

## Thanksgiving

Many Americans consider Thanksgiving to be their favorite holiday. It *is* certainly a wonderful occasion—a time when families gather, eat lots of food, and perhaps watch a game or two. And it is a rare time when we actually observe a pause in our hectic lives to give thanks for what we have.

As citizens of the wealthiest country in history, a majority of us likely give thanks for being American, being free, and having our material needs met. When we really think about our relative abundance in a global context, we may feel even *more* grateful. We don't have bombs dropping near our houses. We don't have civil war. We don't largely worry about basic sanitation or having clean water to drink. Even when times are tough, most of us have some optimism that we'll get through them. In short, we're thankful that we are who we are, and not most other people in the world.

But recognizing good fortune has a tendency to ping the conscience if we let it. For it is not difficult to recognize that what we give thanks for might easily have been otherwise, and it is the expression of a moral soul to see in our good fortune an ethical obligation that we should, in some way, be generous to others.

In the time you have been listening to me, two people have died of hunger. Forty thousand children under age five die will die today from hunger and preventable diseases. Eight hundred million people worldwide are malnourished. Even in our own wealthy land, eight million people are without food, and another 33 million have reason to worry about how they will continue to feed themselves.

The problems of hunger and poverty are of such a scale that statistics tend to flatten one's motivation to respond. What can we do, if we haven't solved the problem by now? Do we even have an obligation to hungry people in Asia or Africa, to say nothing of those on the streets of New York or Missoula?

Philosopher Peter Singer makes the argument that if we can prevent something bad without sacrificing anything of comparable significance, we ought to do it. This is certainly seems a reasonable viewpoint. But what do we have to sacrifice?

In ethics, there is a maxim that "ought implies can." In other words, it doesn't make sense to say that we ought to do something unless we actually have the capacity to do it. Former South Dakota senator and now Montana resident George McGovern begins his book, *The Third Freedom*, with the statement, "Hunger is a political condition." Why does he say it's political? because we *do* have the capacity to end hunger. We just need the political resolve.

McGovern himself estimates that hunger could be eliminated with an additional \$5 billion dollars annually over thirty years. Think about that: a mere five billion dollars. We spend a couple billion dollars more than that annually on lawn care. We spend at least that much every month occupying Iraq. Congress just gave more than that amount in tax breaks to the oil and gas industry. Otherwise, the U.S. budget for foreign aid ranks last among wealthiest nations as a percentage of its gross domestic product—a mere 0.1 percent. That figure is, by the way, 1/24<sup>th</sup> of the amount that most people think it is, and much of this aid goes for military equipment. In short, the additional five billion dollars needed to phase out hunger is but a drop in the bucket of a 10.5 trillion dollar American economy or a \$2 trillion dollar federal budget.

Of course, giving more money for hunger relief isn't the whole picture. Money should be spent in ways that also increase self-reliance. Our obligations are also strongest when we—by actions or policies—have contributed to creation of the conditions of poverty and hunger, such as we have among our poorest Native American brothers and sisters.

Yet even if we only think of self-interest, imagine how much we could do to repair the United States' mangled image in the rest of the world if we took the lead in ending hunger wherever it is found. Imagine how it could help the fight against terrorism.

This week is Hunger Awareness week. It is a time *before* Thanksgiving to be reminded of what we can do: giving regularly to local as well as international hunger relief agencies and engaging in greater advocacy for foreign aid and fair markets. Just as important, a day of fasting on Thursday will do more than help us lose a few calories for the Thanksgiving feast. It grants us a moment of solidarity with almost a billion hungry people—those who with our help, could join us in celebrations of thanks for years to come.

This is Mark Hanson of the Practical Ethics Center at the University of Montana.