

Fixing Haiti

By Randall Frame

I shake my head upon thinking about how I ended up on this muddy road—if one could even call it a road—on the outskirts of Haiti’s capital city in the dark of night. The moon, though not quite full, is more than enough to light my path. But when it hides behind the clouds, I have no choice but to stop, for only a few scattered stars and a handful of campfires that dot the hillsides surrounding Port-au-Prince prevent total blackness.

What a difference a week makes. Seven days previously I’d been sitting in the comfort of the living room of my four-bedroom home in suburban Pittsburgh, anticipating what promised to be an interesting trip—my first—to a country distinguished mainly by its status as the poorest nation in the Western hemisphere. I was part of a team of journalists and business leaders invited by a charitable organization to witness Haiti’s poverty, injustice, lawlessness—some would say its hopelessness—from up close.

Friends who had been to the so-called Third World had warned me that I would be changed, perhaps even disoriented, unable to fend off the emotional and psychological effects of culture shock. I humored them, outwardly acknowledging the accuracy of their predictions. But inwardly, I shook my head. I was, after all, a reporter—a professional who, while not denying his humanity, had been trained to maintain his distance, his objectivity. The truth is that as I examined the itinerary, my biggest concern was whether the return flight would get me home in time to watch my beloved Pittsburgh Steelers play on Sunday night.

For the first four days at least, my assessment of how my emotions would handle Haiti proved on target. This is not to say the experience was easy. It was not. I won’t soon forget the images of skinny dogs and even skinnier people ravaging the same garbage heaps looking for potentially edible scraps. Of naked children who lived in rudimentary tin shacks, whose toys were limited to rocks and whose back yards consisted of mud two inches deep, sometimes more

after a heavy rain. Of long lines of people waiting patiently for nothing more than a bowl of rice and beans and a cup of clean water. Elderly looking men and women curled up along the roadsides, sleeping on the hard ground, bony arms their only pillow. Medical clinics that resembled American hospitals of a century or more ago. Crying children with nobody running to meet them.

But this was not a time for emotion. This was a time for problem solving. As a typically pragmatic American, my whole orientation toward what I was witnessing and learning was geared toward how to “fix it.” And I was not alone. Each night when our delegation returned to the hotel to process the day’s events, the discussion quickly turned to fixing Haiti.

To do so would not be easy, we acknowledged. Education seemed a logical place to start. After all, how can a country get anywhere if nearly half its adult population can neither read nor write? But we can’t expect children (or adults) to learn on empty stomachs. And no one can afford the luxury of going to school if finding enough food to make it through the day is virtually a full-time job.

So how can we fix this food problem? Arable land is scarce as a result of deforestation and soil erosion. Some people in the countryside are able to grow fruits, vegetables, and grains. But the road system is so obsolete that by the time they get their goods to market, they are spoiled. Maybe building infrastructures is answer. Then again, what would it matter if people could successfully transport their products if no one has any money to buy them? And nobody has any money because there are no jobs. We’d visited one charitable organization whose goal was to keep Haitian teenagers out of trouble by teaching them carpentry. But our host acknowledged that his ministry’s main purpose was to give these young people some small measure of self-respect. Few, if any, of them would ever be able to find work period, let alone as carpenters.

Building Haiti’s economy—maybe that was the place to start. But it seemed no matter where we started, we kept returning to keeping people alive and healthy. And they can’t grow their own food—or raise chickens or become dairy farmers—when they have no land and no possibility of ever owning land, most of which is possessed by a relative handful of the country’s elite who, by Haiti’s standards, are quite wealthy. All of this is not even to mention

political and justice systems rife with bias and corruption and a health care “system” that is inaccessible to the overwhelming majority.

Undeterred, our little group of entrepreneurial Americans, in the comfort of our hotel meeting room, went to work each night. As far as we were concerned, there was no problem that could not be solved, though it would take time. Some cited models of projects that had worked in other parts of the developing world to bring, for example, both clean water and jobs to small communities. Others cited advances in biotechnology that would enable people to grow diverse crops on relatively small plots of land. We discussed also the role the U.S. government could play in improving conditions in Haiti.

As we unveiled our plans and proposals, I made it a point to observe our 40ish looking tour guide, Madam Pierre. I was a bit disappointed at her lack of enthusiasm. Though she nodded in apparent affirmation at our grasp of the situation, her silence suggested she was less than excited with our developing vision.

This didn't stop us from pressing on. Our wide-ranging perspectives and ideas for fixing Haiti were united by a common philosophy, one that emphasized the practical—things that would actually work. We applied an American business mentality to the challenge, placing a premium on such words as “efficiency” and “sustainable.” We were not after quick fixes here—no Band-Aids™. We aspired, rather, to permanent solutions.

Though we'd not yet done a single thing, we all came away from these evening gatherings feeling a sense of power and success. Yes, there were problems. But we had answers. Indeed, some of those who gathered in that room each night (myself not included) had access not just to the money but to the human expertise that, if applied intelligently, would likely make an impact on this troubled nation even if it could not completely fix it.

I went to sleep feeling good about myself and also about the future of Haiti. We had come and we had seen Haiti's problems. Next we would conquer them. Plans were in place—or would be soon. In writing about what I had seen—and the solutions that had been devised—I would be doing my part. I had approached my mission objectively and dispassionately: I had

proved my friends wrong. I was content, if not proud. I wondered how the Steelers would fare on Sunday.

Then came day five, the day before our scheduled return to the U.S. Our delegation visited a place called *La Cay Espwa*, which is Haitian Creole for “House of Hope.” Within this simple, two-room structure, a group of nuns dedicated their lives each day to the weakest and most vulnerable of all: starving children. Severely malnourished children would be brought to *La Cay Espwa*, and these nuns would do what they could to nurse them back to health. Mostly what they did, however, was to hold the children in their arms, perhaps stroke their hair. A few rocking chairs, rudimentary in design, were scattered around the room. These faithful women sat and rocked these children. Day after day. All day long.

I surveyed the room, at once intrigued and overwhelmed by the contrast. Over here were these wealthy, influential businesspersons whose elaborate job descriptions went on for pages— memos, employee reviews, seminars, meetings with investors, advertising strategies, and on and on and on. And over here this small group of women, each of whose job description boasted essentially one item: holding children.

One of the nuns, Sister Conchita, approached me carrying a child. She spoke very little English, but as she extended her arms, it was clear she was asking me if I would like to hold the baby. Instinctively I shook my head and raised my hands in protest. I had come to Haiti as a reporter, and reporters are not supposed to get personally involved. But neither did I want to be rude or impolite. If ever I was going to make an exception to my journalistic principles, this seemed a good time for it. I reached for the child. “Her name Maria,” the Sister said with broken English and a quiet smile.

I took Maria into my arms, gingerly at first. She seemed so fragile: I could practically see the skeleton beneath her skin. Only her eyes seemed to have escaped the circumstances of her young life. Her eyes were deep brown and as shiny as any healthy child’s ought to be. She focused them not on me, but on Sister Conchita. It was clear I was “second string.” Perhaps my arms were not as soft or comfortable. Yet she didn’t cry. Maybe she was too weak to protest being held by a stranger. Or perhaps she was just glad to be in anyone’s arms. How could I tell?

For the next twenty minutes or so, Madam Pierre and one of the English-speaking nuns talked about the history and the needs of the House of Hope. I wasn't listening. I was too focused on—too captivated by—this child I was holding. I wondered if Maria had brothers or sisters. Parents. Had any of the people in her small village ever even heard of the Steelers?

The time came for us to leave. I wasn't ready. At first I'd not wanted to hold this child; now I found it hard to give her back. As I returned Maria to Sister Conchita's arms, the child, for the first time, turned her eyes to me. Perhaps she was saying "thank you." Maybe "Thank you for giving me back to the 'first string.'" Or maybe "Thank you for holding me." How could I know?

We visited two other sites in the afternoon. I went along in body only. My mind kept going back to *La Cay Espwa*. Something about that place had jarred me, had upset my mode of thinking. These women were dedicated servants to be sure, their motivation pure as a new day. But their whole approach seemed highly inefficient, impractical, unproductive. These children had little chance of ever being able to help build the country's infrastructures or to become leaders for political change. These persistent Sisters of Mercy could offer a ray of hope to these children, but little more. Theirs was the ultimate Band-Aid approach. They operated out of a total disregard for the big picture. In fact, it seemed to me they focused on the smallest picture possible. If ever there was a lost cause, this was it.

Still, I could not escape the overwhelming feeling that these women had acquired something—some understanding, some realization—that was unknown to me. And I sensed it was something I wanted. Something that I, perhaps, needed. Their circumstances did not keep these women from smiling. Not happy smiles, for there is nothing happy about seeing starving children every day. Their smiles, rather, reflected a sense of peace that is lodged in the depths of the soul, a sense of contentment that comes from understanding fully—and living out completely—one's calling in life.

It dawned on me that I, a trained journalist, had been a bit foolish to think that ours was the first delegation ever to visit this troubled land and to determine how to fix it. Over the last

five days, I'd witnessed firsthand the results of the grand plans of those who'd gone before. Those results were not impressive. I realized that these women I'd come so quickly to admire did not have the luxury of looking at the big picture. And I wondered if they—in their simple, single-minded approach—were doing more to “fix Haiti” than anyone from our resource-laden delegation could ever do or even hope to do. I wanted to visit with them again. I wanted to see Maria.

At our nightly debriefing session, Madam Pierre reminded us to be ready to leave the hotel for the airport at 7 a.m. Then she reviewed the events of the day. As before, she had my attention only when talking about the House of Hope. “On average,” she told us, “one in four of the children who arrive at *La Cay Espwa* will die because they got there too late—too much damage to their internal organs.” She added, “The Sisters can usually tell which ones they are.”

When someone asked how they could tell, Madam Pierre pointed to the obvious signs of starvation: withering away of the body and an almost total lack of energy. In addition, she said, the skin becomes pale and rigid. The hair takes on a reddish hue and begins to fall out. She might as well have been describing Maria. Madam Pierre looked to me, surely aware of what I was thinking. “The child you were holding,” she said, “seemed like a baby because she was only sixteen pounds. She was actually almost three years old.”

Whatever inkling of journalistic objectivity remained in me evaporated quickly. I left the group and returned to my room alone. I peered through my window in the direction of *La Cay Espwa*, unable to shake the image of Maria's eyes meeting mine as I gave her away too soon. Perhaps she was saying “thank you,” as I'd considered earlier. But perhaps she was saying, “Could you hold me a little bit more?” How could I tell?

I formed my own, personal plan to do my part in fixing Haiti. I estimated *La Cay Espwa* was no more than two miles from the hotel. And it was almost a straight shot—just one turn, well marked by a sign on the main road. We had been strictly warned against venturing out on our own. If something were to happen, it could put at risk similar trips in the future. But this was a chance I needed to take.

And so here I am. As I forge my way through the dark silence, the night becomes surreal. Each time the moon emerges from the clouds, I hustle down the road as fast as I can to make up for the dark times when I can barely move at all. At first in the darkness I'd slid my feet carefully down the road, but now I just stand still for fear of passing the sign pointing to my destination.

I think of all I have seen and heard these last few days—the suffering, the sense of helplessness, the pain of broken dreams, or worse, no dreams at all. I smile, sadly, as I acknowledge my friends were right after all. I *am* disoriented, completely off kilter, broken. I think of my world back home, and it seems a completely different world. But there is brokenness there, too. There is brokenness everywhere—crushed and confused spirits all around. But mostly I think of Maria, who has somehow become a symbol—a focal point—both for all that is wrong with the world and for what I can do about it.

I hear footsteps coming up from behind. At first I'm scared, but I assure myself that I am exactly where I ought to be, where I need to be. I find safety in this assurance. As the footsteps get closer, I speak one of the few native expressions I know: "*Bon jour.*" In the darkness, a man returns my greeting, then adds a few words I don't understand.

"*La Cay Espwa,*" I venture.

"*La Cay Espwa,*" comes the reply. Perhaps his eyes are more accustomed to the dark. Or maybe he knows this stretch of road by heart. He takes my hand and, immune to the darkness, leads me along the path. After about five minutes, we stop. As if right on cue, the moon once again lights the night. The sign appears before me. My new friend—my ship in the night—points toward *La Cay Espwa*—visible from here, a hundred yards or so away—and then proceeds down the road alone. I'm not sure what to think about angels, but he is what I'd imagined them to be.

I run as fast as I can to the House of Hope. I stand at the door and knock. For the first time, it occurs to me that perhaps no one will answer. After dark, who knows what danger a visitor might bring? But soon, the door opens. One of the Sisters, recognizing me from earlier in

the day, invites me inside. Immediately I look around. It doesn't take long to find Sister Conchita, sitting on her rocker as before. Holding Maria. It's as if no time has passed.

As I approach Sister Conchita, she stands, sensing exactly why I have returned. She says nothing, but offers me the child. And also her chair. This time there is no protest, no hesitation. I take my seat. A few of the Sisters inquire as to who their late-night visitor might be. But soon the night is silent again. Or nearly so. There remains the weak, rhythmic creaking of an aged rocker that, though old and plain, is fully able to accomplish its mission.

I have arrived at the place where I want to be. And as I live out what I'd earlier in the day envisioned, I am suddenly and fully aware of my weaknesses, my limitations. And aware also of the limitations and shortcomings of humanity, which has somehow failed this child and many others like her.

My four-bedroom house, my physical health and strength, the Steelers—all fade meekly into irrelevance. I am utterly powerless to determine whether this child, who bears the image of God, will live or die this night. But I do have power—complete power—to make certain that if and when her frail body finally yields, she has felt the security, the comfort, of someone's loving arms. Tonight they are my arms. It's the least I can do for her, and also, perhaps, the most. Her weak but gracious eyes look up to mine. And hold their gaze. And in the sacred silence of this moment, there is no other power I crave, no other purpose I desire.