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# Haiti: The rest of the story is ours

Joan Chittister | Jan. 25, 2010 From Where I Stand

I went to Haiti years ago. There was an earthquake going on then, too, but that earthquake was of another making. That earthquake rumbled up from the underground of a people who had been exploited, abandoned, abused and forgotten by their own government and brought to the point of total resistance.

In the midst of the fissure stood a young Salesian priest, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, shouting like John the Baptist in the desert, for peace and justice for the poor in the face of Haiti's sinful impoverishment by the Western world. From 1845 to 1947, Haiti had been forced to pay France reparations in gold for its 1803 war of independence. This required the country to borrow huge sums of money at egregious rates of interest from American, French and German banks. Furthermore, Western corporations, our own among them, were using Haitians at slave-labor wages and paying not a cent in taxes for the privilege of doing so.

Aristide was being hunted by day and by night by minions of a corrupt regime intent on quieting the fearsome voice. Aristide's great earth-shaking crime lay in running a home for street children and speaking a lonely truth in the face of the national family secret that the country was being prostituted by its own government for its own indecent desires. The dictators François Duvalier, or "Papa Doc," and his son Jean-Claude, "Baby Doc," were draining millions out of the country's coffers for personal use.

During that trip to Haiti, in 1989, I made a 20 minute film about the situation called "Voices of Promise; Voices of Hope," which I smuggled out of the country right through the hands of the government security team. The film was to help to raise consciousness in the United States about the deplorable conditions of the place, but nothing much happened to change things there. The infrastructure remained decrepit, the people remained underpaid, the country remained destitute.

The film, nevertheless, talked about more than corruption. It talked just as much about beauty. The country was desperately deprived but ruggedly beautiful at the same time. The people were pathetically poor but fiercely beautiful in their calm and kindness at the same time. The private civilian and religious aid agencies that sustained the poorest of the poor in the country were pathetically undeveloped and totally beautiful in their commitment to this hopeless place. The future was frighteningly dangerous but spiritually beautiful. Haitians were full of faith in God and full of faith in their own unprepared selves.

I had never seen such suffering, such beauty in my life. But now, since the worst earthquake the Western Hemisphere has ever experienced struck Haiti, I am seeing it again. The only question now is how much beauty will it bring and for how long?

For the first time in years, the lead news story in the United States isn't about war. The banner headlines aren't about suicide bombings. The pictures aren't of maimed soldiers. The sidebar articles aren't about suspicion and body scans. They aren't about the oppression of one person by another. But that doesn't mean that the news isn't about pain and suffering, about frustration and powerlessness, about God-awful deprivation and aching hearts.

Instead, Haiti is a story of 111,000 corpses being tilted from dump trucks into open graves in a public trash

heap. It is the story of a small country that had 380,000 orphans before the earthquake and is now calculating that there may well be a million more children, homeless, alone, wandering through life in a place where life does not exist. It is the story of a country of at least 200,000 dead and two million homeless that is totally destroyed and totally demoralized at the same time.

But that is not the end of the story. The rest of the story is ours.

You see, Haiti is also a story of millions of dollars being poured into relief programs for Haiti by simple people everywhere. It is the story of the mobilization of planes, ships, troops, rescue crews and relief agencies from around the entire world. It is the story of reporters gone to record the event having put down their microphones to become part of the rescue scene themselves. It is about celebrities, politicians, presidents and U.N. officials everywhere stopping their own lives and agendas to take up the cause of a people whose cause has almost never been recognized before. It is the story of a world in tears for a people who are surviving their desolation by singing on hillsides together, singing about death as they are pulled from the rubble alive, singing alleluias in their ruined churches as they pray to be delivered from fates worse than death.

This scene, too, has a stunning kind of beauty and deep commitment. This time it is the beauty of the human community dedicated to shining a light through the blackest parts of the human situation rather than aiming predator drones or suicide bombs at other innocents around the world.

For the first time in history, financial aid is pouring into Haiti from every part of the globe. For the first time in history, the ugly face of human abandonment is being exposed to the caring face of human bondedness. For the first time, the human race, ironically, looks totally human everywhere.

There is another test of humanity, however, that Haiti will surely essay and which is a clear and measurable one: How long will the human community stay in Haiti, not just to rescue the few survivors or hand out emergency rations or bury the nameless, unwashed, unblessed dead but how long will we stay there to rebuild it?

After all, U.S. gratitude to Haiti is long overdue. Haiti, the first and only nation to arise out of a slave revolt not only defeated Napoleon in his attempt to retake that island nation but, in the process, foiled Napoleon's plan to then use that country as a launching pad for the invasion and conquest of the land known now as The Louisiana Territory. In other words, Haiti saved the Western United States from French rule. Saved the United States.

So how long will we ourselves, the United States, a country that occupied Haiti for our own interests from 1915 to 1934 and then put half a century into wars around the world and billions of dollars and millions of weapons into death -- stay in Haiti to save it, to repay the debts that the abandonment of an entire people incurs. How much time, how much money, will we and the rest of the global community put into becoming as much a part of Haiti's resurrection as we have been part of its burial?

From where I stand the situation is a clear one: Haiti in its devastation stands not only for the rebuilding of its own country but for the possible rebuilding of the soul and humanity of the entire human community itself.

If we see this one through, Haiti may well save us again, this time not from the loss of our land but from the loss of our humanity.

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