

## *The Deepest Hunger*

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Ancient Witnesses: Amos 8:11-13, Matthew 4:1-4

I can remember when I was young, bending over, looking into the refrigerator and yelling “Mom, there’s nothing to eat!” And sometimes I would be right, everything would be gone everything that was not tied down was gone: no milk, no bread, no peanut butter, no cookies, no chips. It was devastation. And my mom would come down and say, “But I just went shopping yesterday! What happened to the food?” Something like locusts, but much worse—a teen-ager.

I look at teen-agers with a sense of awe, these skinny, gangly creatures who can eat twice their own body weight in sugar and still lose two pounds. And soon I learned, like everybody else, that those days would be gone, gone, gone. Ah, but they were great while they lasted.

Sooner or later we have come to terms with our own mortality. When we are teen-agers we are going to live forever. But then we start to put on a few pounds, start getting aches and pains, and mom and dad kick us out of the house, and we realize, “Hey, this is going to require some work.”

Many years ago I saw an article in a newspaper that I thought was quite profound in an unexpected way. It was another of those endless articles about how to lose weight, but it was different. It was about an approach by Dr. Bob Schwartz, who wrote a book, *Diets Don’t Work*. He had a weight problem and went through years of dieting and regaining his weight. So what he did was to study thin people and their habits. His premise was that rather than going through crazy diets, which only temporarily solve the problem, the best thing to do is to act the way thin people act, to eat like them and to emulate them. (Now, there are a small number of people who act like thin people and due to metabolism still have a problem.) But what he discovered was relatively simple. Thin people don’t diet, they eat only when they are hungry, and only until they are full. Period.

By the way, being overweight is a national problem. According to statistics, most people are overweight in this country. Being overweight is also the cause of heart disease, diabetes and premature death. It should be a concern for us all.

Now all this leads me to ask a very logical question. If the major solution to this serious problem is not to eat unless we are hungry, why would we do otherwise? Why are we eating when we are not hungry?

According to the article, “Most people overeat unconsciously, while feeling stress, to avoid feelings or because they aren’t getting what they want.” Schwartz said, “When you realize that when you’re lonely no amount of pizza will make it go away, you’ve come a long way.” By the way, there should be no gloating by thin people on this subject! There is a profound lesson for *all* people in this statement.

You see, whether it is food or something else, one of the basic spiritual problems of the human race is identifying our hungers. We have at least four basic hungers simply by the virtue of being human beings. In addition to our hunger for food, there is the hunger for sex, the instinctual drive to procreate, natural, beautiful and blessed by God. There is the hunger for human love and affection, affirmation and protection. It has often been noted that orphan infants have died if only for the simple reason that they were not held close and loved by another human being. And finally, there is the hunger for meaning and purpose in life, for things spiritual, for ultimate and eternal truth, for that which is sacred. There are many lesser hungers, too: money, thrills, and so on.

And the problem is that these hungers do not exist in nice, neat compartments. As human beings, we are a mixture of these and much more. And for various reasons, sometimes for being deprived of some essential things in childhood, we lose touch with which hungers are speaking to us. This is a good way to understand addiction.

I am convinced that *every human being is involved with at least one form of addiction in one way or another*. And a good way to describe addiction is simply when we confuse our hungers.

And so an eating addiction is when we eat to satisfy a different hunger. Perhaps it is the hunger for affection that we didn't have from our parents, or perhaps it is deeper, spiritual hunger for meaning and purpose. Or we might have anorexia, where someone literally loses touch with the hunger for food as that person seeks to fill their hunger for acceptance and affirmation in our appearance-obsessed culture. In one, the hunger for food replaces the hunger for acceptance, and in the other, the hunger for acceptance overtakes food.

Addiction is when we confuse our hungers and when we do things *we think are filling us up*, but really are not filling us up at all. You can think of some of the major addictions: alcohol, drugs, pornography, food, rage, the internet, and work. They can all become distractions from another hunger that is not being filled, or a pattern has been developed when there was deprivation, but now the pattern itself is hard to stop. Each one can be a way to try to fill ourselves up, a futile attempt to satisfy another hunger. The mood might be altered; we might get a rush; the feelings might be covered up; but this is only a temporary avoidance. There is even something called "love-hunger" or an addiction to affirmation and pleasing others, commonly called codependence.

I believe that addiction is a *spiritual problem* because it enables us to avoid the most basic hunger of all: the hunger for God. All of our endless attempts to fill ourselves merely with food, pleasure or acceptance are, in the end destructive.

Jesus himself exemplified a spiritual life which was aware of his hungers and which could identify his hungers. While he was in the wilderness and fasting for 40 days and nights, the temptation came to change stones into loaves of bread to satisfy his hunger. Jesus responded to this by quoting from Deuteronomy, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." (8:3) So Jesus would not allow his natural hunger for food to cover up or overtake his hunger for God. He would not sacrifice one for the other.

Now, I need to say something about the importance of bread in the ancient world. Bread was simply the key to survival. It was the one basic food source of the people. And average person ate three loaves per day. A prisoner was allotted about one loaf per day. And to be without any bread meant extreme poverty and distress. It was shaped into these round, shallow loaves, and it was used to scoop up other food. But bread was the mainstay, and when they mentioned bread, often they really meant food in general. Bread, you see, became synonymous with survival, a symbol of life.

In John's gospel, Jesus says, "Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life." And he also says, "I am the bread of life, anyone who comes to me shall not hunger." And so the implicit question from Jesus is: "What are you hungry for, really? Are you hungry only for this bread over here, or do you want something more out of life?"

By the way, this is perhaps the major benefit for the spiritual practice of fasting: it allows us to get back in touch with our hunger for food in order that we may put it into perspective.

Once Jesus' disciples complained because they were unable to cast out a certain demon. Jesus said, "But this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting." (Mt. 17:21) Spiritually motivated fasting seems to unlock a deeper dimension of spiritual awareness. To people who have grown up in food-obsessed America, fasting sounds like a fate worse than death. In reality, it can open the door to freedom and strength.

Fasting helps us to identify our hungers; it helps us to separate them. To be temporarily deprived helps us to get in touch with the feeling. "Oh yes, that is what it means to feel hungry for food. I had forgotten. I had been eating not out of hunger, but for some other reasons." The principle here is that *to satisfy our hungers we need to feel them*. This is why indulgence of any kind is life-defeating. When we fall into indulgence and addiction, we do not feel the tug of our hungers and we lose the awareness of our full humanity. "Ah, yes. To want food, to desire intimacy, for yearn for affection, to need meaning and purpose. I am a human being! Isn't that wonderful?"

So to be aware of what it feels like to have an empty stomach—as most of the world's population feels every day—to feel hungry, to wait for that feeling before eating, to eat only enough to satisfy that feeling—this constant way of life is more than just physically healthy. It is also a way to spiritual health and wholeness. Because when that other feeling comes, the one that is not hunger for food, but makes me want to eat, or that feeling that makes me want to drink or watch T.V. or whatever, then we will be able to identify this as a new and different hunger, a hunger from a different source. And then we might be moved to search for *a bread of a different kind*. And this is a step in the right direction.

Professor of Preaching and New Testament, Fred Craddock said, "the fundamental appetite, the hunger beneath all hungers, is a word from God." Certain mystics call it a "homing instinct" in the human spirit. "Always roaming with a hungry heart," wrote the modern mystic Howard Thurman, "this is humanity in its essential nature."

Thurman wrote about reading an account in the National Geographic Magazine concerning certain trees found growing in the Sahara Desert.

*These trees are not a part of any oasis but stand alone in the midst of the heat and wind, without any obvious moisture. It seems that, hundreds of years ago, what is now the desert was a dank, luxurious growth. As the desert appeared, the vegetation was destroyed until, at last, there was nothing left of the past glory except an oasis scattered here and there. But not all vegetation disappeared; for there were a few trees that had sent their roots so far down into the heart of the earth in quest of moisture and food that they discovered deep flowing rivers full of concentrated chemicals. Here the roots are fed so effectively that the trees far above on the surface of the earth are able to stand anything that can happen to them at the hands of desert heat and blowing sand. This is the secret of those whose lives are fed by deep inner resources of life. To those who are sure of God, God becomes for them the answer to life's greatest demands and, indeed, to its most searching and withering vicissitudes. (Deep is the Hunger, p. 170)*

This is a hunger which requires us to send our roots down deep. There is a tap-root source of life that will help us withstand everything the desert may throw at us. And it is as essential to life as food and water.

As the prophet said, "One day even healthy, well-fed young men and women will collapse from thirst and hunger." Why? Because they did not know they were starving, they could not identify their hungers. "The time is coming," wrote the prophet, "People will be hungry, but not for bread; they will be thirsty, but not for water. They will hunger and thirst for a message from God."