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What I Learned on My Haitian Vacation

by Lori Crantford

On Sunday, February 21, I left Indianapolis bound for Port-au-Prince, Haiti, for what will end up being the most memorable experience of my life, outside of childbirth.

Childbirth was easier.

Maybe you watched televised coverage of the earthquake that struck Haiti on January 12 and its aftermath so vigilantly that you felt like you were there... but nothing prepares you for actually being there. I cannot stress this enough. It's like the difference between watching Neil Armstrong walk on the moon, and walking on the moon yourself.

Going to post-earthquake Haiti feels like going to another planet. First of all, they speak another language, as in not English. I really should have taken this more seriously before going. The only phrase I ever managed to hang onto was *Mwen pa pale Creole*, which means "I don't speak Creole." The irony of saying this in Creole is not lost on me.

The first thing you notice is government housing, which in this case is a good thing. Military tents had been erected near the airport, a comforting beige neighborhood of stability and order. Like having The Supernanny move into your chaotic home.

The quality of tents rapidly declines, while the quantity increases. As you move into and through Port-au-Prince, you are overwhelmed by a pandemic of tent communities. The mobile home parks of Haiti. While they are not as well constructed as mobile homes—substitute sticks and sheets for pre-fabbed walls and ceilings, with the occasional tin siding upgrade—they are mobile homes in the way a feather is mobile in the wind. A stiff breeze, a hard rain, and off they go.

So first, you see the tents. Then, bit by bit, as if your mind is slowly adding elements to your mental storyboard display, more images begin to sink in.

There are people everywhere. People sifting through rubble. People trying to sell what they find in the rubble, or whatever they can... but the sellers far outnumber the buyers. People sitting on sidewalks, in doorways. People on bikes, on foot, careening down crowded streets in cars and trucks, horns blaring. People salvaging parts from crushed autos lying on the sides of roads as if tossed there by a giant bored, destructive toddler. What were once treasures are now trash... and then suddenly you see the trash, which to an outsider would appear to be the Haitian gross national product. As if trash farmers were paid subsidies to plant and harvest more trash, but then the exporting dried up and now they have all this *trash*. (Of course, as Americans, we really have no room to talk. We're just better at hiding it.)

There are other images, of course—*tap taps* (colorful taxis jammed to the max with passengers), livestock, starving animals, and remnants of life before January 12—storefront signs with smiling girls offering cell phone service, a city bus with the words "bling bling" merrily painted on the back, the place where a university once stood—now a pile of broken bricks and crumpled dreams. While your mind takes all this in, through the suffocating chaos of tents and people and trash, you start to be aware of what is no longer there. Of how much is simply GONE. Haiti is a war zone of destruction. Perhaps the vastness of it is exaggerated by the lack of structures to block your vision—the landscape is open and raw, an ocean of dust, waves of rubble, crests of still-standing walls. The broken and jagged remnants of buildings are like looking inside a hockey player's mouth—something busted here, a big gap there.

Between the teeming humanity and the vast landscape of destruction,



Reflections from Haiti

by Rev. David Williamson

there are things to be learned and shared from this crippled country. Has this nation been knocked down hard, pinned against the ropes? Yes. Are they bruised and battered, the Rocky underdog, lightweights in a global heavyweight competition? Absolutely. But like Rocky, Haiti will not quit. Like Rocky, the Haitian people have a fighting spirit, a heritage of pulling themselves up and facing heavy challenges. Like Rocky, they cry out—they cry out for God, not asking where God is, but praising God and putting their faith, trust and lives into God's loving hands.

Their faith is stronger than any earthquake. It is 10.0 Richter-scale faith. And it is really quite something to witness.

I'd like to share with you a few lessons I learned (or re-learned) on my recent Haitian "vacation." Seven days spent traveling with Rev. David Williamson, Rev. Stan Abell, Rev. Frank Van Allen (St. Paul UMC, Bloomington, IN) and David Priest (volunteer videographer at *Later @ St. Luke's*).

Lesson #1: *Never travel with three pastors and a Priest.* I really don't think I need to elaborate.

Lesson #2: *Hospitality and grace have nothing to do with abundance.*

Because we knew it would be important not to leave our footprint, so to speak, on Haiti, we took our own food and

This past month, a movie called "2012" was released on DVD. It's been called the "mother of all disaster movies"—it's about the end of the world, and the clips I've seen show all these floods, earthquakes, and tsunamis destroying civilization as we know it (and somehow John Cusak is navigating his family through all these natural disasters). Apparently there's this whole thing called "The 2012 Phenomenon"—I looked it up on Wikipedia and discovered it has something to do with the end of the Mayan calendar, which some take as a prediction of the end of the world. At any rate, the movie didn't really fare that well in American theaters—at least it didn't make my "must-see" list—but it apparently made its way to as remote a place as Fondwa, Haiti.

"Will you still be living in America in 2012?" The question came from my godson, a 16-year-old boy named Yves-Marie (pronounced "Eve"-Marie). At first I didn't understand what he was getting at. Yes, of course I plan on living there two years from now. Why?

His eyes look worried. He glances down to the side, as if studying the rocks. "Because I've seen the movie. I know what will happen. I will pray for you." Yves Marie is old enough to know it's just a movie. And yet he is genuinely concerned.

I look around at where we stand. Just above us is the APF center—the guesthouse where I once lived. Besides the school, it's easily the largest building in the Fondwa valley. It was the center, the heartbeat, of that valley. It was where important meetings were held and momentous occasions were celebrated. It was where people came when they were sick or in need (to the clinic on the first floor); it was where people received their daily news (from the radio station housed there). And yet, like the school, it collapsed on the day of the earthquake. As Yves Marie and I talked, about fifty strong Haitians were demolishing the building by hand.



Some were pounding on the walls with sledgehammers, others were throwing rocks down to the ground below, where still yet others were shoveling the rubble into the back of waiting trucks. All worked in this great cloud of dust and heat.

Just behind me, across the road, were three big piles of rock, each memorializing a house which once stood there. One house had belonged to Yves Marie's aunt Jesula (whose husband, Boss, was working at the school at the time of the earthquake and barely survived); another belonged to his great-uncle Ciné (who lost a foot in the earthquake and now gets around on crutches); and the final one belonged to Yves Marie's older brother. This was where Yves Marie had slept prior to the earthquake. They were once all nice homes—small perhaps, but built in block, believed at the time to the most stable and durable form of housing. Now all three were little more than piles of rock.

So back to Yves Marie. All this—the APF center, the houses, the scenery of dust and destruction—registered in a second, while his expression of concern still lingered in the air. On the one hand, it feels deeply ironic, that this boy who has lost and endured so much should be worried about me, an American who lives a life of relative ease. But there's something also tragic about his concern, because it occurs to me that, post-earthquake, the idea of the world coming to an end doesn't seem like such a strange possibility for this young man.

My wife, Jamalyn, had been in Haiti at the time of the earthquake. She'd been standing just above the orphanage when she felt the ground moving beneath her "like someone had just grabbed the corner of the earth and was whipping it up and down like a sheet." She watched as the children ran out of the building below like they'd "been shot out of a cannon," and she tried to herd them all up to safety on the road above. Every child, she remembers, was shouting, "Jezi! Jezi!" They

cardboard and scraps of plywood. The bad ones were nothing more than a skeleton-frame made of sticks no wider than my forearms, with bed sheets stretched across from the corners. They looked more like overgrown box kites than anything else, and you wondered what would happen when a stiff breeze came along.

We drove by these "villages," all teeming with people—older men sitting in the openings, children running up and down through the narrow spaces between huts, women taking the laundry down to the nearby stream to wash in the muddy water—and we wondered what life was like for them. Then we arrived in Fondwa and got a close-up look at what life was like in such a place.

Not that the conditions in Fondwa were quite as bad—not at all. The sisters, as usual, were doing the very best they could with meager resources. In the week following the earthquake, the sisters had landed



truly believed that Jesus had returned. When one child asked her point blank if Jesus had returned, Jamalyn replied in half-seriousness: "I don't know if Jesus is here, but if he is, he can find us up on the road!"

When the dust settled, it turned out that Jesus hadn't come, that the world had not in fact come to an end. But I imagine it continues to feel that way for the people of Fondwa. My visit was a full six weeks after the earthquake, and people still talked about everything that was lost. Look at our community center, they said. Look at the school. Look at our churches. Look at our homes. All these beautiful things, broken. That's the word they use—*kraze*—as if their homes and churches were like fine vases that someone took and shattered on the ground. Broken.

And now, in place of these beautiful things, the conditions they are now living in are just plain ugly. That's what struck me on the ride out to Fondwa from the airport. It wasn't the trash, or the crowds, or even the broken-down buildings. The first two I'd experienced plenty on prior trips through Port-au-Prince, and the third I'd seen on TV plenty the past month. It was the tent villages (and "tent" is a generous word in this instance) that got me. The military camps were neatly ordered—those who lived there were the lucky ones. But the further we got out from the airport, the fewer and far-between those military camps became, and in their place we saw the saddest collection of tents you've ever seen. The "good" ones were pasted together with tin and

upon a former tree nursery as their new living site. They chose this site because of the existence of shade trees (which used to protect the tree saplings but now provide some measure of cover for the children) and because of the surrounding fence, which they feel gives them some measure of security in the evenings (when they seem to feel the most vulnerable). They cleaned out the chicken coop below and used that to store all the things which they'd salvaged from the fallen school and guesthouse. They attached tin to the chain link fence in order to make "walls" which do a surprisingly good job at blocking the winds. And they've paid local carpenters to build a giant structure over the rest of the nursery using traditional Haitian materials—stripped "dogwood" trees (different from our dogwood trees, but a very hard and durable tree that grows reasonably straight) and corrugated tin. At the time of our visit they'd covered about half the nursery in this way, while the other half was still covered with a patchwork of tarps.

The sisters moved the entire orphanage up into this nursery, and they also took in the surrounding neighbors (like Yves Marie) whose homes were destroyed. All in all you have about 80 people living in a pretty tight area—I'd guess somewhere around 5,000-6,000 square feet, although I never officially paced it off. In the evening, they roll out carpet they salvaged from the guesthouse so that the children don't have to sleep on the bare ground. Even still, the carpet is tough to keep clean, and most of the mats that the children are sleeping on have been ruined by the dirt and mud.

HAITIAN VACATION, cont'd from page 5

filters to pump and clean our own water. When you go to a country like Haiti, even before the earthquake, you do not want to impose yourself on people who have so little by comparison. Also, there can be some attendant health risks (which is why I took to saying, "Why is it that when other people get out their passports, they get to learn Italian, and every time I get mine out, I get a typhoid shot?"). So we came to Haiti with our little provisions of peanut butter and nuts, dried fruit and protein bars, Jolly Ranchers and freeze-dried Neopolitan ice cream (every bit as yummy as it sounds). We were self-sufficient, a burden to no one.

Turns out we didn't get the hospitality memo. If we had, we would have known that no one in Haiti was going to let us simply feed ourselves. You see, we were their guests. It did

Come back home and try to find something to complain about. Eventually you'll start to complain again, but never as much. It just doesn't seem sportsmanlike any more.

not matter to the sisters who run the orphanage in Fondwa that they were now living on dirt floors with tin siding for makeshift walls, sheets and tarps for flimsy ceilings. It was their home, for now, and they were our hosts. Breakfast and lunch (or if we were out visiting, then dinner) were prepared for us every day. Rice and beans, of course, but also delicious fried plantains, okra, vegetable soup, eggs, chicken, fresh-ripened bananas.

This hospitality extended throughout the community. People whose homes had been destroyed and were now sometimes two and three families living together in one small house would invite us in for coffee (not at all like American coffee unless you happen to add maybe molasses and a quarter cup of sugar to yours), hot cocoa, yams, some kind of fried dough (which a very lucky kitten near my chair was happy to take off my hands) and more chicken. I have to tell you, as a vegetarian, if someone could have verified for me that the chicken on the platter was the one crowing at 2AM, I would have eaten it and not had second thoughts. Just seconds.

We were even treated to coconuts, picked right off the tree for us. While the coconut "milk" did not rank high on our lists (think watered-down piña colada without the kick or little umbrella), the delicacy of fresh coconut meat made my all-time list of good eats. Plus, when was the last time a coconut woke anyone up in the middle of the night?

In the midst of poverty and hard times, even by Haitian standards, we were fed, welcomed, not seen as a burden but as honored guests. They didn't give because it was easy. They gave because their hearts were full. As Dave Duba (St. Luke's World Missions chair) wrote to us when he learned of our astonishment in the face of this unexpected generosity: "Welcome to Haiti."

Lesson #3: Earthquakes crush buildings, not dreams.

For those who lost loved ones in the earthquake, many dreams were also buried in the rubble. But the vast majority of people we met still have big hopes for their futures. Dreams of obtaining a college education are on hold, not terminated. Schools and homes will be rebuilt. Jobs will return.



LEFT TO RIGHT:

A street scene in Port-au-Prince.

The remnants of the APF center.

Ciné oversees the demolition of the APF center.

Boss talks to David about his experiences during and after the earthquake.

Taking barrels for water up the mountain.

Market day in Tombe-Gateau.

REFLECTIONS, cont'd from page 6

There was a fierce storm the first night we were there. Not too much rain, but an incredibly strong wind that lasted through the night. Midway through the night, I exited the tent just to see what it looked like. The wind would gust up, and the tents we were sleeping in would lay down flat. But as soon as the wind let up, they'd pop up again like magic. I thanked God for good old American construction (but then again, maybe the tents were made in China). Either way, I was pleasantly surprised that they made it through the night.

The tarps over the orphanage, though, didn't. Some of the knots tying the tarps to the trees came loose and so the tarps whipped and waved and crackled all night long. I wondered how any one of the children or neighbors could sleep underneath all that noise. Turns out they didn't. Early in the night a particularly strong gust of wind ripped off part of the tin roof. Most of the children and adults stayed standing all night long. They were afraid to lie down and have something fall on them. Just for good measure, we experienced two small aftershocks in the middle of the night, too. A strange feeling, to feel 1,000+ feet of rock trembling beneath your sleeping body.

Then the morning came, and we emerged from our tents into the gray light which somehow brought the comfort that another day was starting, that life had not ended. We watched as some of the children started their chores—fetching water, cleaning dishes, etc—while the kitchen workers set up a make-shift kitchen (the tin enclosure they'd used the day before had blown away) and started making breakfast to feed us and all the children. We entered the enclosure, and the sisters had cleared away the carpet in the front room and set up chairs for a mini church service. The dining room table was now transformed into

The Scripture reading for the day is an unusual one—from the Old Testament, we read the story of Jonah, and then from the Gospels we read how Jesus told his critics that no sign would be given to them except the “sign of Jonah” (MATTHEW 12:38-42). Not exactly the kind of scripture I would've chosen—it seems to talk about judgment more than hope. But in Father Joseph's hands, it turned out to be a wonderful selection. Certainly, he says, things look like we're in the “belly of the whale.” It's dark, and you might think that we're without hope. But there were still, Father Joseph insisted, “signs of life” all around.

That ultimately became my mantra for the week—looking for those signs of life. We saw it in worship, in the humble faith of those gathered to receive the Eucharist. In the children who played games with broken-down wheelbarrows and made kites out of bits of string and plastic. In the neighbors who received us with open arms and always offered coconut or coffee or whatever they had. In the workers who were clearing the way for the buildings to come. Or, perhaps my favorite, in the birth of a new little child during our second night there. The mother had come to the clinic in the middle of the night, in the midst of a painful labor, and the sisters made special efforts to get her to a hospital. The next day, the mother and child returned to the encampment, and they stayed with us until the sisters could help get her back on her feet. Every time I saw that new mother, tenderly watching and holding her child, I was filled with hope.

Truly, life continues on. And as I witnessed those signs of life, I was reminded that homes will be rebuilt, that schools will be reopened, that these children will have a future. And here's the thing Father Joseph said that hit home that morning: He told us Americans that for them,



LEFT TO RIGHT:

Wilkins recuperates at his parents' home.

Inside the temporary orphanage.

Haitian field prep.

Washing dishes.

Tin siding of the orphanage.

an altar. A young man began playing a soft beat upon his drums, and the sisters fell in with their singing. The children gathered off to the side. Mass was about to begin.

In a place like this, the very act of worship is in itself an act of resistance. The Haitians know their situation is dire, they've witnessed the loss of everything they've built for the past 20 years, and yet they refuse to have their spirits broken. They still praise God for life, and they still understand (maybe now more than ever before) that they depend upon God's provision for daily living. When the Haitians say the Lord's prayer—“Give us today our daily bread”—the line has particular force and meaning.

She watched as the children ran out of the building below like they'd “been shot out of a cannon,” and she tried to herd them all up to safety on the road above.

we were also “signs of life”—a sign that the outside world still cares, that our aid will not stop until those homes are rebuilt and schools reopened and “normal life reclaimed.” It's a humbling thing, to be called a sign of life. But Sister Carmelle echoed the sentiment: “When I see you,” she said, “I don't see just you, but I see also the families and churches that you represent. So when I say thank you, I'm speaking through you to them.”

So back to Yves Marie. Here's this young boy, whose home and school have been destroyed. And he's saying—in full sincerity—that he will hold me in his prayers. Oh, that I might do the same, Yves Marie. If only all of us would, and so become the “signs of life” that Christ calls us to be. ■



HAITIAN VACATION, cont'd from page 7

Lesson #4: *Calling chickens is fun!*

At Israel's house, they taught me to call chickens. It was the most fun I've had in ages. Look for me at the State Fair this summer.

Lesson #5: *Complaining is overrated.*

Try this: go live in an underdeveloped nation for a week. Leave everyone you love at home. Sleep on the ground while a radio plays Celine Dion or salsa music all night, and did I mention the chatty roosters? Have no access to any type of indoor plumbing. Dream of port-a-potties. Have a conversation with a smiling amputee. Sit in a 95-degree airport terminal with 500 other people and only two coolers of water for everyone for five hours. Come back home and try to find something to complain about. Eventually you'll start to complain again, but never as much. It just doesn't seem sportsmanlike any more.

Lesson #6: *Small people do big things.*

Probably the most powerful story we heard while there came from the soft-spoken Wilkens. A student who hopes to one day get his master's in human resource development, Wilkens sat on the porch of his parents' home in the mountains and quietly shared his story. He and a teacher were at the university in Port-au-Prince when the earthquake hit. They were immediately buried under the rubble; Wilkens' right ankle was pinned, and heavy stone lay on top of him. They began to cry out for help. Within a few hours, someone was able to extract the teacher but they were unable to free Wilkens. They promised to return, but hours passed and no one came back. Wilkens spent all of Tuesday

pieces of stone imprisoning Wilkens, until finally, arms raised over his head, she was able to pull him free. As he gathered himself and looked up to thank her, she was gone. He does not know her name. He does not believe he will ever see her again. He believes that God sent an angel in the form of a small, thin woman to rescue him.

As we were preparing to leave Fondwa, I was carrying my backpack and a suitcase down the hill to the van when I realized that I was only carrying my backpack. Remy, a precocious little imp from the orphanage, had come up beside me, slipped the suitcase out of my hand and was now marching next to me, the suitcase perched Haitian-style on top of his head. Remy is probably four feet tall. Maybe if you never tell anyone they're too little to do big things, it will never occur to them not to try. Maybe angels have dancing eyes and a killer hug like Remy, strong wills and a compassionate heart like Wilkens' rescuer.

Lesson #7: *Big problems have small solutions.*

I won't sugarcoat it here. It's easy to feel hopeless in Haiti. You could get on a plane back to the States, shake your head and declare the situation to be—to use a highly technical term—toast.

While the situation in Haiti is heartbreaking, it is not hopeless. The Haitian people understand their plight, and yet they have hope. Life has never been easy for most of them and while they have been struck a magnificent blow, they are not defeated. They are resourceful, resilient and proud. Their history has prepared them to fight for their country. But they do need help, and for a long time to come.

I started thinking of the situation in Haiti in terms of getting my sons to clean their room. Telling them to tackle a room ankle-deep in clean and dirty clothes, littered with pencils, candy wrappers, papers—a microscopic Haiti if you will, *sans* goats—would only produce a deer-caught-in-the headlights gaze on their faces. They were frozen, unable to comprehend what to do first. But if I guided them to start with their desk, or work on this little corner here, then little by little they were able to achieve the desired goal.

If you stand back and look at all of Haiti, it produces the same kind of paralysis. So much to do, so many problems, where to



night trapped—calling for help, crying, praying. On Wednesday, a stranger appeared—"a thin woman" is how Wilkens described her. She had heard Wilkens crying and came to help. When he saw how thin and small she was—and a woman to boot—he did not think she would be able to free him. Determined, she worked to shift and move the heavy

start? The thing is, we each have to start small, and then big things will eventually happen as we all pull together. As a community, as a nation, as a world.

HAITIAN VACATION, cont'd from page 9

My aunt Sue is 69 years old and has lived in Haiti for 12 years. For the past two years, she has lived on her own caring for orphans who are either pending adoption or who are unadoptable (due to lack of birth certificates). We were able to stay with my aunt on our last night in Haiti. Besides now being my favorite relative due to her house having indoor plumbing, my aunt—like the sisters who run the orphanage in Fondwa, like Dr. Marie Rene at the Haitian Academy (a long-time mission of St. Luke's)—is changing her little corner of Haiti one child at a time.

Whether the work in Haiti speaks to you, or in Africa or Honduras, the Appalachian mountains or a food pantry in Indianapolis, the biggest lesson we all can learn is that our actions matter. I think maybe every article Kay Walla (St. Luke's World Missions volunteer extraordinaire) has ever written about mission work includes that saying "To the world you may be one person, but to one person you may be the world." It's really true. Kay would never lie.

There's a song on my iPod by Train entitled "Calling All Angels." I've been listening to this song for years but when I heard it after I got back from Haiti, the words really struck me:

*I need a sign to let me know you're here
All of these lines are being crossed over the atmosphere
I need to know that things are gonna look up
'Cause I feel us drowning in a sea spilled from a cup*

*When there is no place safe and no safe place to put my head
When you feel the world shake from the words that are said*

*And I'm calling all angels
I'm calling all you angels*

*I won't give up if you don't give up
I won't give up if you don't give up*

*I need a sign to let me know you're here
'Cause my TV set just keeps it all from being clear
I want a reason for the way things have to be
I need a hand to help build up some kind of hope inside of me*

*And I'm calling all angels
I'm calling all you angels*

*I won't give up if you don't give up
I won't give up if you don't give up*

The people of Haiti are not giving up. And we shouldn't give up on them. We have a lot to teach each other.

And that's what I learned on my Haitian vacation. ■

My Friends Went to Haiti and All I Got Was This Great T-Shirt...



Here's one small, innovative way to help Haiti. St. Luke's member Mike Marker and his business partner Jeremy Chastain, owners of Bring the Hope, have created "Bring the Hope to Haiti" t-shirts—100% of the proceeds of each t-shirt sold will be donated to the orphanage in Fondwa that the Williams are affiliated with. Bring the Hope was launched in March 2009 with one goal in mind: to bring a little optimism to the world. They believe that if more people wear apparel with messages of hope or optimism, that people will see it and think about it, and it may cause them to do something about it. So far they have supported causes like KidsFirst Foundation, Folds of Honor Foundation and St. Jude Children's Research Hospital. ■

For more information on Bring the Hope, visit their website at www.bringthehope.com. You can order the Haiti shirts there (\$15), as well as others.

Having the Audacity

by Dave Miner

I talked with the brother of a good friend the other day about the increasing level of hunger in this country and around the world. "When will we see the day," I asked, "that everyone who is willing to work and work hard can feed their own family?" My companion expressed his belief that this has never happened in the past and will never happen in the future.

As the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday approached, I was reminded of this quote from his Nobel Prize acceptance speech:

I have the audacity to believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality, and freedom for their spirits. I believe that what self-centered men have torn down, other-centered men can build up.

I responded to my companion's sentiment with the observation that over the last three decades we have had enough food to feed everyone. This is the first time in the history of the world that there is enough food to feed everyone. This was never the case before.

At Interfaith Hunger Initiative we are working together to see that all are fed from this bounty. We have the audacity to believe it can be done now and in our town.

Over the last two decades, two major economic powers of the world—China and Brazil—among others, have made dramatic progress towards ending hunger in their countries. They set out very intentionally to do it. They had the audacity.

And once all are fed, maybe then we can also find ways that everyone can feed their own families. Will we have the audacity?