"Are you glad to be back?"

It’s been six months since I left Africa, and not a day goes by without someone asking that question.

“Why of course I’m glad to be back,” is the simple and expected answer, much like “Fine” is the standard response to, “How are you today?”

I can’t help feeling that both greetings carry little expectation of an honest answer.

So today, as we approach the uniquely United States holiday of Thanksgiving, I am ready to answer.

Yes and no.

Sorry. If you thought my answer would be simple, you obviously have never asked me a question. Complicated and nuanced is more my style.

Yes. I am glad to be back and working in the field of aging services again, in a community that works extremely hard to try to take care of the needs of seniors and the disabled.

I am glad to be back around people I love, know and trust.

And I am humbled by how many people are glad to have me back and who missed me.

The “no” side to my answer has to do with how easy some things appear, and how we are that leads us to believe they are easy to have, when in fact they are not. I am talking about the sheer excess of food and the supersizing of America. We’re surrounded by plenty, which leads us to forget that many people in Humboldt County live with what we call “food insecurity.”

I never really knew what food insecurity felt like until I lived in Africa for 14 months. In Botswana, I saw how much people’s lives revolved around food: having enough money to buy it, the ability to carry it home, having the resources (wood, or gas or electricity) to cook it, and then wishing for more of it.

For me, it never revolved around having enough money. I lived on the Peace Corps salary and sometimes things were tight, but it was never “really” tight, because I always had that ace in the hole ATM card for the bank account at home. I rarely used it for food, but I could have, if I had wanted to.
I remember being hungry though, especially during my first months living with my host family. The supplemental food the Peace Corps provided wasn’t enough to feed me for two weeks, so it certainly didn’t help my family. There were days we ate a whole lot of phaleche, a starchy corn staple that filled the belly when it had to. I shared the power bars and peanut M&Ms from the care packages -- thank you for all of those -- with my family during those lean times.

I walked so much and so far, often in 90 and 100 degree temperatures. I couldn’t keep the weight on regardless of how much I ate. And I ate a lot. I often felt bad about this, knowing that in the homes surrounding mine, people were going to bed with only partially full bellies.

My teenage girl friends who visited were always hungry. Sure, they ate every day, or at least I think they did, but they lived in homes where a decent, nutritious meal was an assumption based more on hope than reality.

After coming back here, it was hard to accept the ease with which food can be found. The ability to find food in so many stores – 24 hours a day at some – initially blinded me to the fact that some people here in our own community could see food, but not buy it. If there is a lot there, then there must be enough for everyone, right? And while factually this is true, the reality is, many families and seniors do not have access to this bounty because they don’t have the money to buy what they see.

In Africa, I saw people who I KNEW were just scraping by turn and give money to someone who was just a bit worse off than they were. The people giving it away did it because they saw the need. Their own needs were pushed aside, even if just for that one moment. It wasn’t good planning, but it was what people did. People with work gave money to people who didn’t have work. No matter how little food you had, you always welcomed a spontaneous guest to the table. Everyone shared what little there was.

No, I don’t miss seeing people hungry because I also see them here.

The Thanksgiving holiday has always troubled me a bit and maybe this is the reason. I understand the symbolism and the story it tells, but I juxtapose it with what I know about so much of the rest of the world and a large part of our own country. It’s hard to wrap my head around the excess of it. The number of people in Humboldt County living in food insecure households is simply not okay. We are surrounded by so much food that it causes health problems for many people because they eat too much! Jeez, I just realized my second column is once again about food and healthy lifestyles.

As Thanksgiving approaches, I have a lot to be thankful for. Yes, I am thankful to be back. I am thankful for my experiences in Africa. This week, I am the most thankful for the members of our community who take food insecurity seriously and work hard to help local families feel more secure.

As we move into the holidays, I hope more of us make a habit of not just looking forward to our next meal (which is a nice thing), but that we also work to insure that our neighbors have a next meal, too. People need to eat every day, not just during the holiday season. Please do what you
can and start a new habit in 2013: you eat, they eat, we all get to eat. Yes, my check is in the mail.

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