Why Haiti?

Written By Elizabeth Cooke

Why Haiti? I answer this question endlessly. There's the personal angle: Why did I go to Haiti? My rambling response men- tions the Haitian student my parents sponsored at a Midwest university, the Miami-based biodiesel fanatic my dad met online, and the California foundation that funded my fellowship to work in the small Caribbean nation. Then there's the universal angle: Why does disaster stalk Haiti? Hurricanes, earthquakes, famine, unrest. Why are these the country's headlines? This question is trickier. Entire books have been written about the topic, searching for the histor- ical, political, ecological, and cultural reasons why. I don't claim to have the answer to this second question. I only have my expe- rience, the personal, which together with many millions of others' experiences combine like the dots in a pointillist painting to make up a portrait of Haiti. I pick at the food on my plate while mosquitoes feast on my ankles. It's my first day in Haiti, and anxiety has sent my appetite fleeing. I don't want to appear rude, so I chat with Georges, the biodiesel fanatic who's serving as my fellowship mentor, and Pastor Michel, the founder of the evangelical mission that's hosting me. They make an odd couple. Georges, Haitian by birth but an American citizen, is agnostic

in all matters other than biofuel. Pastor Michel, a lifelong Haitian, is a devout Christian. Together, though, they've taken up a crusade to reverse what they both agree is the sinful destruction of Haiti's trees. I'm here to help. Exhausted by the long day of travel, I'm debating whether it's too early to excuse myself and retreat to my bedroom when Georges sets down his utensils and an- nounces we have a meeting to attend. We move upstairs, where we join three local agronomists sitting in a circle on wicker chairs. Georges shares his dream of a day when Haitian women and

will no longer cook over the smoky, asthma- inducing charcoal fires that have, tree by tree, stripped the nation's mountains bare. He prophesies a verdant Haiti where oil-producing trees, such as castor and Jatropha curcas, will provide clean-burning fuel, preserve the country's eroding soils, and slow the floodwaters that rush down the naked slopes. His words are inspiring, but they're not easy to put into practice, as I discover when he returns to Miami a few days later, leaving me with an abandoned nursery, a musty storeroom full of jumbled tools, and a broad swathe of dusty land that, he tells me, is mine to plant from one mountain chain to the next. At that moment, I'm struck by the yawning gap that exists between ambitious, world-changing vi- sions and the backbreaking, tedious work required to realize them. I've been in Haiti less than a month, and I'm already doubting my decision to come. I feel lost and lonely—and useless. Native Creole sounds nothing like the audio lessons I listened to back home, and Haitian French is a far cry from the Parisian French I studied in school. It's a major accomplishment when I manage to buy an avocado. To top it all off, the mission is hosting a summer camp The place is swarming with children who delight in trying to extract gifts from the young "*blan*." Boys who've eaten their afternoon meal pat their bellies and cry out *"Mwen grangou!"* while girls follow me arou nd asking for my skirt, my watch, my shoes. One evening, after planting seeds with the children and their camp teachers, I splash a handful of water on my sweaty, sunscreen-slick face, then collapse on my bed and pray for a breeze to sway the curtains. Lying there, I think back to the wintry Wisconsin evening when I first hatched the idea to work in Haiti. It was a crystal clear night. A translucent moon hung high in the indigo sky, and as I strapped on my mom's skis and set out across the fields, gliding over four-foot snowdrifts, I felt weightless, limitless, unbound. I was so certain back then that I had something to gain—something to give—by moving to Haiti. All I had to do was leap and trust I'd land safely on the other side.

The resilience of the Haitian people inspired me to contribute in any way I could. I lean against the ruined ramparts of Fort-Liberté, an old colonial stronghold on the northern coast of Haiti, as the last light from the setting sun plays across the waves below. At my side is the mission's kindergarten teacher, Cherline, who has made a particular effort to befriend me despite my faltering French and nearly nonexistent Creole. We're here for a long weekend, accompanying Pastor Michel on business and taking the opportunity to escape the noise and crowds of Gonaïves, the port city where the mission is based. It's quieter and calmer, easier to see the lingering beauty of the island here in this sleepy seaside town. In both places, though, the ghosts of Haiti's past lurk. They're present in the fort itself, a crumbling landmark from the days when the French got rich off this land through a system of brutal slavery and rapacious plan- tation farming. They're present in the central square of Gonaïves, where Haitian slaves first declared their independence and where subsequent generations have marched against native-born dictators and foreign interveners alike. They're present in the shiny new aid trucks, T-shirts, and billboards, the latest manifes- tation of a centuries-long American effort to refashion this country, including a nineteen-year military occupation. And they're present in the vanishingly small plots of land where many Haitians scrape out a living while those in power scrab- ble over the thin cream at the top. No amount of murmuring from these ghosts, however, can ruin this evening. Cherline and I lay our heads on our arms and close our eyes, savoring the soft sea breezes and the sound of the waves lapping at the rocks.

"Quel est le mot pour 'vent' en anglais?" **asks Cherline. I open my eyes and find hers on me. "Wind," I tell her and ask for the word in Creole. We continue to trade words in English and Creole, using French as our medi- um. Sea. Clouds. Sky. Moon. Stars. As night closes in, purple flashes of distant lightning turn the mountains into a spectacular landscape of light and shadow, their grandeur undiminished by their surface scars. I'm still not sure exactly why I'm here,**

but I'm glad I am. Soon after our return to Gonaïves, a series of hurricanes sweep across the island, transforming the roads into quagmires and bringing our tree-planting efforts to a halt. "Elizabeth! Elizabeth!" cries Cherline outside my door late one night, startling me awake. I grapple with the mosquito net over my bed and swing my feet to the floor. They land in water. "It's okay," says Cherline when I open the door. "Don't be scared." We stand there for a moment, face to face in the flickering light of her kerosene lamp, then get to work. Shuffling through the ankle-deep water, we move clothes, food, books— everything we can—to high shelves before hauling two twin mattresses up to the creaky second floor. The wind howls through the cracks in the walls, and the rain drums against the tin roof. I curl up on my mattress, thinking of the people on lower ground who must be fleeing for their lives as the ocean surges and the rivers burst their banks. Cherline paces next to me, trying to get calls through on her cell phone to family and friends. Neither of us sleeps. In the gray light of morning, we wade outside through knee-high water, the wind whipping the rain into our faces. My green hiking pack is strapped to my back, and Cherline holds my arm as we move slowly forward, feeling for hidden branches or ruts in the road. The water streams across the land, rippling where it dips into ditches. We move a little faster as we pass under an uprooted tree dangling from another tree's branches. Around us, hundreds of people carry mattresses, cooking pots, clothes, and other essentials to higher ground. Most move into the mission school just up the road. The scene is sobering, but no one has yet grasped the full scale of the dis- aster. Instead, there is a sense of adventure and vitality and community as neigh- bors wave and shout greetings. Pastor Michel laughs jovially when he spots Cherline and me from his front porch, declaring me the great American explorer. I'm happy to provide him with comic relief. He'll need it in the coming days. Make it stop, I think, covering my ears and squeezing my eyes shut. It's the third prepared for donors. Calls are made to coordinate supply drops. One morning, I discover a visitor sitting on Pastor Michel's front steps. He smiles and stands when he sees me, wiping his hand

on his trousers before reaching out to shake mine. It's Dumond, one of the agronomists I met my first night in Haiti, and who has worked closely with me on the tree-planting project. I haven't seen him since the torrents hit. I give him a summary of the damage, telling him that all of the seedlings in the nursery are gone, lost in the flooding. Then we track down a key to the storeroom and head across the mission, at times traversing by rooftop to avoid the murky lake that has formed around the edges of the place. Dumond stops at the bottom of a set of stairs to roll up his pants and tells me to stay where I am. He hesitates only a second before stepping into the tea-green water. I sit down to wait, listening to his sloshing footsteps as he wades to the storeroom door. When he returns, he hauls a heavy sack to the roof and spreads a few seeds in the sun, cracking them open to smell for rot. He picks out two hand- fuls to save, seed by seed, then heaves the sack to the edge of the roof and dumps the rest into the water. This marks the end of our first attempt at Georges's dream. "Do you like the Haitian nature?" a young man named Sadrack asks me. We're sitting on a cement wall, waiting our turn at the local well. I hesitate, trying to decide what he means. Do I like the personality of the Haitian people? Or do I like the country's landscape? I decide he means the latter and reply, "Yes." Sadrack asks me why. "The mountains," I say. "They're beautiful. Of course, they should have more trees. But still, they're beautiful. And the ocean. That's beautiful, too." I pause, wondering if my words sound as hollow to Sadrack as they do to me. Most of the time, when I look at the bare mountains or the dirty harbors, I can't help wondering how they looked when the Taino people lived here, before Colum- bus discovered this "New World." Tonight, though, the mountains really are beau- tiful. The moon, one sliver short of full, hovers above their rocky peaks, and the setting sun reflects off their slopes, creating a lovely tableau of light and shadow just as I saw on that night in Fort-Liberté with Cherline. "Someday, when I have a family," says Sadrack, "I'll take them up to the moun- tains every weekend. We'll camp away from the city. Smelling the fresh air. Eating the fruits of Haiti—mangos, bananas, coconuts. I've gone camping

with the Boy Scouts. I liked it." I nod. I'm intrigued. Six months have passed since the hurricanes, and many people have still not returned to their homes. In fact, canvas refugee shelters are set up in rows on a dusty plain just down the road from where Sadrack and I sit. He's the first Haitian I've met who aspires to getting into a tent, not out of one. "But you need money to live like that," he continues, turning melancholy. "You need a job. I'll probably never even get married. I have to support my parents. My life is already over." "You're young," I tell him. "Life can change." "Not my life." I want to say this isn't true, but who am I to make that call? I grip the hard seat of a moto while the driver maneuvers expertly between trucks, goats, and bicycles. We're on our way to Passe Reine, a small mountain commu- nity that wants to help with the reforestation project. After a breathtaking thirty-minute ride over roller-coaster roads, we rumble to a stop and Pastor Josué from the mission pulls up behind us. We're greeted by a local leader who guides us, on foot, up a series of winding switchbacks to a high, scrubby plain. A few dozen people are hacking at the brush with machetes, singing as they work, but they stop at the sight of us and gather round to hear what we have to say. I offer a few words in hesitant Creole about my hopes for the project, then Pas- tor Josué speaks at greater length, testifying to his faith that the hurricanes, terrible though they were, present an opportunity to build a greener, healthier, more vibrant country. His words contrast starkly with those of another pastor in Gonaïves who distributed fliers after the storms declaring that they were God's retribution for Haiti's pact with the devil. When Pastor Josué is finished, several people come up to me and tug at my arm, pointing to the surrounding slopes. "We can plant there," they say. "And there." "And on my land over there." Perhaps, I decide, there's space left yet for dreaming. I stand at the end of a deserted road where it trails off into the hurricane lake that once was farmers' fields. Birds swoop low over the water, landing in dead treetops to scan for fish or frogs, while occasional gusts of wind send ripples across the glassy surface. It's a lake that

should not exist, that would not, arguably, if the mountains were lush with trees. But then, there are many parts of Haiti that, in the- ory, should not exist, and when it comes to casting blame for the tragedies of this place, it's easy to point fingers. Why Haiti? Because of the French. Because of the Americans. Because of the elites. Because of the masses. Because of our sins. Whether there's some special cosmic punishment or reward lined up for this particular plot of earth, I don't know. All I know is that the wind and the water, the fish and the frogs, the people in tents and the people in palaces—Haiti and I—are here together witnessing this moment in time and shaping the next. And for now, that's answer enough.