

it to be obscene. That we can live our lives as we do, and expend wealth as we do, oblivious of the poverty of half the human race, is obscene. Kofi Annan said, "Extreme poverty is an affront to our common humanity. It also makes many other problems worse." People see this extreme poverty as unjust And many people see the United States making, and sustaining, the rules that keep it that way.

Imagine some people are playing Monopoly. They play for awhile, and buy almost all the property, and then you join the game. You say, "give me some property, so I can play." They say, "no, you have to buy property." You say, "that's not fair." They say, "we can't help it, those are the rules." "You say, but I can never win if you already own all the property". They say, "the game only works if people play by the rules."

In a very real sense in the world we live in, some people make the rules that everybody has to play by. And if everyone had an equal voice in making the rules, the rules would be different. Antibiotics can reduce aids transmission rates by 50%, and tuberculosis drugs can reduce aids death rates by 30 %, and anti-retroviral drugs keep people alive. Many, many people in the world want these medicines to be produced generically, to be available to everyone who needs them. But this country is among those that have upheld the primacy of intellectual property rights, so people die because they do not have access to medicine which exists, which could save them, which other people in the world receive. This year, five thousand Africans are dying every day of AIDS. That is 35 thousand deaths every week, one hundred and forty seven thousand deaths every month, more than four million in the year. As we are experiencing the enormity of unnecessary death in this country, and mourning the loss of people we knew, and people we did not know, that can help us to wrap our minds around the tragedy of AIDS, and understand why people are angry at us for the rules we uphold.

What is essential to keep in mind is that the deep division between rich and poor which we think of as the North and the South, the developed and the developing, the first world and the third world, is a relatively new thing in historical terms. It is not natural, things have not always been this way. There is only one world. The parts of it came to have the characteristics they now have in interaction with each other, mostly over the last six hundred years. Think of it like a human body that begins to focus its capacity to grow in a few areas, depriving other areas of resources. Imagine that this sickness of uneven growth continues for a long time in the human body: the parts of it receiving more than their share of resources become deformed and swollen. The parts of the body deprived of resources become atrophied, those body parts don't function. As long as the unbalanced distribution of nutrients is not treated, the disease will get worse. This is the condition of the world we live in. It is sick, it has been sick for a long time, and all of our efforts to heal it do not work, because we are not recognizing the systemic nature of the illness. In fact, we invest a tremendous amount of energy in not noticing the systemic nature of the illness. Think about the last few years, and how we have

responded to the manifestations of the world's unbalanced growth. When we hear about violence in Liberia, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Bosnia, do we think about it as their war, caused by their intolerance? A war in Angola, which people did not choose for themselves, has been going on for 25 years. In Sudan, 2 million people have died and 5 million have been displaced by war that has lasted for forty years, off and on. A war began in the Congo in 1997; and in the last two years, three million people, almost all non-combatants, have died because of this war. And the world has looked away, and said, it is their problem. But it is our problem, not merely because of our common humanity, but because our economic and social and political lives are deeply, intimately connected with those of all the people of the world, and they have been, for a long time.

An untreated disease gets worse, the symptoms spread into the parts of the body that did not appear to be infected before. I think this is how we need to understand the destruction of the World Trade center and the attack on the Pentagon. These attacks are terrible tragedies. The people who died were innocent, and the people who caused it have to be punished. But attacking terrorists is not enough. It is not an adequate response. We can recognize the possibility of truly making the world safe from terrorism, if we recognize that the underlying cause of terrorism is related to the underlying cause of war in the Congo, and the despair which gets labeled as religious or ethnic violence. The fundamental cause of all of this death and violence is the appalling heritage of a few centuries of unequal development. The world does not have to be the way we have made it.

Since people created these conditions, people can also change them. And the people who can change them is everyone, it is us. We change the conditions of the world by changing the way we act in the world. Think of the unfair monopoly game. It does not take a revolution to make the game fairer, it just takes people changing the way they play it. Did you ever play monopoly and give away property to make the game last longer? We can do that, in the real world. We can change the rules so they are fair for everyone. Forgiving the debt of the poorest nations would do this. Making voting at the United Nations more equitable would do this. Taxing international financial transactions and using that wealth to build infrastructure in the poorest parts of the world could do it. The world has 345 billionaires. The total combined worth of those 345 people is greater than the GDP of countries in the world whose total population accounts for more than half the world's population. They could be taxed on international transactions, and that wealth could be used to assist those who are most disadvantaged by global economic activity, and the billionaires would still be ok. They'd still be comfortable. And, we would all be safer.

Moving the world to a place where people have less reason to be angry at the United States is not just the responsibility of governments, or the UN. We, as ordinary people, have tremendous power to make the world more equitable. We are the cells and the sinews and the bone of the tightly integrated, coherent organism which is the world, and all our actions have an effect far beyond ourselves. We have power as consumers, and if we choose to, we can use that

power to create equitable working conditions for the producers of the goods we consume. We have tremendous power as citizens of a democratic society, and if we choose to use it, we can wield that power to elect leaders who recognize and are committed to transforming the fundamental imbalances that burden the world. Because we have freedom of expression in this country, we can hold our leaders accountable if they fail to act in ways that benefit the whole of humanity. We are only empowered to take these actions if we understand, if we can see ourselves as part of an organically connected world. So we change the world when we work to change ourselves, and the way we think.

All of these actions are powerful, all of them are effective. Think about the abolition of slavery. The widespread and systematic enslavement of Africans was a large part of what created the world's current imbalance, and there was a time, not so very long ago, when people thought of slavery as natural and inevitable. Just the same way that we make global inequality natural and inevitable when we say first world, third world, traditional and modern. But some people came to realize that slavery was not natural, it was not acceptable, and they resolved to change it. They took actions which did not seem to be in their own material best interest. They began a war of ideas, saying that what people accepted as normal, and moral, was in fact abnormal and immoral. They changed the way they thought, they changed the way they acted in the world. and the world changed. We can do the same thing.

We can decide that the extremes of wealth and poverty in the world are entirely unacceptable. We can systematically, deliberately intervene to change those conditions by the way we participate in the economy, the way we participate in the government of our own country, and in the way we participate in the life of society. This is our capacity, it is our responsibility, and no one can prevent us from exercising that capacity, if we recognize that we have it.

Endnotes:

written following the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center.
-J.W.

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