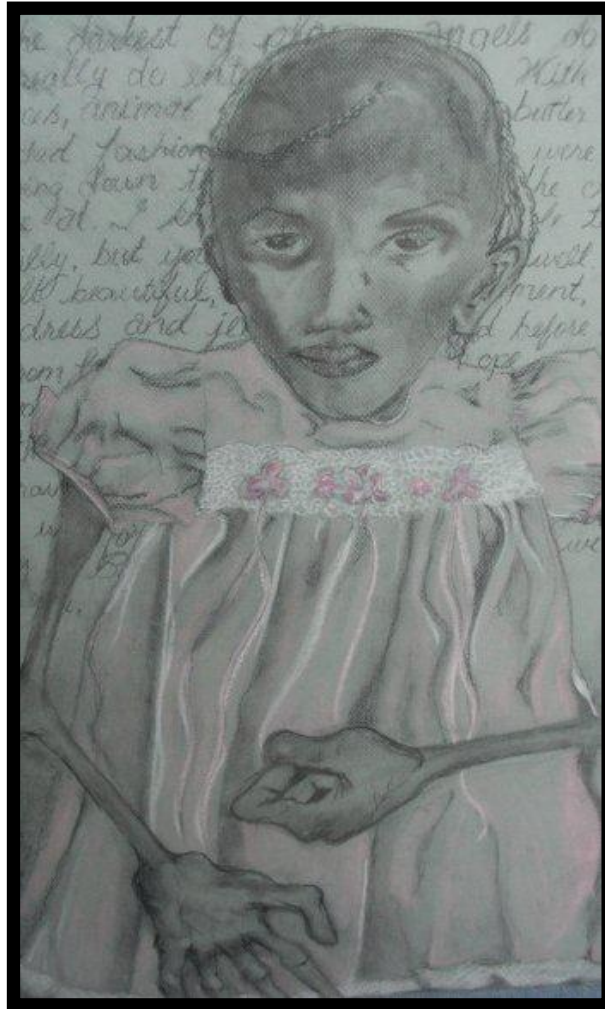


Rocks in the Sun:

Sous le ciel d'Haïti

Memorial to Clorine: *You were proof that we really do entertain angels.*



(Portrait - Copyright 2009: Juliet Suman)

Jonathan Calloway

We are aware that another gigantic wall is being constructed in the Third World, to hide the reality of the poor majorities. A wall between the rich and the poor is being built, so that poverty does not annoy the powerful and the poor are obliged to die in the silence of history... A wall of disinformation... is being built to casually pervert the reality of the Third World. - Chilean theologian Pablo Richard noting the fall of the Berlin Wall (cited in Nelson-Pallmeyer, 1992, p.14.)

The Republic of Haiti. I never expected to peak self-actualization on Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs in a place where so few barely meet the basic physiological necessities. Despite my prior travels to Latin America, Haiti was like a black hole to me. When my Catholic parish offered the chance to volunteer there in the summer, a mélange of frightening images came to mind: face paint, bloody machetes, AIDS, poverty, gangs, and voodoo dolls. The place I prepared myself for was dark, dirty, and scary – a pariah nation. It was a country where people spoke dialects instead of languages and practiced superstitions over religions. Any news coverage of Haiti generally covered images of burning tires and street carnage as if they were an inherent part of Haitian culture – a culture ridden with perceived backwardness, savagery, and inferiority. Was this not the original rationale of my European ancestors when they transplanted them from the African continent onto their Caribbean plantations? Cuban author Antonio Benítez-Rojos (1992) wrote, in regards to this transplantation, that mercantilism was Europe's drive for "inseminating the Caribbean womb with the blood of Africa" (p.5). Haiti remains the misunderstood birth child of this cruel insemination. Like a gated community looming over a shantytown, a wall of disinformation was built to separate me from some of the most neglected and mistreated people on the planet. I was unaware.

Despite the troubling history of Haiti, this essay is not about pointing fingers, but about outreaching hands. In the most remote and forgotten regions of Haiti exists a non-profit organization called *Partners in Health* (PIH). Their logo is exactly that: four hands from each side reaching out to

one another. It represents a radical idea that we belong to each other. Dr. Paul Farmer, co-founder of *Partners in Health*, paved a path for others to follow in the struggle to re-humanize the poor. As their vision states:



At its root, our mission is both medical and moral. It is based on solidarity, rather than charity

alone. When a person in Peru, or Siberia, or rural Haiti falls ill, PIH uses all of the means at our disposal to make them well—from pressuring drug manufacturers, to lobbying policy makers, to providing medical care and social services. Whatever it takes. Just as we would do if a member of our own family—or we ourselves—were ill (n.d).

This vision is a value that I embraced after a cathartic summer in central Haiti.

How to describe Haiti? The poorest country in the Western hemisphere? The fourth hungriest nation on the planet? The country where, in January 2010, nearly 300,000 lives perished in one of the world’s most catastrophic natural disasters? I am not a sociologist, a policy maker, or an economist. I am a student who thought I could go and help make change in Haiti when, in reality, Haiti made a change in me. The following passages contain excerpts from my travel journal as a relief worker. They offer an ethnographic glimpse into my own conversion to a life of pragmatic solidarity with the poor. They epitomize the statistics of poverty by giving the numbers faces and names. Finally, these passages pose an ethical question about the state of humanity and the steps I believe my generation must take to promote justice. It is my intention that they give voice to those forced into silence – a voice to what has remained unheard for more than five hundred unbroken years of broken history.

Ou we sa ou genyen, ou pa konn sa ou rete.

You know what you've got, but you don't know what's coming.

- Haitian proverb

Today was my first day in Haiti. The balmy air fogged my sunglasses as I stepped off the airplane into Port-au-Prince. All of my senses tingled with excitement as I experienced the blaring music, flaring food, and honking tap taps – vibrations of life. Our jeep approached the outskirts of the city into the Cul-de-Sac Plain. As we rode to the village, I witnessed the realities under the Haitian sun. The mountains are beautiful but sun-scorched and deforested. This was not what Christopher Columbus saw when he arrived here. More devastating is the reality of rural peasant life. I saw a woman sit in front of a fire feeding her child baked mud. The child had a pot belly and reddish colored hair – a result of chronic malnourishment. I was reminded that last week I witnessed a hamburger-eating contest. I now just witnessed a mother feed her starving child parasite-infested mud... Our drive was jarring on the rocky roads. Outside my window I saw smiling children wave to us as they walked the same terrain. No shoes.

When we arrived at our destination, we were greeted by the warm embrace of the villagers. They called us “blans” – whites. We settled into the rectory and took a stroll through the area. The sounds of drums resounded out of the church. The chorus of children singing in French resounded in the streets. As I lie in my cot I can hear the sound of drums afar - a Haitian voodoo ceremony. I learned that the majority of voodoo rituals had nothing to do with conjuring evil, but dealt with desperately ill people seeking comfort, goodwill, and healing through their intricate and indigenous spirituality. To think: the world denies them access to modern medicine then they judge them for seeking refuge in alternatives... The drums continue into the night.

Through the course of the next few days, the wall of disinformation began to break down for me. Friendships formed. My friend Juliet, another *blan*, brought her artistic talents from home to bring smiles. We were soon doing animal balloon skits for the children at the school. We drew crowds and laughs everywhere. We were self-proclaimed “COMIC” relief workers! As a rule of thumb, we agreed that we would never let poverty stifle the right to smile. The Haitians were far ahead of us. Their daily struggle to survive gives them remarkable resilience. This was apparent even within the local clinic – a place where our love and tears for Haiti flowed even deeper.

Live simply so that others may simply live.

- Mahatma Gandhi

Today was my first day at a PIH-supported clinic - a small but essential facility in the heart of central Haiti. There are families who walk for days to get here. The lines were long; the waiting rooms were full; and all the beds were taken. Cots littered the yard to make room for the daily surge of patients. In a country with an overwhelming majority of poor, the people are bereft of even the most basic forms of healthcare. Every day a child in Haiti dies from a disease whose vaccine has existed for more than a century. People who once had simple cuts and infections now face limb amputations. Outside, people sat under trees – sick from malaria, tuberculosis, typhoid, dysentery, malnourishment, and HIV. They pointed to their stomachs and mouths as we passed them.

I walked to the outside tuberculosis clinic. Inside was a little girl sitting up in her bed. I was initially hesitant to enter, but realized that no matter how many airborne particles were in the air, any infection would mean a guaranteed recovery at home. I entered her room. The closer I got to her the more tears filled my eyes. She was a skeleton. Her broomstick body compared closely in width to her IV stand. Flies feasted on the puss in her eyes and weeping sores that covered her cracked and blistered body. I knelt down and looked into her brown, sunken eyes. The face of love. I held her hand in silence for nearly an hour. What was there to say? When she drifted to sleep, I left a pack of peanut butter and slipped out of the room with the Lord's Prayer on my lips. I learned from the social worker that her name is Clorine. She is a seven year old orphan in the final stages of AIDS. By the time people began to care, it was too late...

Juliet and I later returned to Clorine's room. My little sisters donated some of their jewelry for me to give to the children. They are about the same age as Clorine. I was reminded of my sisters and their futures. What about Clorine's future? I placed a necklace around her neck and a ring on her finger. Juliet pulled out a beautiful flowered dress. This dress was given to her daughter by a close friend who is also HIV positive. Between these two infected individuals, only one has the option to choose life. Juliet held back tears as she placed the dress on Clorine's bed. We left her room and came back later that afternoon to find her wearing the flowered dress. Every little girl should feel beautiful.

In Haiti, there is an unfortunate expression: *Li mouri bet*. It is Haitian Creole for a “stupid death.” When a Haitian child dies from a preventable and treatable disease, the child's parents say *li mouri bet*. They know that the medical technology exists and that their child was denied access to it – the result of turning healthcare into a market commodity instead of a social responsibility. It upsets me when we hide behind token terms like “sustainability” and “cost-effectiveness” to justify stupid deaths. The world possesses the resources but lacks the resolve to make the morally “sustainable” decision to adequately aide those who need them. Until the day of our departure, we continued to visit Clorine. Some days she would smile, other days she would cry. It was the same for us. She wore the flowered dress every single day.

They say that every three seconds a child in the developing world prematurely dies from disease, hunger, and poverty. I can say that I personally knew and loved one of those children. *One... two... three...* I received a text message from the village social worker with the news that Clorine lost her battle with AIDS. She was laid to rest in the Haitian soil alongside thousands of other children denied food, medicine, and clean water. They built her a coffin and buried her in the same flowered dress she died wearing. *Li mouri bet*.

Woch nan dio pa konnen doule woch nan soley.

The rock in the water does not know the pain of the rock in the sun.

- Haitian proverb

“Manje! Manje!” I was awakened to the voice of a man yelling these words outside my quarters. Food! The truck with the month's supply of USAID cornmeal had arrived to a large crowd of hungry Haitians. People came from every direction upon hearing the call. Mothers, children, and the elderly were given preference to the food. While names were written down, I had the chance to listen to the stories of the families waiting in line. Many had not eaten in days. I didn't interpret their eagerness to talk solely a chance for pity. This was a genuine eagerness to connect with someone they hoped cared enough to try to understand.

Several hundred 55 lb. bags were loaded off the truck. The flow of distribution began. Bag after bag we placed on the heads of the women. I was carried away in the bliss of giving – that I was, for a moment, in communion with all the saints who dedicated their lives to what I was doing for only that brief moment. “I was hungry and you fed me.” It made my soul come alive. Unfortunately, I was soon brought back to the sun-scorched ground of inequity. What was once a sacred duty soon became a privileged choice – a sort of Feeding the Multitudes passage in reverse. With only five bags of cornmeal left, at least five dozen Haitians remained. Until now, the process was relatively peaceful. But as the families realized that so little food remained, people began to push to the front nervously, desperately. There would not be another truck in a while – possibly several weeks or a month. A collective groan from the crowd began to resound and the hands of the people reached out to me.

I was ordered by an officer to choose five. I panicked. "Please don't make me make this decision." Who was I to choose who would eat and who would not? I surveyed the crowd for the weakest, thinnest person. Skeletons around me. Everyone was starving. How do you quantify human suffering when it has reached such depths? I did the only thing I knew to do: I closed my eyes and pushed a bag into the crowd and felt its release. There was another family with food. Another. I did it this way until all the food was gone. When I opened my eyes, I stood alone – face to face with a crowd whose fate was sealed. They would face another season of hunger. Children continued to point to their bellies and mouths. A daughter knelt with her elderly mother and cried in her arms. I do not know what prompted me to stay. All I could say over and over was that I was sorry. So sorry. Not just sorry for this moment, but for everything. I was sorry that this world had so many injustices. Once again, another "blan" held in his hands the authority of who would receive and who would be denied. As I stepped from the pavement, an old woman approached me. The translation of her words from Creole: "If you really knew what it felt like to starve, there would have been enough for all of us. Nobody knows what it's like to be me. Nobody."

As I walked away, I knew the truth. I was flushed with anger and shame knowing that lunch was an hour away. The Creole proverb bears repeating: "The rock in the water does not know the pain of the rock in the sun."

“Fear not, Mary, for thou hast found favor with God.”

- The Archangel Gabriel

I am gazing at the clouds as we ascend over the city. From such a distance above it is impossible to grasp the suffering below me – the epitome of the privileged position. What does the future hold for those below? I left behind everything I brought with me – my backpack, my books, my shoes. I claim only this journal, my passport, the clothes on my body, and a beautiful, hand carved statue of the Virgin Mary. I purchased her in the market. She is Haitian, barefoot, and pregnant. Our Lady's eyes are carved beautifully. As I stare into her eyes I see great faith, humility, goodness, sadness, and strength. The eyes of the poor and oppressed. They are the eyes of Clorine, the people in the clinic, the hungry rows of families, the child eating mud, and the chorus of children at Sunday's Mass. They are the eyes of Haiti.

Experiencing this negligence and suffering has transformed me. Before I came to Haiti, I learned the statistics about its history and poverty. My life's definition of understanding has always been based on knowledge. What's different now? I see the child eating mud when I close my eyes. Little Clorine in her bed. The rows of hungry families. This is the kind of knowledge that can't be learned, but experienced. This is what it means to feel compassion...the knowledge that until these souls found peace in this life, neither would I.

Sa k rive koukouloulou a, ka rive kakalanga tou.

What happens to the turkey can happen to the rooster too.

- Haitian proverb

I remember the night I heard that a 7.0 earthquake had struck Haiti. People would not answer their phones. I stayed up all night waiting for CNN's communications from Port-au-Prince. Nothing could prepare me for the horrifying images that morning would bring. The aftershocks kept coming. As soon as flights were available, I booked one to Port-au-Prince. This is the only journal entry I had time to write while there:

I looked out the plane somberly as I descended for the second time into Port-au-Prince. Smoke rose to the sky over the city. Our jeeps awaited us. Displacement tents are everywhere – miles and miles of tents in every direction. Inside the overcrowded tents are busy doctors working night and day to stave off infectious disease. Mass graves. Children bury their parents; parents bury their children. What does a person do when they run out of tears? Broken powerlines litter the streets. Street children chase after our jeeps and cry out the familiar mantra: “Grangou. Grangou. Grangou.” Hungry. House after house. Building after building. Street after street. Neighborhood after neighborhood. Flattened. Scavenger birds encircle the necropolis. A five story building now compressed to the height of my knees. Crushed metal, car skeletons, rooftops on the ground. Markets, schools, the Presidential Palace, and the Cathedral are destroyed. No class was spared. I am reminded of my own mortality when I realize that any person, regardless of who they are or where they come from, could be, at any moment, at the mercy of a stranger.

I believe the January earthquake broke down more than just walls of brick and mortar. Temporarily, it broke down a wall of disconnection and misunderstanding between the developed world and Haiti. When the earth shook and the city collapsed, the world cried. Why? We connected our humanity with theirs. When we saw mothers wait for days to chisel their children out of the collapsed buildings, we thought of our own children - alone and afraid, gasping for air in the dark. Holding back tears, journalists chronicled mourning Haitians singing psalms outside their collapsed cathedral. Their faith, once taboo and backwards, became awe-inspiring and beautiful. When a televangelist regressed to blaming their suffering on their allegiance to the devil, the international community angrily rebuked him. We began to think about how terrible it must feel to suffer and then be blamed for it.

A missionary at the airport told me that she prayed that Haiti would someday go back to the way it was before the earthquake. I told her that I didn't. They deserve better than that. The Haitian people consider Haiti to be their mother – one to be treated with love and respect. Haitian musician, Erol Josué, remarks: “When you mistreat her, and uproot her trees, when you give her too much responsibility, she is like a woman with cancer. The tumor metastasizes, and explodes” (cited in McAlister, 2010). When people ask for my thoughts on January, 2010, I tell them it was a symptom, but not the cause, of a *socioeconomic* quake that has ravaged the nation for hundreds of years. Before the quake, many of the same victims were already dying. Parents already wept for their children crushed under the rubble of infectious disease and poverty. The fragile, unsupportive ecosystem and infrastructure built by the world's social institutions was what made Haiti so vulnerable to the earthquake. In a world with the moral resolve to promote equity, the owl of Minerva could have spread its wings well before the falling of dusk (Follesdal and Pogge, 2005).¹

¹Minerva was the Roman goddess of wisdom and philosophy. In Hegelian philosophy, her owl's spreading of wings before dusk represents human empiricism. Many modern-day political philosophers interpret this negatively in terms of prevention and tragedy.

“In God’s family, there are no outsiders. All are insiders. Black and white, rich and poor, gay and straight, Jew and Arab, Palestinian and Israeli, Roman Catholic and Protestant, Serb and Albanian, Hutu and Tutsi, Muslim and Christian, Buddhist and Hindu, Pakistani and Indian – all belong.” - Archbishop Desmond Tutu (2004, p. 20.)

It took Haiti for me to realize that we are *all* insiders. In a place where so many *blans* come to convert, I was converted. What can these journal entries say about the human condition? What ethical conclusions can I draw from these experiences? For me, it is the remarkably simple inspiration of Dr. Paul Farmer: “No nation but humanity.” As he demonstrated, if we do not show the world’s marginalized, within and outside our own borders, preferential option, then disease, natural disaster, and violence will (Kidder, 2004). Each person should consider clean water, medical care, adequate food, and safety a *birthright*. Political philosopher, Ser-Min Shei (2005), insists that the whole of humankind is morally responsible for world poverty and human suffering. Such responsibility transcends a shared positive duty of charity into a need for prevention, eradication, and compensation. Personal experience tells me that such normative ethics are the only way that human life can be valued and preserved at its fullest capacity.

When I now look at Haiti’s deforested terrain, collapsed cities, and sick and hungry inhabitants, I now only see inferiority in the ethos, rather than the ethnos. When foundations shake and people collapse into the rubble of infectious disease, starvation, abuse, violence, or cement buildings, I believe that we, as an able-bodied people, have a moral responsibility to reach out our hands and pull them out of the wreckage – just as we pull for our own mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, and mirror images of ourselves.

In memory of those who waited for us under the rubble, and those who died in the silence of history, my plea is that we stand with the marginalized, the poor, the forgotten, and the vulnerable. My plea is that my generation will re-allocate not just our resources – but our values. My plea is that our success will no longer be measured by the failure of others – but by their prosperity. My plea is that the *woch nan soley* – the rock in the sun – will one day join the *woch nan dio*.

Meanwhile, I will not forget the last picture I took before boarding the plane home...



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