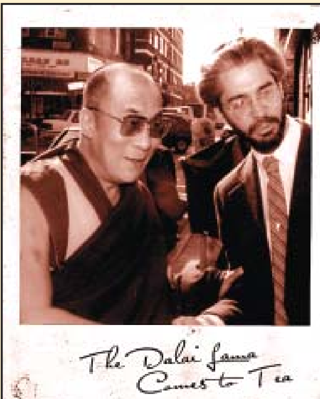
# "Derek Evans

is a kind of Forrest Gump or even TinTin character," writes **Yosef Wosk** in his introduction to **Dispatches from the Global Village** (Wood Lake / Copper House $23.95). "You get the feeling that he has been everywhere, met everyone, and done everything… and that even if he hasn't, he will."




**The Dalai Lama to Derek Evans and his co-workers at Amnesty International:** "I am a simple monk, and what I really want to say is simply that I believe that the work all of you are doing—caring for the dignity of strangers, protecting their rights—I believe this work is sacred. I believe it is more important than prayer."

Having served two terms as Deputy Secretary General of Amnesty International, Derek Evans "has met prime ministers and presidents, rebels and kings, beggars and saints, terrorists and scholars, generals and chiefs. His travels have propelled him through dozens of countries on almost every continent."

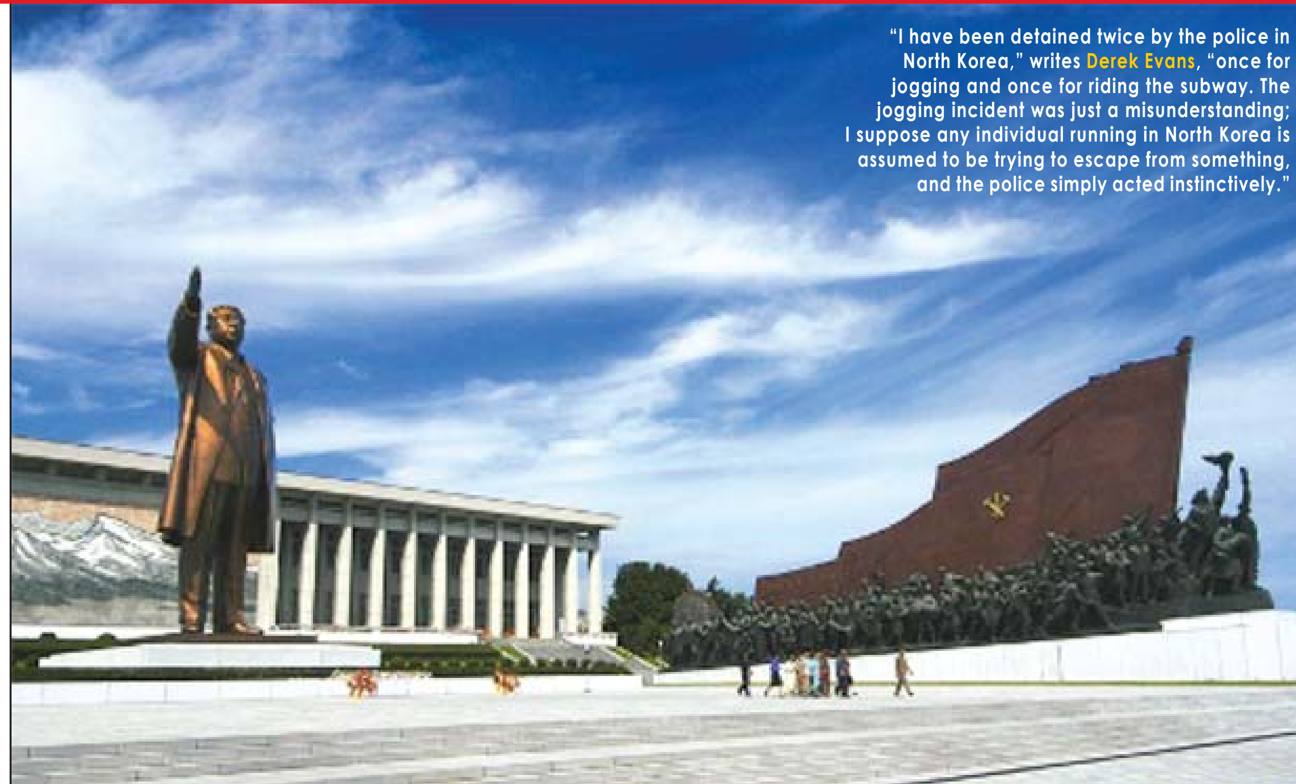
With his wife **Pat Deacon**, a homeopath, Evans came to the Okanagan in 2000 to serve as Executive Director of the Naramata Centre, an experiential learning institute. In his 14th book he has collected some of his observations as one of the world's leading human rights activists.

Citing Evans' *Dispatches* as a Book-of-the-Month, the SFU Bookstore declared, "Whether he's negotiating with rebel factions in Sudan, or meeting under threat of death and in the dead of night with families of 'disappeared' children in Sri Lanka, what shines through in each story is Evans' unfaltering hope that people can find within themselves the wisdom to choose a different path—that somehow we can learn to live in peace despite our differences."

Wise and caring, Evans' essays are encouraging expressions of the continual need to mediate between the powerful and the oppressed to limit abuses of power.

Here he recalls one of his two disturbing visits to North Korea, while noting the insidious encroachments of post 9/11 paranoia and censorship worldwide.

**Derek Evans on meeting Yasser Arafat in Gaza:** "It seems that political leadership means never admitting one's own weakness or failure."



"I have been detained twice by the police in North Korea," writes Derek Evans, "once for jogging and once for riding the subway. The jogging incident was just a misunderstanding; I suppose any individual running in North Korea is assumed to be trying to escape from something, and the police simply acted instinctively."

Foreigners who are invited to visit North Korea are often asked to pay homage to the Great Leader President Kim Il Sung at the Kumsusan Memorial Palace.

# CLIMATE OF FEAR

## Derek Evans of Amnesty International recalls playing diplomatic ping-pong in Pyongyang, North Korea

**One of the less dramatic but most significant consequences of the War on Terror is the creeping encroachment on some of our fundamental and supposedly cherished rights—the rights to freedom of expression and of thought. I say "supposedly cherished," because with each new restriction that is imposed, it becomes apparent that many people in our society actually place very little value on these rights and are ready to abandon them with little more than an indifferent shrug.**

I'm speaking not only about the complex security laws hurriedly adopted in Washington and in Ottawa in the weeks following 9/11—which allow people to be imprisoned indefinitely without charge or evidence—though certainly those laws should worry us all. And I'm speaking not only about the secret, paranoid conspiracies of our public security agencies, which allow government officials to aid, abet, and acquiesce in the abduction and torture of Canadian citizens in Syrian prisons.

I'm thinking also about the many ways that a climate of fear and self-censorship has gathered around us, and has begun to infect many aspects of public life. One of the more recent and insidious examples is provided by Indigo Books. The largest bookseller in Canada, Indigo Books decided to ban an issue of *Harper's Magazine* because it featured an article discussing the Danish cartoons of Muhammad.

Echoing the feeble justifications of the CBC, *The Globe and Mail*, and numerous other members of the "free" press, an internal corporate memo sent to all Indigo stores—as well as its Coles and Chapters branches—explained that the article may offend some Muslims. It went on to note that the cartoons have "been known to ignite demonstrations around the world," making it clear that Indigo's real motivation for pulling the magazine was fear. The feeling of fear is understandable enough, in my view. It's just too bad it can't be openly acknowledged and honestly addressed.

It is important to mention that the article in question, "Drawing Blood: Outrageous Cartoons and the Art of Outrage," was written by the most prominent political cartoon journalist in America, and that it presents a scholarly discussion of the role of editorial cartooning during the past 200 years. As a subscriber to *Harper's*, I had read the article before the ban was put in place, and had recommended it to a number of people as the most insightful analysis of the cartoon controversy I'd yet seen.

Sadly, such scholarly reflection and critical thought is now deemed to be too offensive—or dangerous—to be permissible. I'm not sure what should be considered the greater scandal: the blatant hypocrisy and cynicism of Indigo Books, or the fact that their suppression of the magazine generated so little public concern. Try to imagine what any bookstore or library would look like if we removed all materials that might be offensive to some individual or group. The shelves would be empty, and a dark silence would soon gather around us. Having shunned the honest effort required for dialogue or for understanding, we would soon become prisoners of our own fears and prejudices, unable even to imagine alternatives, and become prone to acting aggressively to perceived threats.

Perhaps most Canadians have little sense of what is at stake if we abdicate our fundamental freedoms, even just a bit, in the interests of good taste or of a quiet life. The most extreme example, I suppose, is North Korea. North Korea is usually described as "totalitarian," "paranoid," and "Stalinist," and even as part of the "axis of evil." It regularly threatens its neighbours with missiles and nuclear tests.

Derek Evans as he looks today

I've been to North Korea twice, once on an assignment for the World Council of Churches, and once as a special guest of the Inter-Parliamentary Union. Whatever words may be used to describe it, North Korea is fundamentally about complete control. I think the most chilling image I have of this comes from a visit I made to a kindergarten in Pyongyang, the capital city. The four-year-olds sat ramrod straight and silent at tables until the teacher gave the command "Be happy!" The children immediately erupted in cheers and laughter and clapping, and just as abruptly returned to their seats, silent and staring, when the teacher declared, "Enough happy!"

You get a sense of how repressed and bizarre the political life of the country is long before you get there. Most visitors enter the country on a connecting flight through China—only you don't receive a ticket or a boarding card, you just get a letter of invitation from whatever organization is your "host." The letter tells you to go to the check-in hall at Beijing's international airport, and to wait.

Curious but obedient, I did as directed. However, I've never been very good at waiting, so eventually I began to ask at the different airline counters where to find the flight to Pyongyang. The staff simply pointed vaguely toward the middle of the vast hall. Feeling absurd, I nevertheless followed their instructions and gradually became aware of a couple dozen other travellers who seemed to be aimlessly standing around, or endlessly searching the monitors as if for some secret clue. We began stealing glances at each other, with a strange combination of recognition and suspicion. Finally, a man in a nondescript airline uniform walked to the middle of the room carrying a little sign that read, "Flight 000, Destination X." Without a word, all the lost strangers formed a line, and we dutifully followed the man through an unmarked exit and onto a North Korean plane.

The hotel in Pyongyang was modern and well-appointed, but came with some unusual services. There was a television in the room, but like all TVs and radios in North Korea it had only one switch—on/off. For the first five days of my first visit, the evening "news" broadcast consisted mainly of reports of what my colleagues and I had done that day. It was a great relief—probably for everyone in the country— when the President of the Seychelles arrived on a state visit and became the new focus of obsessive media attention. Otherwise, TV consisted of endless lectures denouncing the country's many enemies, and providing detailed instructions on the correct line of thought—that of the "Great Leader;" or of his son, the "Dear Leader" and current President, pictures of whom peered down on every room in every building.

My hotel room was not only cleaned every day while I was out, it was also thoroughly searched. In fact, only every second room was occupied by a guest; the intervening rooms were reserved for those who monitored us 24 hours a day. One morning, the guests on my floor decided to test the surveillance. At exactly 7 a.m., each of us turned on our showers and then shouted, "Damn, no towels!" We then opened our doors and looked out into the corridor. Within seconds, it was filled with men in suits running from the other rooms carrying stacks of fresh towels, rushing about and bumping into each other.

I have been detained twice by the police in North Korea, once for jogging and once for riding the subway. The jogging incident was just a misunderstanding; I suppose any individual running in North Korea is assumed to be trying to escape from something, and the police simply acted instinctively. The subway was a more serious incident, in that there was a real danger I might have had unsupervised contact with ordinary people—precisely my objective.

With some diversions from my colleagues, I had managed to leave the hotel after dark, and made my way to the nearest subway station. However, I soon discovered that there are four different types of money in North Korea (for the political elite, for foreign dignitaries, for proletarians or ordinary workers, and for "sub-proletarians"—whoever they are!). The money I had could not be used to buy a subway ticket (a proletarian activity). I decided to try something that had probably never been seen in North Korea, before or since. I stood outside the station as endless lines of workers streamed past, bowed my head, and raised my hands in the universal posture of a beggar. Immediately a crowd surrounded me, and, without a word of discussion, the workers filled my cupped hands with proletarian notes, more than enough to get on the subway. I got about four stations down the line before the alarm was raised and the police boarded the train and took me away.

Throughout my second visit to North Korea, with the Inter-Parliamentary Union, I pressed the authorities for a copy of the Criminal Code. The formal reason I gave for wanting the text was so that I could carry out an assessment of it in relation to international human rights standards. But really, I just wanted to find out if it actually existed, as no one outside the country had seen the North Korean basic law. Every day, I asked for a copy, or suggested adjustments to our itinerary to stop at a bookstore or at a court building. But there was invariably some excuse that made it impossible—the store is closed due to holidays, the building is under renovations, and so on.

Finally, on the last day, after a particularly long meeting, my "host" suggested that we take a break and visit the "Great Study Hall of the People," the national library. We climbed the stone steps of the enormous stolid building, and took the elevator to the seventh floor. This, he said, was the section on law and politics, as we walked through the gloom past rank upon rank of barren shelves and vacant desks. He ushered me down a particular aisle and stopped in front of a single steel shelf on which were four thin green volumes. He took one down and gave it to me—a copy of the Criminal Code of North Korea. Embossed in gold and in mint condition, the text was in English and inscribed as a gift to me.

I was touched by the near intimacy of the gesture, but also troubled by the thought that this basic legal text may actually have been created or contrived during the past week simply to satisfy my demands and to try to ensure a favourable report to the parliamentarians. Most of all, though, I was disturbed by all of the empty shelves that surrounded us—a whole library without books, the ultimate expression of a regime that could not tolerate the challenge of diversity, the risk of dialogue, or the right to freedom of thought.

It is an extreme image, I know, but one that I wish the executives of Indigo Books, and others who act in fear of the open and respectful exchange of ideas, might hold in their hearts. It will certainly be the image I have in mind the next time I am tempted to shop at Coles or Chapters, or hear about a magazine being banned.

[Derek Evans' royalties and a portion of publisher proceeds are being donated to Amnesty International and the Naramata Community Fund Society.]

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