

# THE TWO FACES OF MALNUTRITION

A speech given at the Annual General Meeting of the Molweni School Feeding Scheme.

by Anthony Barker

What an excellent thing it would be if all might eat enough for their needs and none might eat to their own destruction. Nowhere do we see this two-ended dilemma more clearly than in this, our beloved country, for here, in fact there are those who eat too much food and die of it, and others who have too little, and die of that, too. Our own local tragedy is that it can be absolutely depended upon that those who have too little will be black. This is tacitly recognised by the existence of your organisation here, with its splendid, lasting and impressive concern for the feeding of so large a number of school children. Yours is one of many organisations dedicated to the welfare of those who have too little of this world's goods, and too little of its happiness and comfort, also, yet I think you do it better than most, and I'm spellbound by the record that I have read of your work in these past years. To do this kind of thing at all, let alone to do it well, requires great and benevolent cunning, and — which is even more — sheer grit, to go on and on when the returns seem small, and interest flags among the workers. I humbly congratulate you — who am I to say this? — on your work. To which word of congratulation I'm certain that hundreds of satisfied bellies will raise the echo of a grateful amen.

I want to talk about the evening-up process which this country needs (and this world, surely?) in the provision of food and the distribution of the national resources. I begin with an affirmation, which I make loudly and clearly: it is intolerable that some should have too much while others have too little of these resources. I believe this is more the result of man's contrivance than of any natural or historic process. I further believe that this is a time when we must look at this imbalance and cry "Hold! Enough! We will have no more of this rampant greed, nor any more of this wicked prodigality!" This we cry, even though we are never so small a voice, through the great Market-Hall of the world.

To begin with, it seems hardly necessary to discuss with your organisation the baleful effects of too little food. These effects are known in our very bones, and our minds give assent as we see children stunted in growth, or with

bodies swollen with Kwashiorkor. We fear lest these deprived little ones may carry with them all their days the burden of shrunken minds, incapable any longer of rising to the full stature of their manhood. Latterly, work of nutritional scientists, seems to indicate that this does not invariably happen, which must be a relief to our fears. Yet it seems undoubted that such mental truncation does occur in some cases of prolonged childhood malnutrition, and that we should produce even a few such is more than our society can afford. With us, at Nqutu, malnutrition stems from poverty and social breakdown. The poverty is real enough, alas, though, paradoxically there is more money coming into the district than there was, and the traders look prosperous enough. Generally, those engaged in commerce give disbelieving looks to those of us who still cry poverty. For, they say look at the queues outside the bottle-store at Christmas! Truly, this was a frightening sight which many of us saw with horror this year when the better-paid men came back home for the Feast. Thousands — I speak literally —, thousands of Rand poured into that sad trade on the day before Christmas, with an emphasis, the hotelier tells me, on expensive spirits. So how, they say, do we still plead poverty? Because there is a big difference between the cash the Migrant receives in his weekly pay packet, and the sum he sends in his (hopefully) monthly registered letter to his wife at home. This reduced percentage — estimates vary from 20 — 40% of his wages — which cares for his family is not evidence, in itself, of the worker's greed or perversity. Often it costs a man 60 — 80% of his wages to survive at all and pay for his transport, lodging and food, even leaving aside those aspects of la dolce vita with which he is tempted to render tolerable the intolerable aspects of his city life. The money that reaches our grannies' eager purses is more than often pitifully inadequate, even for their country needs: which is poverty, and means for our people, malnutrition.

I have not said that poverty alone is responsible for our malnutrition. There is more to this picture than lack of money, or even lack of food. Under the general title of social breakdown are included illegitimacy, alcoholism, ignorance, prejudice, greed (which operates at the lower

levels of society as it does in high places), and old-fashioned sin (though our sinful society does not love that word). The social sequence which carries a child to our kwashiorkor ward may be daily repeated all over the country: illegitimacy: repudiation of responsibility by the father (for were there not others beside myself? ): economic strain within the home brought on by an idle mother and a hungry infant: a need to earn: lack of work opportunity in the homeland: departure of mother and final gogulation (which is the reduction of the child to gross malnutrition by the ill directed, well intentioned care of grannies). This has the inevitability of a Greek tragedy, and can barely be halted. "Depend upon it," said one of our doctors, "if you see a child on its grandmother's lap, sooner or later you'll have to admit it to hospital".

Governments and those responsible have tended to hide behind this social aspect of malnutrition, excusing themselves from blame when, so obviously, the main factors in the breakdown were the promiscuity of the mother, the prodigality of the father, and the ignorance of the grandmother. "Aren't They awful!" is a white man's comment, which may even be made in a sort of compassion though only, I think, in ignorant compassion. Smashed-up societies always generate evil manners. "An empty belly has no conscience," we used to say at sea, and we remembered, too Kipling's reference to the East, where "there ain't no ten commandments . . . "And isn't this true, also of the arrived end of society? Haven't we held the ten commandments pretty lightly, also? We pay little attention to those sly ones about fornicating (which we call by politer names) and coveting your neighbour's goods, and bearing false witness against him. So we come to see it as true that for individuals to sink so low in the care of their own loved ones, it is society that sets the scene. This is a tragedy acted out before a backdrop of repression and exploitation. It was so in the time of the French Revolution. It was so in 18th Century England, when Hogarth portrayed the exceeding squalor of cheap gin in the already burgeoning slums of London. It was so when Charles Dickens wrote of the poor and wretched and those who lived in 'unfurnished lodgings under the dry arches of Waterloo bridge' How familiar it all is here, today! Here we still have the disgrace of gross cleavage between the rich and the poor: between the powerful and the utterly impotent. Here we still have cheap liquor and expensive bread. Here we still have gross wage differentials; a nation of Bob Cratchitts without so much as a Scrooge to have his heart melted by the plight of his servant. And here we have, over all, the pall of a caste system which precludes vertical mobility within society, whereby the poor might rise up by honest merit and homespun virtue to a recognition of worth. Surely this society must accept responsibility for its poor, its hungry, its ignorant, its disturbed ones; and bear on its own shoulders the burden of this evil? We cannot exteriorise all this pain. It is ours, it belongs to us all, to the politicians and the preachers and the business men and the bankers and the ones successful in professional life, just as it belongs to the poor and the disrupted and the despairing who feel its weight most personally.

So much for the one end of society; the poor end about which we are getting to the point of having nothing more to say, at least nothing that has not been said

before a hundred times, by lips more eloquent than our own, out of better prepared minds. But I do not think it enough to talk—as we consider the evening-up process I speak of today—only of the deprivations of the poor.

As much as to the poor, I turn our attention to the problems of the rich who are about as messed up as anyone can be, with few to look at their dilemma, or make a firm diagnosis of their trouble. Now, of course, I acknowledge that the sorrows of the rich are far more supportable than are those of the poor. I'd rather by far have wall-to-wall carpeting in the bathroom than share a communal privy in the yard. I'd far rather be sure of a place in a good school for my children than live in doubt whether there will be money enough to continue Thokozile's education at all, or, if there is, whether there will be a place for her to study. Yet, for all that, I'm not being perverse in talking about this powerful end of the scale. I seriously mention these because for them the moment of truth has only now begun, and the appreciation of their peril is only just dawning.

At the simplest, nutritional level, I recall that I began this talk by mentioning people who eat to their own destruction. This was not just a fragment of idle rhetoric. Some of us are uneasily aware that the lives of prominent citizens are greatly truncated; that they are mown down by coronary arterial disease at an increasingly early age or fall victims to high blood pressure and diabetes. Are we not to be alarmed by this, also? Are we not to be worried over good minds scattered by cerebral haemorrhage, or blunted by ischaemia, just as we worried about mental capacity lost through childhood malnutrition? Of course we must worry, for this loss is really just as serious. We may be further alarmed by the growing number of Africans within the more prosperous income groups who are moving inexorably along the same pathways to destruction that their white colleagues have long been treading. Obesity, high blood pressure and diabetes are increasingly common among professional Africans, with even a few cases of coronary thrombosis appearing in these latter days. This change in dietary patterns, with its terrible price-tag of avoidable illness, is paralleled often by social patterns which spring up as black and white life styles grow more and more close together. Most prominent among these social disasters is alcoholism, which constitutes a terrible threat to black and white, rich and poor alike. Marriage fares little better, so that that dignified and commodious sacrament is fallen into low esteem among whites and is looked upon with fearful apprehension by blacks. My nurses despair of the permanence of marriage as an institution, and from their doubts draw alternative conclusions. One such is that it is better to have your children — which you can afford on nurse's pay — without the added burden of a husband who may well sit back and let you go on earning his and the children's keep. So we see that malnutrition has a dimension both in deprivation and excess. And we see that malnutrition is but a part of a pattern of social decay which operates not only at the poor end of society, but at the prosperous end as well. Each end might wish, in a guarded sort of way, to change places with the other. Certainly the underfed would wish for more food, while the satiated play around with their polyunsaturated fatty acids like stockbrokers on the share market, victims

of every gimmicky faddist who wants to make a living out of the dietary guilts of the wealthy.

OH! Wretched men that we are! How do we get out of these, our dilemmas? I think we are not yet ready to do so until we have gone more deeply into our problem, and made a more trenchant diagnosis. But, even as we stand, we sense that we are coming to the end of things. The great social questions: must this man starve that I may eat? must this man be a slave that I may be free? are presently demanding of us, answers.

Since this is a society whose purpose is feeding, I concentrate on the first part of our question, though we shall remain aware also of the second, since it is relevant to our dilemma. And the answer to the first part of the question is that we cannot all eat equivalently well with society as it is presently organised and food production through the whole world remains at its present level. With agriculture, as with every other resource, we have been squanderers which will make us, in the eyes of those who follow after us, monsters of prodigality, thieves of the future. Surely this is the lesson of the oil crisis? I am sickened by official complacency and opportunism here: there either is an oil crisis or there is not. If, as I suppose, there is such a crisis, then let us, for heaven's sake, stop fooling ourselves. At present we are saying that the increased price of gold can keep **our** tanks full right up until the last drops of oil ooze out of those desert wells and oil is gone for ever. We pat ourselves on the back that under **our** hills lies buried sufficient coal for 100 years, or may be even 200 years. In time these are little moments only. It is in the highest degree irresponsible to say that we shall be all right in our time—30 years or so—and then go on with motor racing and the violent abuse of the oil stores we have. I think the Arabs are right here, calling us to a sort of penitence in the West, over the squandered resources of the globe which the whites, more than anyone else, have greedily taken to themselves. They are saying to us — I speak to my fellow whites—"we will not let you make a good thing out of the only asset we have under our desert soil. We shall stop you—who already have so much—from taking our lives, too, into your lordly hands." Much as I hate and abominate the horrible methods of hi-jack and bare terrorism, I would have us all learn this lesson which these men are teaching.

This is a prophetic time. Which means, roughly, that we may not know all the answers, but we are being made to look at all the questions. This is what those old Jewish prophets did. They had the advantage over us of being able to say that what they thought, was indeed the word of Jahveh himself. "Thus saith the Lord . . ." We today realise that even our elevated status in South African society hardly qualifies us to speak as though from God,

but we need to raise the prophetic voice, all right. This is why I began as I did: to urge us to cry out with our tiny whisper, and say 'enough!' Here are the facts: We are two societies when we should be one. We are, by law, divided from one another in wealth, opportunity, education and the provision of health. We are committed to policies of the preservation of white supremacy that preclude the just ordering of our society. We face, yet do not face up to, the imminent end of facilities which, over the past 75 years, we have come to see as part of life — the motor car, aircraft and dietary excess. Around us, through an uneasy world, there burgeons a new negativism whose sole purpose is to challenge our hold on power: urban violence, guerilla warfare, the anger of utter despair. Drugs and promiscuity sap our vitality, and cast our people adrift on a sea of indecision.

These terrible spectres on the road ahead are conjured up by our human breakdown. We have so completely lost our way; so entirely stopped our ears to the voices of the wisdom of the ages, that we have blotted out God, silenced our consciences and become totally committed to ourselves and our own selfish advantage. For what other than a greedy society would hog, for the few, all the goodies as this society does? What other than a most selfish system would waste its assets as our society of the west does? Who else but people drunk with the heady wine of personal success would be so careless of the nation's potential, permitting an educational system that condemns bright minds to dull tasks, leaves surgeons pushing wheelbarrows, and shuts poets in clerk's offices?

I truly believe we must, as a society, repent our folly and abase ourselves before God for our determined wickedness. Nothing less will serve to clear the ground. If this seems too unrealistic, too hopeful: if we despair of so sweet a change of heart among those who sit in the seats of the mighty, cannot we, who care, study to reorder our own lives? This is a time for going without ourselves, so that others may have more. This is a time for curbing our own ambitions in order to bring essentials to those who do not even have a chair to sit on, a school for their children.

Here, among you concerned people running this feeding scheme, there is little need for me to speak, yet I speak to myself most of all and also to you and also to South African society, reminding that beyond the repair work (which is what we all do) there is building also to be done. Not much, you say, we can do about this: we cannot alter things very much! I think of Wilberforce and Lincoln: I think of Elizabeth Fry and Florence Nightingale: I think of funny old William Booth and Charles Kingsley. They altered things a lot in their time, largely by their **being**, largely by their singleness of purpose. Have we none such among us today? □