

## Guest column: **The Stuffed and the Starving**

### **Abigail Trafford**

One in three Americans is too fat. In other parts of the world, about 100 million people are too thin.

In the United States twice as many children and adolescents are severely overweight today compared with their counterparts in the 1960s. But elsewhere, the Bread for the World Institute in its sixth annual report on the state of world hunger estimates that 150,000 to 250,000 people die of starvation every year--many of them children.

*Too thin. Too fat.* In the United States we quip that you can't be too thin or too rich. In Africa, where the hunger crisis is concentrated, you are likely to be too thin and too poor.

Obesity and emaciation are opposites, yet as health hazards they have ominous similarities.

Both are killers. As waistlines expand in this country, obesity has emerged as a major health threat. A recent study in the New England Journal of Medicine found that middle-aged women who put on even a modest amount of poundage after the age of 18 are likely to die before women who remained slim. Similar studies in men found the same result.

For centuries, starvation had been the bigger killer. Deaths peaked in the 19th century: One-and-a-half million dead in the 1845 Irish potato blight, for example; five million dead in India in the famine of 1876-77; 12 million in China in 1810. Since the turn of the century, the proportion of deaths from starvation has declined--largely because of better food production and distribution and humanitarian aid programs.

But as the Bread for the World report makes clear, the toll of being too thin is significant and in certain regions, primarily Africa, it is worsening.

*Too thin. Too fat.* Both are indirect killers. In the United States the doctor hardly writes on death certificates that the patient died of eating too much. But obesity is often a factor in diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, gall bladder disease and cancers of the breast and colon--all of which are major causes of death here.

The situation is similar when a person is not eating enough. As Steven Hansch, senior program officer for the nonprofit research center Refugee Policy Group, explains, "Starvation is not a medical diagnosis." People who die of starvation in what are now called "food emergencies" are usually listed as having died from something else--infections such as pneumonia, measles, dysentery or "acute physical distress" such as dehydration or heart failure.

Hansch calculates that actual starvation deaths represent less than 0.4 percent of the approximately 46 million deaths that occur in the world every year. At the same time, he states, malnutrition contributes to about 16 million deaths worldwide, primarily in children, in adults already susceptible to diseases and in the elderly.

*Too thin. Too fat.* These polar twins don't just kill. They also trap their victims in lifelong suffering. In the United States, people who are overweight are more likely to develop chronic diseases such as diabetes and heart disease and not be able to engage in certain activities on the job or in the home. There's also a psychological price that ranges from lowered self-esteem to clinical depression, and even a stigma assigned to being too fat.

Being too thin also has devastating health consequences on the living. Malnutrition is linked with stunted growth, mental impairment

and slowed metabolism. It reduces fertility and makes people more vulnerable to infections. Lack of vitamin A, for example, causes eye damage. Lack of vitamin C leads to hemorrhages and frequent infections. Iron deficiency causes anemia.

*Too fat. Too thin.* Researchers are also reevaluating the causes of this double plague. Obesity is not simply a problem of eating too much and not having enough willpower to say no to cheesecake. Scientists have tracked obesity in families and identified a gene for fatness that may explain why certain people gain weight. Research into metabolism and behavior has also turned up clues to gaining weight. In the process, obesity has been elevated to the status of a disease.

Famine today does not come about simply because a natural disaster has destroyed the crops. In centuries past, starvation was indeed caused by floods, locusts, earthquakes--natural crises that created food shortages.

But today, thanks to greatly increased food production worldwide and global communications, humanitarian agencies can get large volumes of food to disaster areas. The crises that now lead to starvation are caused by human conflict. As Hansch describes in his report, drought, frost, flood and rural isolation have been replaced by the modern risks of "technological and industrial disasters, genocidal activities, complex emergencies, nuclear terrorism and the breakdown of nation states."

In other words, there's plenty of food in the world to feed people who are too thin--as well as those who are too fat. While obesity has gone from being a problem of individual choice (lack of willpower) to a disease state, hunger has gone from

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## Letter to the Editor

*Dear Editor:*

I am a psychiatrist treating principally heroin addicts. My wife and I have been subscribing to *Hunger Notes* for years and greatly appreciate it...I am very interested in economic and social problems of capitalist societies...

It is often argued that individuals, not society's institutions, are responsible for problems of poverty, crimes, drug abuse, etc. Blaming individuals for the ills of societies is fruitless. How individuals think, feel, and act is closely related to the cultural-institutional environment in which they grow up and lives. People moving to the U.S. from a rural Third World area, possibly from an extremely ancient culture, will rapidly adapt; their children will be American. People of all ethnic groups are probably very similar in inherited character traits and instincts; they can adapt quite rapidly to completely different cultural settings. Different temperaments and variations of inborn character traits may be found in all ethnic groups and in all times. Otherwise, the way people think, feel and behave is probably much more environmental than genetic.

Major changes in the institutions of modern countries are needed to improve widespread, serious [social]

problems. However, there is also a widespread fear of improving modern institutions-- many people believe that the "least bad" solution has been realized and that significant changes in the U.S. economic-political system would lead to more problems than improvements. Particularly people who are well off have an unjustifiable fear of a decrease in their material living standard, and they may not appreciate other factors contributing to quality of life.

Today there are many very expensive, materially efficient workplaces, but many people have very limited access to work and no access to arable land... [and] many people are unemployed or marginally employed (underemployed). There are not enough workplaces, and the average workplace is too expensive. The unemployed are virtually excluded from the market economy and they are treated as waste...[This] is an extreme problem affecting physical and emotional health of a large part of the world population and costing every hour thousands of lives. *Governments can best create jobs by contracting with local enterprises and by giving grants or low-interest loans to create needed workplaces...*

Modern cultures encourage competition, fighting and adversarial decision

making rather than cooperation and conflict resolution...[which] would better adapt to human needs... Modern cultures encourage consumerism which is for many people a form of addiction...In capitalism, money is overvalued and has an effect on cultures comparable to tokens in a behavior modification program. *Consumption addiction and greed lead to unethical thinking and behavior.* Capitalist societies need to foster cultural institutions that counteract these problems effectively.

—Heinz Aeschbach, Austin, Texas

**Editor's note:** Dr. Aeschbach would like to support Third World small enterprises and cooperatives as an investor, especially in Africa, and welcomes suggestions from other *Hunger Notes* readers, attn.: Heinz Aeschbach, M.D., 2102A Homedale Dr., Austin, TX 78704-2758.

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being largely a consequence of natural disasters to a side effect of man-made conflicts.

The Bread for the World report lists more than 25 countries that have what is called "complex humanitarian emergencies"-- the combination of internal conflict, displacement of refugees, mass famine and failing economic and political institutions. The list includes Afghanistan, Angola, Bosnia, Ethiopia, Liberia, Mozambique,

Rwanda, Somalia, Tajikistan.

*Too thin. Too fat.* Both in the end are costly to treat. In the United States, where we are too fat, we spend about \$33 billion on diet products-- diet foods and sodas and weight-loss programs. We spend less than \$6 billion in foreign humanitarian aid from private and public sources to help those countries where people are too thin.

David Beckmann, president of Bread for the World Institute, a

grass-roots advocacy organization of largely Christian groups, echoes the recent words of Pope John Paul II when he says: "We must not retreat from generosity toward people in need."

*Too thin. Too fat.* And the gap widens.□

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