the border. This young guard came to my cell and offered me this small boiled egg and said this will give you strength to keep going. Do you know what it is like receiving a small kindness in an enemy's hand? Whenever they were kind to me I thought the worst case was waiting for me after the kindness. One officer noticed my nervousness said, "Did you think we were all these red pigs?" Referring to the cartoon I just showed you.

Every day was like a psychological battle. The interrogator had me sit at a table six days a week and had me writing down about my journey, my work, over and over until I wrote down the confession that they wanted to hear. About three months of detention the North Korean court sentenced me to 12 years in a labor camp. I was just sitting in my room to be transported.

At the time I really had nothing else to do so I paid attention to these two female guards, listening to what they were talking about. Guard A was older and she studied English. She seemed like she came from an affluent family. She often showed up with these colorful dresses and then loved to show off. Guard B was a younger one and she was a really good singer. She loved to sing Celene Dion's "My Heart Will Go On." Sometimes too much. She just knew how to torture me without knowing.

This girl spent a lot of time in the morning to put on make-up like you can see in any young girl's life. They loved to watch this Chinese drama, a better quality production. I remember Guard B said I can no longer watch our TV shows after watching this. She got scolded for degrading her own country's produced TV show. Guard B had more of a free mind than Guard A and she got often scolded by Guard A whenever she expressed herself.

One day they invited all these female colleagues, I don't know where they came from, to where I was held. They invited me to their guard's room and asked if one night stands really happened in the U.S. This is the country where young peoples are not even allowed to hold hands in public. I had no idea where they had got this information. They were shy and giggling even before I said anything. I think they forgot that I was their prisoner. It was like going back to my high school classroom again. I learned that these girls also grew up watching a similar cartoon but just propaganda towards South Korea and the U.S.

[PowerPoint slide appears: Cartoon image on the left of a boy thrusting a spear at a fat red pig with word "SOUTH" above it; Cartoon image on the right of three foxes dressed in green military uniforms holding rifles, standing near a military vehicle, surrounding a small cat dressed in a military uniform in a grassy field with the word "NORTH" above it]

I started to understand where these people's anger was coming from. If these girls grew up learning that we are enemies it was just natural they would hate us just as I feared them. At the moment we were just all girls who shared the same interests beyond our ideologies that separated us.

I share these stories with my boss at Korean TV at the time, after I came home. His first reaction was, "Have you heard of Stockholm Syndrome?" Yes, and I clearly remember the feeling of fear and being threatened. Tension rising up between me and the interrogator when we talked about politics. There definitely was a wall that we couldn't climb over but we were able to see each other as human beings when we talked about family, everyday life, the importance of a future for our children.

It was about a month before I came home, I got really sick. Guard B stopped by my room to say goodbye because she was leaving the detention center. She made sure that no one watched us, no one hears us and quietly said, "I hope you get better and go back to your family soon."

It is these people, the officer who brought me his coat, the guard who offered me a boiled egg, these female guards who asked me about dating life in the U.S. They are the ones that I remember of North Korea, humans just like us. North Koreans and I were not ambassadors of our countries but I believed that we were representing the human race.

Now I'm back home and back to my life. The memory of these people has blurred as time has passed. I'm in this place where I read and hear about North Korea provoking the U.S., I realize how easy it is to see them as an enemy again. I have to keep reminding myself that when I was over there I was able to see humanity over hatred in my enemy's eyes. Thank you.

[Audience claps and Euna Lee exits stage]

[Logo words appear: ALL TOO HUMAN]

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