

“Self-interest seemed almost omnipotent”

Langdon Gilkey’s account of his imprisonment during WWII is a study in how humans act under pressure.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [October 23, 2019](#) issue



Weihsien Internment Camp, Shandong, China. Photo by [Rolfmueeller](#), licensed under Creative Commons.

One of the simple joys in life is pulling an old book off the shelf and rediscovering why it once meant so much. Such was the case recently when I picked up *Shantung Compound*, Langdon Gilkey’s account of the two years he spent in a Japanese internment camp in China during World War II. First published more than 50 years ago, Gilkey’s stirring chronicle of the difficulty of building human community in anxious times serves as a manual for comprehending human behavior in any era.

As soon as Japanese authorities herded nearly 2,000 mostly European and American strangers into a former Presbyterian mission compound, it became evident that overcoming material deprivation was the prisoners’ biggest hurdle. Unsanitary conditions, inadequate food and water supplies, lack of medical care, and general

overcrowding all contributed to the chaos of sudden imprisonment. From among this menagerie of strangers, leaders would have to emerge and form a civilization from scratch.

Gilkey soon realized, however, that a community requires more than the work of locating basic necessities, arranging structures of authority, and deploying human ingenuity to solve technical problems. Moral health is also essential, a health that can easily disappear when selfish behavior becomes the norm.

The situation of prisoners in near constant conflict after “the thin polish of easy morality and just dealing [had] worn off” proved to be a laboratory for observing the secrets of the human heart. Gilkey’s confidence in the innate goodness and rationality of humanity faded as he watched fellow prisoners prioritize personal comfort and security over the protection of weaker members in the camp. “Self-interest seemed almost omnipotent,” he writes, as fellow prisoners continually placed their own welfare above standards of fairness and moral excellence.

Things came to a head in January 1944 when a surprise shipment from the American Red Cross arrived at the camp. Prisoners watched in disbelief as 1,550 parcels of food and clothing—unimagined wealth to the eyes of 1,450 hungry and exasperated camp residents—were unloaded. Some Americans quickly assumed that the arriving parcels constituted their own windfall. These parcels were, after all, from the *American* Red Cross. Self-interest on the part of a few devolved into contempt among all. “A community where everyone had long forgotten whether a man was American or British, white, Negro, Jew, Parsee, or Indian, had suddenly disintegrated into a brawling, bitterly divided collection of hostile national groups. Ironically, our wondrous Christmas gift had brought in its wake the exact opposite of peace on earth.” As Gilkey witnessed the power of greed at work, he became, for the first time in his life, fundamentally humiliated at being an American.

The strife that went on in the camp, with multiple fights over parcels of wealth and daily territorial aggressions over personal space, led Gilkey to conclude that humans aren’t nearly as moral as we’d like to think we are. Persistent selfishness erodes our moral ability and willingness to share with others. Regardless of how creative, bright, or courageous we may be, our penchant for loving ourselves and favoring our own group or tribe threatens to overpower our capacity for benevolence. Only as we locate our personal security and meaning in the power and love of God, notes Gilkey from his Christian standpoint, can we overcome the sin of self-idolatry, which so

often is clothed in religious garb.

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