

million people? Perhaps it is because we all know how clean, honest, hard-working, physically attractive, and middle-class the Dutch are. In other words, they are just like us! And all those dikes, windmills, wooden shoes, and tulips give a fairy-tale topping to our pretty little Dutch units.

In truth, however, there is no reason to avoid or fear a Bangladesh unit simply because Bangladesh is not another clean and pretty little Holland. The good news is that our children are far more open to and understanding of various human conditions and life styles than we adults may be.

This fact was first taught to me by my class of American second-graders in a military dependents' school in a poor rural area of France near the German border some twenty years ago. One father could have spoken for many of my parents when he told me, with more than a little contempt in his voice, that "the French are a dirty, lazy, greedy, and backward people!" Yet I never heard such

a comment from my American seven-year-olds. Perhaps they were too busy after school every day playing with and learning French from their French playmates to realize that they were allegedly in contact with less than an American "Grade A" culture. All I remember is that the ultimate gift that the French playmates could bestow on my American seven-year-olds was an invitation to spend the night in one of the wonderful French village houses of that area. During the cold French winter, the cows lived in one part of the house and the people in other parts of the house. Some of the parents of my second-graders had some rather negative things to say about such a living arrangement, but all of my second-graders thought it was the only way to live through those wet and cold French winters. We insult the openness and maturity of children when we use a Dutch Cleanser approach when teaching about children of other lands.

## Reflections on a Fast Day

PETER GIBBON

"It's terrible, but what can we do?" My ninth grade anthropology class was reading the *New York Times* feature story on hunger. Tiny skeletons dotted a world map, designating starvation sectors. I was also showing them a film strip of Indian children with swollen bellies. I suppose I wanted to shake their complacency, remind them for a few moments of a world outside the student lounge and beyond the athletic field, touch their slumbering social consciences. Robin's question bluntly reminded me of a question that lurks in the back of my mind whenever I discuss social problems. Of what purpose is it to extract a few brief moments of pity from the privileged American adolescent?

It is obviously a sentimental, hypocritical indulgence—suburban teeny-boppers who shop at Saks and feast at Steak and Brew moaning about hunger in Mali. It reminded me of the Turgenev caricature of the liberal Russian intelligentsia of the nineteenth century—wringing their hands (in French) about serfdom in the salons and then returning to their estates at night. Let's get on with the business of imparting skills, training future accountants, executives and lawyers; the church trains missionaries. But I am wary of those who inflict their cynicism on the young and, though I scorn "limousine liberals," I was not particularly

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comfortable in the role of the ironic, impotent intellectual; so I told Robin the least we could do is have a fast day.

A fast day would involve sacrifice: the students would give up lunch. It would also offer a solution: the headmaster agreed the money saved the school by not serving lunch would go to starving nomads in sub-Saharan Africa. I felt the fasting was critical, although some students suggested that a bake sale or donations would probably be more practical and raise an equal amount of money. Fasting involves hunger pangs and this might produce more empathy with the 700 million malnourished than pictures. Fasting was also a recognition that we Americans are partially responsible for the hunger problem because of our voracious appetite for natural resources and beef. Five percent of the world's population consumes nearly one-third of the world's nonrenewable natural resources: "37% of

energy, 25% of steel, 28% of tin, 30% of synthetic rubber."<sup>1</sup> Each American indirectly consumes a ton of grain per year compared to the 400 pounds consumed by the average Indian. Therefore, out of common justice as well as out of compassion we should divest ourselves of some of our wealth.

### Preparation

I quickly found out that responsibility and sacrifice were not active parts of the students' vocabulary. Not that this lack reflects a selfishness peculiar to teenagers. American adults continually talk of social problems in terms of *others'* guilt, folly, and incompetence. If there is rioting in South Boston, it is the bigotry of the Irish; no mention is made of the middle-class flight to the suburb or that not a stationwagon-full of students from Wellesley High could be found who would attend Roxbury Schools and thus contribute to social progress. If the price of gasoline doubles in a year, it is the fault of malevolent Arabs, greedy Standard Oil executives, or negligent government officials. Few mention Americans' insatiable appetite for cheap energy, frequently at other countries' expense. Few slow down their cars or switch to the bus or train. If the environment is fouled, it is tragic and lamentable but few tie up their papers, save their cans and bottles, or use cold water for their wash.

It was clear that the fast day had to be preceded by some sort of educational program if my admittedly exalted goals of no hypocrisy, responsibility, and sacrifice were to have a chance. Otherwise the most I could expect was that some would be resentful, others would have the momentary satisfaction of having done a good deed, and the majority would comply but be indifferent and not alter their habits or attitudes. So, during the week before the fast day, every social studies class addressed itself exclusively to the hunger problem. I gathered articles from a variety of books and periodicals—*War on Hunger, By Bread Alone, Time, The New York Times*—and then I made up a booklet which first described the dilemma and then suggested possible solutions. It was distributed to each student.

First they read Bernard Weinraub's graphic dispatches from Bangladesh, a *Time* magazine article on "How Hunger Kills," and a survey on malnutrition. Then they read a variety of spokesmen who put forth their solutions. The Soviet Union denounced the landlords and recommended a redistribution of land. The Catholics called for continence and sharing. The agricultural scientists called for more research so that new seeds and better methods of cultivation would increase yields. A vegetarian in the United States claimed we must conserve grain by reducing our consumption of beef. A representative of the Third World condemned the United States for hogging more than its share of the world's dwindling resources. A pessimist said

that realistically the United States must consider a Triage policy, in other words, accept the inevitability of mass famine and allot food only to those countries with a chance of survival. Everyone, except the Catholics, was in favor of birth control.

I, of course, was wary of my students drowning in the competing voices of the hunger experts. We have all had the experience of having television or the press present us with a large social problem and five specialists' different and conflicting solutions to it. A certain feeling of chaos, individual impotence, and paralysis ensues. At the same time I believed that the students should be presented with the complexity and the messiness of the adult world. The world is more threatened by the arrogance and certitude of the "New Left" than by the inaction of the bewildered. I also hoped that the hunger dilemma would be less arcane than, say, the finances of New York City and would offer the students some clear moral choices.

My fears about the students being overwhelmed by experts and complexity was unfounded. I had projected my own reaction after a month's immersion in hunger literature. Unaware of the "professional literature" on the subject, with the zeal that comes from being young, hopeful, and somewhat naive, they plunged in. Each presented an hypothesis; these ranged from dropping the bomb on India to compulsory sterilization to giving away all our grain reserves. Each hypothesis was then challenged by other students on either moral or practical grounds. The hypothesis was then redefined. The debate—and I find most adolescents enjoy debating—was clearly an exercise in problem-solving and decision-making. There was a growing sense of complexity, of cultural differences, of "gray" areas, of cost, of what is possible in a given situation: the pill is not always effective if peasants cannot count; boycotting meat means cattlemen suffer; transporting grain to and from remote villages requires roads; milk is repulsive to the Chinese.

I do not mean to say the debate was conducted with the sophistication of the Rome Food Conference. But there was an attempt, by myself and the students, to force an individual to imagine the possible consequences and ramifications of a proposal. Success in this type of mental calculation is critical for personal decision-making as well as for the making of national policy.

### Exploring Values

I looked upon the hunger debate as an exercise in problem-solving. But, more importantly, it was to be an exploration of values. Essentially, I was presenting them with a problem: some human beings starving and others—themselves—never thinking of food, except to complain of the cafeteria's offerings or to ponder the merits of "Goody's" versus "Burger Chef." I was asking them what their response should be. I suggested that the problem

would press with greater and greater urgency upon America, that ultimately the public and not the hunger-bureaucrats would have to make a decision, and that the decision did not depend upon a mass of technical information.

It is difficult to be indifferent to seeing starvation in color. (I had shown them a graphic U.N. documentary on the Sahel and a Bill Moyers' special on India.) And I am sure that some, hopefully even a silent majority, felt vaguely guilty in their abundance and wanted to do something. But many, although upset after seeing the movies and reading the articles, blamed the crisis on the incompetence of foreign governments and the ignorance and profligacy of their citizens, and said what little could be done must be done by our government. The article many students responded most avidly to was one by Anthony Harrigan in the *New York Times*. Harrigan, a spokesman for a conservative citizens group, said in effect that America had tried food aid, that it had failed because of the mismanagement of foreign governments, that we now had our own internal problems, and that it was time these unsuccessful countries were forced to stand on their own two feet.

The appeal of the Harrigan article is not surprising and I am sure it struck responsive notes around the country. It satisfies our natural craving for simplicity and self-vindication. I myself, who was the supposed expert, found and still find myself viscerally responding to Harrigan's confidence and pride. He says that America is a competent, efficient country; we did what we could to bail out those weaker countries who were unable to take care of the needs of their populace; they responded with incompetence and ingratitude; now we will take care of our own problems and force them to be self-sufficient. We are superior; we are compassionate; however, we cannot help everyone, particularly those who do not help themselves. National pride remains intact. Guilt is absolved. My students and the rest of America can self-righteously banish the skeletons from their mind.

The mini-course on hunger naturally forced me, as well as my students, to formulate a solution and to reexamine values. Baudelaire's curse, "Hypocrite lecteur—mon semblable—mon frère!" was properly in the back of my mind throughout the debate. I felt that it was imperative for the ideological success of the fast day to come up with some sort of reply to Harrigan. Students like and need to debate but they also like and need adult direction.

I started by telling them that B.F. Skinner repeatedly reminds us that people almost automatically and naturally ascribe their good character or success to some inner virtue or personal effort and that they employ the same logic when analyzing the success or failure of nations. Skinner suggests that if we closely scrutinize our individual destinies we will find them controlled by environment and circumstance. I suggested that perhaps the same holds true for the destinies of nations. The United States was founded late

in history, with abundant land and resources, a temperate climate, borrowing English technology and institutions, never decimated by invasion. Furthermore, the United States was only two hundred years old. Continued affluence and relative stability were not inevitable. Rome in 150 AD was proud, rich and invincible.

I did not want to convert my students to behaviorism or to denigrate America's accomplishments. However, the history teacher should be the automatic foe of chauvinism and can maintain, I think, that there is truth to the thesis that some nations are the fortunate heirs of history while others are the victims of history. Our abundance cannot be attributed solely to great men and the American character. Once you sense the slow unseen forces of history—and few adolescents or adults do—then your value system cannot be the same. You can no longer confidently insist—as many of my students did—that it is our grain, we worked hard for it, we limited our families, and we can do with it what we want. You are more ready, at least intellectually, to part with some of your goods. On a personal level you can no longer say, my father worked hard for his money; why should he give it up to the careless, to freeloaders? To put it crudely you are starting to think, on an international scale, that "there but for the Grace of God go I." You can no longer bask in unthinking national pride but must confront the complex requirements of social justice.

As for the assertion that we have "done all we could," I pointed out that the United States gives a smaller share of its GNP for foreign aid than some other countries, that food and other types of foreign aid had been declining the last few years, and that much of our aid has been given for strategic rather than humanitarian purposes. As for the accusation of ingratitude, I asked my students to imagine how they would feel, either personally or as U.S. citizens, as the recipients of charity. Some envy and resentment are inevitably directed toward the donor. That does not necessarily preclude a rational and moral obligation.

### Assessing the Problem

What did I hope to accomplish with a fast day and a mini-course on hunger? I first wanted to show my students, through pictures and statistics, suffering and deprivation on a massive scale undreamed of in Westchester County. I deliberately wanted to make them feel uneasy and guilty, to remove them temporarily from their world of gossip, tests, athletics, and romance, and to force them to question the present world economic order. I wanted them to realize—and I stress this in all my history courses—how unusual and precarious our affluence is by understanding that

the actual life of most of mankind has been cramped with backbreaking labor, exposed to deadly or debilitating disease, prey to wars and famines, haunted by the loss of children, filled with fear and the ignorance that breeds more fear. At the end, for everyone, stands dreaded, unknown death.<sup>2</sup>