

Friday afternoon, May 29<sup>th</sup>

At 2:00 p.m. this year's final all-school worship was over. It was also the last official day of class for our soon-to-be graduates. "Ready to head home?" I asked Dave, already back at his computer, logging expense reports. Since 4:30 a.m. he'd been corresponding secretary, cook, administrator, teacher, and preacher at the all-school service. Now he was accountant again.

"Not yet," he said. "We're supposed to have a final prayer of blessing for the *Philo* [13<sup>th</sup> grade] students."

I gave a silent nod. So much for a quick get-away on Friday afternoon like everybody else gets. "The plan was to do it at the end of *adorasyon* [the worship service]," Dave explained, "but Mèt Joe must have decided that the primary kids had had all they could sit through. When he dismissed the assembly, the *Philo* asked if we could do it here in the office."

The *Philo* were gathering in the hallway outside the main office door, waiting to have the prayer in Hugues' office. But his meeting was looking not likely to end soon. "Pastor Dave," Frandy suggested, "how about we meet in your office?"

Dave and I exchanged dubious glances. Probably ten square feet of floor space remained vacant in Dave's office at the moment. Even with the close Caribbean sense of personal space, seventeen of us wouldn't fit. "We can pray out here," Dave counter proposed, stepping out of his doorway into the vestibule area. Quickly a ring of orange polo shirts locked arms on their last casual Friday.

I thought they were antsy to get going. Boy, did I ever misjudge that! "Do you want to sing?" Dave asked. Usually folks here sing before they pray but we had just exited an hour and a half long worship service.

"You can just pray, Pastor Dave," Marie-Claire suggested. I sensed impatience in the moment but later realized it was simply permission to proceed as he wished.

But before Dave could pray Roberta started a hymn -- one verse with words and then humming while the preacher prays -- a standard Haitian evangelical practice. Dave prayed in Creole, thanksgiving and blessing. The humming became words, verse 2. Ronel-Ange prayed. Another verse. Lynne-Vie prayed. As her Bible teacher, Dave had wondered what she really had for faith. She rarely mastered the weekly memory verses. Now she prayed with emotion.

Again and again we layered prayer, song, prayer, and more prayer. Frandy thanked God for all the mission teams who had filled their lives at Univers, also for Americans who had never come to Ouanaminthe but still gave money to make their education possible.

Hantz-Jerry prayed that, regardless of the hardship and pain that might await them, they would never lose their trust in God, that they would always know His abiding presence.

We sang a song where the guys' voices especially quaked in disharmony. I opened my eyes, thinking I'd missed a joke, expecting smiles. These guys, arms gripping their classmates, were trying to sing as they wept. Voices wailed. We were all swaying, sobbing, singing, sighing -- a circle of students pondering their dispersion into separate lives.

I sensed their fear of the unknown because I felt it myself. How would they all manage? How would I.U. be without them? Our always-the-oldest-class would be gone. No other is like the first to exit the womb.

Several students prayed that their adult lives would always bring honor to the institution that had given them wings. Then Marie-Claire praised God for His undeserved grace and provision, also confessing their failings, the times they have been unloving to each other, unsupportive of teachers, selfish in their objectives. She prayed for mercy for future inadequacies. Girls had dropped to their knees, gasping breaths between prayers. Even the always-impeccably-coiffed-and-made-up now worshipped conscious of neither tear streaked eyes nor streaming noses.

Jean-Gardy, who had struggled with depression following his mother's death last year, sobbed. The two guys flanking him just hugged him harder. The prayers became sometimes more whines than words. Song. Prayer. Song.

Silence.

We listened to each other breathe and sniffle; we swayed and slid skin across each other's sweat.

Emmanuel spoke into the quiet – one final simple prayer. He pronounced a benediction which we repeated line by line. Dave had begun with the benediction they had requested of him. Now they blessed each other.

"Amen." The circle broke into hugs and more sobs with best wishes. Clearly the group was emotionally spent without even energy to exit. "Okay, Philo Fifteen," Emmanuel called, "let's huddle."

Immediately the orange knot tightened on itself with Dave and me as appendages. Locker room-style cheers arose about "honoring our school" and "keeping the faith." Finally they had enough momentum to move. Dave and I went into his office to dry eyes and blow noses.

Dave, master of understatement, said, "Well, that wasn't what I expected." I grabbed my journal to record while the memories were fresh. Even twenty minutes later, we could still hear the students not far from the office chatting, singing. When we left the building, half of them were still in the lobby together.

"They don't want to go," Dave whispered.

"Nope. It's scary out there."