

The Other Face of Malnutrition

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After the tongue, the stomach is probably the most difficult part of our bodies to control. My own often voracious appetite leads me to admire those people who have gotten the upper hand in this struggle. But for so many of us, this is not the case.

The word malnutrition brings up images of lethargic, skin-and-bones children with swollen bellies. However, the word actually means "badly nourished." For that reason, a scholarly article in WorldWatch magazine (July/August 2000) stated that the U.S. is home to more than 100 million malnourished people. A quarter of these are "morbidly so" – in other words, in danger of death. Compare this to Ethiopia's 16 million malnourished people in danger of death from starvation.

The medical expenses and lost wages in our country from this type of malnutrition cost an estimated \$118 billion dollars per year – more than \$400 per person in the U.S. Poor nutrition leads to significantly increased risk of coronary heart disease, cancer, stroke and diabetes. The American Cancer Society estimates that, for the average American, changing to a healthy diet reduces the risk of cancer as much as giving up smoking does.

A little known consequence of the American diet are the 350,000 hip fractures suffered annually by our seniors, a fact believed to be caused by excessive protein in our diets (U.S. News & World Report, Oct 30th, 2000). The average American consumes 2.5 times more protein than necessary. Proteins contain sulphur which our livers turn into sulphuric acid. The body has to neutralize some of this acid by "looting the bones" of calcium. Studies around the world have shown an extraordinary correlation between the ratio of plant to animal food and the number of bone fractures. (China reports half as many fractures as the U.S.)

Few people see, or wish to see, a connection between one serving too many of any high-fat, high-sugar food and the corresponding high cost to our society. Recent years have seen a rapid increase in the consumption of high-calorie foods in the U.S. The reasons are varied but some are sinister, such as food manufacturers directing advertisements to young children unable to discern the consequences of a poor diet. They exploit children's innate preference for sweet or fatty foods for the purpose of locking them into life-long habits that are profitable to the

companies. Another is the gradual increase in serving sizes of so-called "junk food," until we arrive at "King-Sized" chocolate bars and "Double Big Gulp" (64-ounce) soft drinks.

Eating is an area of our lives particularly prone to self-deceit. Many of us would be embarrassed if our private eating habits were made public. We try to hide these habits even from ourselves, with researchers finding that, fat or thin, we routinely underestimate our calorie intake. The consequence of self-deceit in eating is what someone has called "a perpetual penance of regret," from which weight-loss programs reap a lush \$33 billion annual harvest.

The number of malnourished overfed people in the world, which is rising rapidly, recently equaled the number of malnourished underfed people (1.1 billion), which is now on a slow decline. Tragically, much of the more rapid increase in the overfed population is occurring in the poor countries themselves due to the influence of American-style advertising and the introduction of western fast food chains. These are found in countries in which live the 1.2 billion chronically malnourished people (World Bank figures) who are forced to survive on less than one dollar per day.

On the one side are those of us who are malnourished because of excess and poor eating judgment: we have a choice. On the other side are those who are malnourished due to lack of resources: they have no choice. Is it possible for us, who have a choice, to exercise that choice for our good by making those who have no choice the benefactors? If we eliminate from our diets the food that is harming us (except for festive occasions) and much of the empty-calorie foods, the cost savings would be enormous (for the average American), and could then be used to help alleviate hunger through development and relief agencies.

The Bible tells us to "Be self-controlled" (I Peter 1:13). One way to exercise that self-control is to exchange some empty-calorie foods for nourishing grains. In the U.S. we consume only 23.6% of our food intake in the form of grains. In China the figure is 54.7%, while in India it is 62.6%. Japan is a wealthy country but the Japanese seem to have more good diet sense than North Americans, for their percentage of grain intake is almost double ours at 40.7%. Why not aim for such a ratio in our diets? Even a bowl of breakfast oatmeal (or other hot cereal) five or six times a week will significantly raise that percentage.

But by far the best incentive for change is compassion: compassion for the people who go to bed hungry every night. One way to develop that compassion is to allow ourselves to get hungry so we know what an empty stomach feels like. I believe that an essential part of genuine Christianity is a willingness to take on the suffering of another ("He hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows," Isaiah 53:4). Being willing (even glad) to give up or limit harmful, empty-calorie foods so that the hungry can be fed is a mark of the presence of God in one's life. Sacrificing for the sake of others brings a joy that far outweighs the momentary pleasure of a piece of cake.

What does Jesus mean when he says, in Luke 6:24–25, "Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry"? Perhaps a clue lies in Isaiah's comment on fasting: "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen... Is it not to share your food with the hungry...?" (chapter 58, verses 6–7). Or: "...spend yourself on behalf of the hungry... (verse 10). God is saying that He is looking for people willing to consume less so that the hungry may have more. Sharing the cost of the food that is harmful to us would be a minimal response to what He is saying.

The beautiful thing about the Christian life is that surrendering to God out of love (John 14:23) means that God dwells in us. It is clear that the internal exercise of self-control, as well as external acts of compassion for the hungry, are both expressions originating from the divine nature.