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# With Pious Regret

BORICHA, THE ETHIOPIAN HIGHLANDS, 2003

In the searing heat of late spring, before anyone realized that what was happening here was just the beginning of something much bigger, a tiny girl stumbled through a field of rocks toward a group of international aid workers. She was barefoot and limping. Flies dotted her face, craving the moisture of her eyes, lips, and nostrils. A shabby gray dress smudged with dirt hung limply from her shoulders. Though she was no more than eight years old, she carried her baby sister on her back, a turquoise blanket binding them together. Without speaking, for that would have required too much energy, the girl weakly stretched out her arms, one hand supporting the other. Her dark, frightened eyes were desperate. Please, they beseeched, something to eat, anything at all. In a famine, the starving speak with their eyes.

Beyond the girl, on the edge of the rocky field, was a warren of olive-green tents. Inside them, 166 children were dying of starvation.

Emmanuel Otoro, the director of Ethiopia's Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Commission for the Boricha region, gently stroked the girl's cheek. A second of comfort was all he could spare. Then he parted the flaps of one of the tents and entered a scene nearly incomprehensible to the modern mind.

Starvation is death by deprivation, the absence of one of the essential elements for life. It's not the result of an accident or a spasm of violence,



the ravages of disease or the inevitable decay of old age. It occurs because people are forced to live in the hollow of plenty. For decades, the world has grown enough food to nourish everyone adequately. Satellites can spot budding crop failures; shortages can be avoided. In the modern world, like never before, famine is by and large preventable. When it occurs, it represents civilization's collective failure.

Just inside the canvas walls of the tent, Emmanuel came upon two infants receiving nourishment through nose tubes. He swatted away the flies buzzing around their heads. "We've never seen a disaster like this before around here," he whispered to a group of nurses and aid workers.

It was an astonishing statement, given Ethiopia's history. In 1984, more than 12 million people had teetered on the verge of starvation, and nearly 1 million of them died. The suffering was so intense, so vast, and so pitiable that the world swore such famine would never happen again. Yet not even twenty years later, "never again" was happening again, in Boricha and many of Ethiopia's blighted regions. And this time, even more people—14 million—were desperate for something to eat.

Emmanuel made his way to a corner of the tent where five-year-old Hagirso sat like a rag doll on a flimsy mattress, propped up between the spindly legs of his father, Tesfaye Ketema. A few days before, Tesfaye had cradled his emaciated son for an hour and a half as they rode in a donkey-drawn wagon over rutted dirt roads to this makeshift famine clinic. Hagirso was starving to death. He weighed just twenty-seven pounds when he arrived. His arms and legs were bone-thin, his head swollen from the effects of protein deficiency. He did not cry or plead for help. His eyes were deep, dark, empty holes. Farewell, they said.

The year before, Tesfaye, along with many other Ethiopian peasant farmers, had reaped his best harvest ever. Then he trekked happily to the market town of Boricha carrying heavy sacks of grain. But the historic bumper harvest overwhelmed the country's underdeveloped markets with a surplus, and prices collapsed. What Tesfaye received from the merchants of Boricha was barely enough to cover his planting and harvesting costs. At the end of the day, including labor and transportation expenses, he reckoned he actually lost money.



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The next planting season, he cut back on costs by sowing cheaper, lower-quality corn seed on his three-quarters of an acre and abandoning the use of expensive fertilizer. He knew this would result in a smaller harvest, but he calculated he would still reap enough to feed his family. Farmers all across Ethiopia reacted in the same manner. Some who worked the country's largest farms took thousands of acres out of production. Others shut off their simple irrigation systems to reduce expenses.

Then all of Ethiopia looked heavenward for rain. But in many places the rains never came. With drought choking the land, Ethiopia's, and Tesfaye's, harvest shrank even further than expected. Tesfaye's family soon ate through their reserve from the previous year. As the pain of hunger gnawed relentlessly, Tesfaye began selling off his few possessions to buy food. First he sold his ox, which pulled his plow. Then he sold the family cow, which provided milk. Then he sold the goats. With nothing left, Tesfaye watched Hagar waste away. Instead of lugging bags of surplus corn to the market town as he had the year before, he now carried his dying son.

In the emergency feeding tent, he stared at the starving little boy slumped between his legs. "He is our youngest," he mournfully told the nurses and aid workers. Surrounded by the dying children of other peasant farmers, Tesfaye was heavy with worry and guilt. What, he wondered, had he done to his son?

As Emmanuel Otoro moved from starving child to starving child, from horrified parent to horrified parent, he heard the same lament over and over. A thought began to form: This wasn't just a disaster scene. It was a crime scene, for what was happening to these families had not been their own doing.

Four decades before, the Green Revolution had introduced scientific and technological breakthroughs, such as new wheat and rice strains and new farming methods, that ultimately succeeded in conquering famine throughout Asia and Latin America. Millions upon millions of lives were saved as the Green Revolution rolled through India and Pakistan and then across Asia. Basket cases became breadbaskets. Norman Borlaug, a dogged plant breeder from small-town Iowa, hailed as the father of the Green Revolution and the savior of more lives than perhaps any other human being in history, had won the Nobel Peace Prize.



These scientific and technological breakthroughs were also introduced to Africa. In Ethiopia's Great Rift Valley highlands, as fertile a place as any on the continent, food production steadily increased. The Boricha region, a plateau overlooking a chain of Rift Valley lakes, declared itself food self-sufficient at the dawn of the new millennium. Ethiopia, so hungry for so long, was closing in on the goal of feeding itself.

Yet something was terribly wrong. The record harvests brought only more misery to the farmers, as the surpluses led to price collapses. Beyond the harvest gains, certain vital aspects of the Green Revolution never made it to Africa. There had been no investment in rural infrastructure to enable the movement of crops from where they were plentiful to where they were scarce, no development of markets so farmers could get fair prices, no financing to support farmers, no subsidies to cushion them against price drops, no crop insurance to compensate them for weather disasters. The political will to finish the job of ending famine had evaporated in Africa.

African agriculture and the Ethiopian peasants and their children were left to die. For Emmanuel Otoro, this neglect was the unprecedented disaster. "First, the market failed," he observed as he turned away from Tesfaye and Hagirso to leave the tent. "And *then* the weather."

In the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa, Volli Carucci of the United Nations' World Food Program (WFP), which had the task of feeding the hungry, unfurled a map of Africa across the shiny expanse of a conference table. Ethiopia, he demonstrated to a visitor with a sweep of his hand, was only the tip of the iceberg. Hunger was raging across the continent. Up and down the east coast, from the Horn of Africa to the Cape of Good Hope, and west across the hem of the Sahara, from the Red Sea to the Atlantic Ocean, crops were failing and more than 40 million people were starving, saved only by food aid pouring in from North America, Europe, Japan, and Australia. Beyond the zones of full-blown famine and starvation, there was the everyday grind of chronic malnutrition that was leaving several hundred million more Africans with gnawing, half-empty stomachs. Countries were growing as weak as their people, for hunger also eats away at economies. Hungry children can't study, hungry adults can't work, malnourished people die more quickly when other diseases strike. You're hungry and malnourished and get malaria, you're a goner. Diarrhea, cholera,



measles: You have no strength to fight them. Tuberculosis, gone. Pneumonia, AIDS, gone. Everywhere people were blind and lame, too small for their age, too old looking for their years. That too, Carucci explained, was hunger and malnutrition—deficiencies of micronutrients such as vitamin A, iron, and zinc—at work.

Hunger in all its forms was spreading, not retreating, despite all of the scientific advances and the decades of intense effort by so many people. “Starvation is an ancient emotion. It is something people in Europe and the United States have forgotten about,” Carucci, an Italian, lamented. “Looking into the eyes of someone dying of hunger becomes a disease of the soul. You see that nobody should have to die of hunger.”

Since the time of the Green Revolution, the world has known how to end famine and tame chronic hunger. We have the information and tools. But we haven’t done it. We explored the heavens. We wired the world for the Internet. We embarked on quests to conquer AIDS and assail global warming. We lifted hundreds of millions of people out of poverty and into the middle class. Yet somehow we haven’t eliminated the most primitive scourge of all.

Norman Borlaug had warned of the consequences of such failure, pleading in his 1970 Nobel lecture in Oslo, “Man can and must prevent the tragedy of famine in the future instead of merely trying with pious regret to salvage the human wreckage of the famine, as he has so often done in the past. We will be guilty of criminal negligence, without extenuation, if we permit future famines.”

The 14 million Ethiopians starving in 2003 bore silent witness on behalf of the world’s hungry—850 million of them around the globe at the time—to the missteps and neglect that allowed famine to invade the twenty-first century and persist in a world that produces more than enough food for everybody. And they warned of an even more dire worldwide food crisis yet to come. Within a few years, surging demand, soaring prices, and spreading hunger would trigger food riots in a number of countries, prompting panicky governments to temporarily ban exports of their grain and rattling economies across the globe. The desperate supplication of the barefoot girl in Boricha was only the beginning.

By 2008, the number of undernourished people in the world had swelled to nearly 1 billion, the largest number since the early 1970s, when



the full impact of the Green Revolution was just kicking in. After dropping in the 1970s and 1980s, the size of the world's hungry population changed little in the 1990s as the new millennium approached, though the proportion of the population in hunger declined due to an expanding population. Now, though, the cost of grain, having settled at a new plateau after gyrating wildly in 2007 and 2008, is once again increasing the ranks of the hungry. Many of the new hungry are in sub-Saharan Africa, where 457 million were undernourished in 2007, an amount that was up 53 percent since the U.S. Department of Agriculture began calculating these numbers in 1992. The region could soon be home to half of the world's hungry, even though it has just about one-tenth of the world's population.

UN health and food organizations calculate that 25,000 people throughout the developing world die every day from hunger and malnutrition and related diseases. That's three times as many daily deaths as occurred during the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, when an average of 8,000 people were slaughtered each day during a one hundred-day orgy of killing. Or as officials of the United Nations World Food Program have grimly noted, it's the equivalent of sixty jumbo jets crashing each day.

Hunger's grip on children is particularly cruel, contributing to about 6 million young deaths annually at the beginning of this century. Of the children who survive, 300 million are classified as "chronically hungry," which means that night after night they go to bed with an empty stomach; 150 million children under the age of five are stunted from malnourishment, which means they likely never will reach their full potential, physically or mentally.

The failed momentum of the Green Revolution deprives some places of the world, particularly Africa, from maximizing their agricultural potential. This denies global markets a tremendous source of food; Africa, after all, has almost twice as much arable land as the European Union, and much of that land, as Ethiopia proved, could be just as productive. Africa is agriculture's largely untapped final frontier.

This neglect is battering consumers around the world. For most years of this young century so far, the world has consumed more grain than it has produced, draining reserves and elevating prices. Borlaug had put us out front in the race to keep food production ahead of the rate of population growth, but now the food supply has become less secure. We're falling behind not so



much because of a population increase but because of the population's increased prosperity. As the formerly hungry of India and China move toward the middle class, they are eating better, escalating the demand for grain-fed meat and dairy products. Meanwhile, volatile oil prices this decade have pushed politicians in a number of countries, chief among them the United States and nations of the European Union, to promote alternative sources of fuel that are made from food. In the United States, ethanol-fuel makers were devouring about 30 percent of the nation's corn crop by 2009, roughly double the amount they used in 2006. Many farmers reduced their plantings of some crops, such as soybeans, wheat, peas, and lentils, to grow more corn for cars instead. Biofuel companies are now competitors of the hungry.

The consequences of this growing demand are dwindling supplies and greater vulnerability to natural disasters that could lessen harvests. Global grain reserves plummeted in 2007 and 2008 to their lowest levels in three decades, ending a long period of gluts that had steadily pushed down the inflation-adjusted, or real, price of food. Between 2006 and 2008, prices of many of the world's staples doubled. Rioting erupted in dozens of nations in 2007 and 2008, escalating global security concerns. A prime minister resigned in Haiti as hungry people clamored for more rice.

Even countries where the Green Revolution advanced the furthest couldn't escape impact. In Mexico, where Borlaug first bred the seeds of the revolution, rising tortilla prices triggered protests. In India and Pakistan and across Asia, complacency over the rising production had sapped the political will to keep the momentum of agricultural development going. They paid for their shortsightedness in soaring rice prices, which more than doubled in the first half of 2008. It all left the World Food Program scrambling to keep up. The WFP traditionally fed those in rural areas who didn't have access to enough food because of crop failures. Now suddenly it also had to feed swelling numbers of urban residents unable to afford the food available. At the same time, its own costs for food aid were escalating.

The global financial crisis that began in late 2008 doused crop prices like everything else. But hunger fighters are bracing for the situation to get worse once the economy recovers. Deserts are expanding, lakes in Africa are drying up, water tables in China and India are sinking, and climate change is expected to complicate the growing of staple crops in the tropical



zones around the equator. Africa is perhaps the most vulnerable, as the majority of its farmers are dependent on rainfall. Bringing more land into production would take a long time, for that opportunity, too, was squandered. Dire predictions are pouring in from many quarters. In July 2008, the U.S. Department of Agriculture predicted that the number of malnourished will rise to 1.2 billion by 2017. The world is on course to give back many of the gains of the Green Revolution.

For a decade we have covered hunger and world agriculture for *The Wall Street Journal*, reporting from the famine zones of Ethiopia and the overflowing silos of Iowa; from the lush fields of Ghana and Malawi and the desert sands of Niger and Chad; from the amber waves of grain in North Dakota, Russia, and India and the cotton fields of Mali and Mississippi; from the peaceful green hills of Washington State's Palouse and France's Normandy and the blood-soaked, tear-stained soil of Zimbabwe and Sudan; from the world-trade negotiating tables in Geneva and the corridors of power in Washington, D.C., London, and Brussels.

Along the way, we have met many well-meaning people who believe that hunger in the world is a given; that, like the poor, it will always be with us. They think hunger is a natural disaster, as it was in the wake of the Asian tsunami of 2004. Or that it is a tool of political control wielded by desperate dictators like Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe and Omar al-Bashir in Sudan. Or that it follows as a consequence of war, as in Biafra and the Congo. They believe that beyond their donations to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) or the World Food Program, there is nothing else they can do about it; they can alleviate the suffering but not prevent it.

The truth is that natural disasters will occur and unconscionable dictators will ruin their countries. But so much of the chronic, everyday hunger in the world is now a man-made catastrophe, caused one anonymous decision at a time, one day at a time, by people, institutions, and governments doing what they thought was best for themselves or sometimes even what they thought at the time was best for Africa.

Even now, many of the people making those decisions—among them renowned economists, development experts, politicians, preachers, farmers, humanitarians—have no idea what impact they had or what part they played in reversing decades of progress. Farm subsidies in the United States



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and Europe, for instance, started out as a vehicle for helping poor farmers recover from economic calamity or war. But over the years they have grown to be a matter of addiction. By 2007, the world's rich, developed countries were paying \$260 billion in support to their own farmers, making it impossible for competing unsubsidized farmers to grow strong in places such as sub-Saharan Africa. On top of that, the international financial institutions controlled by the United States and Europe have long forbade African governments from subsidizing their own farmers if they are to receive any loans. So it is, too, with American food aid, which began as warmhearted generosity toward the hungry and evolved into a jealously protected entitlement *for those providing the aid*. A Band-Aid for the poor is now an industry for the rich. In Ethiopia in 2003, the United States provided more than \$500 million in American-grown grain to feed the hungry but only \$5 million in agricultural development aid to help them avoid becoming hungry in the first place.

The hunger that grows from these decisions—the catastrophe that is man-made—is preventable. And there is more to do than donate money. There is the need for informed people to advocate for policy reform and new practices that work for the world's poorest, to be aware of the global consequences of self-interested decisions, to roll up sleeves and get to work in the fields. Fighting hunger isn't hopeless. It is a battle that can be won, for this generation has more weapons at its disposal than any other.

To that end, a new movement founded on a new will to conquer hunger is rising once again among people proclaiming “enough is enough.” It is coming from the well-fed in America and Europe whose eyes have been opened to the problem, from philanthropists, from churches and synagogues and mosques and temples, from corporate boardrooms, from universities, from small towns and big institutions, from farmers, from entrepreneurs, from the meek and the mighty. And it is coming from the hungry Africans themselves, from peasants and presidents alike, who are fed up with begging for food. But unless we are clear about what went wrong, we risk making the same mistakes, or, as happened before, letting a year or two of plenty sap our will to construct a system that works in fallow years.

This book tells the story of the squandered promise of the Green Revolution and the neglect that brought hunger and famine into the twenty-first



century. It is the story of Africa and the missed opportunities, the wars and the megalomania, the folly and the good intentions gone bad that have left its agricultural potential largely unrealized, its people hungrier than ever before, and the entire world aching for more and cheaper food. It is a tale of self-interest and hypocrisy in the United States and Europe, how subsidies and food aid have gone awry, how geopolitics influenced by remnants of colonial-era policies and practices of the old European powers determine that some countries should bloom and others should starve, how markets failed, how warnings went unheeded, how the present crisis is engulfing us.

This is also, in Part II, the story of the new movement to reclaim the revolution's lost promise and restore its momentum. It follows the trail from Borlaug to Bono, the Irish rock musician haunted by the chorus of the hungry he first heard in Ethiopia in 1984. From Bill Gates and his foundation colleagues, who realized that the medicine they were bringing to Africa was useless in a malnourished body, to Joe Mamlin, an Indiana doctor who became a farmer in Kenya so his AIDS patients would have something to eat. From Eleni Gabre-Madhin, who kept tilting at windmills until she brought a commodities exchange to her native Ethiopia, to Francis Pelekamoyo, whose Bible led his conversion from Malawi's central banker to humble microlender. From a small town in Ohio to a tiny village in Kenya. From European CEOs to a couple of American sitcom-watching moms to a son of billionaire investor Warren Buffett. From British church activists to former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair to statesmen in Ireland working to ensure that their country's dark history of famine isn't repeated elsewhere in the future.

We don't promote one brand of politics over another, unless it is the politics of common sense and doing what is right for the poorest of the poor. We don't favor one religion over another; the major faiths all command their followers to feed the hungry. If we bring any personal baggage to this issue, it is that we are journalists. Although newspaper reporters are often viewed as a cynical bunch, in truth we are a profession of optimists. We believe that finding the solution to a problem often begins with people reading about it. We trust that reasonable people will feel compelled to act. So we write.

In amplifying our reporting for *The Wall Street Journal* into a book, which is based on our own interviews and research unless otherwise noted,





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we have had the generous assistance of the Rockefeller and William and Flora Hewlett foundations and the Chicago Council on Global Affairs. None of these organizations, however, had any influence over the writing or editing of this book.

Our purpose is to help stir a constituency of people who will reverse the neglect and build on the new momentum. The hungry are watching, and waiting.

