

Mustard Seeds:

On What Laying Groundwork, Following Through, and Paying Sustained Attention Can Accomplish, Even in the Absence of Progress

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*In memory of
The Rev. Dayle Casey
(1937-2023)*

I first went to Haiti forty-two years ago, at age sixteen. It was the first time I had ever been outside the United States. My wife refers to the comfortable town in Wisconsin where I grew up as Lake Wobegon. I learned from personal experience that, if you go from such a town to Haiti and back as an impressionable teenager, you never really go all the way back. To say that it changed my life would be trite understatement. My first two trips to Haiti, for ten days in March 1982 and then for six weeks from February to April 1983—missing a chunk of my last semester of high school and resulting in a C in Statistics taught by the daunting Mr. Wasserman, but I couldn't have cared less—determined both the course and the priorities of the entirety of the rest of my life. For me, everything refers back to Haiti.

It's all my dad's fault.¹ He set the tone, as well as setting an example. In 1994, the year I first started trying to write about Haiti, I asked him to remind me how it all began. "You became involved with Haiti 'accidentally' at first," he reminded me. He had planned to take my older brother Aaron, but "his schedule wouldn't permit him to go, so I came home one day and asked if you'd like to go in his place, and you said, without hesitation, 'Sure!'"

I didn't know it, but I was responding to an invitation to live in and bear witness to the real world, very much as my father himself had done when he was a teenager. He was a very good high school baseball player in the 1950s, a time when white and black players on the same diamond at the same time "was rare for us in Texas," as he remembered. "I recall playing one afternoon in a game somewhere in Dallas when there were only two, maybe three of us who were white. I don't know how it happened; I think I was just asked if I'd like to, and I said, 'Sure!' I recall thinking it was a mildly radical thing to do, something most of my friends wouldn't have been caught dead doing."

My father cultivated patience as a job skill, and anyone

who knew him knew how gentle he was. But his moral spine was stiff, and when push came to shove he didn't suffer fools. If you took care to listen carefully, you would often catch him speaking the unvarnished truth. One such truth was: "In an affluent community, clergy are the help." He understood well enough that many of his parishioners saw his role as akin to that of a well-treated domestic servant, but—or rather, and—he knew that his real job was not to acquiesce in that worldview but to challenge it, always politely but steadfastly. Thus, as he said in his sermon at Father Ed Morgan's funeral:

Ed and I did not begin that work with the idea of solving Haiti's problems. We knew, as Mother Teresa once said, that God does not call us to be successful, but to be faithful. So being faithful in two ways is what we wanted to be. First, we wanted to be faithfully present to brothers and sisters in Haiti who could use some help from their more fortunate friends in the United States. Second, we hoped to provide opportunities for our parishes in Colorado, which run the risk of parochialism in every sense of the word, to see that there is indeed life outside Estes Park and the Broadmoor, and that a catholic Church calls us to be aware of and available to that larger world.



In January 1993, between things and a little lost, I limped into Colorado Springs by car from Detroit. A trip to Haiti was planned later that month, and Dad invited me along. I said sure. You might remember that historical moment; I sure do. In the days before we left there was a flurry of news and rumors, a sense that something was about to break. Haitians were feverishly building boats, hopefully awaiting the inauguration of the American candidate who had pledged: "If I were President, I would—in the absence of clear and compelling evidence that they weren't political refugees—give them temporary asylum until we restored the elected government of Haiti." The *New York Times* was now reporting that Bill Clinton was holed up with his advisers in Little Rock, pondering his promises. The night before our group flew to Miami, we

¹ My father, the Rev. Dayle Casey, was one of three co-founders of the Colorado Haiti Project, along with the Rev. Octave Lafontant and the Rev. Ed Morgan. In 2021, the Colorado Haiti Project changed its name to Locally Haiti. See <https://www.locallyhaiti.org/blog-posts/2023/10/10/dayle-casey>.

learned that Clinton had reneged on his pledge to change his predecessor Bush's policy of forcible repatriation of Haitian boat people. Suddenly, Clinton had discovered "a clear and legitimate distinction between political and economic refugees."

That evening I spoke on the phone with Ed Morgan, who had preceded us to Haiti by a week. The conversation was staccato because of a delay and static on the line.

"Have you heard the latest?" I asked him.

"I don't know," he said. "What's the latest?"

"I've just heard Clinton is reneging on his promise."

"Well, we're hearing here that Aristide is coming back."

"Wow! What's your source?"

"My source is the *New York Post*," he said, seemingly a little offended.

"The *New York Post*?"

"I mean the *Washington Post*."

About fifteen of us gathered at four the next morning at Stapleton Airport. We stayed overnight in Miami. "No halt to repatriations" read the *Miami Herald* headline, above the fold and over a large color photo. Again we heard the rumor that Jean-Bertrand Aristide, the young priest turned leftist president ousted in a coup at the end of September 1991, had returned.

The next morning's banner headline was U.S. BARRICADING HAITI. A flotilla of Coast Guard vessels had been sent, presumably at Clinton's behest, although he hadn't yet been inaugurated. Front-page color illustrations showed the various kinds of planes and ships that constituted an "arsenal of air and sea power." THWARTING AN EXODUS, read the caption.

To see the world from above is a great privilege. In Haiti the mountains rise almost directly from the sea; what they must have looked like when there were still trees on them, one can only imagine. From above, Haiti looks like a topographical map of itself, every feature and coastline naked to the gaze. "I was returning without much hope to a country of fear and frustration," writes Graham Greene in *The Comedians*, "and yet every familiar feature ... gave me a kind of happiness." *There*, as our plane drew in, was the Isle de la Tortue; *there* was the main island's north coast. *There* were the undulant hills and river valleys of the Artibonite; *there* was where the northern peninsula curved to join the narrow mainland north of the capital. *There* was Highway One. Port-au-Prince in the bright sunlight, curving and spreading around the bay and up the slopes of the hills in all directions. The long, sparsely populated Isle de la Gonâve in the bay. And the bright blue bay itself, dotted with fishing boats, more detail visible as the plane descended, every feature familiar and strangely comforting. But this time, knowing the Coast Guard blockade was there, one also had the sensation of flying across a dimensional barrier or permeating a membrane.

Down Boulevard Harry Truman and through Carrefour there was almost no traffic that day. Gasoline was cheaper than it had been, about \$3.75 per gallon, but engine oil was up to

six or seven dollars a quart. No one went out, Ed Morgan told us; people stayed inside and listened to their radios. The military government—the regime that had ousted Aristide—had scheduled elections to the Senate for January 18, but most Haitians saw these as only lending the junta a spurious legitimacy.

DIEU SEUL MAITRE, read the tap-taps. PARTY COOL MAN. VOICI DAD. I LOVE YOU BABY. A TOI SEIGNEUR. And, quintessentially: PATIENCE: TOUT EST MYSTERE. *Aba Aristid*, I read on a concrete wall in Léogâne. *Vende peyi pou pouwwa*. Down with Aristide, who has sold the country for power. And on a billboard: SIDA: *Nou tout ka pran*. AIDS: We all can get it. We rode past the abandoned Reynolds bauxite plant, then two and a half hours to go the bone-jarring last twenty-seven miles.

And at last we were in Petit Trou de Nippes. Two young men greeted us. One played a guitar, and together they sang:

*Jésus, je t'aime,
Parce que tu m'as sauvé ...*

That first evening, too soon, I said to Father Octave Lafontant: "*Je veux discuter avec vous la situation politique.*"

He shrugged.

He proudly showed me the new cistern and outhouses.

"*Eske Titid ap vini anko?*" I asked. Will Aristide come back?

He shrugged again.

Father Lafontant was aristocratic, dignified, driven, committed to his own work. To him, the convulsive vicissitudes of national and international politics were distractions. I had learned this about him in Jeannette in November 1990, when I had asked him which candidate he preferred in the presidential election due to take place less than three weeks later.

"Aristide will win," he had responded, then lifted a finger: "—if he lives."

Did former World Bank official Marc Bazin, whom the United States supported, stand a chance?

"Between you and me, no. Aristide is too popular."

Which candidate did he support?

"I support the candidate who will be the best for the country."

Which one was that?

"God will choose the right one."

I didn't buy this. Had God chosen, say, Hitler?

"*Oui. Bon-Dieu a choisi Hitler, mais Hitler a trompé Bon-Dieu.*" God chose Hitler, but Hitler deceived God.²

2 I included this conversation in an essay I wrote a few years later, for a magazine published by evangelical Christians. Without consulting me, the editor changed my translation of *trompé* from *deceived* (correct) to *betrayed* (incorrect). I felt and still feel that the editor betrayed me, not to mention Father Lafontant, who surely knew what he meant to say. I have always considered Octave Lafontant tantamount to what Buddhists call a bodhisattva: a being who has eschewed nirvana for the sake of remaining in this world to help the rest of us along. We do well to take such beings at their word, rather than shoe-horning their wisdom into our own prefabricated theologies.

The day after we arrived in Petit Trou in January 1993 was a Sunday, and the Episcopal Bishop of Haiti was in town in his purple shirt to perform his yearly round of baptisms. The locals gathered in the corrugated-iron shed that was serving as the sanctuary, near the foundation that had been laid for the new church building. Mothers and fathers, wizened elders, impeccably dressed and well-behaved little girls, stiff little boys gathered. The bishop spoke of *la dignité de chaque être humain* and baptized *au nom Papa, Piti e Saint-Esprit*. To us *blancs* he said in English: “We thank you for your sacrifice. We know that each of you have two or three cars in your garage. We know sometime that God will take care of the road, the way he take care of everything.” Then we had the afternoon free. I strolled down the road. A red Land Rover approached from behind. I waved it down and asked for a lift.

“*Pa gen pwoblem,*” said the man driving. He was a local official of the party of Sylvio Claude, the Protestant minister who had been a popular favorite in the 1990 election until Aristide entered the race, and who had been assassinated during the 1991 coup. Three others were in the Land Rover. I got in.

The driver’s name was Williams. “Under Jean-Claude [Duvalier] it was stable,” he told me. “There were no *zinglindos*. But now ...” Zinglindos were gangs of armed thugs who ruled the streets at night. The men dropped me in the town. One of them stayed with me. He was probably in his late teens, and his name was Ismael.”

“*M-renmen peyi blanc,*” Ismael remarked. “*Peyi blanc rich ampil.*” I like white countries. White countries are very rich.

Ismael had been to Guantanamo Bay, where he had been questioned by U.S. authorities, rejected for asylum in the United States, and returned to Haiti. He led me past the town’s square, past plastered houses and wooden huts, and out of town to the cockpit: a dirt square surrounded by palm logs and railings, roofed with banana leaves. Many pairs of eyes watched me. I was asked in English for “one dollar,” the price of admission.

“*Pa genyen,*” I said, which was true. I had no money in my pockets. There was general laughter: mocking but, so I hoped, also welcoming.

While we waited for the cockfight to start, a young man named Jean-Pierre told me in good English about life at Guantanamo Bay.

“It was nice, man,” he said. “Them feed us good. I translate for migration people.”

“INS?” I asked.

“Yes. INS. Here is my idea.” He showed me a laminated card with his photograph on one side.

“Your ID?”

He grinned. “Yes. My ID.”

Jean-Pierre had been interned in Camp 2 at Guantanamo but, because of his language skills, he had been free to show his ID to visit other camps. “Look around, see what’s going on,” he said.

A man was walking around inside the cockpit, blowing a whistle and forcibly pushing people behind the palm logs. Suddenly, without ceremony, two men dropped two cocks on the ground. Amid much cheering and exhortation they squared off, then went after each other with their spikes. For a long time one cock chased the other in circles, first clockwise, then counterclockwise, lunging for its neck. I was jostled, found myself unable to see, elbowed my way back to a view of the action. At long last one of the cocks sat panting in the dirt, its foe stood over it in triumph, the ref blew a long note on his whistle. The cocks’ owners rushed to pick them up and take them a few yards away to suck the blood from their heads and legs. Winning bettors jumped inside the pit, cheering and yelling.

Walking back, Ismael told me about his own trip to Guantanamo. In May 1992, he had paid \$100 to go there in a boat with eighty-seven people. The boat had taken on water and had to return to Haiti’s southern peninsula.

I asked why he had gone.

There was much gang violence now in Port-au-Prince, he said. Zinglindos terrorized, robbed, even entered houses to murder people. In the countryside there was less violence, though many *chefs de section* were *méchants*. Zinglindos would knock on people’s doors claiming to have news of Aristide. When the people opened their door, the zinglindos would enter the house, steal, kill, and *viole se*.

I didn’t understand the phrase.

“Cut,” he said. “Cut your sister.”

On the road we ran into the two brothers who had been singing about Jesus when we arrived. I was to spend much time with them over the coming days, asking and answering questions, walking with them along this road. From them I learned a little of what it was like to pin one’s hopes on a packed, rickety boat crossing six hundred miles of open sea.

Didn’t they know attempting a sea journey was dangerous?

“*C’est la vie,*” said one of them. He planned to try again in February.

Why had he left the first time?

Zinglindos had broken into his house in Port-au-Prince, he said, and he had escaped to a friend’s house in the mountains. He had paid \$180 for passage to Guantanamo—more than Ismael, because his boat had a motor. He had stayed in Guantanamo two months, until his petition for political asylum in the United States was rejected and he was returned to Port-au-Prince.

Did he know about the announcement Clinton had just made, that he would continue the Bush policy of forcible repatriation? Would it change his mind?

No, he would try again regardless. So would Ismael.

But why?

Although they could die in boats, both of them said, they could just as easily die on the streets of Port-au-Prince.

Would they change their plans if Aristide returned?

“Can Titid stop the terror?” asked Ismael. “Can he control the army?”

Back where our tents were pitched, my father proposed some questions he thought I should ask the two brothers. Were many people still planning to get in boats on Wednesday, the day of Clinton’s inauguration? If the brothers went again, would they go alone, or would they take their families? Did they not know that Clinton had arranged the Coast Guard blockade with Bush?



Father Lafontant said something I still didn’t understand: that Aristide could not be both prophet and president. But now Haiti and the international community were stuck, he said: Aristide was the legitimately elected president.

Ed Morgan had been thinking about the embargo and felt he had gleaned two salient points. The United States defined Haitians as economic, not political, refugees, he said; yet it used an economic means that affected the poor—the embargo—as a political tool. Second, Haiti had always been poor. If Haitians were economic rather than political refugees, then why were so many suddenly fleeing now?



Our work in Petit Trou was no different than on previous group trips to Haiti. I spent my days with Susan Hatch, a maternal nurse-practitioner from Denver, examining children and pregnant women, translating questions and instructions, telling mothers when and how to give our medicine to their children. On the day Bill Clinton became President of the United States, Susan Hatch and I examined a four-month-old male baby. He weighed two and a half kilograms. His tiny feet were grossly swollen, and his skin was translucent and unnaturally tight. His body was covered in scabies. He lay motionless on the table, sporadically emitting feeble cries.

Another nurse, Marti O’Dell, told me of the woman she had seen that day. The upper half of her right breast was completely eaten away by cancer—“blown away,” Marti said. On the breast was a lesion at least four inches in diameter, its lip an inch thick, “rock solid,” with rough edges. The woman had had a biopsy in a nearby town, but for lack of a hundred dollars could not afford a mastectomy.

At four in the afternoon on the twenty-first, I saw a three-year-old girl with kwashiorkor, her belly vastly swollen. Kwashiorkor happens when fluid accumulates in the abdomen because of a lack of protein. It’s common in Haiti.

The Haitian woman doctor with our group saw a woman who almost certainly had HIV. She had tuberculosis, fever, and diarrhea, and her hair was beginning to straighten. The day before, the doctor had seen the woman’s husband. Thirty-five percent of the population of Port-au-Prince was infected with HIV, she told me. But the good news was that AIDS was much less prevalent in the countryside.

I asked: With so many people, especially men, fleeing violence in Port-au-Prince ...

Yes, she said. They will spread HIV in the countryside.

She worried about the result if she herself were to be tested. She had delivered two babies without gloves.

“Why?” asked someone, incredulous.

“The woman was about to have it right on the front porch,” said the doctor. “There was nothing I could do. I had to deliver it.”

On our last night in Petit Trou we ate by lantern—the generator had been down since the night before—then sat in reflective postures in cane chairs and on the ground. The male Haitian doctor with us was dark and thin, mustached, less confident than the woman. He came from Jérémie near the remote tip of the southern peninsula, site of the infamous Vespers, when Papa Doc Duvalier had massacred the town’s mulatto elite. The doctor’s own family was black, not mulatto; he had done well in school and had finished second in his medical school class. His parents had been college-educated, but he knew little about his grandparents, or at least he volunteered little. He believed one of his great-great-grandfathers might have been white.

I told him I was sad and didn’t want to leave.

“Separation syndrome?” he offered, with a smile.

“The little boy who was having the seizures,” Marti asked him. “The parents took him away because they said it was spirits. What will happen to him?”

“They will take him to a *houngan*”—a voodoo priest—“and of course he will die. If he doesn’t get better in a day or two, they will say there is nothing they can do.”

“So basically, they will let him die.”

“Yes, of course,” he said, tired, a little irritable. “He will die.”

I had grown fond of the two brothers. “Marti says that you are indispensable,” I told the older one.

“Yes, yes,” he agreed. “I am indispensable.” He paused. “I spend many days now with you,” he said. “And Ted, and Marti. When you go, I will feel—a gweat sadness.”

“I too will feel a great sadness.”

There was another pause.

“But we can write letters to each other,” I said.

“If I don’t go to Santo Domingo, we can wite.”

“If you go to Santo Domingo, tell Father Lafontant your address.”

He shook his head vigorously. “I can’t tell Father Lafontant if I go to Santo Domingo.” He and his brother were only provisionally in the priest’s favor, because they were politically active, supporters of Aristide.

Just before Mass that last evening, miniature farewells anticipated our departure the next morning. “When you think you will come back here, to Haiti?” asked the older brother.

“I don’t know. Maybe next year,” I said, implausibly.

“In ninety-four.”

“Maybe.”

I imagined the prospect with pleasure, mingled with a pre-emptive nostalgia that acknowledged the unlikelihood. A year from now I would be in Thailand, and he planned to be in Santo Domingo.

“Ethan.”

“*Oui.*”

“When you wite the informations, please don’t wite the name of me, and my bwudder. You understand? Because the Haitian police is very week-ed. Yes?”

“Yes. Of course.”

Three children were holding my hands. One of them, the brothers’ adorable youngest nephew, was my father’s godson.

“*Mwen renmen ti moun yo ampil,*” I said.

“And they love you too,” said the older brother. “Jesus say, ‘Let the little kids to come to me.’”

Back in Port-au-Prince, the evening before we flew back, I said to my father: “I don’t want to leave.”

“Well,” he replied, “it’s time to move on to the next thing.”



So much mud has hurtled down Haitian hillsides since 1993 that we’re tempted to consider the Aristide phenomenon old news; that was, after all, more than thirty years ago now. But what’s striking to me is how little has changed in terms of what’s really at stake—and not only since 1993 or 1990, or since 1957 when François Duvalier came to power, but since 1791, the year the slave uprising that became the Haitian Revolution began. *Plus ça change.* Or, I can hear my dad pointing out, since Jesus spoke the truth to the Pharisees and the Roman Empire. Or for that matter since Isaiah: “Seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.”³ As he put it in a sermon just after the 1991 coup:

The *basic* reason is that truth and power in this world do not mix well. A year ago, as a priest who was responding to his vocation as prophet, as one who seeks to speak God’s Word to his people, Father Aristide could substantially speak the truth, because that was his purpose, his aim, the reason for his life. But once *inside* the government,

once he was President with at least some of the world’s authority at his disposal, once he became responsible not only to God and to the poor in Haiti but to *all* elements of Haitian society, Aristide has found that the truth can bite you if it’s spoken too boldly—or acted upon. He has found that in the world, including that part of the world of which he is president, those who have more concern for their power or their self-interest will often sacrifice truth to power and self-interest. So now Father Aristide in Caracas and the army in Port-au-Prince are negotiating. They are trying to determine whether power and truth can share the same office, or what mix of truth and power might be acceptable to all concerned.

Jesus, standing before Pilate two thousand years ago, witnessed to the truth. And part of the truth is that in the struggle between truth and power and self-interest in this world, truth is often sacrificed to power, because of sin. So Pilate handed Jesus over to be crucified, because Pilate did not know what truth was, and did not care. Or rather, better, because in Jesus, Pilate looked Truth in the eye ... and he recognized there the threat of truth to his authority and his power and his own self-interest. And, fearing the truth, he had Truth put away.⁴

In more prosaic historical terms, the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 was a massive geopolitical earthquake that was felt as far from its epicenter as South Africa, Nepal, and Kashmir, not to mention Haiti. The aftershocks are still being felt everywhere.⁵ As Jalil Andrabi, a Kashmiri lawyer who documented human rights abuses by the Indian military—and who, not coincidentally, was later found dead in a river with his eyes gouged out—told me in Srinagar in 1994: “We thought that if people of Romania can go out on the streets and get rid of a dictator, why can’t we go out on the streets in Kashmir?” Many Haitians had similar thoughts, and the vehicle they found for expressing those thoughts in words and actions—or that found them—was Aristide. As they had done two centuries earlier, in 1990 Haitians posed starkly the most awkward of universal questions: Do we really believe in government of, by, and for the people? And the fact that democracy was suddenly in the air worldwide meant that, in that moment, the matter couldn’t be dismissed or fudged.



Another of my father’s aphorisms, one that has haunted me, is: “Well-adjusted people don’t become writers.” Didn’t my own dad want me to be well-adjusted? It turns out that no, he

⁴ In *The Comedians*, the Haitian character Dr. Magiot says to the narrator, Mr. Brown: “I’d rather have blood on my hands than water like Pilate.”

⁵ My late mentor Clyde Edwin Pettit, author of the brilliant, distinctive Vietnam War history *The Experts: 100 Years of Blunder in Indo-China* (alternate subtitle: *The Book That Proves There Are None*), told me in Bangkok sometime in the mid-1990s that he had long predicted that, if the Berlin Wall ever fell, many who had bemoaned it would come to miss the geopolitical stability it had represented and helped enforce.

³ Isaiah 1:16-17

didn't, not really, because to know truth is preferable to living in ignorance. In Haiti at sixteen I was exposed to too much truth at too young an age. I have always considered my early exposure to Haiti a great personal blessing. But, around 2004, when Haiti endured another upheaval and I followed my urge to go there to witness and understand the aftermath, thus precipitating a painful upheaval in my personal life, I realized that it was also a *blessure*, a wound. *Bai kou blie, pote mak sonje*, Haitians say: The one who gives the blow forgets, the one who bears the bruise remembers. Remembering is better than forgetting, but remembering is also painful, because it's our bruises that remind us to remember. Knowing Haiti from a young age turned out to be good preparation for coming to terms with the inevitable loss and failure that attend every human lifetime, as well as every society. We're not entitled to be optimistic unless first we're realistic. As my father said to me, in his car on the way to a medical appointment just two or three weeks before he died: "It's not a matter of what Christians want; it's a matter of what is."

My career as a writer, which has taken me from Thailand to Pakistan to Zimbabwe to Panama and more recently to South Africa and Rwanda, and always back to Haiti, has been a perpetual and often resentful struggle against human beings' ingrained unwillingness to know the truth. Which brings to mind something else my father said to me: "Why do you always have to do things the hard way?" But I blame him for that, because he took me to Haiti at sixteen. For decades, as in the archetypal "hero's journey" that Joseph Campbell identified in many cultures' myth systems, I've repeatedly returned and tried to share the things I began learning then with my own people—middle-class Americans—in writing that I always hope is accessible and palatable, while remaining true. It turns out doing that is hard. I don't say that I've succeeded, but I've always tried, and I'm still trying.

My first try was a book-length manuscript that I wrote in a white-hot frenzy of urgent purpose, even as events continued hurtling forward throughout 1993 and 1994, and as I was also working hard to establish myself as a freelance journalist in a vast swath of the world then still new to me, based in Bangkok. In retrospect I believe that I did, over time, achieve a measure of earned understanding of the Asian societies I was encountering, but I also never really left Haiti. It was with the eyes of one who had seen Haiti that I looked at chronically desperate Cambodia, and tortured Burma, and severely deformed Thailand. In my bones I knew that these places were not behind the times, but ahead of the curve. I also was coming to know the illusions of my own society for what they are. The appalling immediacy of life and death and the ceaseless urgency of politics in Haiti had changed me; having set foot there meant that to remain innocent would have required greater exertion than to acknowledge the world's seamlessness and the implications of my own involvement.

The title I gave that first attempt was the phrase the Clinton

administration (abetted by the broader U.S. establishment) had appropriated for what it claimed to be doing for Haiti: *Restoring Democracy*. I thought the irony would be self-evident. To read about Haiti in assembly-line news reports circa 1993-94—usually agency copy printed, at times above the fold, in papers like the *Bangkok Post* and *The Times of India* and the Asian edition of the *International Herald Tribune* (because that Haitian crisis was also an American crisis)—was disorienting and demoralizing. The country I was reading about was a cartoon of the country I knew. The language in which the stories were written resembled English but consisted of ready-made (not to say Orwellian) phrases—such as *restoring democracy* and *refugee flows* and the old chestnut *poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere*—and low-rent metaphoric imagery: the UN Security Council was going to "clamp" an embargo on Haiti; unhappy Haitian legislators wanted aid to start "flowing" again. As C.L.R. James pointed out in *The Black Jacobins*, his magnificent history of the Haitian Revolution: "In politics, all abstract terms conceal treachery."

A magazine editor who wished me well—the same one who willfully mistranslated Octave Lafontant—assured me that *Restoring Democracy* was publishable. He was wrong. For one thing, I was too callow in my vocation and had not yet learned the hard wisdom in Emily Dickinson's dictum—which my father was very fond of quoting, indeed as recently as a few days before he died—that one must "tell all the truth but tell it slant." I exhausted myself completing and revising *Restoring Democracy*, then I sent it⁶ to a New York literary agent recommended by a friend as soon as I possibly could, which was January 1995, just three months after the United States had, so to speak, restored democracy in Haiti courtesy of a military invasion. The agent's response was prompt, brief, and brutal: "People's interest in Haiti has peaked." By "people" I took her to mean notionally book-buying middle-class Americans.⁷

My next attempt to write about Haiti was in 2004, the year of the second coup against Aristide, when Dick Cheney said, quote-unquote, "We're glad to see him go."⁸ I witnessed and learned a great deal in Haiti and South Florida during the second half of 2004. I called my second manuscript *Haitian Revolutions*, and this time I actually had a contract with a publisher, but the deadline was unrealistic and, again, the continuing events I was covering were too raw and unprocessed; my editor called my manuscript "incoherent." I wanted to retort: *Yeah, that's because the country and its history and its plight are chronically incoherent. You try writing about Haiti.* Nor did it

6 It's worth noting that this was before you could just attach a Word document to an email and consider that a submission. I paid to have a book-length manuscript printed, packaged it up, then paid to have it shipped by airmail from Bangkok to New York.

7 The agent concluded her very short letter: "But I'd love to stay in touch. Please tell me what else you're working on." I didn't.

8 Alert Haiti-watchers will have noted that the mass prison break that precipitated the escalation of the country's latest crisis occurred twenty years to the day after the February 29, 2004 coup.

help that the publisher was British; Haiti was too peripheral to its field of vision. So that second attempt failed too, and soon after, as I alluded above, my personal life in England imploded and then I washed up in 2006 in Seattle, as far from England as I could get within the continental United States, but alas also all too far from Haiti.

And then, on January 12, 2010—*douze janvier*—came the earthquake. This time I decided simply to do it myself, and *Bearing the Bruise: A Life Graced by Haiti* (2012) became one of the earliest projects that led me to what might after all be my real vocation: as a nimble small publisher of books that, I hope, tell all the truth but tell it slant.⁹ Paul Farmer was kind enough to call *Bearing the Bruise* a “heartfelt account” that “gives readers an informed perspective on many of the political and social complexities that vex those who seek to make common cause with Haiti.” So that’s nice and all, but of course “people’s interest in Haiti peaked” again, and some people read my book but many others didn’t. Those of us who maintain a sustained interest in Haiti know too well how each crisis occasions a spasm of frenzied and/or morbid attention, accompanied by yet another steep learning curve for the American public until, predictably, “people’s interest in Haiti peaks” yet again.



Latterly I’ve made peace with the reality that one thing Haiti doesn’t really need is me writing more about it. What it needs (or, better, what its people need) more than anything is exactly what Locally Haiti does so well, notwithstanding an endless string of obstacles and disruptions: local, practical development work, in close and sustained partnership with local Haitian communities and leadership, anywhere but Port-au-Prince. *Décentralisation* was a buzzword—in a good way—among Haitians I spoke to during three trips in 2010 and 2011, but the vaunted international community that was insisting on laying an enormous and very centralized blob of aid only on Port-au-Prince wasn’t listening to those Haitians. The title of Jonathan Katz’s valuable book, *The Big Truck That Went By*, is very apt.¹⁰

As it happens, I saw the effects of a similar massive international aid response on a similarly damaged small and rustic society, three decades ago in Cambodia: Some \$3 billion

⁹ See <https://blueearbooks.com/about/>.

¹⁰ There’s a revealing contrast to be drawn between the widespread pious handwringing that attended the 2019 fire that damaged Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, which will be rebuilt with plenty of corporate sponsorship and such, and the resounding indifference that prevailed following the destruction by the 2010 earthquake of St-Trinité Cathedral in Port-au-Prince and its religious murals, which were acknowledged masterpieces of the Haitian art renaissance. I’ve got nothing against Notre Dame, but I felt the loss of the St-Trinité murals as a very personal loss (not that it’s about me). A pet project on my wish list would be for a network of benign patrons to commission, in the spirit of the *décentralisation* that’s still badly needed, leading Haitian artists to paint new religious murals in provincial parishes. How about in Petit Trou?

was spent on what was then the largest-ever United Nations peacekeeping mission and a badly flawed election (no doubt intended to “restore democracy”), whose result was undone by a coup (which I witnessed in person) just four years later, and a great deal of lasting material and human damage was wrought, not unlike how UN troops from Nepal introduced cholera to Haiti. More recently a young tech millionaire in Seattle bought me breakfast and told me about how moved he had been by his trip to Cambodia. How, he asked me hypothetically—only it wasn’t hypothetical—would I recommend that he spend \$10 million, if he were to set aside such a sum to help Cambodia? The scene in *The Comedians* where Mr. Smith tosses dollar bills into a Haitian crowd comes to mind. I found myself formulating my response to the rich young man’s question thus: *Whatever you do, don’t start by spending \$10 million in Cambodia. Educate yourself first. You might think that money is a substitute for understanding, but it’s not.*

That said, money is also necessary. And the reality is that the money for things like the building and running of the new hospital in Petit Trou must come from outside Haiti. That means you and me, and whatever other sources and resources we can muster. I attended the groundbreaking of the impressive new public hospital in Mirebalais in September 2010 and was given a tour of the construction site a year later by Dr. David Walton of Partners in Health, and I’ve remained aware of both the positive impact that important project has had on both health care and the economy on the Central Plateau and the chronic funding challenges it faces. Locally Haiti, and the Petit Trou hospital, are very likely to continue facing the same conditions that still bedevil no less prestigious an organization than Partners in Health. That’s because people generally find it easier to give lip service than to give money. But the difficulty of the work—and fundraising is, of course, a crucial part of the work—is no reason not to do the work. In fact, the difficulty is itself an indicator of the work’s importance. That said, it’s surely just as well that Locally Haiti’s plans for the Petit Trou hospital are on a notably smaller scale than the Mirebalais hospital.

For my part, I still believe that reading books—books in particular, because they train our attention in a way news coverage does not—is important. “Reading is an act; you do it,” pointed out Ursula Le Guin. Reading helps us understand, and understanding should always precede both judgment and action. The difference between me now and my younger self is that I no longer think it’s necessary for me to be the one writing the books.

My Haitian friend Gerald Oriol Jr. is currently writing a book that I’m editing and will publish. It will be a remarkable book, because Gerald is a remarkable person. He belongs to an elite family—his father is an engineer and his mother is a pediatrician—and he is writing the book in English, his third language, because he wants Americans to read it. He pointed out to me that most Haitian authors of books read

by Americans are Haitian-Americans who live in the U.S., whereas he's an unhyphenated Haitian who lives in Haiti by choice. Gerald is one of the best read and most eloquent people I know. That biographical fact is very far from incidental to the story he has to tell, because Gerald has been severely disabled since childhood by a form of muscular dystrophy. I would say that he is confined to a wheelchair, except that "confined" is not a word I would ever think to use with reference to Gerald. At a moment of crisis in his adolescence, when Gerald declared in despair and frustration that he was going to quit school, his father wept in his presence and urged him to work hard to cultivate the one capacity he was in a position to develop: his mind.

Gerald's family's affluence allows him to employ a driver and other assistants so that he can do what he does best: leverage his social and political connections, along with his rhetorical and moral authority, to do things like work with leaders in Port-au-Prince's *bidonvilles* to establish and fund basketball



programs for young men and women, as well as being a leading advocate for the rights and needs of disabled people, of whom there are many in Haiti. He's fearless and intrepid; I've traveled with Gerald to the Saut d'Eau waterfall on the Central Plateau and to Les Cayes on the south coast. We even talked semi-seriously about

traveling all around Haiti together and co-writing a book. Above all, Gerald is patriotic. He served two high-profile and effective stints as Haiti's Secretary of State for the Integration of Disabled Persons under Presidents Martelly (whose wife is Gerald's cousin) and Moïse. He served in government, in administrations many Haitians as well as right-thinking *blancs* consider to have been distasteful if not illegitimate, because he was asked to, because he rightly believed that he could be useful, and because one of his strongest beliefs is that the capacity of the Haitian state needs to be reinforced and demonstrated. He is very shrewd in his political analyses, which he shares with me usually only when I insist that he do so; he sees politics as a necessary evil and knows how to put it to use, but what drives him is the desire to do needed practical work on behalf of Haiti and his fellow Haitians. When he has been out of government because of politics or because—as now—there is no government, he finds or creates other avenues for his talents and abilities.

The first time I met Gerald, at our French mutual friend Philippe Allouard's birthday party in 2004, I made myself

useful by fetching a second helping of food for him and by pushing his Coke to the edge of the table so he could sip it through a straw. He was then just twenty-four years old. "Are you a Republican or a Democrat?" he asked me.

"I'm anti-Bush," I confessed.

He smiled. He has a nice smile. "So there is a Nader factor with you!"

"No!" I replied, horrified. "I'm anti-Nader too."

The second time we met, he picked me up in his pickup truck driven by his personal driver, a lovely man named Yovens who is tall and looks a bit like Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and whose duties included, at every stop on their daily errands, gently carrying Gerald from the passenger seat to his wheelchair and back. We went to Muncheez in Petionville for lunch, and Gerald casually asked me to help Yovens carry him in his wheelchair up and down the restaurant's long, steep staircase. That was the first of many times that I've reflected on how physically vulnerable someone like Gerald must be in Haiti. But he told me he preferred Haiti to Florida, where he found dealing with the American social service bureaucracies just too frustrating and demeaning.

What he told me six years later, after the earthquake, is worth quoting at length:

I was in my vehicle with my driver, and I really thought that I had a flat tire. Seconds afterward I realized that, obviously, it was an earthquake, because I saw the electrical poles shaking back and forth, and I saw some walls crumbling in the streets. But in the area where I was at the time, it wasn't terribly damaged. It was only when I started seeing people walking with wounds, and people screaming, that I realized that it was more serious. At that moment, I called home to find out how my daughter and my family were, and it was difficult to get a connection, because all the telephone lines were down. But I persevered, and finally I got through to my mother, and she told me the family was okay. And at that moment I called a few friends, and other collaborators living in poor communities throughout Port-au-Prince, and they told me about the devastation in their neighborhoods. And this is when I realized that the situation was really serious and devastating and affected many, many people. We spent the whole night at home, outside of the house. We listened to a few radio stations to find out how things were in the streets, and in the morning I took an early shower, and I took a pickup truck, and I visited several of the neighborhoods in which I work.

It was an overwhelming and heartrending experience. We saw people lying in the streets. It was really terrible. We organized a mass burial with some community leaders. We collected cadavers in the streets, children and adults; we dug a hole in the local cemetery and buried the corpses. We must have organized a burial for hundreds of people. I don't remember the count, but it was a lot. We provided transportation to hospitals for people

that were still alive but injured. We also sent them to the UN log base that was transporting people to Martinique or Guadeloupe to ensure that the wounded people were able to receive immediate health services. But during my visit in these neighborhoods, I also realized that the Haitian people really were fighters, that they were truly the heroes. They were trying to remove people that were under the rubble, trying to help out friends, trying to help out neighbors, trying to help out total strangers. Some of them spent hours digging with their bare hands, helping out, and I realized that the Haitian people really were tremendously courageous and were able to build great solidarity in the face of unprecedented catastrophe.

Gerald also pointed out to me that “what has made [the earthquake] so bad is that we started with a weak, fragile government, and then the government was just wiped out. Nothing was hurt as bad as the government.” And during one of our many rides in his vehicle—which is where most of our conversations have taken place—he articulated the substance of his patriotism:

As a people, we need to take responsibility in our country. We have to fight and work for Haiti. We have to love the country. We have no other country, and we have to cherish every bit of Haiti. We have to learn to love our compatriots, we have to learn to love our natural environment. We have to work and participate in volunteer activities as well. In that manner, we will work toward progress in Haiti.



Another author I work with is Andrew Russell, who wrote his book *The Leadership We Need: Lessons for Today from Nelson Mandela* explicitly from the point of view of a white South African born, as he is wont to note, in 1964, the very year that Nelson Mandela was sent to prison for life on Robben Island. Andrew’s book is patriotic, like Gerald’s, and it’s suffused with the gratitude of a privileged person who became aware only in adulthood of how corrosive his privilege was of the society he belongs to, and who deeply appreciates the gift of forgiveness and reconciliation that Mandela bestowed on his community. Three decades post-apartheid, South Africa is very far from a perfect society, but Mandela succeeded in ways that Aristide did not.¹¹ For that matter, we in the United States could use a Nelson Mandela right about now.

11 One way to assess Aristide’s squandered potential is to consider that he might have grown into a role akin not to that of Mandela but to that played by Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Not Nehru, but Gandhi. Not Lyndon Johnson, but Martin Luther King. Brian Moore’s novel *No Other Life*, which is a roman à clef about Aristide, is suggestive on this point. One hard-earned resource Mandela was able to draw on in guiding South Africa through a peaceful transition, one not available to Aristide because he was too angry and impatient (as indeed Mandela had been when he was young), was the moral and political discipline that he had acquired over twenty-seven and a half years in prison.

Social and political justice are elusive, to say the least, and not only in Haiti and South Africa. The history of political revolutions in general shows that, although they too often become necessary and unavoidable, they really don’t ever make things lastingly better. That’s too bad but, as the saying goes, it is what it is. My father would have said—did say—that that is because of sin. If you’re uncomfortable with such an old-fashioned religious word, call it human nature; same thing. Willie Stark, the populist Southern state governor in Robert Penn Warren’s classic political novel *All the King’s Men*, says: “What folks claim is right is always a couple of jumps short of what they need to do business.” It remains true, though, that the rich are rich because the poor are poor. In some ways it really is as simple as that, and although truth and justice are often sacrificed to power, we all know *darn well*—as Grandma Casey, my father’s mother, said often—that they should not be. Some things, Grandma Casey insisted, are *just plain wrong*. It seems unavoidable that human society will always be stratified to some extent; that seems to be, maybe literally, encoded in our DNA as a primate species.¹² The question is whether that extent can be kept tolerable, or whether the rich will always insist on becoming ever richer, as the poor become ever poorer.

Amy Wilentz’s book *The Rainy Season* was well-reported and prescient in documenting Aristide’s early career, and for those reasons it remains unavoidably important. But it was also culturally tone-deaf, misconceived in its political analysis, and damaging in its outsized influence. Wilentz was young when she wrote it and still had a lot to learn. To me she was for many years a *bête noire*, a poster child for smug, irresponsible Manhattan-type leftism. (To her great credit she has sustained her interest in Haiti, and her more recent writings are chastened and, I daresay, wise and very helpful.) My problem with leftism, which I gleaned directly from witnessing its impact (and the impact of the brutal reaction to it) on Haiti, is that too many of its adherents are in too much of a hurry to go ahead and have the revolution already, rather than solving actual problems in the actual present day. The *Seattle Times* political cartoonist David Horsey summed this up in a 2019 cartoon depicting the controversial Seattle City Council member Kshama Sawant shouting through a megaphone into the receiver of her office telephone: “Hello! Are you calling to join the fight against the blood-sucking capitalist oligarchy?” The caller replies: “Uh ... no. I was hoping I could get a pothole fixed.”¹³

In 2010 I had a conversation with a Haitian businessman named Philippe Armand, a friend of Gerald’s. “Guys like me,

12 In his intriguing recent book *In Praise of Failure*, the philosopher Costica Bradatan writes: “Differentiation is the principle that keeps society together and prevents its members from devouring one another. For, once established, as the primatologist Frans de Waal has observed, ‘a hierarchical structure eliminates the need for conflict.’” It seems to me that the problem of modern societies is how to reconcile our need for hierarchy (so society can function) with our need for justice.

13 See <https://www.seattletimes.com/opinion/is-kshama-sawant-a-keeper-or-kaput/>.

we live in an oasis,” he admitted. “My first oasis is right here, this office. My second oasis is the beach, where I go for weekends. The rest of it, I don’t see. I don’t even listen to the radio; I play CDs. That’s how we survive. And I tell myself that in my business I employ a thousand people, and that that’s a contribution.”

“It is a contribution,” I assured him, for whatever that might be worth.

“It’s pretty micro.”

“But it’s important for those thousand people [and their families].” Then I reflected: “Haiti has been a great education for me for twenty-eight years.”

He asked me the obvious pointed question: “But have you seen any progress?”

“I haven’t seen much progress,” I confessed. “But I have learned a lot.”

The vision of progress that we all claim to cherish is often a mirage. As I wrote above, we’re not entitled to be optimistic unless first we’re realistic. And if there’s anything we can say we’ve learned over the first quarter of the twenty-first century, it’s that life goes on, even in the wake of the previously unthinkable. And the need for social justice will never go away. Hence today’s Haitian gang leaders, like Jimmy “Barbecue” Cherizier, style themselves as Robin Hood-type figures: “I like Martin Luther King, too. But he didn’t like fighting with guns, and I fight with guns. ... I’m not a thief. I’m not involved in kidnapping. I’m not a rapist. I’m just carrying out a social fight.”¹⁴ But it doesn’t suffice to demonize the elite and/or lionize the poor. Human nature crosses class lines as well as national borders and the open sea.

In our collective quest for just ways of living among our fellow human beings, is there a role for people who are privileged but patriotic, like Andrew Russell in South Africa and Gerald Oriol Jr. in Haiti—or like you and me in Colorado and Seattle? The short answer is that there had better be, or we’re all in real trouble. Reviewing the widely discussed recent book *Winnie and Nelson* by Jonny Steinberg in the *London Review of Books*, Stephen Smith writes: “Mandela believed that the two greatest threats to a peaceful outcome of negotiations were the ‘curdling’ into murderous violence of white counter-revolutionary sentiment and unmanageable insurrection by the disenfranchised majority. He played his strongest suit against the rise of white minority extremism [by assertively reassuring and reaching out to whites] and adjourned the revolution for another day.” The adjournment of the revolution constitutes a reprieve for all of us, one it behooves us to use well.



The current moment feels, to me, similar to January 1993: as if there’s a membrane separating us from Haiti. *The Guardian’s*

14 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/mar/10/haiti-gang-boss-king-pin-barbecue-jimmy-cherizier>

report on the secret swearing-in of Haiti’s new “transitional council”¹⁵ on April 25 put it bluntly: “Since the coordinated attacks began, Port-au-Prince has in effect been cut off from the outside world.” Someone in an April 18 Zoom briefing I attended held by the estimable microfinance organization Fonkoze spoke of “pure chaos” at the small airport in Cap-Haïtien, as Haitians with the right paperwork desperately try to leave the country. As the Haitian doctor gently observed in 1993, I have separation syndrome. I want—always—to permeate the membrane, and I believe that obeying that urge—whether by traveling to Haiti or, when that is not feasible or safe, by working even harder to pay active and sustained attention in other ways—is not only crucial to me personally, but conveys moral meaning and purpose.

I’ve cited the work of Gerald Oriol Jr. and Andrew Russell not because I’m their publisher and I want you to read their books (although of course I hope you will), but because they’re strong examples of privileged people who make a point of putting their privilege to good use. I believe that the least that we—those my father called, in his sermon at Ed Morgan’s funeral, Haitians’ “more fortunate friends in the United States”—can do is to acknowledge the true state of the world we inhabit and to remain, as he put it, “faithfully present to [our] brothers and sisters in Haiti who could use some help.” To my mind, being faithfully present means not only showing up, but making ourselves useful. Locally Haiti is in a position to do what it’s doing now because of the groundwork that was laid by the three founders in 1989 (and even before), followed by thirty-five years of steadfast and intelligent stewardship, now under the very capable leadership of Wynn Walent. I can say with confidence that, in the whole wide world as I’ve come to know it since my father threw me in at the deep end in Haiti in 1982, there is no more important or urgent work than the work Locally Haiti and its allies are continuing to do right now in Petit Trou de Nippes.



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15 The transitional council seems fastened together with the diplomatic equivalent of duct tape. In an April 25 WhatsApp message to me, Ti Gerald Oriol put it more, well, diplomatically: “I am not overly confident that it will be successful in its mission due to its structure. I think it is broad and will require a good deal of compromise to be effective. Hopefully, I am wrong.”