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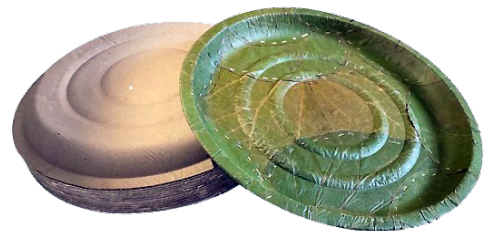
Home-Cooked Meals for Those Without a Home

Compassion is often defined as being sympathetic regarding the misfortune of others. To me, being compassionate also means being able to put myself in the shoes of others and go out of my way to alleviate their pain and suffering to whatever extent I can.

I live in India, where there is a huge economic inequality between the rich and the poor. Personally, I belong to the middle class and have never experienced poverty first-hand or felt what it's like to go to bed on an empty stomach. However, I regularly see people on the streets who have to beg for money and are barely able to afford one square meal a day. My eyes first opened to this fact when I was a teenager and watched a documentary on global hunger. After I started earning wages, I made it a point to donate to charities that work on poverty and hunger. I've been making these donations on and off for a long time now, but I have never actually prepared meals for people living with food insecurity. For my Day of Compassion, I chose to do exactly that.

I picked a Saturday for the Day of Compassion. The day before, my mother and I shopped for food ingredients to prepare a nutritious home-cooked meal that we would give to people in need. We were about to go our regular supermarket when I remembered that there was a new zero-waste store that had recently opened near the supermarket. I decided to shop there and be environmentally friendly as part of the day's activities, thereby broadening the circle of compassion to include the environment. This was my first time in a zero-waste store, so I didn't know what to expect—there were absolutely no plastic or single-use items in the store.

The store encouraged customers to use their own bags and boxes for the items being purchased. I also found biodegradable plates, bowls, and cutlery to go with the food we were preparing. We bought plates and bowls made with leaves of the palash tree, also known as the "flame of the forest." These leaves are often used to serve food in India and are known to have antibacterial and antiseptic properties, which makes eating from them not just sustainable but healthy. In India, people have also traditionally used plantain leaves for plates and bowls, but these days, plastic and Styrofoam products are replacing more sustainable products. By purchasing palash plates and bowls, I hoped to support the zero-waste store as well as the values it represented.



When Saturday arrived, I woke up early and worked with my mother to cook simple but nutritious food to feed around 30 adults. The meals we prepared were vegan and included rice, different kinds of lentils, and lots of fresh vegetables. They were nothing fancy, but they were rich with nutrients essential to good health. We then packed the meals in the palash leaf containers, and hit the streets.



First, we visited a nearby house of worship, Sri Vinayaka Temple, devoted to honoring Lord Ganesh—the God of New Beginnings and Remover of Obstacles. Seated on the temple's steps were many people begging for money. Most of these people were elderly and were either too weak or too disabled to work. We gave them meals, and I was pleasantly surprised when they responded with blessings.

Next, we walked toward an intersection. On the footpath, I saw some children playing in the dirt. When they saw that we had food, they came running to us and were so happy that they could barely wait to get their meal. One little boy asked us to stay there while he fetched his sister so that she could get food, too. Before we knew it, we had distributed all the meals.

The fact that we were done so quickly made me realize how much hunger was out there. Without doubt, my act of compassion was tiny compared with what needs to be done—requiring only \$30 or so in groceries and a few hours of my time—but I'm very glad that I took action instead of waiting until I could do something with a larger impact. A small step now, in my opinion, is much better than allowing things to reach a point so bad that change becomes impossible. The satisfied looks on the people's faces after getting food, the blessings that they gave me, and the children's smiles and excitement—all of these images will stay with me a long time.

Analysis and Reflections

Although I am passionate about this cause, I realized after the Day of Compassion that I can do much more than I have in the past. In hindsight, I can see that I've shielded myself from getting upset about the sorry state of the world in which some people have so much food on their plate that they throw part of it in the trash, whereas other people look through trash just to find scraps to get them through the day.

I myself am guilty of wasting food, which reflects a gap between my attitudes and behavior. To reduce cognitive dissonance from this inconsistency, I practice selective exposure at times and avoid witnessing the harsh reality of economic injustice and hunger. Many of us—myself included—are also guilty of the bystander effect. We see that people are hungry and suffering, but we fail to intervene and instead convince ourselves that someone else will help, that it's not our responsibility to act, or that our actions would make no difference.

Yet my Day of Compassion suggests otherwise—it showed that in only 24 hours, without any special talent or superpower, I could make a difference in the lives of 30 people. My superpower was simply caring.

After this exercise, I feel compelled to better align my behavior with my beliefs. In the future, I hope to take similar actions more often and get more people involved to increase the impact. Using social media and the psychology of persuasion, my goal will be to generate awareness, lead by example, and bring more people onboard.