

**An Act of Grace from the Forest: How is Absolution Possible?**  
*by KO Un*

I skip the old Korean custom of giving a long greeting of delight.

The title of this speech was initially “Crime and Punishment,” a rather ungraceful, if not ungrateful, title for the occasion. It would also have been a conspicuous reminder of Dostoevsky. The title that emerged as an alternative was just as flawed. When one recalls the selling and buying of indulgences in the Catholic Church in late medieval times, one wonders about the respectability of such profane practice. In the end, I used the second title as the subheading for a new one. As long as the subject is the forest, our reality today is that human civilization cannot ignore my lament. The story of the forest today must not be a story but a cry.

Leaving aside the question of sincerity, people are calling the twenty-first century the “century of the environment;” there is little objection, and the reason is self-evident. The rampage perpetrated by industrialization since the late twentieth century, which came on the heels of two thousand and five hundred years of destruction of the forest, indeed revealed the reality of the human desire to privatize the earth and even the universe beyond. This rampage is unlikely to be controlled any time soon because its intensity is unrelenting; the desire to expand the human footprint knows no bounds.

The “century of the environment” is probably a name that came in the wake of the realization, belated though it was, that the earth’s ecosystem and natural environment have lost their final powers of endurance. In fact, if we think about it, the legendary 30-year period of rapid economic growth in Korea was all about catching up with the late twentieth-century industrial powers. Words such as “advanced” or “underdeveloped” are still used to describe a country. The controversy over whether or not such “development” refers to a simple imitation of industrialization is often meaningless. What is clear is that the happiness that comes with advanced industrialization is a happiness implicated in irremediable disasters. Ever faster, and ever more convenient, highways are being built constantly, and every day more forest disappears.

Whether or not there is an archeological consensus on the matter, the forest is the home of the human race. Fear of the forest allowed humans to know where gods and goddesses resided, and allowed humans to be humans. To defend their lives in the forest, human beings had to engage in certain essential social behaviors. Because of this, humanity can never be considered innocent of undermining the sacredness of the forest that is its very origin. The sins are becoming greater today, and it is only natural that the retributions are becoming greater, too.

As part of the respect I have for you, who have come here from all over the world with the spirit of the forest in your hearts, let me assure you that I derive my courage to speak so urgently to you about the forest from that very spirit.

The earth, an insignificant planet flourishing for merely a moment in the

immeasurable history of the universe, is humanity's only habitat. The reasoning behind this claim has led poet Gary Snyder to call the earth a village in the universe, and has led me to call my mother tongue a dialect of the universe. We both recognize that humans are not the only inhabitants of the earth. This is evident when we look at the earth's long history before the emergence of the human race.

Humans live only as part of this reality that is earthly but true. The remorseful thesis of the late twentieth century that there is "only one earth" can only mature when it rids itself of human-centrism. The many champions of the glorification of nature – those who suddenly mention that ancient Eastern philosophies refer to the unity of nature and humans; or those who claim that the Western dualism of separating nature and human is a human hubris that must be overcome – are thus themselves sources of great hubris. That is to say, nature itself does not exist in an eternal and immutable environment. Mutation, and constant creation and extinction, have probably been the actual state of affairs throughout nature's long history. Thus, one cannot permanently and immutably make a statement that nature itself is truth.

I would like us human beings to open our eyes as one of the many natural species living on earth, in a state free from prejudice, a "zero" state lacking the edification of ideology or even consciousness. Accordingly, it should not be only a few enlightened persons who make privileged statements about how unreasonable it is that, as only one of many species living on earth, humans are calling the shots for the fate of all bio-species on the planet. This should not be a matter of concern only to a few eco-elites but an everyday awareness lodged in the bone marrow of every human being on earth. Human civilization so far has devoted itself mostly to immature and reckless adventures. Agriculture, for example, started out as an attempt to civilize part of nature, but from the start it sowed the seeds of industrialization that objectifies the whole of nature. Cultivation was culturally significant because it made it possible for us to change nature. However, this act of utilizing nature went beyond overcoming nature's limitations to enabling its destruction; and from a certain point in time civilization itself became no longer sustainable. Crime and punishment are not two discrete concepts.

Now the era has arrived in which the glaciers in the Arctic Ocean no longer guarantee the safety of urban splendors in temperate climate zones. There are predictions that reckless logging in the Amazon jungle will not stop at being a tragedy disintegrating the lives of local indigenous people but will become an unrestricted global calamity that will cut off the oxygen supply to residents around the world. The modern rules of perspective are invalid. The melting of the Himalayan ice cap, eight thousand meters above sea level, is a matter of concern for Seoul and Lisbon. The fact that the Nepalese government held a cabinet meeting at the base of one of these mountains as a protest is a warning to cabinet ministers in every government that exists on earth. How long can the suburbanites of Helsinki, the urban model for a clean environment, remain clean when the subtropical forest of Yunnan Province in China is being razed for real estate development? Today, pain in places farthest from me cannot but become pain in the very heart of my body. The world is an Indra's Net, of bad things, too.

This very building in which we are gathered, without thinking too deeply about it, is merely an imitation of a forest shelter from the Stone Age. The inner life of humanity is full of unconscious instincts that persist from our experience of living in the forest in the distant past. That we have all flown here by airplane is an imitation of birds both sedentary and migratory: at night sedentary birds would take shelter in forests and then soar out of them when the morning sun poured down, and migratory birds would embark on long journeys to return to their habitat. This place also imitates the cool breeze of the forest with air conditioning, which also protects us from the August heat wave and from direct exposure to the scorching sun. Our civilization, at best, is a civilization based on an exaggerated imitation of nature. This echoes what the ancient Greek sage said about art: that it is an imitation of nature.

Unfortunately, human civilization, either as an imitation or representation of the forest, is accelerating human illiteracy concerning nature as it pursues a goal we must no longer allow it to pursue. Furthermore, for a long time the savagery of production and development has looted the forest as if it were another exploitable “consumer good,” a process justified in the name of “civilization”; the non-civilized are disparaged by this so-called civilization as “savage” or “primitive.” Without a shred of guilt, no less.

Venice is a “floating city,” a jewel of human creation and a symbol of civilization. It is different from the floating villages of Cambodia on the Mekong River. The floating city that is Venice is being supported by 1.9 billion wooden piles underneath it, wood that came from across the Adriatic Sea, from Lebanon and Greece, and from the forests of the Mediterranean coast. The destruction of the forest on such a scale is at least visible; most of the lumber consumed in constructing human civilization and the forests destroyed in the process have not and cannot be counted. The river basins of the Tigris, the Euphrates, and the Nile were once green, as was the Amazon Rainforest in South America. The greenery in the Sahara and Greece disappeared, leaving only deserts and bare stone mountains.

The Yellow River basin in China was once a basin of forests. For one million years of hunting and gathering, it remained so. In the span of four thousand years of agriculture and barely a few hundred years of industrialization, most of the forests in the basin have been destroyed. Today, four billion people, out of a human population of six billion, rely on wood burning for cooking, heating, and lighting. The Yellow River basin forests from the Bronze Age or Iron Age in China have long disappeared. Perhaps Confucianism, a set of ethics venerating the memory of the past, was adopted as the state ideology as an institutional device to prevent further expansion of civilization.

The poet Du Fu from the Tang Dynasty wrote, “Though the nation perishes, the mountains and rivers remain.” Despair over the defeat of his nation in the war with northern tribes overlaps with his hope that the mountains and rivers still remain the same. If he were a poet today, he would have written a different poem. If he were to be a poet tomorrow, he would write yet different verses. About ten years ago I wrote the following: “A poet from the past/ said that though a nation

perishes the mountains and rivers remain/ A poet from today/ says that though mountains and rivers perish, the nation remains/ A poet from the future/ will say/ Alas/ mountains and rivers have perished/ and the nation has perished, too/ You/ and I, too, have perished.” In fact, an alarming adage has been circulating since the last century. Some attribute the saying to Chateaubriand<sup>1</sup> and others to Toynbee. It goes like this: “Forests precede civilizations, deserts follow them.”

If there are limitations to the humanities studies that came with modernity, or with the spirit of humanism that emerged during the Renaissance, it is because while they raised human dignity and improved human rights, they objectified the dignity of nature. By “nature” I mean every form of life. Also, a certain religion not only rejected other forms of religion as heresy, but also objectified all life forms other than human. In contrast with the nature-friendly perspective of ancient Asian philosophies, European thought took nature as the object of human control; given this background, it is ironic that Europe is now preserving the natural environment and Asia is suffering considerably from environmental destruction. Of course European civilization has procured necessary materials from Africa and other regions under its control. The United States, which has the longest continuous history of destroying the largest areas of forest in human history, now imports trees from a neighboring country, Canada, for Christmas decorations in order to preserve its own forests.

Taking a look at the paper manufacturing and lumber industries in Korea or Japan, one can say that these countries are participating in the overcutting of rain forests in Borneo, an action at the furthest remove from the growing movement to “go green” in their own lands. The equatorial tropical and subtropical rainforests, I understand, do not have the same regenerative power as forests in the temperate zones. After a decades-long race to industrialize, Korea is currently in the process of planting ten billion trees. Despite the severe deforestation during the colonial period and damage from the war, Korea is a model nation that has succeeded in unprecedented national forestation efforts. Currently Korea has forests that, nationwide, absorb 40 million tons of carbon dioxide every year. This is equivalent to the capacity for purifying the exhaust emissions of five million passenger cars per year. It is also comparable to the great work of the Black Forest of Germany that has been nurtured for the past 150 years. However, if industrialized countries strengthen their forest policies but do not stop importing forest lumber from other countries, ultimately they will have looked the other way in the face of a serious global problem.

Thus a Human Charter for the Forest (Forest Charter) is warranted; it should be declared to prevent any further atrocities committed against forests after the cumulative crime of forest destruction perpetrated over previous centuries by human avarice. Moreover, voluntary institutions are also urgently needed to ensure that such a declaration does not become a mere slogan. If the glorious wonders of human civilization that the human race is so proud of are the result of slaughtering most of the forests on earth, then that glory can only be accepted to some degree

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<sup>1</sup> François-René de Chateaubriand (1768-1848) is considered the founder of Romanticism in French literature. [Translator.]

after restoring, by the utmost human efforts, the prehistoric sacredness of the forest. Considering that the life expectancy of the planet earth is believed to be about 13.7 billion years, the future of the human race can probably be guaranteed only if we make the forest spirit the principle value for the spirit of humanity.

Starting around two million years ago, our human ancestors began inhabiting the forest, and humanity has lived there for ninety percent of its evolutionary history. Some forest-dwelling instincts are still intact in the human unconscious. Now the last few decades in a few hundred years of industrialization are threatening to sever humanity from its own long evolutionary history. Zhuangzi said long ago that all things envelop each other. This is also an appropriate concept for stressing the importance of a universality bringing the entire earth together as we lay to peaceful rest the ghosts of dead forests, the forests we killed off in the past.

From then on, as we live this century of the environment given to us, we shall restore the sublime instinct humans have had for the forest and nature. By doing so, we shall reflect upon the mistaken epistemology of modern philosophy that claimed victory over the ontology of ancient philosophies and begin to understand nature within the framework of a new ontology of life. There may be no need to eagerly subscribe to the ecological fundamentalism whose credo is that everything modern is evil, and it would be impossible for us to return completely to life in the forest; however, we need to correct the mistake of concentrating only on the happiness that modern life—a life not always comparable to that of ancient or prehistoric times—grants us. The United Nations should also play a different role in the future: it should transcend its political role of mediating between countries or mediating international conflicts and give greater priority to mediating between humanity and ecology and the environment at the planetary level.

In ancient India, spending a period in the forest was a mandatory rite of passage. It may be possible in modern human society to promote a return to, reliance upon, and familiarity with nature by institutionalizing forest experiences based on such a virtuous legacy. Accordingly, I make the following few suggestions:

1. All schoolchildren, at every grade level, should be required to take a class on learning the names of trees and planting trees, and meditating and doing physical and mental training in the forest. Once or twice each semester, teachers should take students to a forest and give them a lecture on mountains, forests, and nature.

2. In workplaces also some working hours should be allocated to “forest time.” In Korea, youth are referred to as “the trees of the future;” the eldest son in a family is called *gidung* (pillar) or *daedeulbo* (crossbeam); and a talented person is referred to as *injae* (“human timber”). Accordingly, it would be more than fitting to celebrate birthdays, admission to schools, finding a job, promotions, marriages, the birth of children, recovery from sickness, or even deaths and their commemoration by planting a tree. This should become a social custom.

3. Korea Forest Service and other relevant government administrations should be raised in status and advanced to the rank of top government agencies, and appointments to important government positions should require that candidates

have tree-planting experience. Such a campaign for the forest at the national level should strengthen solidarity with neighboring and other countries and regions and help bring about “debordering” of forests. Along with these measures, tree planting should be designated as the first article of social ethics.

4. We should ensure that boasting of increasing the forest volume tenfold over thirty years in South Korea does not foster a sense of superiority over North Korea with its impoverished forests. We should find ways to implement tree planting in North Korea and other regions.

Also, we must not stand idly by and watch the desertification of northern China; instead we must implement the brotherhood of forests through tree-planting campaigns there.

There should be efforts to make sure that such comprehensive approaches to forest rehabilitation campaigns based on regional solidarity eventually become globalized. A prize should be established and given to persons deserving recognition for such world-wide forest campaign efforts; such an award should promote a global forest rehabilitation campaign. In addition to these measures, a festival that explores forest culture as the basic instinct of the human race would create an opportunity for brainstorming about various forest-related ideas and wisdom; such a festival would have great importance.

The forest is the future for all of us. By declaring that “the forest is the future,” I am not suggesting that we return to the age of the prehistoric forest. But I am certain that human life will no longer be sustainable if we continue to exclude the forest from our daily lives and continue as a civilization that knocks down forests. The northern European god Odin is the god of the forest. This god is not as humane or cultured as the Greek gods. He is rough and simple. However, his genuineness is more heroic than the heroism of the gods in any other mythology. According to the story of Dangun, the Korean creation myth, Dangun established the first city under *Sindansu* (神檀樹), a tree that is the mediator between heaven and earth. Sinsi (神市, “the City of Spirits”) was thus established there five thousand years ago. We see here that the divine forest called *Sindansu* is where a nation was founded. Such stories reflect forest history. If we could achieve a “century of the forest” through critical reflection on our civilization, that would be a human creative achievement that is truly sacred.

My thesis is that the crime can no longer remain buried, punishment can no longer be evaded, and absolution is too shameless; this thesis is a subset of the larger thesis that the grace of the forest still endows us with blessings to the extent that we serve the forest. Nature is still the main body of all life forces and leads to the healing of all pollution and sacrilege. Humanity today must return at least part of itself to nature. The nations of tomorrow will succeed as nations only if they are nations of the forest. I hope that today’s meeting is the meeting of forests.

The servant of the forest is indeed a saint.

Thank you.