
Volunteer's Journal - Molly Bangs

Haiti was overwhelming from the moment I stepped into the airport at Port-au-Prince. I had expected this. But as many times as I'd seen the images on television or read about the disparity in newspapers, it was never tangible until I saw it. Even now, the magnitude of it all is yet to sink in. But realizing and digesting the Haitian reality, that over 300,000 people died in the January earthquake and millions are still living in sprawling, filthy tent camps with a rising threat of a cholera epidemic that has already killed over 1,000, all under the nose of a useless government, is not possible in two months time. Attempting to fathom the situation all at once is enough to send anyone running for the next airplane back to the first world. Haiti is best consumed in small doses.

Not to say that the country is an utterly destitute and hopeless mess. Chaotic and daunting as it may be, Haiti is teeming with energetic, beautiful people with a genuine zeal for life. All the Haitians I have been acquainted with are boldly honest and instantly loveable. And they all know how to dance.

Living with nuns is, as one would expect, an experience unto itself. I have always pictured nuns as personified penguins completely void of personality and imagination. The sisters here in Lilavois are very much the opposite. They are singing, dancing, gossiping, laughing, burping, loud and excitable creatures. They get a kick out of having their photo taken and showing me what their hair looks like under their habits. They like to keep a stash of cold beer in the refrigerator for me even though none of them will drink it. They are enormously kind and generous. Sometimes too generous. The words "I am not hungry" seem to have little meaning to them, which often creates the effect of living with five grandmothers.

The sisters have been very accepting of my religious beliefs, or rather, the lack thereof. In the unhurried words of Sister Rosemane "You are not a Christian, and that is not a problem." She asked me last week if, perhaps, I would like to come to a mass with her just to see what it was like. I agreed. They have been so tolerant towards me I figured I should return their respect, and also it would be an interesting experience from an anthropological perspective. That it was. Afterwards, Sister Angela asked me the inevitable question "so how did you like the mass?" Well, the truth is I found the priests' sermon unrealistic and rather offensive, but instead I answered with the universally recognized facial expression for "Not exactly my cup of tea." No further questions were asked.

The best part about going to mass was the journey there. Sister Rosemane suggested we take motorcycles, which one hires like a taxi driver here. I hesitantly agreed. There was something very heartwarming about watching Sister Rosemane in her white habit traveling down a dusty Haitian back street on her way to mass on the back of a motorcycle. She promised me we will go on another ride soon, this time not to church.

I have been conducting English lessons with three of the sisters here during the week. Sister Angela has been teaching me some Creole in return. I have grown especially fond of these lessons. The sisters are eager to learn and eager to laugh, and their eagerness is infectious. Last week, one of our topics of conversation was "What are you interested in?" Sister Rosemane's reply was "les singes". I didn't understand the word and no one knew the English translation. The definition I came across when I looked it up online was "monkeys". Sister Rosemane apparently had an interest in monkeys. I discussed this with her at dinner, and after several rounds of gorilla-like impressions I came to understand that the word actually encompasses "apes" as a whole. "You know, Molly, there are some people who think that humans came from apes. Evolution. Do you believe that?" she asked. "Yes, of course I do." I replied more quickly than intended, now half-expecting a lecture. "Me, I'm not sure," she said. "I find this very interesting."

My original motivation for coming here was my interest in Aquaculture, which I plan to pursue a degree in starting next September. I figured I could get a bit of hands-on experience working at the tilapia ponds here in Lilavois. On a small-scale operation like the one here, I have learned that this consists primarily of feeding the fish and waiting. We are predicting a harvest mid-September. A couple of weeks back, I joined the notable aquaculturist Valentin Abé for a tour of his fish hatchery in Croix-des-Bouquets, one of three projects he has in Haiti. The shiny, state of the art hatchery produces millions of fingerlings every year. This is aquaculture on a businessman's level. What is disturbing is that once the grown fish are harvested and brought to market, only about 20% of Haitians have enough money to buy them to feed their families.

One of the most remarkable characters I have ever met is a young Haitian man named Peter Gamaée. The talented photographer Andrew Hogan, who traveled with our group in October, was exploring the streets of Lilavois when Peter approached him and spoke to him in English. When asked how he learned to speak English, he replied that he had taught himself. After the rest of the group left for the U.S., Peter came to see me at the school, and since then we have been having English lessons two or three times a week.

Peter's story is a heartbreaking one. At 17, he has already endured more hardship than many people will face in a lifetime. He lost the better part of his immediate family in the earthquake. He buried his own father. His mother's remains are still buried somewhere in the rubble of his crumbled home. His older brother was badly injured, and after waiting nine days for medical workers to reach the village, he died. Peter lives in a tent in his backyard with his little sister and uncle. When international aid workers finally reached the area, they spoke little French and no Creole, and Peter spoke no English. He began to teach himself with the help of a used book he found at a market and by listening to the USAID workers.



Peter Gamaée (photo by Andrew Hogan)

Despite all the hurdles that Peter has confronted in his short life, he is remarkably upbeat and full of life. I have never heard him complain about his misfortune. He speaks fondly of his parents, but is excited about what the future holds for him. He is passionate about becoming fluent in English. He sees it as his ticket out of poverty, as he hopes to find a job as a translator one day. His progress over the past weeks has been immense and he is very pleased with himself. I don't think I have ever met someone so driven. Last week I told Peter that if he found an English teacher who would continue working with him after I left, I would leave him enough money to pay for the class. He returned two days later and had already found a course to suit him. Fifty dollars for a month may not seem very expensive, but it is beyond the price range of most Haitians.

Cholera in Haiti has been a popular topic with the international media. Though many Haitians seem to feel that the media is playing up the epidemic, it appears that most people are taking the problem seriously. There are posters scattered about Port-au-Prince explaining the disease, how it spreads, and how it can be prevented. Similar messages are being spread via radio broadcasts and church services. The teachers at the school here have discussed the importance of washing hands frequently and drinking clean water with students of all ages. The sisters

were surprised to hear that the epidemic was the main headline on the New York Time's website two weeks ago. They asked me if I was scared. The truth is, no. Here, where we are educated, have access to clean water, safe food, and good sanitation, the chances of falling ill are slim. Unfortunately, these conditions are not present in much of the country. Cholera is very much a disease of poverty, and considering the squalid and crowded living conditions of the millions of displaced in Port-au-Prince, it is a wonder that the disease has not spread faster and done more damage than it has. On a recent trip to the central village of Saut d'Eau, we passed a Unicef cholera treatment center. It consisted of a large, open tent, a doctor, and a smattering of cots.

I'm sure anyone with an interest in Haiti has been following the national elections held last Sunday, as they were also widely publicized. Chaos, violence, and claims of fraud deterred many Haitians from voting, and many that did wish to take part were turned away because their name was not on the list or they were not able to obtain an identification card. Of the sisters in Lilavois, only Sister Cadet voted. The rest seemed apathetic, or did not feel their vote would make a difference. Results from the elections will not be available until December 20th, or later. Even though I have my qualms with the election process in my own country, I must admit that the atrocity that is Haitian politics casts it in a rather favorable light.

Last Thursday, I was wandering around the back yard with the satellite phone waiting for signal to call my parents and wish them a happy Thanksgiving. It was about this time when I noticed the turkey that had been tethered to a tree since my arrival had gone missing. Though he had a habit of breaking free, he was always promptly discovered and retethered. I inquired with Ismin, a particularly warm and lovely young woman who lives and works at the house about his whereabouts. Ismin's French is limited (more so than my own), and her reply translated as "the bird is saved." She made a hand motion that resembled a bird flying away. Instead of putting two and two together, I figured he had escaped.

As you might have guessed, we had a Thanksgiving feast which featured free-range turkey as the main course. Sister Cadet, who spent several years in Boston and is well acquainted with the American holiday, told me she had been saving our back yard friend for Thanksgiving since she found out I would be spending it with her in Haiti. Not only was the meal delicious, but I have also been sleeping more soundly since the turkey has been saved. He was rather talkative in the wee hours of the morning.

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