

THE FACES OF FAMINE

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One of the last things you think will ever happen to you is that you will wind up in a developing country in the middle of a famine, humanity's surrealistic struggle with the calamity produced when too little food meets with too many people. We have all seen the Malthusian pictures of people in India, Africa or somewhere else we often can barely spell, small children bloated with kwashiorkor or wasting away from marasmus waiting in line in the hot sun for some pitifully small ration of food. Just something to eat.

Some are aware no doubt of the staggering number of deaths attributable to simply not having enough food. Estimates *begin* at around 1,000 people per hour (one person every 3.6 seconds). These of course are only those whose deaths are directly attributable to starvation. Perhaps a many as 50% more deaths arguably can be attributed to other causes that enter the picture *after* hunger and malnutrition have prepared the way by weakening the person beyond the point of reasonable immunity to disease or resistance to hardship.

While some very real progress has been made in the past few decades, the numbers remain staggering. Few extrapolate these numbers to see what they really mean, but the answer is that more than all of those who voted in the last United States presidential campaign will die before this year is out from hunger alone. In about the same time it took the allies to defeat the axis powers, a *greater* number than died in all of World War II from *all* causes will die of hunger and starvation. Nonetheless, you will see no daily news coverage of this war in the popular media. It is not very good business.

Still, there are even a few others who pound away at the hungersite (<http://www.hungersite.com>) hoping somehow to make a dent in this bleak story of the world's vast need and profound neglect. You awoke to the reality of hunger in the world only a few years ago from your deep sleep of complacency. You remember it now.

Along with other members of your Sunday school class, you were watching a brief video produced by ZPG (Zero Population Growth) one Sunday morning. The video depicts the growth of the world's population over the past 2000 years. It is simply a picture of a map of the world. With a little year counter in the corner that clicks off 6 or 8 years every second beginning about the time of Christ's birth when the Earth's population was around 300 million people or not many more than the population of the United States today. Every time the world gains another million people the video would add a little point of light on the map. The little white dots represent the approximate geo-center of the location of the additional people.

For most of the few minutes it takes to run the video, not much happens. Then, in the last 20 – 30 seconds, at the beginning of the 19th century, activity picks up with a light blinking on here and then one there. Then, in the last ten to twelve seconds, the world map lights up with the hundreds of little lights that suddenly appear. Asia and Africa seem to nearly explode with the brilliance of the burgeoning lights.

It is very sobering to consider the implications of this film even while sitting in the comfort of one's own church. Like some kind of intellectual exercise we contemplate what it means. Usually, we do not know and though some few attempt to tell us, it is easier not to hear – to allow ourselves to remain occupied with the other matters of our lives - even as you are being called to go to one of these places. And it is not that you do *not* care because you *do*. It is simply that you can not begin to imagine this kind of horror occurring on this magnitude.

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But now, you are in Africa working to improve literacy and basic education in a little place called Nguludi in the southeastern corner of Malawi. It just so happens that the people of Malawi are on the tail end of a three year drought and some questionable handlings of the nation's small reserve supply of food a year ago. Last summer these same people experienced their worst outbreak of cholera in ten years. This year, they are outdoing themselves and are now in the *final* throes of their worst famine in fifty years.

Now, Malawi is a place where famine is no stranger. To say that there have been no *worse* of these devastating disasters in a place like *this* in such a lengthy period takes the breath away from even casual observers. Up close and personal, it dead on stops your heart.

You can not live and work in a place like Nguludi doing any kind of 'development' work and be separate or apart from the thousands of villagers living near and around or their problems and concerns. It is not possible nor would you want really to be separated from those whom you aspire to love. They, their lives and their environment are *all* what you are now a part of – no matter what they tell you back home before you go to a place like this, you can not remain separate and apart from it.

You want to bury yourself in your work and put a pretty face on as much of it as you can. But in the end, you realize the futility of hiding and appreciate instead that the likelihood that you will help bury more than that approaches virtual certainty.

In the beginning, you hope that perhaps the estimates will be too large or that surely the international community will do something to prevent such a calamity from happening. Then, one day your neighbor's dog kills and eats another neighbor's chicken not five meters from your bedroom window.

You have never seen *this* face of hunger before. You have never missed a meal you did not have some choice in arranging. Besides your dumb-struck, utterly stupefied reaction to such an enormously unreal thing so strange and alien that your eyes can hardly believe what is before them, it ultimately strikes you that you are wholly perplexed by this event.

Why is this dog killing that poor chicken you ask? Why, indeed why?

A few days later, you observe some villagers eating the remains of some flying insect that swarmed over everything and everybody a night or two before a result of a downpour at just the right moment in the reproductive cycle of this thing you do not even know the name of. Someone later remarks that these insects were actually quite tasty (if dried in the sun and wings properly removed) and your ears join your eyes in shocked incredulity.

Yet the imagery of these incidents is real and you finally require a self-admission - like a sharp knife carving through the breast of a just-roasted turkey the complacency of your quiet being lops off to one side cut away by these powerful and disturbing visions. Something is very wrong with this picture that you ponder; something *very* wrong indeed.

As the number of people coming to your home each day for food continues to mount, you find yourself absently wondering just how many days of food *you* have on hand at any given time. In a country where electricity and water do not reliably operate a distinguishable part of the time, you always try to have enough non-perishables to get through at least a few days at a time. But that is all. For a variety of reasons it simply is not feasible to purchase or maintain very much of a rainy day supply. Still, you are thinking about it more than you did.

As the enormity of this somber reality grows, your intellect begins to be stretched in trying somehow to make sense of these things. In a world that has gone to the moon, split the atom and made the million dollar a minute commercial, it is a complete marvel we have not made any more of a difference to so much of humanity where it really matters the most. You ask questions, you research

and you find out about protein-energy malnutrition (PEM) and how even when PEM does *not* kill, the devastating disturbance that it is to the otherwise normal and healthy development of a child.

How is it you ask that with millions being spent on international ‘relief’ so many people fail to get it? The United Nations you learn is actually studying this problem. Curiously, it is those nations who are somewhat *more* developed that actually receive the lion’s share of international aid. They know better how to get it. They know better how to use it. And, so at least the argument goes, *these* countries’ have a form of corruption not so continuously and prominently displayed as these lesser developed nations. Regrettably, it is the ‘other’ more erudite yet still sadly human examples of sleaze that we somehow find *more* acceptable.

Then, one day you are moved to anger over it. And after a few false leads, your questioning leads you to one person who is supposed to know what is going on at least in this little corner of the world so far as food is concerned. His name you are told is Brother Wladmir van Heck.

Brother Wladmir is from Holland. He has experienced starving as a young boy and refugee courtesy of Nazi Germany during World War II. He has been running a private non-profit here for a dozen years called Home Based Care. Home Based Care feeds orphans, the families caring for orphans and those too sick or elderly to get food for themselves even under more ‘normal’ circumstances. He now helps as many as 60 villages’ orphans find hope and to somehow continue ‘hanging on’.

In talking to him you know you have found the right person. After a very brief while, you find yourself promising him the proceeds of any funds you might raise to help feed the hungry in and around the Chisombezi River – Nguludi area. He is genuinely pleased to hear this but shares the somber observation that despite his considerable efforts in Europe to raise funds, he still needs 50% *more* than he has or expects before this chapter of Malawi’s on-going tragedy plays out in mid-April when the maize (corn) growing becomes harvestable. You begin to understand why the worst part of a famine is always in the weeks just before it ends.

The practical reason for this is that for the past months, people have been living off past season’s harvests and carefully rationed supplies. But since the end of November, these have all been consumed. Now, people need a way to hang on until mid-April. It’s just that all of the knots have already been tied in all of their ropes and it is not going to be enough.



Brother Wladmir van Heck with a handful of his many volunteers

Then, a wonderful group of Methodists in Stockbridge, GA whose Sunday School class goes by the name of ‘Dunkers’, contacts you promising some funds to help in the current situation. The money is raised and when it arrives you add your own contribution to it. But as you do the math in your head, you realize again the magnitude of the problem surrounding you. It is not nearly what the Brother needs to feed just the orphans. Still, he smiles gratefully as you hand over enough Kwacha to feed 70 people for about ten days; ten days, ‘more or less’.

The Brother is appreciative and he is somehow optimistic. Despite the fact that these next ten to twelve weeks are absolutely the worst so far as the people, their malnutrition and their susceptibility to disease and other misfortunes are concerned, the Brother is hopeful that perhaps other sources still might be found in time.

At any rate, he invites you to go along with him to see how his group of interdenominational volunteers distribute food – an act repeated about every ten days or so as it is this amount of food that is dispensed – about ten days, ‘more or less’. More food than this makes these orphans and elderly more of a target for abuse and mistreatment than perhaps they already are if this can be imagined. At

any rate, the little Toyota pickup is filled to the brim with 50 kg (110 lb.) bags of un-milled maize. While it heads off on the rugged round about drive to nearby Masikini Village the Brother heads out leading his small entourage to cover the three kilometer mostly up hill walk on foot.



Brother Wladmir is 73 but he walks at a good clip despite the overall ascension. You pass people who all know Brother Wladmir. “White brother” some are heard to call him.

You talk as you walk but mostly, you listen. He tells you what you already know or have feared. This crisis is for real. There is essentially no outside ‘relief’ reaching the people at this location.

Now, there simply is no understanding this. You have tried but no answer seems altogether adequate. There are some who have told you that it is because this area is so overwhelmingly Christian being predominantly Catholic and Presbyterian. That it is these churches who have spoken out so strongly against the sitting president’s bid to change the country’s constitution to permit his own third term of office does not miss these people’s attention. Regrettably, that this president is Islamic does not miss their

attention either. Still, despite the verisimilitude of this argument, you remain uncertain. After all, how could he?

You pass the rounded top of Masikini Mountain as you cross over the hilly terrain blanketed with fields of growing yet quite immature maize and denuded banana trees. The sky is deep blue with clouds that look too much like they belong somewhere perhaps in the Bahamas as part of some fairy tale vacation instead of here with so much impending doom.

Suddenly, there it is - Masikini Village. You see right away the place where the distribution is to take place. You cannot possibly miss it. Scores of people are easily seen milling about standing or sitting. All of them waiting on the white Brother’s volunteers to give the signal to begin.

You begin to take the pictures you realize you came to take. It is a welcomed preoccupation that you greet with some relief. The ‘shoot’ is ‘easy’ as wherever you look, you see the faces you have come to see, the faces of famine. They are all there. Hunger, poverty, pleading uncertain eyes, gloom and despair. Need and neglect are there too.

You squeeze the button to save this face and then that one. “...for I was hungry and you gave Me food” You can’t help but think.



One face in particular is named “Awiliwembe”. You cannot ask her how she came upon this name as you do not understand each other’s spoken language. But her face talks to you.

Her arm is in a make-shift sling and it is clear that her arm is not all that has been hurt. “Awiliwembe” has many of the faces you see this day and you shoot them all. Now, your eyes are welling up so that you have to turn away. It is all you can do *not* to bolt and run away or else grab her and the rest of them up in your arms. They are all so small, so fragile.

Their faces tell of their enormous unmet need, of their unspeakable losses and their many personal tragedies. Half of the orphans you are told are without parents because of malaria. You believe this as you have personally seen so many cases since your arrival in Malawi. Without the Mefloquine, screened windows and mosquito nets that no westerner would be caught without, the mosquitoes simply have it all their own way every night throughout the tropical rainy season. No famine for them.



The volunteers from the villages now begin collecting the ‘tickets’ they passed out earlier to those who are to receive the food. Some have complained that they know other orphans who are being overlooked. Yet despite the likelihood that this is true, none of *these* kids is getting fat on a ten days supply of corn.



Finally, the bags are poured out into a heaping pile and two volunteers, assisted by a number of others begin filling buckets full of maize. The children need to bring their own bags and receive one bucket for the ticket they now surrender. And so as they call the names of the villages represented this day that these people can queue for the food, a ten day’s supply more or less.

After a while, the Brother motions to you and you start back. The distribution goes on for a while at Masikini and then the volunteers go on to the next location across the Chisombezi River. This day, more than 3000 kg (6,500 pounds) of maize is distributed to hungry orphaned children and to the sick and elderly. Most of the hungry however do not receive *any* as there simply is not enough to go around.

On the way back. You can still see the faces of the children. The more you reflect back, the more the faces of “Awiliwembe” and the others fill your mind.

They are all there. And just as in the reality experienced only minutes before, “Awiliwembe” and the others are surprisingly calm and well behaved. No mad dashes for the food or fighting of any kind despite the well understood fact that there is not going to be enough.

They take their turns even the very young ones. Your mind fights to suppress thoughts of these children’s suffering. These children at least, you argue nearly aloud with yourself, *these* children have hope. Hope made of fresh maize and a sunny day.

Still, as you finish making your way back home and again the following day however, seeing the face of “Awiliwembe” and her tiny chums again in your mind brings pause for renewed concern. Despite having witnessed their personal courage and spiritual stoutness, you can not help but look at your calendar.

Your eyes well up again as you consider once more anew that these precious children of God who *are* the many faces of famine have only remaining to them a food supply now of just 9 days . . . ‘*more or less*’.

Jan Heckler
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Nguludi, Malawi

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