

Alliance to End Hunger Summit Speech
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REVISED

Hello. Thank you for that introduction, Rebecca. And thank you to the Alliance to End Hunger for asking me to speak tonight. It's an honor.

When my co-director, Kristi Jacobson, and I embarked on *A Place at the Table*, we knew about as much about the issue of hunger as your average American, or at least, your average American who had never themselves experienced food insecurity. Our intention was to shine a light on what struck us as a grievous wrong here in one of the world's most abundant and prosperous nations. As filmmakers, we believed passionately in the power of storytelling to impact the mindset of our nation. Indeed, it's that belief that drives me in my work every day.

One of our first steps back in June of 2009 was to meet at the DC boardroom of the Alliance to End Hunger, where many of the members who are in this room tonight, graciously took the time to share their thoughts about how a film about hunger could help their efforts. What you all told us 9 years ago was that our nation already had the resources, the smarts, and the capacity to end hunger. What we lacked was the public will. From that day forward, garnering that will became our mission.

Kristi and I learned a lot in the process. We were shocked to learn of the scope and scale of hunger in the U.S. At the time we began, the USDA's newest numbers pegged food insecurity at close to 49 Million people. We assumed, with numbers like that, that we'd find widespread national apathy to the issue. And in fact, we found the opposite:

Although hunger and food insecurity are often 'hidden in plain sight,' the fact that millions go hungry in the United States seemed well known to the public. Hunger deeply upset the Americans that we met and there seemed to be an infinite number of ways to help: Fundraisers, food drives, bake-offs, marketing initiatives, celebrity spokespeople, especially during the holiday season. These efforts were visible and well publicized, sponsored by industry-leading companies. We could see that, through the hard work and amazing efforts of those of you in this room, the anti-hunger groups in the U.S. had earned broad public awareness and trust. And Americans seemed to deeply care. So how come the numbers were so bad? And why were they only growing worse? Why hadn't that caring translated into broader public will to end hunger?

The answer, I've become convinced, lies in a deeper look at the storytelling and messaging all around us, both conscious and unconscious, that has shaped our nation's attitude about poverty and hunger for decades. And that's what I'd like to talk to you about tonight.

I firmly believe that how we communicate about this issue moving forward could make the difference as to whether the anti-hunger and anti-poverty movement ever achieves the kind of critical mass that translates into genuine cultural change.

Authors of childhood memoirs often write of how the unspoken things in their families had the greatest impact. How they would 'fill in the blanks' of their family story, and make false assumptions about those 'unmentionables,' that sometimes took on a life of their own. As Kristi and I studied the issue, we realized that in the absence of any clearly articulated solutions, the public was doing exactly that: they were filling in the blanks and assuming that the problems of hunger and poverty must be unsolvable. That this is one of those issues you can only hope to manage, not fix.

Now, I'm old enough to recall when AIDS appeared in the 1980s and the paranoia and prejudice that followed in its wake. It was a huge problem, and growing worse by the day. The public was bombarded with images of hollow-eyed orphans in sub-Saharan Africa, bodies wasted by the disease. AIDS was widely believed to be incurable. And that is still true: there isn't a "cure," a magic pill, for the virus that causes AIDS, to make it disappear.

But at a certain point the public came to understand that while a cure for virus that causes AIDS still eludes us, there are solutions to the *epidemic*: ways to arrest its progress, minimize its impact and even more critically -- prevent it from happening in the first place.

Now this didn't happen organically, or by chance. This cultural shift began with clear-eyed storytelling by trusted figures and people whose narratives disrupted the prevailing prejudices of the day, which had been mostly stories of drug use and promiscuity. This messaging destigmatized the illness and helped it be understood not as the consequence of bad life choices, but as a public health crisis, worthy of public resources. And once the public's mindset shifted, they were open to the idea of that AIDS prevention as a national health priority was a whole lot smarter and more effective than letting the disease run its course while we focused on managing its symptoms.

But imagine if back in the '80s and 90s the public had adopted the idea that in a sexually liberated, Westernized culture, a certain amount of HIV and AIDS is inevitable, so let's hold bake sales to fund research. Or donate the proceeds of restaurant week to hospice care.

The AIDS epidemic is a very flawed analogy, I know. But I raise it as an example of a monumental crisis in recent memory in which the activists and the people working on the front lines -- people with vastly different agendas and strong differences of opinion -- came together to make telling the right story – *one that would bring the public on board as partners* – a fundamental part of their work.

Ask yourselves: When it comes to stories about hunger and poverty, who is the public getting its information from?

Over the last 40 years, the efforts of deep-pocketed interest groups governed by a uniquely American brand of free-market orthodoxy have been well-documented. These groups invested heavily and wisely in an interlocking network of media outlets, academic programs, and think tanks designed to get our nation to tack right, to sell citizens on trickle-down mythology that has embraced deregulation and allowed the shifting of pressing public health issues into the private sector.

The storytelling they created crossed disciplines, and was used to help design policy that has chipped away steadily at the social safety net – especially food stamps. The narrative they promoted about welfare fraud and waste in the system played well, then and now, in John Wayne America, where individual achievement is one of our most cherished tropes. After all, if folks are struggling because of their bad choices, why should taxpayers foot the bill?

Blaming others helped deflect from a perfect storm of destabilizing events happening right in plain sight: a crushing recession layered over pockets of historic, generational poverty. The migration of manufacturing jobs overseas and the erosion of unions, which in turn led to wage stagnation that has hollowed out a once robust American working and middle class.

These painfully shifting demographics have led to an increase in housing costs, and ever deeper pockets of poverty and social isolation, which is where food deserts are born. Add spiraling medical costs, as our nation manifests the health impacts of an artificially cheap fast- and packaged—food diet. The net result: in 1968, we had 10 Million hungry people in this country, in 2018 we now have 42 million, and an administration hostile to the very idea of a social fabric. I don't need to tell anyone in this room what's going on. Funding for the social safety net is threatened as never before. Those of you working on the front lines are more stretched than ever.

But while you're doing your critical work of meeting the ever-growing need, who is pushing back against the demonizing of the poor by the right? Who has undertaken to reframe the issue as one of structural strains brought on by shifting national priorities, rather than poor personal choices?

It's not that the anti-hunger and poverty groups are not engaged in their own storytelling about poor people, and its unfailingly sympathetic to be sure. But most of the content from these groups is designed to tug the heartstrings, usually with images of hungry children. And while these images may pack an emotional wallop, they unintentionally reinforce the image of poor people as dependent and infantilized, a group that, like a nest of baby birds, begs feeding.

Is it any wonder low-income Americans feel condescended to and resentful?

I believe images like these, sent out with the best of intentions, are just as damaging to our cause as the fiction that poor people are to blame for their condition. Both mindsets lead to

inaction at the policy level, which is where (those of us in this room know) that lasting and profound differences can and should be made.

Our goal with *A Place at the Table* was to disrupt the storytelling of the right and the left, and to suggest a different paradigm: namely that hunger is **a solvable problem**, but not unless we stop pretending it is strictly a humanitarian issue, and not a political one.

In the film, we asked that the country recognize hunger as the unintentional result of so many factors, including the defunding of important anti-poverty measures at the federal level, and a broken, hodge-podge food system that favors industry over eaters. We knew these were not easy things to talk about, but we felt it was our nation's only real hope at undertaking the policies that could fix things. We argued that in finding real solutions, the upside to our nation -- economically, educationally, psychologically --- would be profound and far-reaching.

As we showed the movie around the country we had a disorienting but soon familiar experience: members of the audience -- sometimes the entire audience -- would approach us after the screening to say, *'We get it now! We want to be part of changing this! Sign us up for what you're doing!'*

But what were we doing? Hell, I thought we'd done our job! But it became increasingly clear with each screening that folks were asking to be pointed towards ways to engage with solutions, and it was on us to figure out how to help them. We realized we'd need to talk to larger audiences than the ones already motivated to watch a documentary about hunger. We'd have to get the messaging out, at scale. But how? Was it even possible to shift our nation from a charity mindset to a solution-based one? Especially when so many of those solutions rested on thorny issues like SNAP cuts, wages, agricultural subsidies?

We didn't know, but our small team -- a couple filmmakers and media professionals (and a chef) set out to find out, by pulling together a strategic communications campaign to talk to the public. We knew it wouldn't be simple. But we had had the experience, over and over again, in churches, synagogues, community centers, universities, town councils, and it never failed: once people understood that this was a solvable issue, they wanted to be part of the solution.

We've faced plenty of challenges since we began, in earnest, in 2015. For one, we've learned that the dozens of anti-hunger and anti-poverty groups in this country have each coalesced around their own separate and nuanced facets of this complicated issue. Getting them behind a single message is all but impossible. We've had to let go of the notion we could or should speak for everyone in this diverse, and multi-faceted movement.

Another challenge has been the sheer complexity of the issue. Connecting with new audiences may be easy when you're sharing kitten memes. But the idea of systems change isn't sexy and it's not easy to sum up for a public that prefers its learning in 144 characters. Far easier to imply that solutions are as easy as 'click here to donate.'

But a much bigger challenge is one we didn't fully appreciate until recently, as it has reached fever pitch, and that is formidable public anger and suspicion.

Some context you likely already know: the American economy is supposedly strong. The Dow Jones is north of 26,000 and unemployment is way down. But for many, these numbers aren't reflected in their quality of life. Wages have not kept pace with the standard of living.

The NYT explained this dynamic in a recent piece: "Economists call it the 'productivity-pay gap' – the fact that over the last 40 years, while the economy has expanded and corporate profits have risen American productivity has increased by 77 percent, while hourly pay has grown by only 12 percent. If the federal minimum wage tracked productivity, it would be more than \$20/hour, not today's poverty wage of \$7.25.

That alone is enough to piss a lot of us off.

And as I mentioned earlier, the structures that have historically protected American workers – namely Unions – have declined significantly. Victor Tan Chen described in *The Atlantic* how the labor movement in its prime helped create a 'moral economy' in which the average worker had a notable voice, and wages rose across the board -- even in firms without them -- due to their impact.

This resonates on a personal level for me; my grandfather, Seymour Silverbush, told me how as a young man, he had been stiffed by his boss on more than one occasion at the end of a week of grueling work, with no recourse, nowhere to turn for help. It wasn't until he joined a Union that he had any way to know, reliably, that an honest day's work would lead to an honest wage. Once that security was in place, he could start to build a life for his family, and exercise his freedoms as an American.

Obviously, the Labor Movement was not the answer to all our problems. It's had its own sordid history of gender bias, racial discrimination and worse. But as the Unions dwindled so did the message they implicitly carried with them, *that real freedom can't exist without economic security*.

Today the American dream has morphed from the notion of social wellbeing and steady upward mobility to one about exception. The tech entrepreneur with an IPO, the social media breakout star, the corporate CEO. As the class divide has widened and the new American dream has become increasingly unattainable, outrage has simmered and encouraged the tribalism we see all around us. Take a presidential candidate and racist groups eager to fan that rage and here we are. A nation turning on itself.

According to a new analysis by the Pew Research Center, people are more likely now to respond to members of Congress with an angry response than a like. An undercurrent of suspicion and resentment is now the dominant sentiment across media outlets, in our town

hall meetings, on the Senate floor, and in the street. Civil disagreement has been replaced by disenchantment and deep skepticism of the 'other.'

I had a personal brush with the new normal recently when I planted a lawn sign supporting a Democrat challenging a conservative incumbent, in the sleepy town on Long Island where my family spends our weekends. Vandals spray-painted the words, "Trump!" and a desecrated Jewish star, among other sentiments, across our and property. And although we received an outpouring of support and solidarity on social media in the weeks that followed, laced throughout were comments from folks who were certain that we had engineered the incident ourselves, to stoke anti-Trump indignation.

Say what you want about that, but I look at it as information. People are feeling things, and we'd all do well to pay attention, and care.

Why? Because when our media and personal spaces are full of rage, it's that much harder to ignite people's belief in the collective good, in the responsibility we all hold to each other, and all our children. That much harder, and that much more important.

So, what can we do about it?

Do we throw up our hands, accept that this is the national climate and keep doing what we've always done in the hopes that somehow things will change?

Or do we, as leaders in the crusade against hunger and poverty, see that this is a moment of unprecedented opportunity and seize it?

You see, one thing media experts tell us is that when something takes up too much space in the landscape, a backlash is inevitable. And we – the anti-hunger and poverty movement – are uniquely poised to be that backlash. What's the perfect comeback to bitterness and toxic tribal isolation? Empathy and connection.

How do you counter grievance and resentment? With dignity.

How do you combat helplessness and frustration? With action.

The moment is ripe for a movement that recognizes the public's desire to be part of the change and knits it with the authentic human emotions we are all hungry for, regardless of our differences.

The anti-hunger world can be the voice expressing that ***dignity and empowerment matter as much as nutrition for people to truly thrive.***

We can be the voice expressing to America that they can demand our leaders support policies that provide opportunities for a better life.

And we can do it by conveying a simple but singularly important message that gets lost in our tug-the-heartstrings ad campaigns: the big problems of our day are solvable and within our grasp, if we all lean in to fix them. We can tell people that while *charity may feel good, it's engagement in our democracy that works.*

This message may not have found an audience even two years ago. But the truth is, Trump has succeeded where even Obama failed – he has spawned a new wave of diverse voices, especially young ones, jumping into our political process to bring about the policies they care about.

Let's talk about young people for a moment: The research shows that they care deeply about social justice. **A 2017 [UK-wide survey](#) found that 58% of 10-20 year olds took part in some kind of social action in the previous 12 months.** And examples are everywhere: Greta Thunberg, the autistic 15-year old who has single-handedly raised climate change to the top of Sweden's national agenda. Or the Parkland high-school students, who, in the face of Congressional inaction, are getting gun-control measures passed all over the country at the state level. Everywhere around us, young people, even the ones not old enough to vote, are driving change.

And we know they care about food. According to research, 18-35 year olds spend the equivalent of *five entire 24-hour days a year* browsing food images on Instagram. Young people place a lot more value in what they put into their body so we know they're open to the message that healthy and adequate food matters.

This is the demographic that will be determining our national priorities in short order. It's our job, as leaders in the fight against hunger and poverty, to reach them and knit our agenda to theirs. It's a shorter distance than you may imagine, but the first step for all of us is to take control of the narrative, step away from what hasn't worked and lean into what does. We may not be marketing experts in this room, but that doesn't mean we can't learn from them.

So, what does that look like?

Whether your focus is on advocacy, food banking, summer meals, or obesity awareness, we can pull together in our storytelling just as leaders in the fight against HIV/AIDS did in the 90's and start by disrupting the conventional wisdom of hungry people as a problem, or as dependents and freeloaders. Let's look for ways to reframe them as honorable and promising, as all people can be when they are given opportunities to succeed.

We don't all need to parrot one another. But together let's agree to base our communications about hunger and food justice in the simple and non-polarizing truth: ***Food feeds human potential. When individuals get the nutrition they need, they can form strong communities. And when our communities are strong, our nation moves forward.***

This is a message we can all get behind. It removes entirely from the equation the notion that low-income and struggling families are groups who need to be fed by the rest of us – which robs them of dignity, and contributes to the widespread resentment that has fueled the ugly cultural and political divide that has characterized our national dialogue for the last 18 months.

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That's the first step.

That opens the door to a dialogue about empowerment and solvability. But is that enough to replace the nation's mindset of fixing problems with charity with one that emphasizes action and solutions? The answer may lie in neuroscience.

Neuroscientists tell us that engaging in charity excites the part of our brain known as the medial forebrain. It sends a pleasurable 'hit' through us of a neurotransmitter called dopamine, also known as the "reward molecule," like how we would ordinarily feel after being praised, or exercising. So what's wrong with that? Charity lets us do good and feel good about ourselves, right? The problem small acts of charity is not just that they communicate a they act as a release valve for the public's feelings of empathy and activation that could be deployed towards bringing about real change. Once we get that pleasurable 'hit' we feel we're done, and we don't press for solutions.

According to a study of consumers by media firm Radium One, social media has a similar effect on our neurology. Says the study, "every time we post, share, 'like,' comment, or send an invitation [through social media] we advance our concept of self in a way that scientists say provides that same dopamine signal to the brain.

Now I'm not suggesting that sharing on social media is akin to real, political action. But it's not meaningless, either. Throwaway hashtags of the past, in the right climate, can evolve into important identity signifiers. Messaging that reinforces democratic engagement can offer the same chemically powerful emotional incentives that charity has traditionally provided, without reinforcing damaging assumptions about poor people or misleading the public as to what works.

Using social media to tell a story of agency and empowerment may seem obvious, but think about it: We've all come across that incredibly urgent post from a group we'd like to attach our voices to and share, but it comes with an image – a suffering child, a disaster site -- that just feels wrong to 'like.' So, we keep scrolling, looking for the next thing to engage with instead.

But if anti-hunger/poverty groups prioritize creating and sharing content that shares thoughtful solutions in ways that are easy to like, share and 'own' it will condition the public to see that these are issues worth talking about and tackling in the public sphere. When it's time to decide how we allocate public resources, doesn't it make sense that citizens will be

more open to spending their tax dollars on causes with which they've already engaged on social media?

It begins with this: we need to be unafraid to express that helping people means demanding policies that benefit them. Full stop.

Talking policy has been message kryptonite for not-for-profits for a bunch of reasons. Certainly, we have to be mindful of not crossing a line that threatens our tax status. But the larger fear – that we'll alienate potential donors with a 'political' message may soon be a thing of the past. We can learn a lot by studying how brands and celebrities are using this cultural moment to engage with the public. Think Nike and Colin Kaepernick. Or Adidas and Billie Jean King. Sticking your neck out and taking a stance may increase the public's trust in your message and insert you directly into the zeitgeist. Which is what anti-hunger and anti-poverty groups need to do if they ever hope to exit their not-for-profit silo and become relevant in a meaningful way.

Here are some important ways we could do this:

- Let's connect hunger and poverty to other issues that people care about. For example, hungry people live in communities most affected by environmental problems. Anti-hunger groups could have been among the voices speaking up about the water crisis in Flint, Michigan. Racial equality and food justice go hand in hand – we could have lent support in Ferguson, and should do so anywhere our civil rights are compromised. This is matter of both ethics and practicality: by supporting and allying with others fighting these important battles we can leverage their platforms and increase all our collective impact with legislators. **Most importantly, it would reinforce the interconnectedness of hunger and poverty with the critical stories of our day in the public mind.** We may understand how these issues relate to one another, but the public doesn't and implying that hunger is a standalone phenomenon is both misleading and ineffective.
- **We should seek out ways to take ownership of the narrative about hunger and food justice** and share it – through our lens – with groups who need the information. In the past months APATT has been connecting to groups that mentor down-ballot candidates across the political spectrum, and educating them about how hunger can be tackled on a policy level. This gives them the talking points they need to connect with voters, and puts the issue on their platform and radar if they get into office. This is not about becoming lobbyists. It's about putting the issue on the radar of people with platforms of their own and making it easy for them to engage.
- Let's make the story less about us and our efforts and more about **the intrinsic value of the people we are working for.** There is the belief in the not-for-profit sector that poor people are just too burdened to play a role in changing their circumstances, so why even try to enlist them? Yet there are numerous groups – like Witnesses to Hunger, created by my personal hero, Dr. Mariana Chilton, that enlist people who have experienced poverty first-hand in

developing the programs, research and policies designed to help them. My dream would be for every food pantry to provide easily accessible opportunities for clients to get their voices heard and have political impact.

- And last, we should be “future-fitting” the issue. Anti-hunger and anti-poverty organizations need to educate themselves on the new tools of storytelling and deploy them. If we wait to reach young people until they’re in the position to write big checks (or even vote) we will lose them to causes that understand how vital and valuable they are. APATT is working hard to promote the new, young heroes of hunger and democratic activism, like Rachel Sumekh from Swipe Out Hunger and Amanda Litman from Run For Something, young people whose work is making the levers of change accessible to all. By getting their stories in front of the public we’re laying it out in no uncertain terms: *charity may feel good, but democracy works.*
- Most importantly, we should be talking to elementary and middle-school kids. Think about your own passion and interests as a kid. I bet something that mattered to you then is still playing a role in your life today. Sparking a kids’ passion for fixing hunger and poverty through democratic action could have a lasting and mobilizing effect for decades to come. To do this, APATT is working to develop kids’ podcasts and curricula for resourced-stretched school districts. We’re creating fun, hands-on content that tells the stories of change-makers throughout American history, regular people who solved some of our thorniest problems by using their voices and standing up for what was right. By doing this, we can teach kids that success isn’t a zero-sum game available only to a lucky few, but a healthy, thriving culture in which everyone has a genuine shot at becoming who they are meant to be.

Yes, this is more complex than organizing a bake sale, but the potential rewards are far more lasting and profound, and they go beyond the next election cycle or Farm Bill. We can sow the seeds for a vastly more productive political discourse in the future, by helping kids understand that hunger and poverty can be ended by communities seeking and demanding change. The content that anti-hunger and –poverty groups put out in the world could be a vital piece of the underlying message: As flawed and messy – even ugly at times – that our democracy can be, it is special, nonetheless. Like any living, breathing organism, our democracy will thrive if we participate and care for it. And hell, it’s worth it.

Thank you, and have a good night.