

WINNER

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United States

A Little Hard To Swallow

*I am the cause of world hunger.
I wander through aisle after aisle of endless food.
I wonder nothing as I wash uneaten leftovers down the sink.
we are not facing a food shortage crisis.
we are facing an apathy crisis.
yes, I am
the cause of world hunger,
the reason 798 million people go to sleep every night with a bear clawing their insides,
the murderer of 12 million children every year.
I am
the unknowing apathetic.*

Just southeast of Florida is an island nation by the name of Haiti. I was there once on a cruise, finding it a perfectly delightful place, with a lovely market and charming locals. It was only recently that I found out the truth about where I had vacationed. Finding Haiti to be “an undesirable location” due to “recent political unrest,” Royal Caribbean, the cruise line I traveled on, boasted that it “cordoned off a remote portion of this island, and the totally safe and private compound provides guests an opportunity to experience the magnificent beauty of the region.” They rechristened the area Labadee. This was the “Haiti” I had seen. The actual country was named the second hungriest nation in the world in 2000 by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), where the 62 percent of the population who are undernourished lack an average of 460 calories a day. To think, my father and I went jet-skiing off the coast of a nation characterized by constant hunger pains, only to return to our ship in time for the elaborate banquet held that evening.

A possible answer to the question posed by world hunger can be summed up in five words: *awareness, activism, economy, peace, and education*. The first two realms are up to citizens of the developed world, while the remaining three fall to struggling nations, helped by their more prosperous counterparts. Nations worldwide must put aside border lines and cultural prejudices to work together in finding a solution. Standing alone is not an acceptable option for humanity.

I. AWARENESS

*I am not here to make you feel guilty,
I am not here to make your conscience weep.
but you are just as much to blame
as me.*

Chronic hunger didn't happen overnight, so we cannot expect an overnight cure. Root causes are many, making it impossible for a one-size-fits-all solution. The 1996 World Food Summit called for a goal to reduce hunger by 50 percent by 2015. While this is a commendable ambition, with many regions—notably China and India—making enormous strides toward nutrition, what of the remaining 400 million world citizens, the 50 percent whose hunger will not be assuaged? Thus far, simple, effective methods have proved useful, such as education, which raises salaries to improve quality of life and reduces birthrates, creating fewer mouths to feed. However, if hunger is to be eradicated, increasingly creative methods must be used to chisel at the problem. The first step in any humanist objective is to raise awareness, particularly in the developed world. Indifference is a powerful weapon, one with a rich history of flirting with conflict. Give people something to fight for, and blame can no longer be placed on the silence of the individual.

II. ACTIVISM

*I live in a country where 66 percent of my fellow citizens,
crammed with donuts, french fries, and Starbucks to go,
are coated with a slimy layer of
glistening yellow fat
resting drowsily just beneath their rubbery skin.
we eat our feelings,
we eat our cravings,
we eat
because it's there.*

Everyone plays a role in the world hunger crisis, but I would like to focus on my own country, the United States, for a moment, as the subject literally hits home for me. We are a nation of abundance; at any given time, 96.1 percent of our citizens are at least moderately food secure. An ample supply of soup kitchens and food pantries ensures that most of our poor will not go hungry. Naturally, this is praiseworthy, but our work in improving hunger security in other countries is somewhat lacking. America's abundance is supplemented by its consumer-oriented nature. If instead we could channel our consumption as generosity, the United States could be a formidable weapon in the face of hunger. The individual activist could play a central role in this transformation, writing letters to local congressmen urging new legislation and raising community awareness with demonstrative "hunger banquets" or even protests. To boast of a country ruled by the people, the people must speak first. Our citizens, who have on the whole been blessed with prosperity, have a responsibility to our brothers and sisters in the world outside America's borders.

III. ECONOMY

*8,242 miles from my overflowing refrigerator
lies a small country called
Somalia.
most classmates I ask have never even heard of it.
the ones who have are at a loss as to where it is.*

*oh, but they should know. because while my peers grab a quick latte,
75 percent of Somalia's citizens,
living on little more than \$1.63 per day,
enter in a daily struggle to stretch their skin
around spindly bones
and aching joints.*

I find it hard to believe that half the world lives on less than \$2 per day (globalissues.org), but find it harder still to believe that I could not do that at all. It feels increasingly hypocritical to engage in this field of activism when I calculate my own daily cost of living. The inconsistency is mind-boggling. Poverty has a direct correlation to hunger. In an article entitled "12 Myths About Hunger," the Institute for Food and Development Policy emphasizes that "enough wheat, rice and other grains are produced to provide every human being with 3,500 calories a day...The problem is that many people are too poor to buy readily available food." This doesn't even include other staples, such as fresh produce or beans. We have enough food—it's just that the distribution, like much of society, is tremendously unequal. In an economically secure world, the established human right to the basic necessities of life would be met for all people. The next step in the hunger struggle is to stabilize the economies of struggling countries. If they are not helped to thrive financially, these areas will remain a missing piece of the hunger puzzle for years to come.

IV. PEACE

*the ferocious growling of a little girl's stomach
is her only twilight lullaby.
chest heaving in ragged breaths,
this beast within
is all she's ever known.
that, and the gunshots echoing through the night.*

"They rape the women, take the children. You wake up in the morning and say 'I want to live today.'" I recently had the opportunity to meet with Daoud Ibarahaem Hari, a refugee of the genocide in Darfur. His somber words echoed throughout a roomful of stunned ears as he described the warfare raging across his country. War has a terrifying relationship with starvation, one that is taking its toll right now in Sudan. CNN recently reported that an estimated one in five children in the Darfur region is "severely malnourished." Janjaweed militiamen will kill men outside village limits, so women must venture forth, facing the constant threat of rape and beatings on treacherous hunts for food. Amnesty International is particularly worried about the rainy season, a gap between harvests, where the daily mortality rate is estimated at 3,000 (Reeves 2004). Another elemental figure in the eradication of world hunger is to bring peace to the world, but this may prove to be the most difficult task of all. The world must act now to bring help to Darfur and other areas ravaged by war. Granting refugee status, airlifting food, and sending in peacemaking troops only marks the beginning of this crusade. But it is crucial. As Dante once cautioned, "The hottest place in Hell is reserved for those who, in times of great moral crisis, maintain their neutrality."

V. EDUCATION

*the family lives in the so called
land of opportunity
where the streets are paved with gold.
there is no gold
walking down the alley to pick up food stamps
and grabbing some outdated produce
from the corner store dumpster
so that they can have some dinner tonight.*

Thirty-four million is a staggering digit. Even more incredible is using this number in the context of an industrialized country's food insecurity. The United States seeks to assist foreign nations, whom we refer to as "third world" or "undeveloped" with condescending detachment, while simultaneously ignoring our own citizens struggling with undernourishment. This is not the fault of the victims. Merely residing in a modernized nation does not secure financial and nutritional freedom, nor should such problems be chalked up to laziness or lack of motivation. As an example, consider that the cause of a homeless man dying in an alley from hypothermia one January night is not the fault of the weather. Rather, the blame lies in a society where the economically insecure are not protected. A country's high gross domestic product per capita is irrelevant if 10 percent of its citizens hold 70 percent of the wealth, as has been the case in the United States in recent years (United for a Fair Economy 2006). If a country does not possess an overwhelming desire to financially assist nations struggling with hunger, it could at least serve its own people, establishing government programs to aid the needy, adjusting tax laws, and increasing federal aid for college-bound students from struggling families. Education is the key to unlocking countless freedoms the world over. Investing in education equates to improving an exponential amount of futures.

*again, I'm not pushing the world's guilt onto your shoulders alone.
certainly no one
could possibly have that weight thrust upon them.
but you're not off the hook yet. you see,
what have you done to help?
...I thought so.
you get your slice of blame now, served with a side of disappointment. no extra charge.
don't worry.
your indigestion is completely normal.
this stuff is hard to swallow.*

*but you can keep the acid reflux at bay
if you get up off that couch,
put the potato chips back where they came from,
and do something.*

I do not pretend to hold the solution to eradicating hunger in my young hands. In many respects, from being a legal minor to the fact that I am not even authorized to

operate a motor vehicle, I am simply a child. I can hardly boast superior knowledge of how the world works, much less form ideas on how to improve it that so many others before me have failed to accomplish. But, as an individual, I am confident in my ability to make a difference. My favorite gem of advice, straight from the mouth of Leo Tolstoy, is that “everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself.” There may be 798,000,000 people going to bed hungry tonight, but there are also 5,804,224,175 more snuggling up under the blankets with a full stomach who could help them. I am ready to say something. I must speak up now, because each day I wait will cost 42,500 lives. No human being would knowingly want that on their conscience. But it’s there. We’re all to blame.

*you take those pictures in your mind:
skin draped over mere skeletons,
the mother giving up her food to keep her children alive,
watching as most of the crops she harvests are exported to countries who can afford it.
let them absorb you
as you run to Wendy’s for a burger.
think now of how easy it is for you to be filled.
think now of those 798 million starving people—they are your brothers, your sisters-
the world is your family.
and you are ignoring them.*

*I hope their faces haunt you
every time you
crack open a box of cereal.
cram a handful of cookies down your throat.
I hope you choke
on the way you ignore your family.*

like I said, it’s hard to swallow.

I hope you do something.
I hope you do it now.

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