

Where famine is never-ending

It's "that" time of the year again. Before long the number of youths calling up distant relations and family friends to ask for donations will spike as funds are collected and collated for World Vision's 24-Hour Famine.

After the famine, the barley sugars and the Just Juice, things quickly settle back to usual. Perhaps one or two youths are actually affected, become active, become involved for those in poverty. Most just let it fizzle out.

The problem is not really with the youths themselves, although it may seem that way. The problem is that it is the world that is starving.

We can rally around and support the Victorian bushfires far more easily than we can rally around the faceless, cruelly bloated image of a starving child. The world is starving, it is at war, it is in crisis.

There are endless genocides and civil wars and famines and droughts and there are endless collectors knocking on doors and asking if we, the people, or if we, New Zealand, would please cough up some change in the service of humanity.

We do not remember those evils we only hear about, because we hear about so many.

What we will remember is an evil we can see. I was lucky enough, if you can call it lucky, to travel to Nepal for a month as a volunteer. I stayed in a

Nepali home throughout January, I lived a middle-class Nepali lifestyle and I worked in a school for the underprivileged children of the Tibetan border.

Some of the things I saw were definitely evil. I saw children getting beaten, in one case with a metal pole, by family members. I sat down to eat with children who were only fed once a day, and because I was the guest I was given twice as much food as they were.

I saw real poverty; street children sniffing glue paid for by tourists; lepers without limbs begging on the streets; orphanages hiring out babies to women so they could beg more successfully.

I walked the five minutes to work through this every day, and when I got there I had to deal with the same kinds of things. My children didn't have a toilet; they had a concrete floor with a groove down the middle which I never saw cleaned out in my whole month of work.

There was a doctor at my school, aged 14, called Baguati, and she did her best with the medicines she was sent by their Thai sponsors. No matter how hard she tried there were kids wandering around with horrific skin conditions and diseases because she just did not know how to help them all.

I was there at the frontier of aid. I

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was the humanitarian effort, the support, the help. I was there to give these kids a chance, and the best I could do was try to teach them English. I am no teacher, and I certainly didn't appreciate mine enough until I tried to become one overnight.

I think the only lesson that really sunk in with them was when I taught them how to tell me how they felt. On my last day a kid called Karma told me he felt "emotional turmoil" at me leaving. I almost cried.

The main lesson I learned, sitting in a classroom of 4-to-16-year-olds and two goats called Shangri-La and John Rambo, listening to children trying to read from the school's only novel, was that I was useless.

Tsewan was 16, a year away from his school leaver's certificate. He had a wealthy sponsor and kept himself and his clothes clean. He told me he only wore his special leather shoes for the days I came to school.

One day he and I were sitting together at lunchtime and he told me he wanted to become a doctor, but he wouldn't be able to. I told him not to be silly, he was easily bright enough, he would just need to believe in himself and work at it.

He told me no. He didn't have enough money to afford university, and his family needed him to support them in their village. He hadn't been home for six years because home was in Mustang, a long journey from the capital Kathmandu. But he planned to visit home for a month once he left school before coming back to the city for work. "If I am lucky, I will find work in a taxi or a shop. But many people are wanting work." He was factual, accepting. It was the first hopeless moment I felt.

I want people to learn from what I saw. There are the hungry in every corner of the globe. There are kids in New Zealand who wake up in the morning and go to school without breakfast and come home to an empty cupboard. There are children in Africa who will die of hunger. The children I worked with in Nepal did not need to go hungry; they were fed and clothed and given a place to sleep. Yet they miss out on some-

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thing we all take for granted. Tsewan will never get a chance to live out his dream. Karma wanted to be a movie star but had been saved from a life as a begging street kid. Baguati told me she wanted to write but will probably never be given the opportunity — even in the school we had to be given special permission to use paper during a lesson.

The children of the world need food, clothes, healthcare. Most importantly they need to be given a shot at their dreams — what we take for granted.

I hope Tsewan is happy with the life he ends up living, and I hope he keeps hold of the email address I gave him so that one day I can talk to him again and see how he is getting on. He was far more adult than I was; he taught me more than I could ever teach him and more than I could ever hope to teach you.

If we are going to make a difference, if we are going to feed the hungry until they can afford to dream, then we need to persist. It may be "that" time of year, the month where we care and give a little, but it needs to be "that" decade, "that" century, "that" society before we can hope for change.

It doesn't take a month's focus; it takes a change in society. So this year, when the famine is over and your nephew or grandson or god son has made their sacrifice and you your contribution, ask them what they want to be when they grow up, what their dreams are.

Try to remember what you wanted to be, what the world of possibility meant to you and imagine not having any options. This year, commit to feeding the hungry and sheltering the homeless. Commit to helping the sick and the refugees of war. Commit to kids like Karma and Tsewan and Baguati. Commit to making dreams come true. Maybe, just maybe, we will make a difference.

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LIFE
LESSONS:
John Scott-
Jones
(right)
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