

Homeward bound: Haiti Dispatches

Gerry Straub | Jan. 29, 2010



Gerry Straub in Haiti in December

Haiti Dispatches No. 5

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti -- Late Tuesday afternoon, Jan. 26, I sat near the main entrance of the Haitian Community Hospital, in the open courtyard that serves as the triage area where the incoming injured are evaluated and given some initial care. I was thoroughly exhausted from crisscrossing Port-au-Prince most of the day, hunting for images of destruction and humanity. I had seen much of both.

There was one scary moment when we were in Cité Soleil, the oldest and largest slum in the capital; a convoy of trucks with food rumbled down the main street causing a scene of mass bedlam as people rushed off to wherever the truck would be stopping to dispense the much-needed food. The intensity of the starving hoard of people rushing past us was frightening.

As I sat in the triage area trying to steal a moment of stillness amid the cacophony of woeful sounds, I scribbled down some random thoughts.

There is a constant buzz of noise: cries, screams, conversations in many different languages. And there is a constant whirl of movement. Nurses and doctors rushing here and there. Patients being carried in or out on stretchers. Supplies coming in. Volunteers coming and going. Constant movement and noise, day in and day out, without relief or let up. Even at night, surgeries are performed and the sound of moaning barely abates. I've been here five days and I can't even recall what normal life is, what it is like to walk across the street from the San Damiano Foundation office to get an espresso at the Cuban-American Café. Will normal life ever return after seeing a charred skeleton trapped beneath a hotel, or the decaying foot of a child sticking out of the rubble of a collapsed grammar school, or the bleeding wound of an amputee?

So much suffering, yet so much compassion.

We were scheduled to depart on Thursday, Jan. 28. But at the last moment on Wednesday morning, we learned that there would be no open flights out on Thursday, and we needed to rush to the airport immediately in hopes

of getting on one of the three chartered flights that would be leaving after bringing medical and relief workers into Port-au-Prince.

We had no idea when the flights would depart or their various destinations. We just had to hope that there would be enough empty seats to accommodate the 18 members of our team scheduled to go home.

There was no room on the first flight, but thankfully, all but one of us made it on the second flight. After a six-hour wait in a small, brutally hot terminal, we boarded the plane and took off at 3 p.m. We landed in Fort Pierce, Fla., at 5:30 p.m. In Florida, six members were whisked off to nearby West Palm Beach Airport for flights that evening to Atlanta and Chicago. The remaining dozen of us would be taking a chartered plane to Dallas at 9 p.m. Dallas was home to eight of us, and the remaining four, including myself, would catch flights on Thursday morning from Dallas/Fort Worth Airport for three cities in California.

With a few free hours, the Dallas bound people all had dinner at a nearby seafood restaurant. After a week of living on Pop-Tarts, everyone was hungry for a good meal. At dinner the conversation revolved around medical discussions, reliving hard or sad cases, as well as the administrative problems that arose from so many medical teams from around the world trying to cope with supplies shortages and learning how to work together under such dire circumstances. I learned that one patient died of tetanus. And another patient who had been quarantined with tuberculosis passed away after two days of isolation.

Not having much to add to the conversation, I slowly tuned out and became lost in the sudden transition from the desperation of Port-au-Prince to the exuberance of an upscale restaurant in Fort Pierce. There was so much food ? huge steaks, a wide variety of seafood and a steady flow of drinks. There were big screen TV's and lots of loud conversations and laughs throughout the restaurant. It was hard to take it all in, and oddly enough, even though I was glad to be out of Haiti, I also wished I was back there.

When we returned to the airport for the 9 p.m. flight to Dallas, we were surprised to find a Gulf Stream Five private jet waiting for us. One of the doctors said the plane was the top of the line corporate jet. As we boarded the luxuriously appointed plane, we were each handed a yellow rose. There was a banquet of eloquently designed trays of food and an abundance of beers from around the world. During the flight we were served hot shrimp wrapped in bacon. Along the way to Dallas, we learned that the plane belonged to a wealthy and famous Texas oilman who simply wanted to help us get home and who wished to remain anonymous.

In the space of a few hours I went from the extreme of desperation, destruction, and poverty to the extreme of immense wealth. It was a transition I could not make. I could not get the images of all I had captured on film and tape out of my head.

Early on Thursday morning, before leaving the hotel for my flight to Burbank, Calif., I read a passage from Elie Wiesel's book *Night*, which was quoted in a book on Franciscan humility that I was reading:

The SS hanged two Jewish men and a youth in front of the whole camp. The men died quickly, but the death throes of the youth lasted for a half an hour. ?Where is God? Where is he?? Someone asked behind me. As the youth still hung in torment in the noose after a long time, I heard the man call again, ?Where is God now?? And I heard a voice in myself answer, ?Where is he? He is here. He is hanging there on the gallows.?

My thoughts after reading that drifted back to the painful memory of the collapsed grammar school. I could see inside a classroom. The blackboard, small desks, scattered books and notebooks were clearly visible. The haunting site of a young boy's decaying foot sticking out from the rubble. One minute the boy was studying, the next minute he was dead. Where was God? God was hidden in the rubble, the magnificence and mystery of God's humanity at its worst. I thought how God is often buried under the rubble of our lives, buried under so

many trivial and unimportant things that prevent us from loving God. And loving God is of paramount importance in the life of a Christian.

I'm not sure how long it will take to make any sense out of what I saw in Haiti. Maybe it will never make any sense. But I do know that the presence of so many wonderful men and women who rushed into this hell of suffering was truly inspirational, for they became living symbols of the compassion God calls each of us to embody.

[Gerry Straub is a filmmaker, who in December was in Haiti working on a documentary titled "Angels of Compassion: the Luminous Force of Intentional Kindness." He returned to Haiti Jan. 21 for more filming. While there, he filed reports for NCR by phone.]

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For more information on the foundation Straub created, The San Damiano Foundation in Burbank, Calif., and to read about and order his films, please see www.sandamianofoundation.org [6].

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