Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Phillip Clay: A Year Later

Julayne Lee · Wednesday, August 22nd, 2018

I moved back to South Korea in 2004 on a one-way ticket to live and work for an indefinite period of time. At that time in my adoption journey, I believed that if an overseas adopted Korean (OAK) returned to Korea whether for a short visit, to study, or to live and work, it meant having come to terms with the complexity of their adoption journey. It meant we could feel less weird with our white names and Asian faces trying to navigate the heritage and culture that had rejected us. It meant at least we would try to live until natural causes would bring our lives to a close. Perhaps my naiveté was such because after my first return to Korea in 2001, I felt nothing close to normal and wondered if I would ever stop feeling so out of touch with everything, including myself.

Within a few weeks of my move to Korea, the adopted Korean community received news of a fellow OAK living in Seoul who died by suicide. I joined other adopted Koreans at a short ceremony at the funeral center where we had to ward off the Korean media who seemed to be there only to capture our collective grief as emotional pornography rather than get to the root of why suicide chose one of us in our motherland. More meaningful to me was the thoughtful memorial held in the garden of KoRoot, a non-profit guest house for OAKs returning to Korea. It was a Friday evening and I remember the lights strung across the lawn provided some peace and comfort for our confused sorrow. A poem was read and many an embrace and quiet but sincere condolences were exchanged for someone most of us barely knew.

An adopted Korean in the U.S. asked me if it was strange to attend a memorial for someone I'd never met. Not at all. It would have seemed strange if I hadn't attended. It was the most beautiful memorial ceremony I'd been to because the one thing that brought us together was that he was one of us. And perhaps for some, including myself, we knew that we'd come so close to the same.

Last year I remembered this all too clearly as I gathered for another vigil. On May 21, 2017, Phillip Clay died by suicide in Seoul. Adopted to the U.S., Clay never received his citizenship and was deported back to South Korea in 2009. News of his death reverberated across social media. It was as if I could feel our collective grief weighing on every word in cyberspace. Someone messaged me wondering if we could do something in Los Angeles and I felt a vigil appropriate. We needed space and time to try to make sense of a system that has failed far too many of us. On Sunday, May 28, 2018, we gathered at the Korean Consulate in Los Angeles. In total, 18 of us came together to make signs in English and Korean, light candles and share our thoughts, tears and again a poem. Even a passerby joined us, completely unaware adoptee deportations were even an issue. It was dusk and even though most of us had never met Phillip Clay, let alone knew who he was until his death, it felt to me like we were remembering a brother, a long lost friend who we wished we had

known in life and not only death.

I wanted the vigil to make a political statement which is why I chose the consulate and encouraged other cities to hold vigils at their consulates or other places of significance. Adoptee Solidarity Korea – Los Angeles (ASK-LA) members supported the vigil and with short notice on Memorial Day weekend, assembled a beautiful memorial to Phillip Clay, symbolic of solidarity with other inter-country adoptees in deportation limbo.

Other organizations also held vigils. The Adopted Koreans Association – San Francisco's (AKA-SF) vigil was held on the same day accompanied by a memory book and plaque to commemorate Phillip's life. Vigils were also held in Seoul both upon Phillip's death and then also prior to his return to the U.S. Cremated, he was allowed to return in death. Upon his return to the U.S., a vigil was held for him in Philadelphia. I think the need for us to come together and grieve someone we may not have known speaks to the unbreakable bond we have as overseas adopted Koreans. It's not having to explain ourselves to each other, the headshake in agreement that says, "I understand," being validated by complete strangers through conversations we'd only had with ourselves our whole lives. And with the randomness of adoption, knowing this could have been our fate as well.

Phillip's death was one of at least four transracial, inter-country adoptee deaths by suicide last spring: Daniel Larson-Fine, Jane Trybulski and Gabe Proctor also died prematurely.

I had originally intended to finish this in time for publication to coincide with the anniversary of Phillip's death but writing this has been more emotionally burdensome than I anticipated. I thought it would be another political piece I could write and then move on with my next deadline. However, writing this meant reliving the emotional turmoil I felt last year seeing all these deaths by suicide and having very little of it make sense a year later. The only thing that makes sense is that the system of inter-country adoption continues to fail far too many and the system is still broken yet continues to thrive as an industry that far too often puts profits before people.

The Adoptee Citizenship Act of 2018 was introduced in March of this year. If passed, it will grant citizenship to inter-country adoptees with the exclusion of those who have been charged with a violent offense and have been deported.

If you are an adoptee without citizenship (AWOC) and would like to connect with other AWOCs and to learn more about the ACA of 2018 please contact the Adoptee Rights Campaign adopteerightscampagin.org. For information on the National Korean American Service & Education Consortium's (NAKASEC) campaign "Citizenship4All" regardless of criminal record and to learn about adoptee rights, please go to nakasec.org.

If you are an adopted person considering suicide, you can find resources here at Adoptee Suicide Prevention: kadsuicideprevention.com/online-resources.

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