

GUEST ESSAY

I Escaped Poverty, but Hunger Still Haunts Me

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By Bertrand Cooper

Mr. Cooper is a writer in Los Angeles. This essay is part of Times Opinion's Fortunes series on the psychology of class.

About three months after I was born, my father was incarcerated. As a toddler, I was poor but housed. Mom and I stayed with a paraplegic meth dealer named Tony who used to employ my father.

After that, up until the age of 14, life depended on Mom's relationship with a man who sold insurance. When they were on, there was money. When they were off, there wasn't. Through high school, it was all poverty — abject, uninterrupted and more severe than what had preceded it. I was on the margin's edge then, out where the neglected become fosters, become homeless, become trafficked, become dead. At 18, I was working poor — a condition that reinvigorates the meaning of wage slavery. After eight more years of poverty, I was out. It's been eight years since, and I haven't been back.

Escaping poverty is a question of how long you can go without pleasure. If you were raised with money, going without pleasure might mean something like canceling your Netflix subscription or purchasing a slightly older car. What I mean by pleasure is food, clothing and shelter. I mean tolerating the daily denial of basic necessities without lashing out in ways that will get you put in a box.

Going without food is the hardest. The urban sociologist William Julius Wilson once said that what he distinctly remembered about growing up in rural poverty was hunger. Wilson grew up Black and poor in a family of seven during the 1940s. That a survivor of Jim Crow and its racist horrors recalls hunger as a defining torment says a lot.

The same sentiment was arguably shared by Mollie Orshansky, the U.S. government economist who chose to put food at the center of poverty's official definition. Orshansky, like Wilson, was raised in poverty, and in the 1960s she developed the poverty measurement that remains in use today: multiply the cost of a minimally nutritious diet by three, and if you earn one or more dollars less than that, the federal government deems you poor.

Paradoxically, the worst of poverty's afflictions becomes a tool for managing it. Not eating was so vital to my getting out of poverty that whenever I hear my middle- and upper-class peers talking about their inability to abide some new diet, for one or two callous moments, I think, "There's someone who wouldn't have escaped."

When I was poor, I would skip meals to buy inhalers for my asthma. I would skip meals to pay for car repairs. I would skip meals to support my partner's education and my own (and she'd do the same). Since you can get by with very few clothes, and rent is not something that can be adjusted on a whim, food costs are the easiest lever to pull.

My psychologist tells me that I possess several characteristics of obsessive-compulsive personality disorder. According to one study, individuals with this disorder have a 77 percent greater willingness to delay gratification compared with the general population. That quirk of my psychology probably helped me with persistent self-denial. But it also meant that when I was permitted to eat as much as I wanted, on those rare occasions when free food was on offer, I would turn that same resolve into a single-minded determination to obliterate any sense of my own hunger. I would binge.

I was 9 the first time I binged. It was Thanksgiving, which didn't mean much in my mom's house. I came downstairs that day to see her throwing a punch into her boyfriend the insurance agent's upturned arms. I don't recall whether this was the time that her ringed fist slipped through his guard and onto his temple or the time she grabbed a loop of keys and hurled them at his head. Whichever it was, it produced a cut and an insult that was sufficient for him to call the police and tell us to get out. I was sent to spend the holiday with family in Philadelphia, and Mom went back to New Jersey to spend it in jail.



Antoine Cossé

Excluding my Mom's boyfriend, everyone in my life was in poverty or along its periphery. My aunt Shawn's home in Philadelphia was a rowhouse that looked like a set from the series "Shameless," with a dozen formerly stray dogs holding court from the doorknobs down. But there was food: turkey, stuffing, mashed potatoes, mac and cheese, green beans, sweet potatoes and pie. I was awash in gratitude, happy to be with people who liked holidays and were willing to spend money they didn't have to celebrate them.

The meal itself was short. Shawn and her partner wanted to get back to the football game on TV; the only other adults had a newborn to attend to, and the younger cousins were eager to go off and play. Left to my own devices, I went into the kitchen.

Despite feeding eight or so people, the 25-pound turkey seemed to me hardly touched. I pulled a stool over to the counter, sat down, and ate the meat straight from the tray. I ripped and devoured the flesh until a section was bone — and even then a bone has cartilage at the ends and mushy marrow in the middle. I ate everything that humans can digest, breathing infrequently, until the neural itch to swallow made me fear that I might choke. Undeterred by the prospect of an ignominious death in my aunt's kitchen, I continued to eat until my stomach was distended and I could feel my lungs pressed against my heart. After a while, I couldn't remember what it felt like to be hungry. In fact, I couldn't imagine feeling hungry ever again.

Bingeing is more effective with a strategy to override the body's signals to stop eating. For someone who rarely cooked, Mom was fixated on diets and weight loss, and I was able to subvert her advice for my own purposes when I knew food would be abundant.

"It takes 20 minutes for your brain to register that you're full," she would say, so I'd eat as much as I could in the first 20 minutes. "Liquids take up space in the stomach" — so I wouldn't drink anything save for a sip or two to aid in the act of swallowing. "Sugar ruins your appetite by tricking you into thinking you're full, but you'll be hungry again soon after" — so I avoided sugar to gorge upon fat and protein. These became the reliable strategies, though I did experiment with others.

When I was 12, I twice tried to eat a large meal in secret and then quietly vomit up a portion of it before the next meal began. To my chagrin, purging did nothing to lengthen the amount of time that I felt free of hunger. I tried fasting in the lead-up to a free meal, but I learned what competitive eaters already know: starving makes you feel full faster. Takeru Kobayashi, the six-time champion of the Nathan's Hot Dog Eating Contest, came to prominence when I was 13, and I gleaned from his interviews that competitive eaters "expanded" their stomachs by ingesting large volumes of food or fluid the day before competition. Fluids are cheap, so I added this to my list of tactics.



Antoine Cossé

I initially made the mistake of bingeing at every offer of food. At friends' houses, the speed at which I finished my plate revealed that I was starving, and my friends' parents felt obligated to offer more, which I naïvely accepted. Someone eventually would pull me aside and tell me that I couldn't come over for a while, at least not within spitting distance of 6 p.m. Sometimes the penalty for hunger was severe. When I was 15, my grandmother threw me out five months after taking me in. Among the reasons she gave to the authorities was that I ate too much.

The best opportunities to binge were those less likely to exact a social cost: large gatherings like birthdays, holidays, parties. In my teenage years, the ideal was a class party. Teachers would often put food choice to a vote. If you like to binge, it's best to steer selection away from things that are easy to count and assign. If the class votes for subs, there's a chance that 25 students will produce an exact order of 25 sandwiches. The problem of little surplus.

In contrast, to get pizza exactly right requires the teacher to multiply the number of students by two or three and then divide by eight. I have found that seemingly no one is willing to do this amount of arithmetic, so pizza is always ordered in excess. Most students restrict themselves to two slices. I would find ways to eat at least eight slices and leave with the leftovers.

My binges were never frequent enough to take a real toll on my health. Before I turned 18, opportunities to overeat didn't come along very often. There weren't many chances as I moved through college, either. At 26, I was hired to be a tutor at an education technology company based on the strength of my GRE score. In the years that followed, I moved from tutor to team lead, to manager, and finally department head.

My income now is such that I'm never truly hungry, but I still never feel full unless I binge. When I do, I am partial to fast food. I've finished two bags of Arby's on my way to a McDonald's, and I've never managed to preserve a chocolate milkshake from the takeout window to my front door.

Binges like these are rare for me, every three months or so, but even if they weren't, it would matter less now. I can afford supplements and a gym membership. If vitamins and working out fails to balance the scales, I can afford cholesterol medication, insulin, bypass surgery. New therapies for managing the effects of the American diet are being developed all the time.

If I were poor, this food might kill me. Having money means that, in every sense, the cost of eating whatever I want goes down.

A study published in *The International Journal of Eating Disorders* found a near equal rate of bingeing among those of high and low socioeconomic status: 4.9 percent for high and 6.3 percent for low. The only difference is that the need for willpower declines as you ascend. Warren Buffett eats at McDonald's most mornings, changing his order depending on how well his investments are doing. His friend Bill Gates loves McDonald's too, so much so that he owns thousands of acres of potato fields that supply the French fries. Some will remember when Donald Trump served McDonald's at the White House.

In 1988, the year I was born, the Census Bureau reported that there were approximately 31.9 million people in poverty. In 2019, the last year before the pandemic, it had grown to 34 million people. According to one study of 20 million children, only 3 percent of Black children born into poverty make it to the upper class — adults whose annual household income is in the top 20 percent. The fact that I'm among that 3 percent is due to good fortune (an unearned talent for tests) and the help of strangers: federal grants and low-interest loans put in place by people I have never met. Delaying parenthood was vital to my escape, but it wouldn't have happened without access to contraception and abortion, which will be less available to the poor kids coming up behind me.

But extreme self-control — self-abnegation — was crucial, and the cost was immense. I barely remember most days of my youth. Pleasure commits experiences to memory, and I spent 26 years without much of it to speak of, leaving me mostly with bad memories and blank space.

Today I have a life worth living, but that is uncommon for my class. Half of Americans born in the 1980s earn either the same or less than their parents did. Eighteen percent of the Black elderly are poor, and many are second-generation poor. Had I died at 26 after spending 9,496 days on this earth with no guarantee of food, clothing or shelter, I would have been inclined to say I wasted my time.

Bertrand Cooper is writing a book on popular culture and class divisions among Black Americans.

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