

4.3 Meeting Haiti Eye to Eye: June 2011

As many of you know, I am recently back from a trip to Haiti with 9 other men and women who are studying for the Unitarian Universalist ministry. The beginning and end of my formal journey into ministry have been bracketed by the nation of Haiti. The first book that I was assigned to read as I entered the Candler School of Theology was Tracy Kidder's book about Doctor Paul Farmer titled *Mountains Beyond Mountains*. And, the last week of my ministerial internship was spent with a group of ministerial candidates in Haiti.

When I committed to deliver a sermon this morning I realized that it was Father's day and I thought that I could craft a sermon around family life and fatherhood as I saw it in Haiti. I have to tell you now that my experience in Haiti has left me reeling with a vision of broken human relationships that has overwhelmed any thought that I had of speaking around the topic of Father's day. For that I apologize. There is one central figure in my presentation today and his people address him by the honorary title of Father Chavannes. I hope that you will find the story of Father Jean Baptiste Chavannes to be an inspiring one on this father's day.

The immense human tragedy that is Haiti can bring any feeling thinking human being to the point of despair. Haiti can make you call into question whatever faith you have. I use the word faith here in the broadest sense. Faith is the trust in a map of reality that guides the individual and gives direction and meaning to our lives.

Whether your faith is in a loving imminent God, or in a transcendent Spirit of Life; whether your faith is in the human spirit and potential, the strength that comes from people acting in their own self interest; or whether your faith is in the collective human will, the free market capitalist system or a socialist managed economy... Haiti will test your faith and leave you reeling... searching for something solid and grounded to hold on to.

I stumbled on a quote from Carl Jung in preparing this sermon. Carl Jung, the founder of analytical psychology said,

“I have treated many hundreds of patients. Among those in the second half of life - that is to say, over 35 - there has not been one whose problem in the last resort was not that of finding a religious outlook on life.”

Another way to look at that quotation is to say the only way to make sense of the contradictions of life is to cultivate a religious perspective on them. To be religious is to give meaning, to make connections and to develop commitment.

Haiti presents a challenge to anyone who is willing to meet Haiti eye to eye. How do we connect the problems of Haiti to our understanding of the world, How do we give meaning to

what we find in Haiti and what does this say about our commitment to a religious outlook on life?

At the end of each day in Haiti the group of seminarians that I was with gathered on the front porch of the building we were staying in to talk about what we had experienced that day and how that experience was affecting us. On the very first day Kevin Tarsa from Traverse City Michigan talked about an experience that anyone who has traveled to an impoverished location has faced.

We usually traveled to our site in two SUV's. This day, Kevin was in one with six or seven other people sitting on bench seats that ran front to back in the vehicle. The driver had to stop in the city of Hinche in the Haitian highlands to get a tire repaired. The seminarians had opened the back doors of the SUV to let in some fresh, if hot and humid, air. As they sat looking out the back door and talking among themselves, they were respectfully approached by an old woman. When she was right at the back door of the SUV, she looked inside making eye contact with the obviously healthy passengers and then she made the motions with her hands that signify in any language that she was begging for some food.

It has been my experience that a travel agent or a local host who might accompany me in such circumstances would most likely counsel me to ignore the beggar, look away, or even look angry and dismissive. The seminarians hadn't been prepared for this confrontation and they nervously looked away from the beggar and at each other. No one was prepared to respond to this simple request for some food.

In relating this story, Kevin made the point that it was the direct eye contact that made the difference. He had been looking out the window of the SUV as it moved through city and rural streets, looking at grinding poverty and he was trying to process it intellectually. But when confronted eye to eye with a request for food from another hungry human being, a person that he could reach out and touch a person who he could help directly and immediately, it was entirely different.

These seminarians were face to face with another human being in real need; meeting that person face to face, eye to eye; seeing and feeling her humanity, her need. If they allowed themselves to open their hearts; then they would be called to respond and nothing short of a sincere effort to reach out and help would give them peace...

The easiest way to avoid the discomfort of being confronted by the disparity between my privileged life and the life of a peasant in Haiti is to avoid opportunities that might bring about such a confrontation. Skip over the newspaper articles, change the channel on the TV, and for heavens sake, don't entertain any idea of travel to such a place.

I spent May 24 to May 31 of this year in Haiti at a training center for the Mouvmen Payizan Papay in the central highland of Haiti. The MPP was founded in 1973 by Chavannes John Baptiste. As the name implies it is an organization of Haitian peasants that started in the little village of Papay about two miles from the city of Hinche in the Haitian central highlands.

The logo for MPP shown in this slide tells you a lot about the mission of the organization. The palm tree is symbol of freedom for Haitians and is prominent on the Haitian flag. The palm tree in this case is growing out of a drum that symbolizes the unique cultural heritage of the Haitian people. Beside the drum are the hand tools of a Haitian peasant, the machete, and the pick and the hoe. And, to the right of the drum is the conch shell used to sound like a horn to call the people together. MPP promotes cooperative sustainable organic only farming techniques.

MPP lists its main goals on its web site:

1. Improve the environment and the soil so that Haiti can regain its food sovereignty
2. Contribute to an efficient management of natural resources such as water, forests, seeds, etc
3. Advocate for women's rights
4. Promote environmentally conscious and sustainable alternative sources of energies
5. Work to build the countryside to become a dream place for people to live, work and raise families

This "JustWorks" trip was arranged as a cooperative effort between the Unitarian Universalist Association, the Meadville Lombard Seminary and the Starr King Seminary. The Unitarian Universalist Association is the association of congregations that includes the Columbus Fellowship. Meadville Lombard and Starr King are the only two Unitarian Universalist seminaries in the country, located in Chicago and in Berkeley California respectively.

The Unitarian Universalist Service Committee is a non-sectarian organization that advances human rights and social justice in the United States and around the world. Headquartered in Cambridge, Mass., UUSC is a tax-exempt 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation. Their mission and vision are guided by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the seven Unitarian Universalist principles that affirm the worth, dignity, and human rights of every person.

A few minutes ago, I described an "eye to eye encounter" between a group of UU seminarians and a woman begging for food in Haiti. The UUSC uses the term "Eye to Eye Partnership" to describe the manner in which it does its work.

The UUSC does not presume to know what is best for the people that it is trying to help. Instead they identify partners in their target area.

Quoting from the UUSC annual report: *What is an eye-to-eye partnership?*

“An eye-to-eye partnership is a partnership that offers respect and mutuality, that appreciates diversity, that gives each other support, that is open to teaching each other. The commonality of our partners is that we treat them as equals.”

The annual report for the UUSC in 2010 quotes the great American labor and political leader Eugene Debs:

“I would not lead you into this Promised Land . . . because if I could lead you in, someone else would lead you out.”

The UUSC searches for partners that are working for the Promised Land; partners that are not asking to be lead but are asking to be supported in their struggle. The UUSC supports such programs around the world including right here in *Georgia*.

The Southern Alternatives Agricultural Cooperative is the only African American-owned pecan shelling facility in the United States — and it is run by women. They are located in Leslie GA 70 miles SE of Columbus. One of the things that makes the UUSC such a treasure is that they appreciate and build their programs around the distinction between charity and social justice. Charity is absolutely necessary to mitigate the immediate effects of social injustice. But, it is the role of social justice work to identify the root causes and seek to eradicate them. The idea behind the trip was to coordinate the efforts of the association, the UUSC and the seminaries in the training and formation of ministers with respect to social justice issues.

After the earthquake in January of 2010 the UUSC looked for partners in Haiti that they could assist. They have six different partners in Haiti now. One of the most important of these is MPP. As a rural agricultural cooperative movement MPP was not directly affected by the devastation of the earthquake, but they were soon overwhelmed trying to cope with the refugees from Port au Prince who moved out of the city into the highlands. The UUSC partnered with MPP to help provide funds to care for these refugees. In particular MPP proposed the development of an “Eco-village” that would eventually include 40 homes and associated agricultural land that could provide shelter and livelihood for a small number of refugees. Our task in the seven days we were in Haiti was to help build the foundations for the first three of these homes.

This group of ten seminary students came to Haiti and saw the wonderful work being done by Chavannes Jean Batiste. Father Chauvannes began his work with the peasants of Haiti as a lay worker in the Catholic Church. He thought he was facing a technical problem. The peasants of Haiti needed to learn some basic good farming techniques and his role was to teach them. He quickly discovered some deeper root causes that were preventing the peasants from

adopting his agricultural techniques. The peasants were being held back by a superstitious fatalism and a divisive social pattern. Both of these were born out of ignorance.

The fatalism manifested itself in a belief that a good crop or a poor crop was more the consequence of the will of God than it was the result of anything that the farmer could do. If the crops failed because of lack of rain, it was God's will. Irrigation, for example, was an attempt to circumvent the will of God and was thus pointless.

The divisive social patterns also had a basis in superstition. It is still a common belief that illness and other social calamities are the result of deliberate spells cast by jealous neighbors or family members. There was a built in bias against cooperation. This bias was not helped by the fact that Haiti had been ruled from its beginnings by military elites that held the power of life and death over the peasants and that often took brutal action to break up any possibility of an organized resistance. Your neighbor might very well betray you to the authorities and so it was extremely difficult to develop trust.

We were staying at the training facility for MPP and we were given tours of the facilities and pilot projects being used to train the peasants. It was all very appealing. Composting techniques were being developed, drip irrigation technology, traditional plant species were being recovered and trees were being grown and planted in an attempt to restore some of the forested land of Haiti.

I was impressed by what I saw, but at the same time, coming from my background in the United States and Canada it seemed to me that there had to be a role for mechanized farming and for industrial plantations. I had the opportunity to ask Chavannes what role he saw in Haiti for industrial agriculture. I was not prepared for the answer... absolutely none. Haiti should be farmed using organic techniques only and all of the available land should be worked by the peasants in cooperative farms.

Chavannes made it clear to me that he had no use for the bureaucrats and the capitalists of big business. He called them the people of the city. I had been reading about the history of Haiti before this trip but I was woefully unprepared to understand what I was seeing. I continued to read on my return and I am slowly making some sense out of what I have seen.

The history of Haiti has been a history of exploitation of the poor of Haiti by those who controlled the land the capital and the military weapons. Although the country had its own brutal dictators, these dictators were supported by the great powers of the world. After 1823 and the Monroe Doctrine, the USA primarily became the power behind the power in Haiti.

This exploitation has pitted the 80% of the population which is rural, dark skinned, poor and illiterate against the 20% of the population which is urban, lighter skinned, more affluent and better educated. Jean Baptiste Chavannes has lived through much of this history of hardship, terror and injustice. As an advocate for the peasants, he was the enemy of the military rulers of Haiti. He survived a number of assassination attempts and he had at one point to flee Haiti and live in exile. He saw the meager buildings of his MPP movement knocked down by the Haitian military after the 1991 coup.

I confess that after a week in Haiti and almost three weeks of reflection on the experience I am not optimistic for the future of that nation. The present president appears to be in the mold of the ruling class who identify with the rich and powerful who see the solution for Haiti in terms of making the country friendly to foreign investment. Looking at Haiti's history it does not seem that foreign investment has done much to alleviate the plight of the poor majority in Haiti.

As a UU I am part of an organization that affirms and promotes the use of the democratic process. I have little doubt that in a true and fair democratic election the victor would not be setting out to make Haiti business friendly. It is much more likely the victor would be someone like Chavannes Jean Baptiste... a man committed to the poor of the country.

If I use the image of the impoverished peasant standing before me as a metaphor for Haiti I admit that I find it hard to hold the eye to eye contact... I want to ignore the peasant, to look away.

The plight of Haiti is the result of a system based upon centuries of exploitation and greed. I benefit from living comfortably within the system of American political economic and military power. The same system that has cooperated with those who have exploited the country of Haiti.

I agree with Carl Jung, that the my problem in the last resort is finding a religious perspective that can incorporate these contradictions, that can give meaning, make connections and develop commitment.

What positive message can you take away this morning?

As I said, Haiti can break your spirit. It can leave you questioning your faith, whatever that faith may be. It can leave you reeling searching for a solid clod of earth to stand on.

Perhaps Father Jean Baptiste Chavannes and his MPP is such foothold for our hopes. Despite military dictatorships and repression, despite assassination attempts, despite exile from his beloved Haiti he continues to work toward a vision of a restored self sufficient Haiti, where the people of Haiti are the goal and not the means to an end.

I will close with the words of the great Unitarian Universalist Theologian James Luther Adams...

"The meaning of life is found only by those who enter into the struggle for justice in history."

May it be so. Amen