

Childhood as it was never meant to be

Why are truckloads of innocents becoming nothing but cold, dead statistics?

BY THOMAS FROESE

KAMPALA, UGANDA ♦ One of the unexpected things I've caught since coming to Africa for the long haul is a certain disturbing feeling in the pit of my stomach. It's grown there quietly, feeding, I suspect, on the various foreign sights and sounds around here, especially those of the children.

Of course, African kids are more than stereotypical media images of bony, starving waifs. There's more to African life than Do They Know It's Christmas? that 1980s hit song by BandAid about Africa's Christmas chimes of doom.

Still, unlike in Canada this holiday season, some African children will starve to death. Many others will experience childhood as it was never meant to be. And having my own young children here doesn't help my stomach much, not when my three-year-old asks, as she did recently, "Daddy, what's a Muzungu?"

I can't really respond, "Well, Elizabeth, in an African context, Muzungu means 'rich, white person' and this, Sweetie, is what you and I are. Just remember, if some children call you this, it's not mean-spirited, it's just rather matter-of-fact. So don't worry, be happy."

Likewise, when visiting a Ugandan orphanage, Elizabeth's mother and I can't easily explain to her why some kids have no mummies or daddies. There's so much that little ones don't understand. So many of them here, Elizabeth and her brother Jon included, sing innocently and honestly about how "red and yellow, black and white, Jesus loves all the children of the world."

So then why does the UN's 2006 State of the World's Children report that 11 million kids under five are now dying yearly from malnutrition or disease? Why do 600 million live in abject poverty? Why can't at least 100 million access even primary school-

ing? Why do 2.5 million have AIDS, a killer that's orphaned another 15 million, with plenty more coming?

Why during this, the Mother of all Childhood Seasons, when toys spill over in so many living rooms, do so many children live in this sad and sorry and terribly true state? Why are truckloads of innocents becoming nothing but cold, dead statistics? Can't Jesus do better?

Despite some gains, disparities are stretching across the globe like some hideous alien's tentacles. Simon Fraser Public Research Group reports if today's world had 100 people, 50 would be malnourished, 70 wouldn't be able to read, and 80 would have rotten housing. Six would have half the wealth. One would have a degree.

Of course, there's a complex web of reasons for all this, and none have much to do with Jesus: poor personal choices, destructive cultural mores, wars, government corruption, unfair global trade, and the list goes on. Metaphorically, the lunatics are taking the asylum. Control is falling to the bastards among us, and children are suffering the most.

If you find this offensive, consider recent science from Paul Zak, of Claremont Graduate University's Center for Neuroeconomics Studies in California.

Zak suggests human nature is basically good, that our brains are even hard-wired to cooperate. People find it natural to, for one thing, share. But, some 2 per cent of us, at least in Zak's lab studies, are "pure non-cooperators," always hoarding, always into themselves at all costs.

The technical term in Zak's lab for these people is moral "bastards." Their brains apparently work differently, like those of sociopaths who don't, or can't, care about anyone, maybe due to dysfunction of the chemical oxytocin.

So, it can be argued, there really are bastards out there. The question is,



JEAN CHAMBERLAIN FROESE, SPECIAL TO THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

Primary schoolchildren in Mukono District, near Kampala, Uganda, enjoy their recess by hamming it up for the camera. While African children have many challenges, their smiles show there's more to life in Africa than stereotypical images.

how do we save our children from them?

And how do we avoid becoming bastards ourselves?

It may seem strange, but when one is a Muzungu in Africa, especially at Christmas, these are the things that can fester in one's stomach.

But, then again, on one level or another, maybe we're all bastards. And maybe God loves us anyway.

Maybe that's why the story of the first Christmas has been left for us to ponder.

It's something to think about the next time you hear the radio play BandAid's unnerving song about Africa's children, and what we have or haven't done for them.

And it's something to give thanks for when you see that wonder in a child's eyes on Christmas Day.

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THOMAS FROESE, SPECIAL TO THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

Some of the 60 orphans during nap-time at the Amani Baby Cottage, an orphanage in Jinja, Uganda. Many of these children's parents have died of AIDS. Worldwide, 15 million children are now orphaned due to AIDS, just one of the challenging statistics in the UN's 2006 State of the World's Children report.