

Helping others can be a life-long passion

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"Life's most persistent and urgent question is, 'What are you doing for others?'"
--Martin Luther King Jr.



At this time of year, I am reminded of the famous famine relief songs, "Do They Know It's Christmas?" and "We Are the World." The world is shrinking, thanks to our all-encompassing information technology. Every minute of every day we can see images and hear voices from our brothers and sisters around the world. We can stand up together against a foe and feel united in our solidarity. There is a responsibility and a burden that comes with increased knowledge and awareness.

"Since the world has existed, there has been an injustice. But it is one world, the more so as it becomes smaller, more accessible. There is just no question that there is more obligation that those who have should give to those who have nothing," said Audrey Hepburn.

The more we know about the plight of others around the world, the more we are called to action, encouraged to become brothers in arms in the war against poverty aggression, hunger, disease and starvation.

Debilitating illnesses that have been cured in the west, still claim children's lives in developing nations. Civil war, famine, disease, and pestilence continue to plague our counterparts.

I often feel a bit guilty that we have so much, and even waste so much when others merely scrape by.

For many of our counterparts around the world, it's like the Middle Ages, when average life expectancy was in the mid-30s. They succumbed to things like scurvy, dysentery, typhoid fever, cholera, measles, chickenpox, influenza and whooping cough. Of course, some of these things are still about today, such as chickenpox. However, we are lucky to have improved medicines and supplements that can help us to treat these viruses. For example, nowadays, people who may be suffering from chickenpox can benefit from taking valtrex or another antiviral drug. This helps them to overcome the virus. Previously, people wouldn't have had these treatments which resulted in lower life expectancy.

Malnutrition still plagues millions around the world. The majority of childhood deaths (70%) are reportedly due to diarrheal illness, acute respiratory infection, malaria and immunizable disease. Malnutrition is the underlying cause in many of these. Other side effects of malnutrition include increased susceptibility to infection, musculature wasting, skeletal deformities and neurologic development delays. According to the World Health Organization, malnutrition is named as the biggest contributor to child mortality. UNICEF says in 2016 alone, 7,000 newborn babies died every day. Newborn deaths made up 46 per cent of all child deaths, an increase from 41 per cent in 2000.

I have seen the effects first-hand. So have my son Liam and my oldest daughter Lexie. Maybe it was those high school experiences that made Lexie pursue humanitarian work in her university studies. I remember vividly riding in the back of a pickup truck along dusty Dominican paths, stopping at remote villages of Haitian workers and handing out supplies. Every part of me ached but it was one of the best experiences of my life.

Lexie is off to Rwanda for five weeks in 2019, as part of a university-led experiential cultural immersion, designed to give students a

first-hand look of what developing nations face. Students will engage in five weeks of active and interactive community service in Rwanda.

Despite the abundance of natural resources in Rwanda, a huge portion of the population still lives below the poverty line. HIV/AIDS, malaria, bacterial diarrhea, hepatitis A, yellow fever, etc. continue to threaten lives in Rwanda today.

Rwanda has witnessed huge progress these past few peaceful years. Many still remember the 1994 genocide that resulted in the deaths of over 800,000 innocent people. During the Rwandan Civil War, which began in 1990, some 2 million Rwandans, mostly Hutu, were displaced and became refugees.

"Overcoming poverty is not a task of charity, it is an act of justice. Like Slavery and Apartheid, poverty is not natural. It is man-made and can be overcome and eradicated by the actions of human beings. Sometimes it falls on a generation to be great," said Nelson Mandela. He urged us all to be that generation.

Volunteering abroad has become quite popular in recent years, and opportunities have led to a sort of "voluntourism," where socially conscious people like to check off a good deed on their bucket list. But for people like Lexie, it's not a passing fad, it's her future, her career path. Her studies are making her a complete, educated advocate, who can walk the walk.

She hopes to one day work with a leading NGO such as the Red Cross, World Vision, or similar aid organizations.

Poverty and high mortality rates in Africa are nothing new. Most of us Baby Boomers will vividly recall Michael Jackson's "We Are the World," recorded by the supergroup United Support of Artists (USA) for Africa in 1985. Millions were raised and it brought the issues to the forefront and perhaps brought people around the globe closer together.

"The destiny of world civilization depends upon providing a decent standard of living for all mankind," noted Norman Borlaug.

Helping the world's downtrodden is within our grasp, but there are many obstacles, not the least of which are making sure the aid gets to the people on the ground.

Lexie loves being one of those "boots in the mud" and pretty much gives away everything she owns to help others. Her trips are not subsidized and they don't come cheap. I remember when she went to Kenya, we had to purchase special helicopter air ambulance insurance in case she needed medical care. Lexie has to rely on fundraising and donations. Like a dutiful dad, I help her any way I can. Thanks to the generosity of our "King family," she's on her way to reaching her goal for Rwanda.

Lexie doesn't consider herself extraordinary at all. To her, this comes naturally and it's almost her *raison d'être*. She says she simply has to volunteer.

In this day and age, that's rare. I feel so blessed that Lexie, with our help, can make a difference.