

**Fasting and Food, not Weapons:
A Mormon Response to Conflict**

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Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke?

Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh?

And if thou draw out thy soul to the hungry, and satisfy the afflicted soul; then shall thy light rise in obscurity, and thy darkness be as the noonday:

And the Lord shall guide thee continually, . . . and thou shalt be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters fail not.

. . . thou shalt raise up the foundations of many generations; and thou shalt be called, The repairer of the breach, The restorer of paths to dwell in. (Isa. 58:6–7, 10–12)

I wish to share with you two ideas, two proposals, and two images. First the images. On 13 May 1981, in St. Peter's Square in Rome, I was reaching over a barrier to touch Pope John Paul II's outstretched hand as he circled through the crowd in his Jeep-like "Popemobile" at the beginning of his weekly public audience, when I saw the bullets hit him, one squarely in the front below the heart.

The second image comes from Christmastime, 1983. That same pope, making his yearly visit to Rome's Rebibbia Prison, turned aside to the cell of Mehmet Ali Agca, the man who had shot those bullets, and visited with him alone in a corner of that bare, white-walled room for twenty minutes. He held Agca's hand, whispered to him, seemed almost to be receiving his confession, reached out to take his arm. As he left, Agca lifted the pope's hand to his forehead in the Muslim gesture of respect. The pope later said that he had told Agca he forgave him for the shooting, that he fully accepted him as a brother.

A cynic might claim that such a well-publicized "gesture" (television crews and photographers present) was expected and merely political in intent. But the cynic would be wrong. The gesture in fact surprised us all, and it has no larger political meaning, unless we give it one (as we should) by recognizing that the affairs of groups and nations—terrorism, war, and starvation, along with all other evils and their solutions—finally come down to the individual heart and to personal gestures of mercy.

My thesis in this essay is quite simple. It is that fasting regularly and giving the food saved to the hungry, especially our enemies, is the surest route to world peace as well as world health.

Impelled by universal human emotions in the face of hunger, especially in a crisis, we have shown we can unite in ways we seem unable to do in other matters, even in something so basic as arms reduction. Participating in the first major fast for Ethiopia, 10 November 1984 (as well as the National Fast for Poland, 24 February 1982), were people with a wide range of beliefs: Jews, evangelical and liberal Christians, Mormon Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims. There were, as well, people with no specific religious belief, not believers in a personal God but merely believers in life and human responsibility, people trying to make sense of life and trying to be ethically disciplined in response to that sense. This immensely diverse group of people was able to unite in both empathizing with the hungry by going without food and in giving the savings to stop the hunger.

Is there a rational basis for such unity? I believe there is: the position of morally serious but nonbelieving people, which might best be called Stoic Existentialism, is a viable, often very attractive alternative to religious faith, and it has grown especially attractive in the twentieth century. One reason is that traditional theistic religions have neither prevented nor given persuasive explanations for the terrible atrocities of this century: concentration camps, liquidation, hundreds of wars, official torture, the nuclear threat, and now widespread drought and disease and starvation, apparently man-abetted, in Africa, a condition some are beginning to call the greatest disaster in human history next to Hitler's holocaust, Stalin's and Mao's purges, and Cambodia's recent nightmare.

The case for Stoic Existentialism was perhaps best made by Albert Camus in his novel *The Plague*. A Catholic priest and a nonbelieving doctor confront an epidemic that suddenly strikes a northern Africa town. The plague becomes symbolic of all that mysteriously attacks and kills us, all that inexplicably dooms human endeavor. The priest, Paneloux, at first tries to explain the plague as God's punishment on the wicked town; his ideas are opposed by the Stoic, Dr. Rieux, who nevertheless respects the efforts of the priest, and of other Christians, to help those who have the disease. Rieux states his position in these terms:

Every country priest who . . . has heard a man gasping . . . on his deathbed thinks as I do. He'd try to relieve human suffering before trying to point out its excellence. Since the order of the world is shaped by death, mightn't it be better for God if we refuse to believe in Him and struggle with all our might against death, without raising our eyes toward the heaven where He sits in silence.¹

That is the Stoic ethic: to fight, without taking comfort in explanations. And Camus shows the Christian priest, after he witnesses the horrible

death of a child, coming around to a position similar to Rieux's: It no longer makes sense to call the plague punishment when it kills innocent children. After they struggle together to save the child and suffer through his death, there is a very moving exchange between this representative believer and representative nonbeliever. It would be good for all of us, since all of us can identify with at least one or the other—perhaps even both—to listen well. When Rieux reacts bitterly to the child's death, Paneloux says, "I understand. . . . That sort of thing is revolting because it passes our human understanding. But perhaps we should love what we cannot understand." Rieux replies, "No, Father. I've a very different idea of love. And until my dying I shall refuse to love a scheme of things in which children are put to torture."

A shade of disquietude crossed the priest's face. "Ah, doctor," he said sadly, "I've just realized what is meant by 'grace.'"

Rieux had sunk back again on the bench. His lassitude had returned and from its depths he spoke, more gently:

"It's something I haven't got; that I know. But I'd rather not discuss that with you. We're working side by side for something that unites us—beyond blasphemy and prayers. And it's the only thing that matters."

When Paneloux declares, "You, too, are working for man's salvation," Rieux replies, "Salvation's much too big a word for me. I don't aim so high. I'm concerned with man's health; and for me his health comes first."²

Certainly, all mankind cannot agree on what "salvation" is or how to attain it—or perhaps even on what means can save us from nuclear war, since every proposal immediately raises political questions that divide us. But nearly all of us can come, I believe, to agree with Rieux's position—and with Paneloux's actual behavior—in seeing present death and disease as our chief and universal human enemy. And all of us, believers and nonbelievers, have prophets who have taught us well the simple and essential ideas upon which a common effort to fight death and disease, and to end starvation, can be built. The first of these is that we are all sinners and all equally responsible, not in the sense of being to blame but in being able to do something—to act for ill, or good. We are all capable of acting contrary to what we know is right—and we often do not even know what is right. None of us, therefore, can hold self-righteously aloof. Not only the Old Testament prophets and Christ taught this clearly, but so did Augustine, Luther, Freud, Marx, Dostoevsky, Camus, T. S. Eliot, Bellow, and most other great writers and thinkers, whether Stoic nonbeliever or theist believer.

For those of us who accepted Spencer W. Kimball as a prophet, this was his judgment on Americans, particularly his fellow Mormons, at the time of our self-congratulation at our bicentennial in 1976:

We are, on the whole, an idolatrous people—a condition most repugnant to the Lord. . . .

We are a warlike people, easily distracted from our assignment of preparing for the coming of the Lord. When enemies rise up, we commit vast resources to the fabrication of gods of stone and steel—ships, planes, missiles, fortifications—and depend on them for protection and deliverance. When threatened, we become antienemy instead of pro-kingdom of God; we train a man in the art of war and call him a patriot, thus, in the manner of Satan’s counterfeit of true patriotism, perverting, the Savior’s teaching [that we love our enemies]. . . .

We forget that if we are righteous the Lord will either not suffer our enemies to come upon us . . . or he will fight our battles for us.³

But few of us listen to our prophets when they point to our universal sinfulness. Perhaps we could listen better to their universally consistent solution to that sinfulness. In every great religious and philosophical tradition, the principle for stopping human evil has been central and repeated: helpfulness and mercy instead of rejection and vengeance; humble, sacrificial love instead of pride and selfishness. The Old Testament prophet Micah says it this way: “He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?” (Micah 6:8).

The New Testament is even more challenging. Just before he was crucified, Christ taught his Apostles the one basic criterion of acceptance by him—the one that would separate his acceptable sheep from the goats when he came again in glory:

For I was an hungered, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in:

Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me,

. . . Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me. (Matt. 25:35–36, 40)

In teaching this same fundamental Principle, the Book of Mormon Prophet Benjamin emphasizes two ideas that I believe would particularly help us in finding a solution to world hunger: first, that mercy cannot be in any sense judgmental or reserved or even discriminating and, second, that mercy is essential for the well-being of the giver as well as the receiver. Benjamin instructs a group of newly converted Christians:

And also, ye yourselves will succor those that stand in need of your succor; ye will administer of your substance unto him that standeth in need; and ye will not suffer that the beggar putteth up his petition to you in vain, and turn him out to perish.

Perhaps thou shalt say: The man has brought upon himself his misery; therefore I will stay my hand, and will not give unto him of my food, not

impart unto him of my substance that he may not suffer, for his punishments are just—

But I say unto you, O man, whosoever doeth this the same hath great cause to repent; and except he repenteth of that which he hath done he perisheth forever, and hath no interest in the kingdom of God,

For behold, are we not all beggars? Do we not all depend upon the same Being, even God, for all the substance which we have, for both food and raiment, and for gold, and for silver, and for all the riches which we have of every kind?

And if ye judge the man who putteth up his petition to you for your substance that he perish not, and condemn him, how much more just will be your condemnation for withholding your substance, which doth not belong to you but to God. (Mosiah 4:16–19, 22)

This point—that we must give without judgment—is precisely relevant to the current crisis in Ethiopia, where the communist regime has apparently, through centralized economic planning and imposed land reform, brought on at least some of the problem and is responding in ways that look politically motivated. Should we stay our hand, as many in our country have demanded, because their punishments are just? Were we right, in response to the imposition of martial law in Poland in December 1981 (by a government which seemed to be bringing on the suffering and economic chaos of its people through socialist planning and subservience to Russia), to make reprisals by cutting off all our government aid and cooperation of various kinds? I think not.

And what do our acts of mercy towards others—feeding the starving, aiding the sick who do not deserve it—have to do with our *own salvation*? According to Benjamin,

For the sake of retaining a remission of *your sins* from day to day, that ye may walk guiltless before God—I would that ye should impart of your substance to the poor, every man according to that which he hath, such as feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and administering to their relief, both spiritually and temporally, according to their wants. (Mosiah 4:26; emphasis added)

That same wisdom echoes through all great literature and all revered examples of ideal human response: Shakespeare's Portia reminds us that "In the course of justice, none of us should see salvation" and that mercy "blesseth him that gives and him that takes."⁴ Mother Teresa of Calcutta, who persists against incredible odds to help the starving and dying in that city's streets, has been called inefficient, not able to begin to keep up with the increasing misery around her as the population increases. Her critics claim that what is needed is a massive, rational government program. But she continues to define poverty not as a lack of resources but as a lack of love and does not feel her work futile if she can do no more than offer a few

dying people the chance to die, as she puts it, “within sight of a loving face.” Seeing that mercy is more important than efficiency, both for the receiver and for the giver, she achieves the greatest efficiency that exists in Calcutta because she is doing something.

Mother Teresa teaches her helpers that prayer and meditation are important preparation, but that finally they must renounce personal luxury and give themselves to uncalculating giving. She knows what John taught:

But whoso hath this world’s good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him?

My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth. (1 John 3:17–18)

She knows what was well understood by Brigham Young. When he heard, during the October 1856 LDS Church conference in Salt Lake City, of the Willie and Martin handcart companies’ plight in the snow of Wyoming, he dismissed the conference to go to their aid by saying, “Prayer is good, but when baked potatoes and milk are needed, prayer will not supply their place.”⁵ A central part of the dream Martin Luther King called us to share was that prayer and pious hopes are not enough to bring social justice without adding direct action, but on the other hand social justice as a shared goal can help bring spiritual salvation to both blacks and whites.

If all our various religious and nonreligious philosophical traditions teach us what to do about human need and human conflict and why, the remaining question is how to do it. There are some examples before us. Oxfam, one of the main sponsors for the November 1984 Fast for Ethiopia, was founded at Oxford University in 1942. It slowly grew and expanded, a branch coming to America in 1970. In 1983, Oxfam America raised about \$5.6 million—which is a pittance compared to the need, but something. So perhaps we should think a few minutes about the scale of need and the resources available. Robert A. Evans has made hauntingly specific the image of a “global village” that has become popular in recent decades:

If the world were a village of one hundred persons, one—third would be rich or of moderate income, and two-thirds would be poor. About thirty-five would suffer from hunger and malnutrition. At least half would be homeless or living in inadequate housing. In the village, forty-seven would be unable to read and write, and only one would have a college education. Six of the one hundred would be Americans and would have over one-third of the Village’s entire income whereas the other ninety-four would subsist on the remaining two-thirds. The Americans would produce sixteen percent of the village’s food supply and consume most of it themselves, except what they would store for future use or even destroy to raise its value in the village market. Over half of the remaining ninety-four would be hungry most of the time and would consider the six to be enormously wealthy, disproportionately well fed with three of them on a diet. Of the ninety-four, forty-two would

eventually die of diseases such as malaria, or cholera. Another fifteen would die of starvation within a year; ten of these would be children.⁶

Perhaps the central implication of this image is that those of us (probably all who will read this essay) who are among the most privileged five or six percent in the world village should try to imagine how our suffering and dying neighbors, the desperate parents of diseased and hungry children, might perceive us if we really were their immediate neighbors in a village. We could thus understand the judgments of the world upon us. Distance and borders cannot provide moral immunity, especially if we believe, as Mormons do, that we made specific covenants in the great councils before we came to this world, promising that if we turned out to be among the more fortunate in the mortal probation of chance and agency we would give our maximum effort to bring salvation to the less fortunate—whether through missionary work, temple work for the dead, or “feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick” and imprisoned (Mosiah 4:26). But if we merely believe in simple human brotherhood—that all men and women are of one family, with filial obligations as deep as our genetic makeup—we will find a way to share our good fortune, most of it undeserved, and to reduce the pain and hatred and danger that differences naturally cause.

As a specific and personal answer to the question of how, let me share some of my experiences with Food for Poland. In the summer of 1981, after I returned from Europe to BYU, I found myself increasingly obsessed with Poland and the remarkable razor-edge persistence of the independent labor union, Solidarity, and its struggle for greater freedom. Because of my close witness to the miracle of the pope’s survival and my resulting sensitivity to the other miracles that seemed to protect and bless Solidarity, I found myself lying awake at night, wondering and worrying about the many dangers still threatening that wonderful human effort and then about what I could do to help Poland. Finally, I felt I had to act. I called a friend, the lay Catholic theologian Michael Novak, who is of Polish descent and who I suspected had some contacts with Solidarity leaders. It turned out he had just returned from meeting with a group of them in Rome, and he told me how to reach them in Poland. I phoned Bronislaw Geremek, a medievalist who was chief advisor to Solidarity. He and his wife reviewed Poland’s immediate needs—milk for the children and aged, medicine for the epidemic of life-threatening diarrhea that hunger was producing, and detergents to help deal with the diarrhea and other sanitation problems—and asked us to help right away.

Impelled by that request, we organized a nonprofit foundation, with a national advisory board headed by Novak, which included a range of compassionate and distinguished people, from industrial and political leaders

like George Romney to writers like Isaac Bashevis Singer. The work of actual fund-raising and arranging for commodity donation and shipment centered naturally in Utah, especially at BYU, and at a few centers developed by friends around the country, particularly among the many Polish Americans in Chicago. We had a planeload of milk donated and ready to be shipped when martial law was declared on 13 December, and all flights were grounded. We hesitated a bit until we could be certain supplies were getting through, and after verification through our contacts in the Catholic church in Poland, we made our first shipment, by truck and then Polish ship, in January.

We followed up with many fund-raising activities, including sponsoring a National Fast for Poland in February, and we were able to airlift a large shipment of detergents and medicines and help the Polish National Alliance and other groups with a cooperative convoy of food and clothing from the western states, a convoy that totaled over seven million dollars in value and included a large contribution from the LDS church. We sent our managers on two separate trips to Poland to supervise distribution and report to our contributors. The climax of our effort in the summer of 1982 was to help sponsor the visit to Provo of the former Polish ambassador to the United States, who had resigned when martial law was imposed and who spoke at the Fourth of July Freedom Festival and helped us with a major fund-raising effort.

To that point I had learned, at significant cost, some important things. Using government surplus milk, we could translate a one dollar donation into twenty gallons of milk delivered in Poland, enough to feed ten children for a week. In good conscience, I could tell students that foregoing a ten-dollar movie date (and attending instead the free International Films at BYU, for instance) meant milk for one hundred children for a week. A similar claim could be made right now about other places in the world. Furthermore, such things as slightly outdated but still perfectly good medical supplies, clothes, books, and current medical journals (without which the western-based Polish medical profession was quickly losing ground) could do immense good if we could spend a little effort and get them to the right place.

I learned that if one absent-minded and inefficient professor of English could make a pitifully small, but real, contribution, so could many others. I talked to people almost every day who could give thousands of dollars, even millions, and never miss it, but would not. I got letters from families who fasted regularly and sent us their savings, to the penny—and some who sent donations for a while and then stopped when publicity stopped.

I learned how governments can help and hinder. In the summer of 1982, just after we had received our largest total of cash contributions, we

found ourselves cut off from the purchase of further surplus milk by the expiration of the earlier government allotment. The current administration had formed its main response to Poland around the reprisals imposed by President Reagan in response to Jaruzelski's martial law. We worked with the Department of Agriculture, aided by Utah Senators Garn and Hatch, to initiate new allotments of surplus milk, and finally, after much effort, received permission for a million pound shipment in 1984.

In the process of this experience, I became convinced that our little effort did more to promote peace than all the government's reprisals. In fact, I believe that if our government in 1980–81 had had the courage and fundamental sense of Christian logic to give Poland a billion dollars in a well-designed Marshall Plan type of rebuilding program (with no political strings attached that could have aroused the Soviets), that action just might have made the survival of Solidarity possible.

Instead, our government cut off almost that much in loans and commodities, including feed for the huge chicken industry we had encouraged and now helped destroy. Perhaps this policy can be justified by the logic of retaliation which governs world power politics. But if I may quote again from *The Merchant of Venice*, "In the course of justice, none of us should see salvation." Withdrawing help, using food as a weapon of retribution, will not bring peace or freedom or stability to Poland. That can be done only by mercy and sacrifice, a willingness to live with and help a basically socialist system that probably would remain so under a fully democratic system—and that must remain unthreatening to Russia in its foreign policy. We could still achieve great benefits if we could move our government to massive, politically neutral technical and material help now that relations between our countries are thawing a bit. But that requires public support for giving to, even loving, an enemy, something we must still learn to do, even if we say, as Christians, we believe in it. That is why I believe in a goal of solving world hunger, which would require cooperating with our avowed enemies—just as we are now being asked to do in Ethiopia. If we cannot do that, then I see no way we can eventually solve the much more touchy problem of arms control with those same enemies.

Let me make two simple, if rather dramatic, proposals. But first I will make one that is too dramatic, probably impossible: Get the United States and Russia each to give half their arms budget to meet the Third World's basic needs. It has been calculated that the nearly one-half-trillion dollars per year thus made available would provide resources for all the needs—food, health, education, even housing—of the poorer countries. If we would join our power and resources to these ends, we would learn to be friends—and might also learn that we could do just fine without the other half of our arms. Most of us tend to object that we would do it if "they"

would, but “they” can’t be trusted. All right, if we’re unwilling to risk unilateral action because we really don’t believe Christ and the modern prophets that loving our enemies would bring response, then let me suggest, as my first serious proposal, a perfectly safe move. Our finest experts cannot agree within 10–20 percent about just what arms budget is really “necessary” to our national security. There would certainly be no risk if we dedicated a mere 5 percent of that budget to peace. With that 5 percent, at least sixteen billion, even if the Russians would not respond in kind (though I believe they would), we could provide enough funds to send each year one million of our young students and young professionals to live and study in Russia, to learn their language and to understand and appreciate their culture and their political and moral perspective. And, with that 5 percent, we could also pay for one million of their young people to live in America and learn the same things. In twenty years, 10 percent of our respective populations would know each other as something other than the dangerous propaganda caricatures we are to each other now. (If nothing else, the presence of a million of our best young minds in Russia and of theirs here might help deter both sides from nuclear attack.)

We constantly use our immense resources instead for the more direct, the “easy” solution of force—which usually doesn’t work at all and never provides a lasting solution. For instance, our government recently approved spending another \$130 million to make our embassies in Asia more “secure” after all the terrorist bombings. But we have great trouble allocating that kind of money to solve the problems of poverty and homelessness that produce the terrorism. We strike at the branches of evil but never at the roots.

There are many things I don’t know with certainty. I don’t know if a nuclear freeze would work, if it would make peace more rather than less secure. I’m not absolutely certain spending 5 percent of our arms budget for exchange of students would build love (perhaps it would merely confirm our suspicions and hatred of each other). I’m not even completely sure that joining together to feed the poor, especially those who are our enemies, would allay the antagonisms and suspicions that preserve the arms race. But I firmly believe these are our best chances and deserve a try. We have tried the other ways—recriminations, reprisals, name-calling, infantile line-in-the-sand braggadocio, all the machinations of “justice” and vengeance—none of which are endorsed by Christ or any of the great religious or secular prophets and thinkers of history. And none of them has worked. On the other hand, the Marshall Plan, which gave our resources to rebuild the nations of former enemies and thus was the only major international effort in our century that could be defended as mainly consistent with Christian principles, has worked magnificently. And yet, even as

Latter-day Saints, we resist the scriptures and the clear counsel of one of our modern prophets, President Kimball, who demanded of us in 1976:

What are we to fear when the Lord is with us? Can we not take the Lord at his word and exercise a particle of faith in him? our assignment is affirmative: to forsake the things of the world as ends in themselves; to leave off idolatry and press forward in faith; to carry the gospel to our enemies, that they might no longer be our enemies.⁷

The logic is rationally and historically irresistible. The only way to permanently do away with enemies (defeating, suppressing, even killing them has never succeeded) is to turn them into friends through Christ's gospel—that is, through the natural laws of merciful giving and forgiving. Just as surely as revenge and violent justice only make us become more like our enemies, as brutal and finally as evil, so mercy and generosity have the greatest chance to make our enemies become more like us, as good and peaceful.

Our Church leaders have set the example, and it is for us, using our agency, to do what they, given their specific stewardship, cannot do or direct us to do: to initiate, organize, create the mechanisms for solving world hunger and for leading our government into paths of thought and action that will support that goal and may move our enemies (whether they do it through shame in the face of world opinion or genuine human response) to join with us. Despite the feeling, and public allegation, of some Utahns that we founders of Food for Poland were traitors (giving aid to an enemy in time of war), the Church gave over one hundred thousand dollars in welfare supplies for Polish aid in 1982 and has continued such aid to the present. Despite the claim of some Utahns that the Ethiopian Communists deserve their fate, the Church called for a day of fasting in the United States and Canada on 27 January 1985 and joined in the National Day of Fasting in November 1985, giving the proceeds, over ten million dollars, to Ethiopian and other short-term relief as well as long-term preventive measures. Church leaders in England and elsewhere around the world followed up with very successful fasts in their areas. And the Church provides continuing opportunities for both members and nonmembers to contribute directly to such famine-relief efforts, without any administrative costs, either by sending contributions directly to the Church or through local wards.⁸

“Conservatives,” who have emphasized obedience, can now show their sincerity by being obedient in following an example they might not readily have chosen. “Liberals,” who have called for more direct Church action in social needs, can now put their money where their mouths have been. But all of us, in order to direct and sustain our efforts in the areas of individual creativity that will solve the problem, must come to believe, with emotional

conviction, what our scriptures remind us is true: “[God] hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth” (Acts 17:26). Whether we believe the prophets or the biologists, we are one blood. The withered, fetus-like child staring out its last minutes of life in a Red Cross camp in northern Ethiopia and her desperate parents who walked a hundred miles to bring her there for help have their claim on us, no matter what terrible things their political leaders are doing.

Finally, I believe that the most immediate way to feel that unity of blood and some of the shared pain that might move us to do something is to fast, to go without food and water ourselves until we genuinely sense how close we all are to death if our sustenance were cut off. And regular fasting—and, in the Mormon tradition, giving the money saved to feed others—seems to me the most direct and practical way both of solving world hunger and of building human empathy to the point of solving other problems. Suppose that once a week the one hundred million Americans who are overfed, for whom diets and reducing would improve their health (many of whom are spending money in an attempt to lose weight), would simply fast for two meals and give ten dollars to famine relief. That one billion dollars per week, used with only average intelligence and effectiveness, could solve all the major problems of starvation in the world. And if we could get others, beginning in Europe, then Russia, then the fortunate in the needy countries themselves, to follow our example (which is the one motivating force that would work), we could move on to long-term economic improvement and the solution of other problems such as health and housing and education. Fasting has an intrinsic power that can expand our vision and action into other areas, into dealing with political oppression and competition—even, I believe, into confronting the fearsomely competitive arms races of the world.

Listen, again, to Isaiah, who spoke the Lord’s condemnation of ceremonial, long-faced fasting and his description of the only fasting that is acceptable:

Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke!

Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh! (Isa. 58:6–7)

I believe this last line refers not only to our tendency to hide from the immediate families in which we live but also to cut ourselves off from the larger human family, from the one blood and flesh we are all part of, according to Paul and the biologists.

We need to fast so starvation can end in Ethiopia and all over the world. We need to fast so we can develop the empathy and motivation to become one flesh with others, even with Ethiopian—and Polish and Russian—Communists, so that there can be some genuine basis for the trust necessary to end the arms race. We need to fast so that we can retain a remission of our own sins as King Benjamin taught, by learning mercy and by changing ourselves so that we do not add to the world's evil through seeking mere justice, demanding retribution, or merely ignoring human needs. The Lord is clear in his promises about what will follow a true fasting of the kind he has called for. He describes our late twentieth-century plight and a way through it:

Then shall thy light break forth as the morning, and thine health shall spring forth speedily: and thy righteousness shall go before thee; the glory of the Lord shall be thy reward.

Then shalt thou call, and the Lord shall answer; thou shalt cry, and he shall say, Here I am. thou take away from the midst of thee the yoke, the putting forth of the finger, and speaking vanity;

And if thou draw out thy soul to the hungry, and satisfy the afflicted soul; then shall thy light rise in obscurity, and thy darkness be as the noonday:

. . . thou shalt raise up the foundations of many generations; and thou shalt be called, The repairer of the breach, The restorer of paths to dwell in. (Isa. 58:8–10, 12)

The Lord has, in these verses, drawn a straight line from fasting for the hungry to becoming a “repairer of the breach” between us and Russia—to preserving peace that will “raise up the foundations of many generations” instead of dooming those generations to nuclear destruction. The Lord is describing, with the extra power of poetic language, a precise and inexorable moral law: mercy begets and multiplies mercy; sacrificial giving will beget and multiply kindness, understanding, patience, brotherhood—even between enemies. We have all seen and can understand a corollary moral law—that force and vengeance and destruction beget force and vengeance and destruction. There is a straight line from the 1969 My Lai massacre, where frightened, exasperated, battle-weary American soldiers killed Vietnamese women and children, to the wholesale slaughter of Cambodian educated and urban classes by Pol Pot's rural Communist revolutionaries in 1975 and the slaughter of those revolutionaries in turn by Vietnamese invaders in 1979. That kind of line goes from the blitz of London in 1940 to the destruction of Berlin in 1944, from the vicious bombing of Coventry's civilians and cathedral to the even more vicious and unnecessary destruction of Dresden, of 130,000 of its people and all its churches, from Pearl Harbor to Hiroshima to enduring, peace-threatening fear in the Russians and Chinese that we might drop nuclear bombs on them at any time.

We have seen again and again the Lord's promise fulfilled, that they that sow the wind shall reap the whirlwind (see Hosea 8:7). Can we not exercise a particle of faith in his equally infallible promise that they that cast their bread upon the waters will find it after many days (see Ecclesiastes. 11:1). That promise, and the associated penalty, were pronounced again in these latter days. In the Doctrine and Covenants, the Lord makes absolutely clear that he has provided a way for us to do away with hunger and want, but that it must be done in his own way, which is "that the poor shall be exalted, in that the rich are made low"—not by taxation or force but through our own irresistible moral convictions: "For the earth is full, and there is enough and to spare; yea, I prepared all things, and have given unto the children of men to be agents unto themselves" (D&C 104:17).

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1. Albert Camus, *The Plague*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Modern Library, 1948), 116–18.
2. *Ibid.*, 196–97.
3. Spencer W. Kimball, "The False Gods We Worship," *Ensign* 6 (June 1976):6.
4. *The Merchant of Venice*, 4.1.199–200, 187.
5. *Deseret News*, 10 December 1856, cited in Eugene England, *Brother Brigham* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980), 175.
6. Robert A. Evans, "From Reflection to Action," in *Human Rights: A Dialogue between the First and Third Worlds* (New York: Orbis, 1983), 242.
7. Kimball, "The False Gods We Worship," 6.
8. Eugene England, "Keeping Christmas," *BYU Today* 40 (February 1986): 16.