

Feeding the Hungry

by Rev. Don Garrett

delivered June 6, 2015

at the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Lehigh Valley

I never knew hunger as a child. I mean, well, I did get hungry sometimes. But that just meant that it was time to eat. Now, that could be uncomfortable if it wasn't time to eat yet, but I could always count on breakfast, lunch, and dinner happening at the assigned times.

Breakfast was usually cold cereal before school. Sometimes my mother would pack a lunch for me to take to school, and other times I'd buy my lunch in the school cafeteria. Come to think of it, buying lunch became the more frequent option as my parents continued to have more and more children – eventually seven of us.

So I thought I knew what hunger was. It was that pain I felt in my stomach when I wanted to be fed. It was uncomfortable and I would get grumpy and grouchy as I waited for my food. But there was usually kool-aid or fruit or cookies or something I could munch on to tide me over.

But I certainly had no sense of being privileged or well-to-do. My parents saw to that. They were children of the depression, after all, and there was no amount of food in the pantry or money in the bank that would change their basic orientation. They argued about money and it seemed like my father was always angry with my mother for spending too much on food. You see, they both had known grinding poverty – my father more so than my mother. He told me of one summer when he ate nothing but onions because he had a job picking onions and they let him eat all he wanted. But his hunger was just a story to me.

And hunger remained just a story until I had dinner at a friend's house, when I was in the fifth grade. I knew him from school – we got along and had fun together, so he invited me over. He lived in a farmhouse that wasn't a farm any more. I remember what it looked like on the inside. I'd never seen a house that was really made of just wood before. I was used to carpets and upholstered furniture. Every

sound echoed. The floors were bare wood, the walls were bare and blank, the table and chairs were all wood and they rocked a little. I now know that they were poor.

But there was no air of poverty in their attitudes or actions. They welcomed me warmly and I had a nice time. I returned home and later went to bed. As I lay in bed, I recall having the strangest feeling, a feeling I couldn't remember ever having had at bedtime before. The feeling was so strong that I couldn't fall asleep. I lay awake for several hours before I recognized it for what it was: I was hungry! I'd never gone to bed hungry before! I got up, went downstairs, ate a bowl of cereal and went back to bed.

The whole experience was so far outside my frame of reference that I couldn't process it – I just forgot about it. But, over the years, it came back from time to time as I realized that my friend went to bed hungry every night. This was my first encounter with real hunger.

But hunger is a more direct experience for some. An internet search brought me many stories of childhood hunger, like this one from the Road Runner Food Bank. "Michael is an elementary school student who has struggled in school. He has struggled to perform well, struggled to fit in, struggled to be a part of his elementary school classroom activities. Why? His teacher discovered that his mom worked nights leaving him usually without dinner or breakfast. Since Michael usually came late to school, he didn't have time to eat his free breakfast provided at the school. He complained all morning about his hunger. Michael's teacher said it was all that he could focus on, and it affected his ability to perform, interact, learn and play at school."

I learned that when a child doesn't have enough to eat, imagination – the kind of imagination that frees you to think and wonder and learn – goes out the window. All they can think about is where their next meal is going to come from.

Another poignant story came from the blog of Nikki Johnson-Huston, who received her law degree from Temple University in 2004. She is also a 2012 Eisenhower Fellow. She wrote about her experience as a child.

"A large part of my childhood was spent battling hunger, food insecurity, poverty and sometimes homelessness. When people ask me how growing up in

those circumstances impacted my life, I tell them that it made me someone I would not have otherwise been.

“I spent many days hungry, scared and not knowing where my next meal would come from or where I might be living on a particular day. When I was young, I didn't understand what was happening to my family, but I knew that it wasn't how people were supposed to live. It felt like sometimes the world had forgotten about us and our problems, but then we would meet someone who treated us with respect, like the workers at the rescue mission where we would get two meals a day when we were homeless or the food pantry that would give us groceries when there was more days in the month than there was money in our pockets. The kindness that was shown to me and family in the food pantries, rescue missions and homeless shelters can not be overstated. When someone would give me a snack and ask me what I wanted to be when I grew up, they were not just nourishing my mind, but my spirit. They gave me a sense of being normal for a few moments and most importantly helped me to believe that there was a future for me where I got to grow up and have the luxury to think about what I wanted to accomplish with my life.”

She continued, “Hunger limits you in a way that is difficult to describe because you are constantly thinking about getting food, keeping food and not knowing when you are going to eat next. It's a vicious cycle. You want something better, but you don't know how to get it. Food and housing are so fundamental to the human condition that not having those things paralyzes you and keeps you living hour by hour instead of thinking about what you would like to accomplish in a day, week, month or year. Hunger, poverty and homelessness stole my childhood. It took away my innocence and my sense of security, but I was one of the lucky ones. I not only survived, but learned to thrive. I had many failures along the way but in the end, found success with the help of many people who came into my life. I have accomplished my childhood dream of being a lawyer, but there are so many millions of people who continue to struggle like my family struggled and we as a country have not done enough.”

She goes on, “I have worked hard and had the support of my wonderful grandmother but without charity and the social safety net, I would not have been

able to achieve my dreams. I needed school lunches, welfare, health benefits, food stamps, Section 8 Housing, subsidized applications for college, financial aid and student loans. No one makes it alone, everyone has help in some way. The lucky among us have families who can provide for their needs but for the less fortunate, those things need to be provided by the social safety net and non-profits. The benefits that were given to me and my family was an investment by the taxpayers in my future and I believe that I was a good investment. The question is are we going to continue to invest in our people in a way that allows them to live in dignity and have the opportunity to achieve their own American Dream? Or are we going to continue to make cuts that make it almost impossible for people to achieve a better life?"

The conservative right in our country has done incredible harm to America's poor by characterizing them as unworthy and that any money set aside for food assistance only encourages them to be dependent. Combine this attitude with a very real economic recession like the one we've experienced recently and you get a very harmful result: cuts in the safety net that may be the only thing standing between hungry children and their chance of thriving. One sobering quote comes from Dr. Mariana Chilton, Ph.D., an associate professor of public health at Drexel University, who said, "This recession will be permanently inscribed in the bodies and the brains of children growing up today."

You see, hunger and malnutrition aren't merely distractions for children, they do very real harm to their growing bodies. Proper nutrition is critical to a child's development. Not having enough of the right kinds of food can have serious implications for a child's physical and mental health, academic achievement and future economic prosperity.

It's well established that hungry students have lower test scores, come to school late or not at all, and are more likely to repeat a grade. And students who eat breakfast at school have better attendance records, are less likely to be tardy, and exhibit fewer behavioral and psychological problems.

Andrea Agnew, childhood hunger advocate and writer for Livestrong, wrote, "Hunger has been linked to disease, pain, physical weakness, anxiety and death.

With over 40 percent of households living below the poverty level in the United States, many children are affected by hunger. Approximately 13 million American children live with or are at risk of experiencing hunger. Because childhood represents such a critical period in human development, the long-term impact of hunger on children can be extremely detrimental.

“Good nutrition has a direct link to proper physical growth and development for kids. Children who experience chronic, unsatisfied hunger are at risk of not getting the appropriate intake of necessary vitamins and minerals to ensure reaching developmental milestones. A child might be shorter than average height and could be significantly underweight. Some kids succumb to common childhood diseases because hunger lowers immunity necessary for warding off illnesses.

“Your youngster's cognitive development might suffer from hunger. Children experiencing chronic hunger could develop learning disabilities or other cognitive impairments. . . Your hungry child might fall behind in grade levels.”

A study done at Cornell University found that hungry young people are more likely to suffer from depression and attempt suicide. They report that “one in five American children live in poverty, the highest level of childhood poverty among developed nations, and that almost 4 million children live in homes where, at times, due to lack of economic resources, there is not enough food. Previous studies had shown that depression is a common result of insufficient food. . . 60 percent of the adolescents who lived in homes with inadequate food intake had at least one suicidal symptom and almost 20 percent attempted suicide.”

Finally, “Unlike many other factors that contribute to psychological, developmental or social problems, this one is fairly straightforward to address. We need public policies that ensure that families have access to enough nutritionally adequate and safe food for an active healthy life.”

I can go on and on, but you get the message. We know the need is real and resources are often targeted to balance the budget so we can afford other things. If the supplemental nutrition assistance program is weakened, many millions of seniors, people with disabilities, children, struggling parents – working and unemployed – and others will suffer. Our country would see more hunger and

poverty, worse health and educational outcomes, and higher health costs. The nation as a whole will be weaker – morally, economically and fiscally.

I'll conclude with a quote from President Eisenhower, who said in 1953, "Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed.

"This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children. The cost of one modern heavy bomber is this: a modern brick school in more than 30 cities. It is two electric power plants, each serving a town of 60,000 population. It is two fine, fully equipped hospitals. It is some fifty miles of concrete pavement. We pay for a single fighter with a half-million bushels of wheat. We pay for a single destroyer new homes that could have housed more than 8,000 people. . . . This is not a way of life at all, in any true sense. Under the cloud of threatening war, it is humanity hanging from a cross of iron."

We know what the problem is. We know what the need is. Sometimes we feel helpless in the face of our problems, but this morning doesn't need to be one of those times. You have paper and pens and a sample to guide you. I invite you to write your letter to Senator Toomey right now, this morning. We CAN make a difference.

May it be so.