

OPINION

Thursday

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Chaos is symptom of global inequities

When few eat resources as children go hungry, should violence shock?

Seven years ago, Los Angeles blew up. More than 50 people died, 800 buildings were razed, thousands more vandalized. On the very day the Rodney King verdict unleashed chaos in L.A., San Francisco also boiled over.

Before the riots, I'd escorted a class of high school juniors to St. Anthony's soup kitchen in downtown San Francisco. Here, the inner city overflowed with homeless from around America, as well as immigrants from around the world.

In preparation for our community service, we had done a little homework. From Bread for the World reports we learned that the United States has the highest child poverty rate of any industrial country. The world's wealthiest economy had still left millions of families below the poverty line, with members of ethnic minorities especially vulnerable to chronic malnutrition.

In response, our class decided to help in a soup kitchen. Instead of serving spaghetti behind safe steel counters though, we were all asked to



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Voices

simply sit and eat with those gathered.

Anxiety levels soared. But an hour later, getting students out of their chairs was a task. Apprehension had dissolved. Fear had scooted over for compassion. Students had given lunch money away.

That's not all. A gap had closed. Instead of serving the "disadvantaged," we had sat in solidarity with victims of economic injustice. We experienced firsthand the ways poverty, prejudice and homelessness intertwined. By sharing a common meal we bridged a vast distance to discover people more like us than we could have ever dreamed.

No sooner did we discover this community and commonality than we also discovered its opposite: chaos. As we left St. Anthony's we stepped into a

war zone. Protests over the Rodney King verdict paralyzed public transit. Fires burned in the streets. As we hiked the final leg back to school, anxious parents in the distance waved us in.

Had our compassion for victims of social injustice come too late?

In the seven years which have passed, the disparities between the world's richest and poorest people have only increased, according to the latest Human Development Report by the United Nations. Every year, Americans spend \$8 billion on beauty aids. Europeans dole out \$11 billion on ice cream alone. Those luxuries combined cost more than what it would take to provide basic schooling, water and sanitation to the more than 2 billion people who go without education or toilets. Glaring inequities such as these, ignored for so long, provide the perfect tinderbox for popular unrest, the UN report concludes.

We who are privileged to build immense new homes over Michigan's vanishing farm lands, and cruise solo in bigger and bigger SUVs would do well to remember: Our consumption patterns have social impacts which deepen global inequities. Industrial nations like our own comprise only 15 percent of the world's population, yet

we account for 76 percent of the world's consumption expenditures. Scientists estimate we'd need three more planets if everyone expended material resources as does the first world.

When we continue to allow for an unjust distribution of the world's resources, we further distance ourselves from living in unity with people who, while having less material goods, remain more like us than we realize. We deny the contributions they offer. In addition, we forfeit two of God's most precious gifts: the gifts of community and compassion. Without these, the chaos we end up with may be the verdict we deserve.

My former neighbor had a family heirloom framed on her kitchen wall. The colorful embroidery read: "Wear it out. Use it up. Go without." Delicate threads sewn years ago, it offers counsel for our country — both wise and just.

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