

Out of Sight, Out of Mind



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Many of us who live in the Western world somehow manage to think the poverty of others does not impact us.

It's one thing to read the statistics about poverty; it's quite another to look it in the eye.

Traveling to developing countries can be hazardous, not just to your health, but to your mind. You can avoid some of the most common health hazards by drinking bottled water, using anti-microbial hand cleaner, and avoiding the most dangerous neighborhoods at night. Those are common-sense cautions for the most obvious risks. Seasoned travelers know what to do about them. But there are other risks that are much more difficult to contend with.

What do you do about the images, smells, and memories that haunt you? How do you reconcile the vast sociological distances between the haves and the have-nots that you encountered? Whose eyes will you remember when you return to the comforts of your familiar surroundings and can't sleep at night? Which experience will continue to revisit you as a knot in your stomach or a lump in your throat?

There are plenty of statistics and data about global poverty – these are just a few:

- Half the world – nearly three billion people – live on less than two dollars a day.
- Nearly a billion people entered the 21st century unable to read a book or sign their names.
- More than 800 million go hungry each day.
- 640 million live without adequate shelter.
- 400 million have no access to safe water.
- 270 million have no access to health services.
- Over 100 million primary school-age children cannot go to school.
- 10.6 million died in 2003 before they reached the age of 5.
- Each year, more than 8 million people around the world die because they are simply too poor to stay alive.

Despite the enormity of these numbers, many of us who live in the Western world somehow manage to think the poverty of others does not impact us. We have enough to eat. Our houses are warm and dry. If we need access to healthcare, we have insurance. We pay taxes and make donations to charitable organizations to share our wealth with those who are “less fortunate,” (an ironically dignified term for a most undignified condition).

Out of sight, out of mind.

It's one thing to read the statistics about poverty; it's quite another thing to look it in the eye, and every traveler to a developing country gets that opportunity sooner or later. If you have even an ounce of humanity in your soul, you will be changed by the experience. Here are a few people I've looked in the eye.

Meeting people like these, learning their names and hearing their stories is life changing.

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- Maria raised six children by herself in a three-room house in Romania. The largest room is 12 feet by 12 feet, with a ceiling that is barely six feet. There is one bare bulb providing light for the room that has a small stove and one bed.
- Odour rides a bus 25 minutes to work as an assistant to an American family in Africa. He earned about \$130 a month, which is about twice the going wage for the job. He struggled nervously when I asked him to take my picture. I don't think he ever used a camera before.
- I met 15-year-old Cristina at a hospital in Honduras, where she was holding her premature baby. She wore a well-worn t-shirt that said, "Americans helping Americans in Appalachia," as she prepared for the three-day walk back to her village.
- The lines on the face of Viktor in Kyrgyzstan told their own stories. At 73, he had outlived most, but he still cut a spry figure as he rode his donkey back to the home he shares with four generations.

Meeting people like these, learning their names and hearing their stories, is life-changing. It demands a response. For some, it merely stimulates a sense of gratitude, usually expressed, at least in thought, as "there but for the grace of God go I." For others, it causes some measure of grief, a broken heart, at the unfairness of life. It is the rare exception that takes a vow of poverty and goes to live among the poor, which is why Mother Theresa was, and still is, so celebrated. Others vow to use their power and influence to fight against the darkness of poverty and disease. They may commit to developing businesses, teaching skills, or igniting the creative spirit found in every human being. But traveling and meeting poor people causes an internal conflict that demands reconciliation. It plays on your mind. It becomes an affliction.

Every essay should reach a conclusion, but this one must be an exception. I may have to wrestle with the conflict between rich and poor the rest of my life – we all may have to, but maybe that is as is should be. There are no easy answers – only unsettling questions...