

Haitian Vignettes

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Fear

Haiti has a long history of political and social turbulence. The weight of recent food shortages has added to the burden of an already taxed and exhausted population, causing even more upheaval than usual. In varying degrees, many loved ones petitioned me to remain safely home for fear of violence on the unsettled island nation.

The city of Port-au-Prince is a disaster. Garbage is piled in the streets and the gutters. The houses are in half built deterioration. Roads, vehicles, and buildings are in dangerous disrepair. Every bit of free space is used as outdoor markets.

I was fearful only once. As a group we spent the first night in Port-au-Prince at the Martial family home. At midnight we woke to the noise of an angry, drunken mob, smashing bottles in the street. Was that “America” I heard shouted in the fury? Could this possibly be directed at us? The crowd was so large it seemed that they stopped in front of the house. The chaos eventually moved into another neighborhood and the street was again still. My heart took a bit longer to quiet.

We remained wisely cautious as a group throughout the trip. There was never evidence of hostility directed at us from the population. I remained without fear for the duration of our travels and experiences. I am proud of myself for not changing my travel plans and staying home, for not making decisions based on unlikely events and danger.

Shopping in Haiti

Delta Airlines did not allow us to travel with our generator to Haiti. The morning after arrival to Haiti the larger part of our group departed to the small agricultural town of Granduc with our supplies in a large bus. We were starting our medical/dental/education service that afternoon. A group of five, including myself, stayed back with the Land Cruiser to pick up suitcases at the airport, buy some needed supplies, and purchase a generator. MasterCard, wisely though frustratingly, refused the transaction. The call to the customer service hotline was entertaining to say the least.

“Hi, my name is Danielle Boochever, I’m in Haiti and I need to buy the generator you have just denied.”

Bob from Fraud Management suspiciously asked for the maiden name of my mother and mother-in-law, card number, address, and so on, which I answered correctly.

Bob said, “So let me get this straight. You were at Nordstrom’s in Salt Lake City yesterday, and today you’re in Haiti purchasing a generator?”

“Yep.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah it’s another world,” I said.

“I can’t even imagine.”

“You have no idea”

We made our purchase and wisely tried generating power before leaving the parking lot. Who knew it would be so difficult to start a generator? A UN soldier from the Philippines shouldered his gun and took the time to instruct us on the start up technique. It was the first of many times during our stay in Haiti when I stepped out of myself and looked over a situation and thought “how bizarre”.

The First Patient

With our new generator safely stored in the Land Cruiser we began our drive to Granduc through the country side. I noted a fedora hat lying out of place in the middle of the road. The reason became clear as we rounded the corner. A bleeding, old man lay on the side of the road. A group of town’s people encircled him. One was trying to shake him into awareness. He had been hit by a motorcycle just moments before. As a group, we stopped to assist. The shaker was convinced to stop. The victim was laid out flat on the side of the road.

He presented with erratic, shallow breathing and a weak and thready pulse. He was having a small seizure, was unresponsive to stimulus, and his pupils were unresponsive. He had two small lacerations to the scalp, moderately bleeding, with a compound fracture to the right tibia/fibula with the leg bent outward in an unnatural position and abrasions over most of the upper body. Naively, I asked to call an ambulance. We wondered if we should start CPR when his heart and breathing stopped but decided with no further support the effort would be useless. So, there we sat by the side of the road in Haiti, as 30-40 villagers looked on, with pressure to the head wounds, witnessing our first patient die. Not exactly a propitious start to our mission.

Our patient had fortitude. He rallied after a few minutes. His pulse became strong and steady. His breathing improved. The bleeding had stopped. He responded to verbal stimuli. He also started moving. We directed a couple men to use a plank from the back of a truck as a back board. We fashioned a splint out of a 2x4 and a bed sheet to stabilize his leg after it was carefully aligned. We loaded our patient into the back of a villager’s truck with instructions for the caregivers to keep his neck and leg stabilized during what was sure to be a rough ride to the hospital.

What must our bystanders have thought? A group of white people jumping out of a vehicle, swooping in, telling them what to do. Who then fixed up their neighbor and sent him to a clinic. The strangers jumping back into their own truck, driving away in the opposite direction. The onlookers left behind, contemplating the evidence of the odd experience, the remaining drying blood in the road.

During the week spent working with the people of the small farming communities of Granduc and Timo I found myself occasionally frustrated. The population was sometimes noisily aggressive, crushing forward to hand us their children. I would think, “If you did it my way you would be seen faster.” To improve my attitude I remembered that these are people consistently disappointed by their corrupt government. Needs in health, education, shelter, food and basic services have not been met for many generations. I like to think, in their shoes, I would have stood patiently in line awaiting my turn. If I am being completely honest and objective, in their shoes, I would be front and center yelling for someone to care for my child. Motivated by fear of being let down yet again, desperate not to miss my only opportunity for care and too impoverished for other options. I would definitely be front and center—it’s human nature. I’ve misbehaved for much less during my life.

Early Morning in Timo

At 4:30 a.m. in Timo the cacophony begins. Crowing roosters, braying donkeys, chickens, song birds greet the first inkling of light. While everyone sinks deeper into pillows and blankets for more rest, I get up. Leaving the family compound I sit on a rock and watch morning’s glow reveal the striated crops on near and distant rolling mountains. The first of many families arrive. They are seven. I stand to greet them. I am met warmly though the mom and children are shy. The dad and I squat side by side on the rock, looking out over the valley and start a conversation. I use pulverized French and he is patient as I stumble over words. I tell him I think his country is very beautiful. He agrees. He asks if we have doctors as well as dentist. I respond, “Yes.” I tell him his family has to wait until 7:00 a.m. when we will start to work. He nods and is not upset. He asks if the services cost money. I reply they are free. He looks relieved and his smile shows glowing white teeth lighted by the new day (although some are missing). The children grow brave and touch my skin. They rarely if ever see white skin. I’m sure I am as white as their father’s teeth. I smile at them, tell them good bye and that I will see them later. The mom and dad each take my hand and thank me. I think to myself, I feel so happy in this moment, in this beauty. Human connection made; all the sweeter for the effort.

Good Bye

It is early afternoon in Timo. As a group we are packing to leave. Mules and horses are loaded with residual supplies for the arduous hike out of the valley up to the road. Across the patio I spot the matron of the home we have been working in. In my best French I thank her for everything. I said good bye and that I’m enchanted. She being only slightly taller than half my height hugs me tightly around the waist and begins to cry. I am not moved to tears but instead filled with awe and joy. She pulls away suddenly and says something in rapid fire Creole. The words are incomprehensible to me but I have hope she has asked me to return again next year.

Things Seen Along the Way

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People walking down the street with upside down, rust color roosters clutched in hand creating a strange bouquet.

A couple hours at a beach, after an aggressive rain storm. Swimming in tepid Caribbean waters. Sitting under a palapa, sipping warm coca cola, eating roasted corn on the cob, joking and laughing in easy camaraderie.

There was a labor and delivery in Granduc not many new about. It happened without fanfare. A stash of toilet paper rolls was pulled from the corner of the room during packing. The room we had been sleeping and working in. Three white eggs were exposed. The chickens were always underfoot inside and out.

People—mostly women—carry anything and everything on their heads for transport. A man carried our compressor during the uphill hike out of the valley.

A tarantula the size of a man's hand, to his detriment, rested in the latrine too long causing a great stir that lead to his demise.

Showering with a tin can, a bucket of tepid water and a basin. Who knew?

A very tall man walking along the dusty road with a very large white tuba, followed shortly by another man with a brass tuba. We heard later that tubas are in great demand at funerals.

The matron of the house in Timo made probably the greatest speech of her life. It was about gratitude and orated the night before our departure. The speech was translated for us. She was caught up in her moment. Her best line was, "I am so happy I could kill a cow." The statement received lots of surprised laughter. I would have been happier if she had offered to kill the noisy, early rising rooster. I would have been grateful for that.

Linda was surrounded by a family of bumpy, naked, little children of varying ages, all with scabies. She applied very white medicinal cream on a very dark skinned baby as the others looked on, waiting their turn.

Anytime we reach out to another disenfranchised human being and offer true assistance the scales of equity are tipped ever so slightly but tipped none the less.

On a selfish note: it was a marvelous adventure!