Haitian offerings of love and hope

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Soil so red it appears like the sky rained rust over the sweeping countryside. A tropical country, Haiti, once green and lush is now barren and almost treeless. But it is a country nonetheless, one that possesses a beauty all its own, shaped, strengthened and celebrated through the spirit and determination of its people.

Somehow, my limited grasp of the English language does not enable me to describe, as I'd like, the extremes of this place. There is both extreme beauty and ugliness, richness and poverty, care and arrogance. It is a country populated with some of the most amazing people I have ever met or may ever meet again.

The people who make Haiti what it is, are not rich land owners, for they are few. The soul of this country comes from the poorest of poor, for they are the ones who share with you what little they have. Their expectations for such actions are simple—a courteous smile and a pleasant thank you. Where can you go in the world, where appreciative behaviour is all that is expected when sharing what little you have with another human being?

The daily challenges seem to strengthen this kindness of heart.

The orphanage I worked in was near the little town of Kenscoff, high atop a mountain, away from the city—a place the children could feel safe.

By Canadian standards, the children’s quality of life was minimal. But in Haiti they were the fortunate ones. They received three meals a day, mostly rice and beans. On Saturday they received an extra portion of rice with one piece of chicken and on Sunday each had one boiled egg with bread.
Water was available for them to wash in, and they even got one large glass of water a day to drink. The unit used to purify our drinking water worked on electricity; and, since we only had electricity for two to three hours a day, that was all we could supply for over five hundred children. We sometimes supplemented our electricity with a generator, but that required gasoline, and gas cost money. During a big rain, we would store as much water as we could in our cisterns, located under the houses we lived in. Otherwise, water would be trucked in at a price.

A house in Haiti is called a Kay (pronounced Ki). I lived in a house at the orphanage, called Kay St. Patrick, with thirty little girls between the ages of nine and twelve. I worked with a Haitian woman, Madame Cienne. She and I kept order, made sure all the chores were done, and that the children said their prayers and were kept clean.

As soon as dinner arrived and the children were seated, Madame Cienne would start her hour-long walk home to her own family. It was imperative for her to arrive before dark. You see, a number of Haitians are afraid of the dark. They believe voodoo zombies come out at night. This is a pre-dominantly Catholic country. From what I saw and heard, my observation was some Haitians were Catholic by day, voodoo believers by night!

Once Madame Cienne had left for the day, the children were all mine. We sang, they danced, we played games, or they braided each other's hair. I broke up disputes. I scolded them. I hugged them. I made sure they knew that their very existence mattered to someone.

It took time for the children to come to trust me, and to understand I would care for them and keep them safe. These girls were all very special and very precious to me. I was their substitute mother, so to speak.
I loved them.

We became a family.

The orphanage also offered an education. The government permits only Haitian teachers to teach and they have just a grade 4-5 education themselves. The language of the people is Creole, and yet school is taught in French. So, it takes the average child a number of years, if they even have the opportunity to go to school, before they begin to learn anything. There are few books, even less paper and very few writing tools. Everything is learned by repetition. The teacher recites, the children repeat—all day long.

A typical day at the orphanage began at 5:00 a.m. We were 6000 feet above sea level and mornings were brisk. So when my alarm would go off, the first thing I'd do would be to jump out of bed and check for electricity. If there was some, I'd run upstairs to wake the girls. They would grab a large bowl from under their beds, come down and get water and then line up outside my door. I had an electrical gadget that would warm their ice-cold water for them so that they could wash in a little bit of comfort. It was such a treat on those cool winter mornings. Many mornings we simply lit our candles and washed with cold water.

Despite their poverty and the hardships Haitian people face, they are very proud. The children at our orphanage had to be clean and have a clean uniform to wear to school each day. These children had to learn to care for themselves at a very early age. They were doing their own laundry by the age of eight—hand washing on Saturday mornings.

We lived in square concrete buildings that reminded me of bunkers. The girls would scrub the floors each and every day. Then they had breakfast. By 7:30 a.m., all work was done and everyone was busy braiding each other’s hair or practicing their multiplication tables.

The bell would ring out at 7:50 a.m. and we would all march down together two-by-two. They would assemble, pray, sing the national anthem and be in school by 8:00 a.m. sharp.

That was my opportunity to bolt for the volunteer house and try to get a shower. More often than not, the electricity would go off as soon as I got there. Then I'd grab a cup of coffee, visit a bit with the other volunteers and then head back up to my house (Kay St. Patrick) for a sponge bath.
with cold water.

The days were filled with different things that included everything from letter writing to small car repairs, to visiting with the children in Kay Christine (our home for the physically and mentally disabled).

At 10:30 a.m., the children had recess and we would give them whatever fruit was in season at the time. First it was mangos, then huge avocados. After recess it was back to school until 1:00 p.m. when I'd meet my girls and we'd walk back to the Kay for lunch. Then it was back to school until 4:00 p.m.

After school it was always a mad dash, for there was much to do. The girls had to quickly change out of their uniforms, and open up the cistern and haul water up on a rope with buckets to fill two barrels full so that way we'd have water to wash dishes, bathe in the morning and wash floors. It was then lights out (or candles) by 8:00 p.m. and that was our day.

Every two weeks, each volunteer had a weekend off. Often we would head down to Petionville to where our hospice/hospital for sick children was. We'd bunk in with the volunteers there for a couple of days. That meant first a 45-minute walk down to the nearest village, where we would catch a Tap Tap (a type of taxi), cramming in with the local people for an hour-long, bumpy ride into town.

The weekend was supposed to offer a little R&R. That meant maybe a little sleeping, (until it got too hot and humid to stay in bed) a visit on the roof at night or a trip out to grab a beer at a local bar.

Most pubs were simply shacks, measuring about six feet square, with a window and when you were there you simply stood in the street watching the comings and goings. Sometimes there would be a woman with a wok cooking over open coals frying up some grillot or plantains. I would pass on the grillot, which was deep fried pork, for the meat would have been hanging in the sun with the flies on it all day, settling instead on the plantains. They were simply like a sweet French fry.

If nature called while you were out, you simply found a place out of sight because that was as private as you were going to get. No one paid much attention anyway; it was simply nature's call.

Sometimes on our weekends off, Dr. Bob would talk us into getting up at 6:00 a.m. and riding a Tap Tap into Port au Prince where we would meet up with Mother Theresa's Sisters of Charity. About 30 years ago, the government donated an old abandoned building to the Sisters so that Mother Theresa could set up her wound clinic, and that clinic still runs to this day.
Never have I experienced anything like my time there at the wound clinic. Dr. Bob took care of mothers and babies; the sisters and volunteers took care of everyone else.

Have you ever seen cancer up close? If left untreated, the injury grows until there is green oozing flesh hanging off the bone. I treated a woman with breast cancer one time. There was nothing left of her breast, except green tissue resembling something from a horror movie. All I could do was apply a fresh bandage, give her two Tylenol, and smile and send her on her way.

"There must be something more we can do?" I asked one of the sisters. She looked at me with much sadness in her eyes and said, "No, my dear, but you can pray for her. Pray that the good Lord takes her very soon, because once that cancer gets into her bones, the pain will be excruciating. There will be nothing more we can do for her. She will die a very painful death. Please pray for her," was all she could say.

The Sisters of Charity are unbelievable women. They come from all over the world to live among and minister to the poorest of the poor. They learn Creole, the language of the people, and teach the language of prayer. Yet, what stays with me to this day is this woman's amazing response to me in the face of so much suffering. She would always take my hand, smile at me, and thank me for helping her. I did so very little; I felt so inadequate and so very, very sad. That woman's face and smile will stay etched in my heart forever.

That same day, I witnessed a mother with her dying child in her arms. We could not help. It was too late. That baby died in his mother's arms, right in front of us. The sisters consoled the mother the best they could and the child was taken back to the hospice with us. I will never forget our ride back from the clinic that day, Dr. Bob and I riding in the back of an open truck, with a tiny coffin between us, driving through a sea of black faces with little hope for a better life.

We once had a little fellow come to our hospital for sick children, who, in his quest to find a drink, accidentally had drunk battery acid. He had burned his esophagus right down to his stomach. With the help of some American doctors, we were able to fly him to a hospital in the States, where they performed numerous operations. Thankfully, they were successful and he has since joined the multitude of children in our orphanage.

He was one of the lucky ones. For the average Haitian there is no running water. They sometimes walk hours to retrieve just enough water for a day; and even then this luxury, if not boiled, can kill their infant children. The leading cause of death in children under two in Haiti is diarrhea, attributed mostly to impure water.

Life is not easy for the average Haitian, but despite all the hardships, they live with hope. They still wake up and hope for a better day. They can still whistle while they walk to work in the mountains to try and plant seeds on a hillside. They farm with their hands and, if they are lucky, with a small shovel.

When they see their vegetables poke through the red soil, they smile, for there will be food to eat. They might even have enough to take to market and be able to buy a new pair of shoes for the winter. Amazing, is all I can say, truly amazing!

My life was changed forever by my six months in Haiti. I will never be the same again. But, if the opportunity arose, I'd go back in the blink of an eye. The people, the country, the poorest of the poor, they captured my heart in a way nothing else could.

Someone once asked me, if I could change one thing in the world, what would it be? My answer was simple. Every person should spend at least six months to a year in a third world country. To see what life is like for many people all over the world. Maybe then could we live in a society that could share some of our wealth with others? Where we might hear, "What can I do for you?" instead of "What's in it for me?"
I have a bumper sticker that I keep on my fridge and it goes like this:

_No Electricity, No Water, No Phones. But I still love Haiti!
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That simply says it all.

About the Author

**Dianne Le Chasseur**  Born Aug 9–, 1953, Coquitlam, BC. I grew up in the small French community of Maillardville. At the tender age of eighteen, I married an older man of nineteen! We started a family immediately and by the time I was twenty-nine, I had eight children. In 1982, one of our daughters died and changed my appreciation of family forever.

We raised all seven children to adulthood. At the time of my life when most mothers were seeing the light at the end of the tunnel, I chose to spend six months in an orphanage in Haiti, only to come back and wonder what I was to be doing with the rest of my life. The answer came in the form of building a house, one my husband and I could eventually retire to located high in the mountains away from the grind of the outside world. As I approach fifty years of age, my house is almost complete and I am ready to embark on a new adventure. Where it takes me, I haven’t a clue but I can’t wait to see what life has to offer.