

LEARNING ABOUT HUNGER

by Duane Karlen

It was a beautiful, sunny Caribbean day, and I was ready for some lunch. I stopped at a street stand for what is known locally as a “roti,” a large flour tortilla wrapped around a curried potato and chicken filling, spicy and delicious, big enough to be a meal by itself. To wash it down, I also bought a huge cup of sweet, tangy tamarind juice, chilled with ice.

I found a bench under a tree amidst people coming and going about their business, unwrapped the roti and savored the first few bites. Then I put it down next to me on a napkin and picked up the cup of juice. That’s when he struck.

I didn’t see him coming, but he must have been watching me. He ran past the edge of my bench and scooped up the roti with an outstretched hand, hardly slowing a bit. I looked up to see him moving away, noticing his thin shirtless form, his ragged pants, his long unruly hair. I distinctly remember the smell of him, that combination of sweat and rankness that go with unwashed clothes and an unbathed body.

As he ran, I saw him bring the roti to his mouth and wolf down a bite. Staring after him in disbelief, the realization hit me: he had stolen my lunch! A flood of adrenalin released me from my initial shock, and I leaped up, infuriated, to begin running after him. He sped on, lifted the roti to his mouth and took another quick bite. Fueled by the intensity of the pursuit and the outrage of what was happening, I began to shout as I ran, “Thief! Thief! Stop him! Stop that guy!”

Now I was in good shape from regular exercise and jogging on the beach, but he was fast as well, no doubt energized by his own emotions. Continuing to shout out for others to



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stop him, I zipped by people in the street, seeing their heads turn, catching their glimpses of curiosity about what was happening. Then I noticed something else. No one was attempting to stop him. Nobody else gave chase. No one else seemed outraged. This made me even angrier, and I began to gain on him.

But as I ran further and got closer, a thought crept into my mind: What would I do if I caught him? I wasn't sure. I slowed a bit so that the distance between us remained constant. Why, I would knock him down and smack him for stealing my lunch! Hmmm, maybe not a good idea in this neighborhood, I realized as I looked around. Well, I would demand my roti back! Ah, well probably not—after all, it was mostly eaten by now.

At that, my focus began to change. In my mind's eye, I began to see what was happening as if I were one of those bystanders on the street, or as if I were behind a camera filming a scene in a movie. Images sharpened and shifted, and I started to view the situation through a new lens.

I saw a white man, healthy and in good shape, nicely dressed, chasing a poor, black man in ragged clothes. I saw someone who was well fed chasing someone who was hungry; trying to get back the food he thought had been stolen from him. I saw someone who was angry chasing someone who was desperate. I stopped shouting "thief" as I ran.

The scenario shifted again. I now

imagined myself speaking to the crowd, pleading my position in an objective manner that he had taken my roti and committed a crime against an innocent person, as if appealing to society's sense of what's rational and proper.

"And what is that crime?" might ask one of the bystanders.

"Why, he stole my food!" I would reply. "It's outrageous and it's illegal! You have to uphold the law or everything will fall apart." In my imagination, the audience seemed to listen to my words, but their faces were hard to read. I didn't know what they were thinking.

At the back of the crowd a curious passer-by stopped to ask someone else what's going on.

"This guy grabbed the white guy's roti and ate it," came the reply, "and the white guy is pissed off about it."

"I suppose he was hungry," said the other.

"Of course, why else would he take it?" They looked at each other. It was pretty obvious who was hungry and who wasn't.

"Well, I guess he could have asked the foreigner for it if he was that hungry!"

At that point either one of them might have said, "Well, the foreigner could have offered it to him too!" But neither of them said that. They both understood the situation.

I stopped running entirely and walked along for a few minutes. The guy had disappeared. Then I

turned back, my breath and emotions returning to their normal rhythms. Nobody noticed me now, other than a casual glance at a foreigner. I realized how thirsty I was from the chase, and I thought of my tamarind drink back on the bench and how good a cold drink would taste.

Later on, I thought about the guy I chased. He must have been thirsty too. After all he ran just as hard as I did! He would have enjoyed that tamarind drink too. Perhaps we could have shared it, for it certainly was big enough!

Later on, much later, I realized he was my teacher. He taught me about hunger. At the time I would have said I didn't need one, at least on that topic. I had studied hunger, I had worked in international development, and I had lived in places where hunger touched the lives of people around me. I could talk about the topic for a long time. So, since I didn't think I had anything to learn, he had to trick me. He had to do something outlandish to get my attention. He was desperate. I understand why he ran. I know why I ran after him. I just wish I had thought of thanking him instead of chasing him away.

Duane Karlen was a Peace Corps Volunteer in Nepal from 1970-72. He later worked with Peace Corps as a staff member, both in the Eastern Caribbean and at headquarters in Washington, DC. He currently lives in the Washington DC area and works at the Foreign Service Institute.



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