

**“The Hungriest Game”**  
**A Sermon Offered by Rev. Kathleen Rolenz**  
**Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship**  
**Appleton, Wisconsin**  
**fvuuf.org**

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A couple years ago, I visited a friend who had two pre-teen children. That weekend, as we drove around together, running errands and shopping, both of their kids were in the back seat and something really unusual was going on. They were – quiet. Absolutely quiet. No arguing, no hitting each other – no running commentary about the passing scenery, because they were both reading. “What are you reading, Samuel?” I asked him. He showed me a copy of the Hunger Games, which at the time, I knew nothing about, but I remember thinking if any book, other than Harry Potter can keep two kids quiet for a car ride, I should check it out.

So, I did. I read all three books saw all the films, and watched the last film in the Series – Mockingjay – here in Appleton on Friday. I don’t always preach about films and books, but this one has grabbed me a way that very others have, because as all good stories do, it points to something both terrible and hopeful about the ways in which we are hungry. I don’t think it’s a coincidence that the release of this last film is set just before Thanksgiving, because it’s a time of year when we reflect on the harvest and on food – anticipating the abundance or the lack of it-- from concerns about escalating inequality to wondering what we can do about it.

If I’m going to riff off this metaphor of the Hunger Games, I’ve got to tell you a little bit about the story, if you haven’t read it or seen the films. *The Hunger Games* is set in a dystopian future in which North America is ruled by a cruel dictator named President Snow. Under totalitarian rule, the nation is divided into twelve districts with each district slaving in poverty to produce goods for the excessive appetites of the Capital, whose residents exhibit the worst stereotypes of superficial celebrity culture. There had once been a populist uprising against the Capital, but it was squashed and resulted in the creation of an annual tradition known as the Hunger Games, designed to punish the districts and remind them of the price of rebellion. Each year a lottery is held and one teenage boy and one teenage girl from each district are selected to participate in the games and fight each other to the death - a kind of life or death Survivor on Steroids. The winner of the hunger games wins a lifetime of individual, personal comfort and a year’s worth of slightly-better-than-starvation rations for his or her district.<sup>1</sup>

The narrative of the film is set into motion when a lottery is held to select the tributes from each district. Katniss Everdeen, lives in District 12, one of the poorest, hungriest districts in all of Panem. When her vulnerable young sister is selected to be a Tribute, Katniss, knowing that she would surely be killed in the arena, volunteers to go in her place. The boy selected from District Twelve is Peeta Mellark, a doughy boy who is also the son of a baker. Together, they go into the arena and throughout the course of the three novels, take on the culture of oppressors who literally feed to excess the rich and the obedient citizens of the Capital and starve to near death the rest of the world.

As with all really good science or future oriented fiction, there is a sharp critique of the world as it stands today – in a world where literally thousands of people are starving, some to death in a world where we actually have enough food to feed everybody. The Hunger Games is

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<sup>1</sup> Credit to Tom Belote for this description of the Hunger Games Plot Synopsis

not only about oppression through starvation, but it's also a powerful indictment of much of today's culture – of the use of violence as entertainment and using media for propaganda; of our appetite to watch other people's suffering---of the profound disparities of the haves and the have nots, the terrible ways in which the competition for food, or clean water have pitted nations against nations and people against people. And, it deals with themes that are close to the heart of our Unitarian Universalist faith; personal integrity and the value of human worth in this life.

I was thinking about this the other day while pulling up to a stop light at the end of the freeway ramp. There, on the side of the road, was a man with sign. "Hungry. Please help." As always, I was clutched with several, immediate and deeply conflicted emotions. My first thought was 'I hope the light changes so I don't have to deal with this.' But it didn't. I sat there. He looked through the window at me; and I at him. That day, I had a handful of pennies within reach and a twenty dollar bill in a purse that was in the backseat. To give him pennies seemed insulting but to give him money would require reaching for my purse in the back seat which was awkward and difficult. So, that day, I looked as sympathetic as I could muster, gave him a brief nod of acknowledgement and drove on.

I'm not proud of that. As a minister, I'd like to tell you a story of pulling over and talking with him, finding out about his story and what led a human being to make his living by holding a cardboard sign that read "Hungry. Please help." I try to be better prepared for that moment now – by having a grocery or gas card in my wallet to give away, but there still lingers a profound sense of sadness and anger within me – not for him – but that this is the way that he way he earns his daily bread.

Maybe you've been faced with the same, guilty dilemma, knowing that whatever you do will be a drop in the ocean of an entire sequence of circumstances, events, choices, and decisions that led to that moment by the side of the road. Maybe you've responded to calls from the Hunger and Homelessness Action Team – providing or serving meals at the Warming Shelter; participating in the Empty to Full Pan Project or serving meals at the Homeless Connections. That's all to the good of course. One of the things that has really impressed me about the Fellowship is that you actually work hard to make real the third part of your mission statement: "to lead in social justice." Your leadership in this community – around issues of hunger and homelessness, of some of the ongoing and tireless work of the social justice ministry team is inspiring and necessary.

One of the wonderful and important things about the Church as an institution and this Fellowship in particular, is that it provides opportunities for you to serve needs greater than your own; to get involved from the micro to the macro-levels of change; from dealing with the immediate need of hunger – the causes of hunger, which is poverty--to the larger, systemic issues of income equality—America's own 21<sup>st</sup> century version of the Hunger Games.

I wondered then, – well how bad is it? How many people are hungry in this nation? About 14% of American households are food insecure, which translates to about 17.4 million people. When you look at the pie chart, you see how even that begins to break down into households who have enough food, those who have barely enough and about 7 million people, probably like my friend on the highway with a sign, who have "very low food security." Wisconsin fairs better than Ohio in that food insecurity in Ohio falls above the U.S. Average; and in Wisconsin, it's below the U.S. Average.<sup>2</sup>

So the obvious question here is – is there just not enough food in the nation to feed everyone? The answer is an unequivocal "no." According to the World Food Program, there is

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/key-statistics-graphics.aspx>

enough food in the world today for everyone to have the nourishment necessary for a healthy and productive life. At the same time, here in the States, more than 48 million Americans rely on what used to be called food stamps, and now SNAP: The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program – while at the same time, Congress seems to be playing their own version of the Hunger Games by making 5 million dollars in cuts to SNAP last fall which directly affects people’s lives. I don’t think there’s a coincidence between Hunger Game author Suzanne Collins naming of “The Capital” as the axis of corruption and our own Halls of Injustice in Washington DC.

The relationship then, between hunger and poverty cannot be overstated. Hungry people are poor people and the face of poverty is something we’d prefer not to see or talk about. The last time we as a nation actually put poverty front and center was over fifty years ago, with President Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty in 1964. That was a hopeful time when all things seemed possible; the civil rights movement galvanized a whole host of other human rights movement - including the rights of poor people, and the movement was gaining momentum. There was a belief that as a nation we could take on poverty and fix it. Johnson boldly declared “we shall not rest until that war is won.” At that time, people were talking about not just the middle class – but the poor.

Even children could participate in this Great American Conversation about the poor. The picture on the monitor behind me is a real doll that was produced in 1965 for only one year – with the belief that somehow even little girls would be interested in the plight of the poor. I know I was. I had to have one of my own. I was a young girl when I first saw this doll in the discount bin of a thrift store, and knew that I had to have her. I think my liberal leanings were evident even back then when I wanted to rescue her, give her a home and ensure that she would never be hungry again. Fox Valley Fellowship – I want you to meet my favorite doll from 1965 – Suzie Sad Eyes – produced the year after Johnson’s famous War on Poverty speech and never produced again. She sells on ebay now for over a hundred dollars. So, Fox Valley – meet Suzie Sad Eyes – my favorite doll from childhood. I tried to get her to be friends with Barbie and Ken, but they were only interested in jet setting off to Miami in their red convertible. Barbie and Ken are long gone, products of downsizing, but Suzie – well, she’s still here, and she’s still poor.

In 1964, the poverty rate was at 19%; today it’s approximately 14.5%. If there is good news here, it’s that the rate of those living in poverty has not increased, but what *has increased* is a growing, gnawing divide between the very rich, the very poor and a struggling and often sinking middle class.

The Hungriest Game then, is not a dystopian sci-fi film, but it is in fact the reality in which we live. The Hungriest Game of our time is actually unchecked capitalism that is supported by a web of policies of corporate globalization, free trade, outsourcing, privatization, tax shifting and evasion, subsidies and bailouts, deregulation and decline of support for public institutions, many of which, our Unitarian and Universalist ancestors had created! At the 2014 General Assembly in Providence, Rhode Island, the topic of “Escalating Inequality” was selected to be a Congregational Study Action Issue for the next four years. Some churches are doing an all-church read of the book *Beyond Outrage* by former Secretary of Labor Robert Reich as a way of exploring the systemic issues of poverty and hunger in a land of plenty. Reich cites 7 major factors as to why the economic challenges facing the United States today are systemic:

1. For the last 3 decades, almost all of the American’s economic growth has gone to the wealthiest 1%.
2. The Great Recession of 2008 was followed by an anemic recovery because America’s middle class is in so much debt.

3. Political clout and power has flowed to the top; Politicians are forced to rely on contributions from lobbyists and wealthy citizens.
4. Corporations are paying less tax and receiving more government hand outs.
5. Government budgets are squeezed, resulting in less revenue for public institutions.
6. Americans are competing with one another for slices of as shrinking pie.
7. A meaner and more cynical politics prevails.

Reich writes that the game of today's capitalism is rigged, and we all know it. He writes "*A profound change has come over America. Guts, gumption and hard work don't seem to pay off as they once did...Instead, the game seems rigged in favor of people who are already rich and powerful, as well as their children. Instead of lionizing the rich, we're beginning to suspect they gained their wealth by ripping us off.*"<sup>3</sup>

So, how do we change the rules of the game? In the books and the film "The Hunger Games" Katniss Everdeen offers two strategic ploys that change the course of their history forever. Nearing the end of the first Hunger Game, she is pitted against Peeta, her friend and colleague and love interest. They are supposed to kill one another, because there is to be only one Tribute. Katniss and Peeta decide they are not going to play by the Capital's rules any longer, believing that if both their lives can't be spared, then both their lives should be sacrificed. This move would destroy the entertainment value of their battle, so the Capital spares them both, at least until the second book. I can't tell you the second move that Katniss makes, because it would a giant spoiler alert, but what I can tell you is that it goes right at the heart of everything that is evil with the Capital's "ism" – a system that puts money and power above the ability of ordinary people to live lives of meaning and purpose without extraordinary want.

At the end of Reich's book, he concludes with a little known speech by President Obama, given at Osawatomie, Kansas in 2011. In it, Obama writes..."*It's heartbreaking enough that there are millions of working families in this country who are now forced to take their children to food banks for a decent meal...[but] fortunately, that's not a future we have to accept. Because there is another view about how to build our future...it's not a view that says we should punish profit or success or pretend that government knows how to fix all society's problems. It's a view that says in America we are greater together, when everyone engages in fair play, everyone gets a fair shot, everyone does their fair share...*"<sup>4</sup>

What can we do? We can work on the micro level of course – providing meals and food; we can educate ourselves about the insidious and intersecting lines of inherited poverty, racism, greed, and a theology of scarcity that create a permanent underclass, we can vote for candidates both nationally and locally who are naming this issue as part of their own platform, and, we can be aware of our own hunger. I'm hungry for a country that actually names the escalating inequality between the haves and the have nots as a national priority. I'm hungry for a country in which food pantries don't exist any longer because everyone has enough to eat. In a 1967 Speech at the Riverside Church in New York, Dr. Martin Luther King wrote: The greatest purveyor of violence in the world today is the United States and to save itself, the US must lead an international crusade against poverty, racism and militarism. To do that, he said "we've got to have a reconstruction of the entire society; **a revolution of values.**" A society that truly believe in the reality of abundance that we sang about in the opening hymn "for everywhere a feast is spread that's always at our side."

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<sup>3</sup> Reich, Robert. *Beyond Outrage*, pg. 34 (e-edition)

<sup>4</sup> Reich, Robert. *Beyond Outrage*, pg. 72 (e-book version)

We need a revolution of values – values that are near and dear to the heart of Unitarian Universalists; values that Unitarian Universalists ancestors and other liberal religious faiths have worked for; a living wage; quality public education; affordable health care; and for God’s sake – enough food to eat in a land of plenty. A revolution of values is required if these so-called ideals can be made manifest in this country. And we need to get hungry for that – and demand an end to these Hunger Games once and for all. May it be so!

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