REQUIEM FOR HAITI

by Maureen Downey

I remember Haiti -- as it was in 1980.

Our luxury cruise ship first dropped anchor at the capital, Port au Prince and we trooped down the gang plank, first world tourists, bottles of "Off" spray in our handbags, cameras at the ready, to join the milling crowd on the hot, busy pier.

It was a long time ago and I don't remember everything, but the things I do recall are forever etched in my memory like a series of "still life" studies in a vividly coloured slide show.

I remember being driven in a very ancient taxi down the main street of Port au Prince. All the taxi windows were open for air, of course, on the hot, humid day, and as we slowly made our way down the unpaved dusty street, many hands and arms of different lengths were thrust through open windows. Festooned with bracelets and necklaces of shells, beads and seeds of unknown origin, these were the hands and arms of smiling Haitian children. "Buy, madame, buy" echoed the choir of voices as they scrambled along to keep up with us until we turned the corner.

I remember that I didn't "buy" because my attention had been totally diverted by the extraordinary appearance of the street. Before me passed a virtual Biblical scene. We were driving past a row of small, open shops built along what appeared to be a wall of concrete blocks. Small recesses had been created by concrete dividing walls spaced at intervals along the wall, each with what appeared to be a rusty, iron-barred grill which could be slid across and locked at night. Here merchants stacked or displayed their wares on lines and pegs. Dogs and cats padded around or lay in whatever shade they could find, and where the line of shops ended, perched on a rickety cane chair in front of an old treadle sewing machine, a wiry cobbler was sewing Roman style sandals – his finished footwear strung from a small line beside him.

Soon our taxi stopped in front of a large, imposing stone building set back a short distance from the street. Holy Trinity Anglican Cathedral. As we entered, a group of Haitian school girls preceded us, dressed in short sleeved white blouses and mint green "gym slips" in the British school fashion. With its ethereal soaring arches, the immense interior was truly inspiring, made all the more beautiful by the brilliantly coloured Bible

scenes painted by Haitian artists, which covered the walls from floor to ceiling behind and on either side of the altar, delighting the eye and stirring the soul.

I remember driving along narrow, unpaved streets lined with various shapes and sizes of houses, mostly whitish in colour, many of which appeared decidedly "crumbling". We finally stopped for a while in front of the palace of Papa Doc Duvalier (then "dictator" of Haiti). Set back from the road and surrounded by lush green lawns, it was a pleasing white structure. Across from the palace, beside the taxi stop, we encountered a group of Haitian "artists" displaying and selling oil paintings, many of which were very attractive. However we had been advised to be wary of such vendors and shop only at recognized art dealers because the oil on many of the "street" paintings often came off in the wrapper!

We next visited an art studio where we could see (and also purchase) wood sculptures or paintings by many well known Haitian carvers and artists. Such art, we were advised, would immediately triple in value once it left Haiti. I bought a painting that I liked, and the information proved correct.

I remember driving along wider tree-lined streets, past larger houses set in manicured gardens, the homes of the (few in number) very rich, before arriving at Port au Prince's famous rum liqueur factory. Perched atop one of the city's knolls, the factory resembled a medieval Spanish castle complete with towers, turrets, ramparts and courtyards on many levels. Here one could sample numerous rum-based liqueurs, served in cool rooms or courtyards by uniformed waiters who flitted around among the tables carrying trays of small plastic glasses. An interesting feature of all these liqueurs was that they also smelled of the particular flavour. For example, the banana liqueur not only tasted of bananas - it had the aroma of bananas. Apparently the French family that originally established the factory had formerly been parfumiers in France.

Emerging from the shady liqueur factory into brilliant sunshine, I encountered two little curly haired boys (possibly aged 4 and 6), ragged and appealing, each holding a colourful Bantam rooster in his arms. When I first saw them, they were posing for an American lady to take their picture, with the city below as a backdrop. Afterwards, they held out their hands and received some coins. What a good idea, I thought! The boys happily lined up and smiled for my photo, but then I made a mistake: Not having much change and thinking they were brothers, I gave the older boy about 50 cents, assuming he would share with the younger boy. Not so. Luckily I was able to dredge up more money from the bottom of my handbag for the

little boy who remained firmly planted in front of me, palm outstretched, until paid!

I remember sailing into the tiny town of Cap Haitien, about a day's sailing to the west and then north-east, and anchoring at its rather dilapidated and deserted pier.

The major tourist activity at Cap Haitien, as I understood it, was making a day trip by taxi and mule to visit Citadelle Laferriere, a large fortress situated on one of the highest peaks on the Island of Hispaniola, and the ruins of the grand Sans Souci Palace at Milot, a small town at the foot of the mountain. This turned out to be an eight hour expedition, made on December 24th, making my Christmas even more memorable.

I remember that, once ashore, we were greeted by a cavalcade of very dilapidated taxis, which were to transport us to the town of Milot, the starting point for the ascent to the Citadelle. In Haiti at that time, given the rather dubious running condition of most motor vehicles, it was the practice to send along a number of "spare" cars and not uncommon to glimpse a sole wheel wobbling away down the street and observe the passengers of the unfortunate taxi decamping into a "default" vehicle!

We drove through the rather ramshackle town of Cap Haitien, along the unpaved road lined on either side with deep, foul-smelling sewage ditches. On either side of us was lush, tropical countryside with banana palms and brilliant blossoms. Interspersed in the flora and fauna were small shacks made of bamboo or tar paper, mostly with two rooms divided by a ragged sheet or flimsy piece of cloth – dirt floors and thatched or tar paper roofs. No evidence of plumbing, running water or electricity. No shortage of mangy dogs, ragged children, hens pecking around -- and always the stench from the drainage ditches alongside the road. Often we saw, painted on the walls (in French) the words, 'Jesus, the only hope'.

I remember arriving in the busy town square at Milot, with its backdrop of the ruined Sans Soucis palace and the fortressed mountain looming above. Awaiting us was a melee of mule and horse owners surrounded by their rather boney mules and horses. In due course, each of us was matched with a suitable mule or horse, whereupon we climbed a flight of 3 wooden steps and mounted our designated animals! My mule was named Fifi. Fortunately for me, Fifi was one of the few more robust looking animals. Many of the horses were so emaciated I doubt they would have been able to carry me to the mountain peak and survive! Fifi had two fit looking owners - Jean and Pierre – whose job it was to push and pull and otherwise get Fifi and myself to the top of the mountain.

The mountain track was steep, and the climb was made more difficult because parts of it had been turned into deep slippery mud holes by tropical rains the previous day. For two hours all the mules, horses, etc. struggled up the rocky path, the jungle closing in all around, occasionally glimpsing Milot far below, and the air becoming ever stickier as the sun rose higher in the bright blue sky.

I remember chatting with Jean and Pierre. I hadn't used my French in a while but we got along. Jean had a sister in Montreal and when he learned I was from Canada, as he pulled and pushed he waved excitedly to the other "mule men", pointing towards me and shouting "Canadien, Canadien!" whereupon there were many smiles and nods in my direction. I learned there are many priests and other Canadian "helpers" in Haiti.

At the halfway point (after about 2 hours), all the "riders" were served a snack of juice or water, brought along from the ship. The mule drivers rested and had a drink of water. About half an hour later, the climb resumed, the trail becoming so steep that I had to lean forward and cling tightly to Fifi's broad, warm neck while Jean pulled and Pierre pushed. On either side of the trail, among the palms and bushes, were tar paper shacks, women breastfeeding infants, ragged children playing, dogs and cats yawning or sleeping, and tattered rags (clothing?) on lines strung between the trees. Everyone smiled and waved.

Two sweaty hours later, we reached the summit, dismounted from the mules etc., walked up the path past enormous quantities of cannonballs, and climbed the steps to the flat roof of the fortress. Here there was a 360 degree view - on the one side the jungle slopes and green countryside of the Dominican Republic – and on the other side the dense jungle and brownish fields of Haiti, with our ship like a toy in the distance, anchored at Cap Haitien, and beyond that the blue Caribbean stretching to the horizon. It was like standing on the top of the world.

I remember the experience of going to the toilet at the Citadelle. At one end of the ramparts stood a small "house", its door guarded on each side by a stout Haitien armed with a bucket full of water. The procedure was simple. One entered, there was a quite usual toilet complete with toilet seat, one did the necessary, and then one exited. At that point, one of the "guards" entered and 'flushed' the toilet with his bucket of water. While he was off refilling it, his partner dealt with the next 'user'. Well organized except no toilet paper!

I sat on a stone wall in the courtyard and ate a box lunch (again provided by the ship). There was a barbecued chicken leg, a bread roll, a

small cup of cabbage salad, a cookie and a sealed cup of juice. We were instructed that when we finished we should put our garbage in a container resembling a big mesh playpen, located in the centre of the courtyard.

As we turned to leave, a crowd of people (who lived in the shacks on the mountainside) suddenly appeared. They carefully climbed into the "playpen", and began sifting out and eating our scraps.

The return journey took only one hour. It was very bumpy and bouncy! I had to lean far backwards and hold on tightly to Fifi's mane, while my ribcage took such a beating that it hurt to move for about a week afterwards.

As we neared the bottom of the mountain and slowed down, we were continually followed by a group of begging children between the ages of 4 and 12 (I think). Most of us began going through our pockets and giving them our small change. Many of them carried beautiful wood carvings which they wanted to sell but unfortunately most of the wood they use is full of termites and not safe to take home. Later, I did manage to buy a beautiful "safe" carving in the Milot town square.

All our small change having been expended, one lady happened to drop a pencil stub while ransacking her purse for more. Immediately about eight children fell upon the stub and when we realized that pencils were so highly prized, we gave all that we had to a mob of joyful children. And when we gave them all our ball point pens too, it was as if they had received the crown jewels!

When at last we reached the Milot town square and dismounted, I gave Fifi a hug and then it was time to pay Jean and Pierre their daily fee, which was Can. $4; but we were allowed to tip, resulting in more smiles and handshakes with Jean and Pierre. After the 6 hour trek, I don't think there was anyone who didn't give a tip. Jean and Pierre were family men. I asked myself, was any amount really enough?

I remember learning about the Citadelle. Why was such a fortress on top of a 3,000 foot mountain? Well, Columbus first discovered Haiti in 1492. Later arrived the Spanish who wiped out the native Arawak peoples. Then in 1697 Haiti became the French colony of Saint-Dominique which became a leading sugarcane producer dependent on (Haitian) slaves. In 1791, there was a rebellion of the 480,000 strong slave population which was suppressed by Napoleon Bonaparte in 1801 but it succeeded in 1804 and the new nation was given the Arawak name, Haiti, and became the world's first independent black colony.

Subsequently, Haiti was divided into two separate areas and Henri Christophe, who had been a leader in the slave rebellion, declared himself king (dictator) of the northern area in 1811. It was he who built and occupied the Sans Souci palace and who commissioned the building of the Citadelle which is the largest fortress in the Americas and was, with the palace, designated a World Heritage Site in 1982. Altogether 20,000 workers built the Citadelle between 1805 and 1820 as part of a system of fortifications designed to keep the newly-independent nation of Haiti safe from French incursions. The fortress was outfitted with 365 cannon of varying size together with enormous stockpiles of cannonballs which are still there because, ironically, a French attack never came! As for Henri Christophe, he eventually fell from grace and in 1820 he committed suicide, according to legend, by shooting himself with a silver bullet. Since then, Haiti has been ruled by a seemingly endless line of dictators who imposed absolute obedience to their authority.

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So we returned to our luxury liner, showered in our air conditioned staterooms, enjoyed our five course dinner (served by quite a few waiters from Cap Haitien, who prized a job on a cruise ship), and wished each other a Merry Christmas.

I remember that, later, some of us asked questions. We learned that the average per capita income in Haiti was about $60 per annum, that a woman will bake her bread for the family, reserve maybe two loaves of it and carry them to market on a tray on her head, sell them for the best price she can get, buy some more flour etc., walk the two miles home, bake again, feed her family, reserve some more loves, and repeat this every day to survive. Life expectancy is 60.

Over the years, I heard that Papa Doc died and that Baby Doc succeeded him, and to celebrate his succession the streets of Port au Prince were paved. Baby Doc had been educated elsewhere and there was talk of better days for the people of Haiti. Much later I heard about riots, political upheaval. Baby Doc had to leave Haiti – more political unrest.

I sometimes remembered, I occasionally heard, but it was all so very far away, wasn't it. Most of the time, I forgot.

But I could never completely forget Jean and Pierre, the little boys with their roosters, and those children fighting for pencil stubs. At the time, all I could think was "Thank God it's a warm climate and the sun shines

mostly every day to warm them". Now, thirty years later, the sight of them still remains, engraved in my memory.

I wonder where those little boys are now? Did they grow up, marry, have children? Did they die in the earthquake?

Some years after my visit, I learned that the cruise ships stopped visiting Cap Haitien. What happened to Jean and Pierre and their families, Fifi and the other mule and horse owners, and all the hungry people on the mountain?

I ask myself why I know so very little about a land so beautiful and so poor. I suppose we are all very busy with our own lives, aren't we?

Why does it take a tragedy like a devastating earthquake happening before us "rich ones" stop to think about the right of even a child, a Haitian child, to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness"?

It seems to me the "tragedy" has really been going on in Haiti for centuries. The earthquake simply shocked "the world" into seeing Haiti clearly for the first time.

For Haiti, could it now, finally, be possible to bring about life out of death, prosperity out of poverty, hope out of despair and enduring "joy" out of sorrow?

The pain of Haiti challenges humankind to rise to its noble best.

I remember Haiti, but is remembering really enough?

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Footnote:

If you would like to see the murals (most of which have been destroyed), go to: http://thewoundedbird.blogspot.com/2010/01/murals-in-holy-trinity-cathedral-haiti.html and http://haitiforever.com/windowsonhaiti/trinity.shtml

For details about the Citadelle Laferriere, go to: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Citadelle_Laferri%C3%A8re

For a map of Haiti, go to: http://www.worldatlas.com/webimage/countrys/namerica/caribb/lgcolor/htcolor.htm
Haiti.cbc.oct10