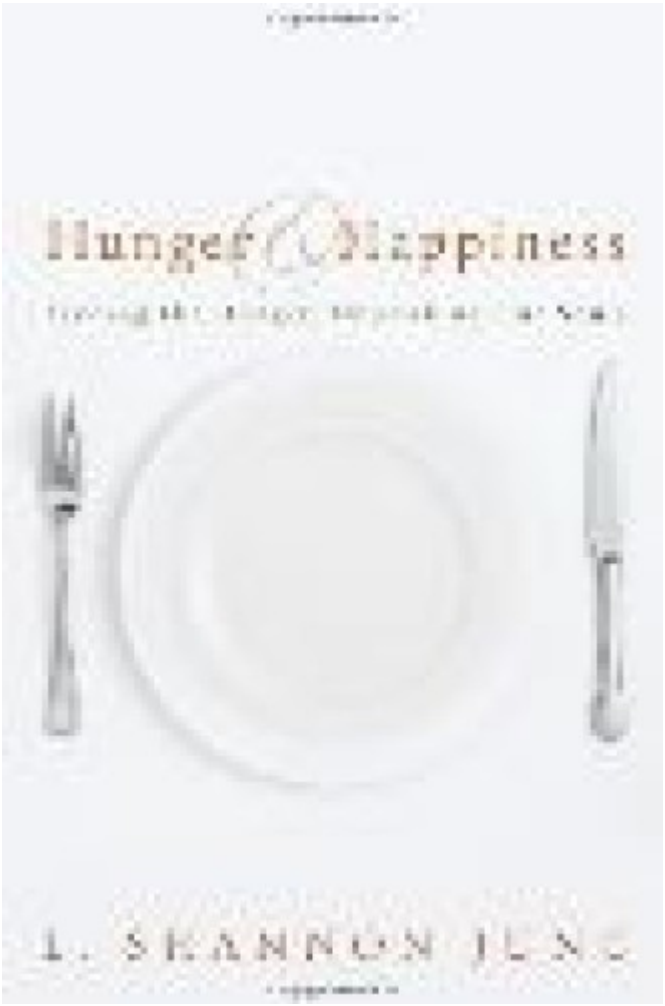
# Hunger and Happiness: Feeding the Hungry, Nourishing Our Souls

reviewed by Daniel G. Deffenbaugh in the August 10, 2010 issue

## In Review




### Hunger and Happiness: Feeding the Hungry, Nourishing Our Souls

L. Shannon Jung
Augsburg

For those of us living in central Nebraska, it’s difficult not to be reminded daily of the role that agriculture plays in the global marketplace. Morning farm reports on radio and television keep us all apprised of the going price for a bushel of corn, and discussions about pork bellies are about as common as laments over the weather. When it comes to the economy in the small towns that dot the map of the Great Plains, farming is king. Even now, as the rest of the nation reels under record unemployment, life moves on apace, with our jobless rate still hovering around 6 percent. With grain elevators in every town brimming with golden abundance, it’s easy to be seduced into believing that all is well in the heartland. We’re living in the breadbasket here, and we’re proud of the fact that our honest labor in the fields is helping to feed a hungry world.

But relatively low unemployment and burgeoning commodity stores in the nation’s agricultural states mask deeper problems whose effects can be felt all over the planet. Consider the incongruity of two stories that appeared almost simultaneously in the news media toward the end of July of last year. While the Nebraska Corn Board was predicting another record year for grain production and lauding the technological innovations that were making this possible, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization was releasing new data indicating that worldwide the number of people experiencing “food insecurity”—a newly sanitized way to describe starvation—had for the first time in history exceeded 1 billion.

So last summer, while many Ameri cans were taking Sunday drives through mile after mile of verdant corn fields and assuring their children that this food was helping to solve the world’s hunger problems, the reality was—and still is—that this grain (or its byproducts) was more likely to be found in their gas tanks or in their hamburgers and soft drinks than in the stomachs of people threatened with famine.

This is obviously not a production problem. Nor is it a matter of distribution. As Shannon Jung argues in *Hunger and Happiness*, this is a spiritual problem, a malady of the soul. We in the so-called First World are enjoying the benefits of a global marketplace without taking responsibility for the social and ecological effects our good fortune has on its victims. To paraphrase a claim from an earlier chapter of our history, hunger anywhere is a threat to human happiness everywhere, especially in a world that is increasingly interconnected.

The political and economic impacts of food production, distribution and consumption have been the topics of recent texts by Michael Pollan, Eric Schlosser, Barbara Kingsolver and others; concerns about how our food choices affect our individual and communal health are not new. What makes Jung's book significant is the facility with which he summarizes such issues as the illusion of cheap food, the effects of government subsidies on health and the economy, and the environmental impacts of conventional agriculture—with which he reflects both critically and faithfully on their implications for the church. Each of his six chapters is organized to offer insights into the theological significance of the topic at hand, to suggest a new moral direction for addressing the problem, and to propose creative and practical steps toward transformative action.

For example, to those who would seek to justify world hunger as a regrettable but necessary outcome of economic competition in the global marketplace, Jung counters that the Christian theological tradition cannot be understood apart from a divine economy of grace and abundance. We worship a God who wills that all be afforded the opportunity to enjoy their lives; a social, political or economic order that obstructs this fundamental feature of the faith must therefore be judged as immoral. It is the vocation of every Christian to challenge the common practices that rely on an oppressive appropriation of others' lives and labor in a misguided pursuit of our own happiness. Human cooperation, not competition, is the real source of long-lasting enjoyment.

Perhaps the most important feature of this text is Jung's firsthand familiarity with many of the social service and church organizations dedicated to ad dressing issues of hunger and happiness, whether through economic, political or personal means. His final chapter is a useful compendium of hands-on practices that can help readers nourish their souls by reversing their complicity in world hunger. This book is written specifically for those in the pews who are concerned about the intersection of their faith and their daily choices.

Though the subject matter might lead us to think otherwise, Jung's primary focus is Christian spirituality, and he is not afraid to venture into areas that few writing in this field have explored. The first step on the road to transformation, he argues, is penance performed with the faithful knowledge that forgiveness is possible. Then we can set aside our obsession with material consumption and begin pursuing in faith the ideal of spiritual communion. In no other book that I have read on this topic has an author argued for the importance of self-consciously confessing our sins and

accepting forgiveness for our complicity in the tragic consequences of our consumer habits.

This is the third book on the ethics of food that Shannon Jung has written in the last six years, and it is his most important. Indeed, without *Hunger and Happiness* the previous texts—*Food for Life* (2004) and *Sharing Food* (2006)—would be incomplete, perhaps even frivolous. Read together, the three mark a potentially significant transition for the church: they help us to realize that a theology of incarnation can inform us even in what is often perceived as our most mundane human act, eating. Though the books deal critically with issues of theology and ethics, Jung's tone is never a distraction to the ear of his primary audience, the lay reader.

I had the opportunity recently to use *Hunger and Happiness* in an undergraduate course on Christianity and social justice, and it was instrumental in inspiring a student-led food-awareness campaign on our campus called Forty Days of Lentils. Students chose the Lenten season to reflect faithfully and in an attitude of penance on the local and global effects of their food habits. This speaks well, I think, not only of the accessibility of this text but also of the impact it can have on the lives of those who are serious about their spiritual commitments and willing to make a few lifestyle changes.

*Hunger and Happiness* could be the most important book written in recent years on the ethical implications of a Christian's food choices. It is at once theologically sophisticated and practically grounded, and it has the potential to redirect the lives of both individuals and congregations toward a richer enjoyment of the kingdom of God.