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THE BIG IDEAS

The Humanity We Can't Relinquish

Searching for a shared humanness in North Korea.

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By Pico Iyer
Mr. Iyer is the author of many books on the customs, religions and cultures of countries around the world.

NARA, Japan — We'd just emerged from a long and rather liquid dinner on a barge along the Taedong River, in the heart of North Korea's showpiece capital of Pyongyang. Two waitresses had finished joining our English tour guide, Nick, in some more than boisterous karaoke numbers. Now, in the bus back to the hotel, one young local guide broke into a heartfelt rendition of "Danny Boy." His charming and elegant colleague, Miss Peng — North Korea is no neophyte when it comes to trying to impress visitors — was talking about the pressures she faced as an unmarried woman of 26, white Chanel clip glinting in her hair. Another of our minders — there were four or five for the 14 of us, with a camera trained on our every move for what we were assured was a "souvenir video" — kept saying, "You think I'm a government spy. Don't you?"

But I was back in North Korea because nowhere I'd seen raised such searching questions about what being human truly involves. Nowhere so unsettled my easy assumptions about what "reality" really is. The people around me clearly wept and bled and raged as I did; but what did it do to your human instincts to be told that you could be sentenced, perhaps to death, if you displayed a picture of your mother

— or your granddaughter — in your home, instead of a photo of the Father of the Nation? Did being human really include not being permitted to leave your hometown, and not being allowed to say what you think?

I've never doubted that humanity is a privilege, even if we, as the animals who think, are also the creatures who agitate, plot and fantasize. Governments try to suppress this at times, and many of us in the freer world now imprison ourselves by choosing to live through screens, or to see through screens, like the Buddhist demagogue Ashin Wirathu who, in defiance of the shared humanness that the Buddha worked so hard to elucidate, compares his Muslim neighbors in Myanmar to wolves and jackals. More and more of us these days seem to be living at post-human speeds determined by machines, to the point where we barely have time for kids or friends. But if we're feeling less than human — or pretending we can engineer mortality away — for most of us it's a choice we're making, and can unmake tomorrow.

In my home of more than 30 years, Japan, nobody thinks twice about being married by a robot or apologizing to a pencil after you throw it across a room. My neighbors rattle on cheerfully about "2.5 dimensional characters" and "demi-humans;" their government has appointed the mouthless cartoon cutie Hello Kitty and a 22nd-century blue robotic cat named Doraemon as cultural ambassadors. Lines between animate and inanimate run differently in an animist Shinto universe where — you see this in the beautiful films of Hayao Miyazaki — every blade of grass or speck of dust is believed to have a spirit.

A robot of Doraemon, one of Japan's cultural ambassadors, at Taobao City in Hangzhou, China, in 2015. VCG/VCG, via Getty Images

In Japan, as in its neighbor North Korea, a human is often taken to be part of a unit, a voice in a choir; her job may be to be invisible, inaudible and all but indistinguishable from those around her. At the Family Romance company in Tokyo, 1,200 actors stand ready to impersonate, for a price, a child's absent father, for years on end, or a wife's adulterous lover. The Henn-na Hotel in Nagasaki describes itself as the world's "first hotel staffed by robots."

But all this means only that the boundaries of what it is to feel human emotion are stretched, to the point of including motes of pollen or the railway carriages people bring presents for. Even the dead are treated as human in Japan. After my mother-in-law passed away in February, her closest relatives never stopped chattering to her, setting out a glass of her favorite beer next to her coffin, applying blush to her waxen cheeks. My wife still puts food out for her father five years after he was placed into the earth; this month our son will return home because his departed grandfather and grandmother are believed to be visiting for three days then as well.

To me this only confirms the visceral sense many of us have that holiness and humanness may be more closely entwined than we imagine. Speaking to the Dalai Lama for 44 years now, I'm often most touched when he stresses how mortal he is, sometimes impatient, sometimes grieving, just like all the rest of us. I keep returning to the novels of Graham Greene because he reminds us that a "whisky priest" can get drunk, neglect every duty, even father a child, yet still rise to a level of kindness and selflessness that a pious cardinal might envy. It's in our vulnerability, Greene knew, that our strength truly lies (if only because our capacity to feel for everyone else lies there, too).

For more than 30 years now I've been traveling — to Yemen, to Easter Island, to Ethiopia — to see what humanness might be, beneath differences of custom and circumstance and race. I've watched young mothers dodging bullets, children living in garbage dumps, those whom disease has left far from most of the

capacities and restraints we associate with being human. If circumstances change, however, I never doubt that the humanness of just about every one can be recovered.

The first time I visited North Korea, 24 years before my evening on the barge, my guide led me, during my last afternoon in the city, up a hill. It was just the two of us. Below were the cutting-edge (if often uninhabited) skyscrapers, the amusement parks and spotless, wide boulevards his government had created out of what, only 35 years before, had been rubble, a demolished city in which, North Koreans claim, only two buildings remained upright.

My guide wasn't unworldly; he'd studied for three years in Pakistan and spoke Urdu and English. He knew that his sense of what it is to lead a human life was very different from mine. But what he said was, "Don't listen to my propaganda. Just tell your friends back in America what you've seen here."

Was he going off script for a moment — or only offering an even craftier set of lines his directors had given him? I couldn't tell. But I could feel that he was appealing to something human in me and whatever understanding two humans can share, even if they come from opposite worlds. Official Pyongyang seems the last word in inhumanity to me, but as my guide kept waving and waving goodbye while I passed through immigration, I felt with fresh power how no one can fully deprive us of our humanity but ourselves.

Pico Iyer is the author of many books, including "The Man Within My Head," "The Art of Stillness" and the forthcoming "Autumn Light," a book on Japan.

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