

Hunger Pangs
Rev. Rod Richards
Unitarian Universalist Church of Southeastern Arizona
10/11/09

Readings

1. From a September 14, 2009 [Association of Arizona Food Banks](#) press release:

Survey results just released by Feeding America, the nation's largest domestic hunger relief charity, along with newly released Census data on 2008 poverty, income and health insurance data combine to paint a stark picture of poverty and hunger in Arizona.

The Census data shows a striking 16.1% of Arizonans lived in poverty over 2007-08, compared to 13.2% in 2000-01. This seven-year change is a historically significant increase for Arizona, culminating in 1,172,000 people living in poverty. During that same time period, median household income in Arizona dropped 6% from \$50,839 to \$47,942, compared to only a 3.6% dip nationwide. In 2009, federal poverty guidelines are set at an annual gross income of \$22,050 for a family of four...

In Arizona, food banks distributed 42.2% more food in the first two quarters of 2009 versus 2008 while also seeing demand for emergency food boxes, a 3-5 day supply of food for a family of four, increase by 23.2%. Some food banks have reduced the frequency of emergency food box distribution so that newcomers aren't turned away...

More than half (56%) of the country's food banks reported that they are seeing more children as clients. One in five Arizona children struggle with hunger, which is the sixth highest rate in the country.

2. From a July 3, 2009 [transcript of Bill Moyers' Journal](#):

In Philadelphia, Bill Clark, who runs the largest food bank there, told The Inquirer that many new people are coming "terrorized," "in shock," "embarrassed" to be asking for a handout.

Meanwhile, it was reported last week that our government will spend 835 billion dollars this year on the economic bailout. The masters of finance who brought on this disaster seem not a whit embarrassed at handouts of such magnitude.

The only counter to such unrepentant avarice is public opinion fired by moral conviction...Many issues divide our religious traditions. But suppose they came together on this one cause, to put right what's wrong with a system where people must turn to charity because they can't count on justice.

Sermon

Comedian, [Jerry Seinfeld](#), says this in one of his standup routines:

On my block, a lot of people walk their dogs and I always see them walking along with their little poop bags. This, to me, is the lowest activity in human life. Following a dog with a little pooper scooper. Waiting for him to go so you can walk down the street with it in your bag. If aliens are watching this through telescopes, they're going to think the dogs are the leaders of the planet. If you see two life forms, one of them is making a poop, the other one's carrying it for him, who would you assume is in charge?

Who would *you* assume is in charge? If you were not enmeshed in the activity, did not treat it as normal, everyday routine, how strange it would look! What I loved about this joke is that it led me to reflect on what we take for granted; it caused me to think about how funny many of our normal activities would look from the alien perspective.

Sometimes funny...sometimes tragically incomprehensible.

For example:

18,418 people died of hunger on this planet on Friday as of 3:30 PM Mountain Standard Time. At 3:31 PM, that number climbed to 18,445, with an additional person dying almost every two seconds. That made 8,030,355 people who died of hunger this year.

“How can this be?” our space visitor asks. “Is there not enough food?”

Oh, no...there’s plenty of food. In fact, [Americans waste daily](#) about 5 times the amount (in tons) that is provided in total global food aid, and they spend 20 times the amount for that wasted food than the amount that is distributed globally to feed hungry people (*from midday figures on 10/09/2009*).

The aliens are puzzled. So are some earthlings.

How do we explain this?

[The United Nations reported in 2007](#) that one third of the global food aid budget, or some \$600 million annually, is wasted due to conditions tying it to processing and shipping by national carriers of donor countries.

[A 2004 study](#) conducted by anthropologist Timothy Jones for the University of Arizona indicates that a shocking forty to fifty per cent of all food ready for harvest never gets eaten. Nationwide, he says, household food waste alone adds up to \$43 billion.

Whatever reason we may give for the staggering number of people that go hungry in this world, it is not about a lack of food.

By an accident of birth, I have never experienced hunger...not *real* hunger. I was born into a middle class family in the United States of America. I have been hungry, yes. I have skipped meals, sometimes more than one. I have fasted voluntarily. I have lived on a very lean and inexpensive diet when money was tight. But I have never experienced hunger. I always knew that food was in my future. If I had to go without food temporarily, it was with the assurance that it wouldn’t be for long. Part of the devastation of hunger is the fear of not knowing when it will end.

When I first heard that the government had replaced the word “hunger” with the term “food insecurity,” I considered it a shameful euphemism, but I have come to believe that this is a descriptive designation. Food insecurity refers to the lack of access to enough food to fully meet basic needs at all times due to lack of financial resources. Food insecurity does not magically disappear with a meal; the uncertainty lingers about when the next meal will come and where it will come from; the uncertainty lingers about obtaining the proper vitamins and nutrients; the uncertainty lingers about the prospects for employment (and remember just as unemployment can lead to hunger, hunger can lead to unemployment as it strips

away our potential to think clearly and act effectively); the uncertainty lingers about navigating the maze of government regulations or obtaining the proper paperwork. Hunger is a state of being; it is not something that disappears with a meal, but only with the assurance that one will be able to secure regular meals (and will not have to sacrifice healthcare or housing to do it). Hunger, in this country, is deep insecurity in the midst of flagrant, unconscionable excess.

My uncle is a Lutheran minister. He and the youth pastor at his congregation wanted to involve the youth group in a project to assist the local food banks, but thought that first they should give the kids the barest taste of what it means to be truly poor in this country, to have to go hungry. They decided they would have a sleepover in a house owned by the church; after gathering on Friday evening, the youth would have nothing to eat until after the service on Sunday. (They could have water, and they were prepared for any medical emergencies that might arise.)

Friday night flew by pretty quickly. The youth missed food, they said, but mostly out of habit; they usually had stuff to eat as they were watching movies or playing cards or just hanging out.

Saturday morning was a little rougher, as they woke to no breakfast and had to face the prospect of a whole day without food. As the day wore on, they tried to keep busy with activities, but often one or another of them would stop to speak to my uncle or the youth pastor.

“This is really hard,” one said. “I never really knew what it was like to be poor... to not *have* anything to eat. I can’t wait for Sunday morning.”

“So you think you have a better idea of what it’s like to be poor?” my uncle asked the group later on.

They all nodded vigorously.

He then asked the youth pastor to run an errand for him. The kids looked a little confused. “Where’s he going?”

“Oh, he’ll be back,” my uncle said.

Soon, the youth pastor did come back...with a bucket of chicken.

“Is that for us?”

“No, no. You don’t get to eat until Sunday morning, remember? But Pat”—the youth pastor—“Pat and I don’t have to wait.”

“What? You’re going to eat in front of us?”

The two ministers proceeded to eat chicken in front of the outraged youth group. After eating their fill, not bothering to eat all the meat from the bones, leaving many untouched pieces still in the bucket, they got a pitcher of water and some paper towels and washed their hands over the bucket, the water falling onto the perfectly-good chicken.

At that point, the outrage turned to real anger. “This is really sick!” “I can’t believe you ruined all that food.” “And you know how hungry we are.”

My uncle turned to the group. “Now,” he said, “*now* you know what it’s like to be poor.”

It is one thing to be poor; it is another to be poor amidst such callous prosperity.

It is painful for people to go hungry; but it is tragic because *there is no need* for them to go hungry.

And I know that it is all much more complicated than I am making it sound, right? There are plenty of reasons why things are as they are; there are untold challenges in feeding people that I have not acknowledged. There are political realities and economic principles and agricultural obstacles and transportation issues...

So let’s explain all those to our alien visitors, who want so much to understand our ways. Let’s explain to creatures who just stepped onto our planet how this all works.

Given that it is possible to feed everyone in the world, explain how a self-described compassionate species [can allow over 1 billion of its members to go hungry](#).

Given that there is no shortage of food, explain how a species that supposedly cherishes its young [can allow 16,000 children to die each day from hunger-related causes](#), about one child every five seconds. How can we, in this country, allow one in six children to live on the brink of hunger? ([In our own state](#) of Arizona, 20.2% of children under 18 are food insecure, the 6th highest rate in the country.)

Explain how [America can waste](#) 82,000 tons of food a day, while supplying only 17,000 tons in global food aid.

Explain how people can work full time and more and still not make enough money to pay for a place to live *and* the food to keep them alive.

Explain how \$50 billion dollars pledged by the G-8 countries in global food aid by 2010 can be considered anywhere near sufficient when set against [a global military expenditure of \\$1464 billion](#) in 2008.

Explain how it is that [the richest 499 people](#) in this country have assets totaling the annual salaries of 30 million American workers. Let me say that again: the richest 499 people *have assets totaling the annual salaries of 30 million American workers*.

Explain “too big to fail.” Haven’t we already failed? If 1 billion hungry people in a world of plenty is not failure, what is? Aren’t we really talking about banks and corporations too powerful to ignore, while poor, malnourished, struggling and starving individuals are too powerless to matter? Which may help to explain how [Jamie Dimon, the head of J.P. Morgan Chase, told his stockholders](#) that 2008--a year of such calamity for so many American people, losing homes, losing jobs, losing hope—he told the stockholders of J.P. Morgan Chase that 2008 was perhaps their best year ever.

Explain to the alien beings how it is that this has happened, and when you’re done explaining *how*, then tell them *why*. Then tell *me* why.

[Sasha Abramsky](#), author of *Breadline USA: The Hidden Scandal of American Hunger and How to Fix It*, said, in an interview with Laura Flanders, that while he wrote a book about hunger, he did not end up writing much about food. When people asked him why he didn't include more suggestions for policies on food, he said, "Because we don't have a food problem in this country; we have an income distribution problem." Because money has been systematically directed toward the richest 1%, it is not surprising that we no longer have the tax base that would support a social safety net: food stamps, healthcare, minimum wage hike, etc.

And I don't have to tell you that things are getting worse. The numbers of unemployed continue to rise, while the income of previously-secure families continue to fall towards poverty and homelessness and hunger. People are showing up at food banks, as Bill Clark of Philadelphia said, "terrorized," "in shock," "embarrassed" to be asking for a handout; forced to turn to charity, as Bill Moyers said, because they can't count on justice.

And how do we explain that? How do we fix it?

Well, first we acknowledge that there are so many people in need, and we respond to that need as best we can.

The food and dollars you give today matters in the lives of real people, our neighbors in this community. We cannot slight nor underestimate the power of individual and congregational generosity. The Discretionary Fund has been a blessing to people in that we, as a congregation, are able to respond to emergency needs of individuals who have no other resources. The small amounts that we can offer help to lessen stress and avert unnecessary disaster. The assistance we give to Good Neighbor Alliance and to the St. Vincent de Paul Food Bank and to the Migrant Center through your donations and volunteer time matters, and I often wish that I could bottle up the gratitude expressed to me by volunteers at these organizations and by the individuals who are helped by your generosity so that I could bring it to you. It is clear that what you do makes a difference.

It is better to light candles than to simply curse the darkness. It is better to provide meals than to simply curse the system.

And still, the system must be changed; the darkness must be overcome for those who come this way after us. What if religious traditions came together across perceived divisions to fire public opinion with moral conviction, to change what is broken in the machinery of our economy so that it will stop breaking the lives of people in its path. Our second source calls us to confront the powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.

Powers and structures of *evil* you say? Isn't that a little dramatic?

The number of people who died worldwide this year from hunger, when I checked it Saturday morning, was 8,050,097, increasing by 20,000 since Friday.

So our visitors from space are still waiting for our explanation. They are waiting for us to educate them; to make them understand...not just the how, but the why. And they have one further question: why let this go on?

What will we answer?