

I Walked in a Daze

K.P. Yohannan:

As I changed planes for Dallas at JFK International in New York, I was overcome at the sights and sounds around me. Those of us who grow up in Europe and Asia hear stories about the affluence and prosperity of the United States, but until you see it with your own eyes, the stories seem like fairy tales.

Americans are more than just unaware of their affluence—they almost seem to despise it at times. Finding a lounge chair, I stared in amazement at how they treated their beautiful clothes and shoes. The richness of the fabrics and colors was beyond anything I had ever seen. As I would discover again and again, this nation routinely takes its astonishing wealth for granted.

As I would do many times—almost daily—in the weeks ahead, I compared their clothing to that of the national missionary evangelists whom I had left only a few weeks before. Many of them walk barefoot between villages or work in flimsy sandals. Their threadbare cotton garments would not be acceptable as cleaning rags in the United States. Then I discovered most Americans have closets full of clothing they wear only occasionally—and I remembered the years I traveled and worked with only the clothes on my back. And I had lived the normal lifestyle of most village evangelists.

Economist Robert Heilbroner describes the luxuries a typical American family would have to surrender if they lived among the 1 billion hungry people in the Two-Thirds World:

We begin by invading the house of our imaginary American family to strip it of its furniture. Everything goes: beds, chairs, tables, television sets, lamps. We will leave the family with a few old blankets, a kitchen table, a wooden chair. Along with the bureaus go the clothes. Each member of the family may keep in his wardrobe his oldest suit or dress, a shirt or blouse. We will permit a pair of shoes for the head of the family, but none for the wife or children.