

*Written by Candilla Park, Groton Academy Editor  
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As someone who participated in competitive debate for years (Public Forum in middle school, Oregon and Parliamentary in high school), I've regularly contemplated the meaning of discussion. Debate, for one, somehow makes perfect training for the both the worst and best discussions.

I say "worst" because debaters can never abandon their post, even if they've quietly become convinced by their opponents. Admitting loss ruins any chance of winning the round. But, I also say "best" because debaters also diligently prepare to fight both sides of the resolution, think from both perspectives, argue both the pro's and con's. Good debaters must be passionately and simultaneously convinced by opposite viewpoints of the same issue. As a result, debate has planted a bit of an obnoxious devil's advocate within me, but it's also taught me to consider contradictory opinions. I found this surprisingly useful when I went to South Korea this summer to teach English to North Korean refugee children.

I'm in a particularly curious position when it comes to North Korea: my parents are from South Korea, had me in Guam, and raised me in the mainland states. This summer, North Korea and the United States engaged in a war of words regarding the former's nuclear missile program and speculation simultaneously rose about the particular vulnerability of Guam, the American territory nearest to the totalitarian state.

News about North Korea is always centered around the crazy government, Kim Jong-un, or their nuclear weapons. It never speaks of the people. "North Korea would never start a war with us – it'd be stupid. We could bomb their entire country in seconds," is an opinion I've heard too many times from both boarding school students and the general public, unfortunately. This rationale completely ignores the 27 million innocent North Koreans who have suffered human rights violations (heavy restriction of movement beyond their towns, no access to healthcare or food, a false education forced down their throats, lack of freedom of speech) that most Americans can never imagine. And, to suggest to wipe out an entire ethnic group with the press of a button?

Even South Koreans discriminate against North Korean refugees. The Korean language and culture between the North and the South has inevitably grown apart over the last seven decades, only making it more challenging for refugees to adjust. They face difficulties finding jobs, since South Koreans look down on the North Korean accent. They don't immediately adapt to capitalistic society or the culture – from clothing to etiquette to an understanding of money, everything is different. They face mental

disorders at alarmingly high rates – depression, PTSD, anxiety – after making the life-risking journey to South Korea.

Half of the South Korean population, and especially the younger generations, are either neutral or against reunification with North Korea. Their rationale? “It’s unfortunate, but they’ll only burden us.”

I was reminded of my debating experiences, in that both our current administration and North Korea’s dictatorship will only heighten threats and tensions; that many South Koreans don’t take a second to empathize with North Koreans’ plights; that we Americans ourselves only recognize a small portion of what North Korea means. I saw all the dismal parts of debate, to be exact – we are only concerned with winning, whether we want to win the argument or win the war or win the game of life and get ahead economically. We strive to win, sacrificing truth and human connection while we’re at it.

But, I admit that I didn’t quite comprehend this barrier before I met my North Korean refugee students, either. I had always been interested in that area of politics, but actually meeting people who have lived the nightmare is a different story.

One of the North Korean teenagers I taught was named Choon-mi. Her brother was still stuck in North Korea, her mother was working various jobs to get them out of poverty, and -- in a state of severe depression -- Choon-mi had jumped off a building last year in an attempt to commit suicide. Fortunately, she survived. While the doctor had predicted that she would be paralyzed waist down for the rest of her life, she miraculously recovered her ability to walk within months.

So I met Choon-mi wearing a spine brace and walking with a slight limp. During our English sessions, we would discuss life in the United States, and she would curiously ask about school life, how people dressed, and whether we grew so tall because we ate lots of bread. And I would ask about North Korea, China, and South Korea, and attempt to understand her stories in her mixed English and Korean. Sometimes we would disagree on the values of extraversion versus introversion, or on the facets of different education systems. We shared and shared, and her smile was radiant. And I thought, this is how discussion should be.

We will all have our own, inevitably different, opinions. But there are ways to handle these differences that are better than others, and one of the best ways is to learn about the other side. Whether it’s boarding school drama or politics or philosophy, understanding the other side and acknowledging their humanity is the first step to, at the very least, a good discussion.