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Finding food now in Haiti is not shopping

by Melissa Musick Nussbaum

My Table Is Spread

The last time my son-in-law, Corey, went to Haiti, I requested a souvenir from the gift shop at the Port-au-Prince airport. I wanted him to bring me a poster of "Les Chefs d'État d'Haiti, 1804-2011." This display of the pictures of Haiti's presidents -- individuals, as well as committees that have ruled throughout Haiti's last 200 years -- tells the length of each person or cadre's tenure.

Job security is not a feature of Haitian political life. There's Pierre-Louis Nemours, who served from Dec. 12, 1956, to Feb. 3, 1957. Sylvain Franck succeeded Nemours on Feb. 7, 1957. By April 2, 1957, he, too, was out of office.

Retirement benefits don't seem to be an issue, either. Guillaume Sam Vilbrun managed to keep his post from March 9, 1915, to July 27, 1915 -- beating the yet-to-be-set records of Nemours and Franck by almost two months -- before he was assassinated on July 28, 1915.

Violence goes with the office. The first two Haitian presidents died violently: Jean-Jacques Dessalines by assassination and Henri Christophe by suicide.

My 4-year-old granddaughter, Anna, who lived in Rosier, Haiti, likes to look at the poster. The faces look familiar to her. She searches the pictures and asks me, "Where's President Obottom?"

"President Obama isn't the president of Haiti," I say. "He's the president of the United States."

She looks harder at the dark faces and says firmly, "Yes, he is."

And then, as if I have had a hand in some unwholesome mischief, she asks again, "Where's President Obottom?"

I do not tell her that I would not wish the presidency of Haiti on Obama, or anyone, for that matter.

I recall listening as my husband walked our daughter's Haitian foster child up and down the concrete porch of their home in Fond des Blancs, talking softly to her. Though he had cautioned me against getting attached to this child all the way south on the plane, it was Martin who could be heard cooing to little Eronne, "Aren't you the smartest girl? Yes, you are. You're the smartest girl. You're going to be the president of Haiti."

My daughter, Elisabeth, wondered what Eronne had done to merit such ill wishes.

Anna and her older brother, Luc, have some sense of the hardships of Haitian life. When they returned to this country, Luc took in my kitchen and announced, "Ma-maw, you have a hundred of glasses and more chairs than people sitting." It was not a compliment.

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Anna prays daily for "the Haitis," as she calls them, usually asking "for the children to have toys" -- and here, if you are grabbing a tissue to wipe away a tear prompted by such infant piety, let me hasten to add the rest of the plea -- "so they won't come and take ours."

That, and Luc's recitation of the Golden Rule -- "Do unto others as you do unto others" -- pretty much sums up my prayer life and my share in the works of mercy as performed, rather than spoken, by me.

So, it is with some foreboding that I have agreed to Martin's decision that we try to get Winddcheley Sauterne, a former student of our son-in-law, out of Haiti and here to our house in Colorado Springs, Colo. Winddcheley was in college in Port-au-Prince when the earthquake struck in January. A true child of the millennial generation, he took two things from his room as he ran, and the building crumbled around him: his cell phone and his laptop computer.

Living on the streets, he searched for Internet access. When he found a café that had connections, he emailed Elisabeth and Corey. The message read, in part:

I sure you have heard the news about what just happened to Haiti. Now once again, our heart is broken. School is gone, many people died during the last big devastation. Hopefully i am still alive as a miracle ... but everything is gone! I don't know what to do. I have no place to live. Here life becomes harder. Now, I wonder what I am gonna do. My house collapsed where i lived in Port-au-Prince. I lost everything. All i had. I can't stop crying. I want to do something, but i have power, no help. I am in the mud.

Everything is expensive all of sudden. I need help. Please, my friend, if you can do something do it. I can't live in this situation.

Please, help! I don't want to die!

We have engaged an immigration lawyer. We have received Winddcheley's resumé over the Internet. We have talked to the administration at our local community college and have been told that they would be pleased to have a multilingual -- Creole, French, English and Spanish -- speaker in their classes.

Our daughter is helping Winddcheley apply to work in a language camp this summer. If he has a job and a sponsor, his chances of getting a visa increase.

Elisabeth says she tries to get Winddcheley to tell more of his personal story, the part about being an orphan and being the first person in his family to learn to read or write. She wants him to tell his prospective employers about the sister who died at age 21 from a heart condition, a condition that was diagnosed, but for which she had no money to buy medication or other treatment.

Winddcheley is reticent to talk about his troubles to people he does not know. Perhaps because his troubles are no different from -- except, in many cases, to be less than -- the troubles of so many around him.

When Winddcheley tells us on the phone, as he did last Saturday, "I am hungry," we know it means he has no food. We say the same English words. They mean, "I'm bored." Or, "I'm stressed." Or, "There is nothing in the refrigerator that appeals to me." Or, "I'm tired of chicken; I feel like pizza."

There is no drama in Winddcheley's voice when he tells us he is hungry. Hunger is part of the world he has always known. Finding food in Haiti is not shopping; it is a desperate, daily hunt for survival.

I worry about losing personal space and privacy when, and if, Winddcheley comes here to live. He worries about living another day. I don't wonder for a minute how the rich man could step over Lazarus dying at his door.

I wonder how the rich man -- and I -- can ever learn to look down and see who stands or lies or kneels upon our doorsteps. Even with Moses and the prophets, even with the one who has risen from the dead, how can we learn to look down, and see?

[Melissa Nussbaum is a writer, speaker on church and liturgy, and coauthor, with Jana Bennett, of *Free to Stay, Free to Leave: Fruits of the Spirit and Church Choice*.]

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