

**11:00 a.m., Saturday, November 19, 2011**

I stopped so suddenly, arriving at the stairway to our UMC apartment, that Dave, coming behind, bumped into me. "Oh," he said, looking about, "is something wrong?"

I had to laugh. "No," I said. "I just wanted to say I had a good time."

He looked down at me and smiled. "I'm glad you enjoyed our Caribbean getaway."

"I did. Thank you." We stole a kiss, like a teenage couple ending a date on the front stoop.

Amazing what twenty-four hours one mile away across an international border can do to revive the weary. Approaching the 90-day limit of our tourist's permit, we needed to have our passports stamped with an exit date in order to remain legal aliens. This weekend, lengthened by Friday's national holiday for the 1803 Battle of Vertières, was a good time to get away. We stayed at Raydan Hotel where mission teams traveling through the DR often spend an overnight and we ate at Beller restaurant, an open-air sports bar, where teams sometimes eat. We didn't need to go all the way to a coastal resort because mostly we simply wanted to escape phone calls and requests at the door to crash. We still met the occasional beggar, had to ignore blaring meringue music for hours outside our hotel and experienced an hour-long water cut-off, BUT it was still a break from the routine of responsibilities in Ouanaminthe. I was sincere in the appreciation I expressed to Dave for the respite and knew he also felt refreshed.

I've been mindful in recent weeks of the broad spectrum of students served by Unvers. This month I took on two more TOEFL prep groups, these all 12th graders. These students are our highest achievers with the greatest fluency in English who have the potential for US study or for jobs in Haiti requiring English fluency. With the traditional Haitian educational approach being based on rote memory, what a cognitive stretch for these students to formulate and defend their opinions in English! Their insights captivate me as we discuss sticky issues like animal rights, the death penalty or the definition of legal marriage. Regularly they assume a conservative biblical basis for argument which I have to explain is no longer a given in US society. I heard myself saying to them, "As a believer, you are responsible before God to articulate your faith foundation, but, as a person in the world, you cannot presume that your audience shares that faith." As my uniformed, intensely attentive students nodded their heads, I thought, *Okay, note to self: walk the talk, boldly state biblical convictions with intelligible passion so that my non-believing neighbor can comprehend. A tall order in any culture.*

At the other end of the IU academic spectrum from the stellar students, we have kids who are barely passing, probably not good at memorizing. With only one curriculum recognized by the Ministry of Education, these students take all the same courses as the whiz kids: a mix of advanced math, science, foreign language, Haitian and French literature—altogether commonly called a "classic education." In the current, generations-old depressed economy, these students have few job prospects upon graduation. Many days I wonder how people even get out of bed with no access to Prozac. Some ignore the gloomy big picture by focusing on positive details, such as a new-born in the household, involvement in a choir or the latest musical release. Others become irritably glum, feeling overwhelmed by meager resources. But an astounding majority, in my experience, faces the current dark situation with the profound faith that Day will ultimately dawn. I see this faith manifested in students from the youngest classes to the oldest and am humbled by it. It's a faith that is not limited to our mandatory Bible classes but finds expression throughout each day's classes and from September to July.

Aliette was absent from two consecutive 11th grade English classes. "Do you know what's wrong with Aliette?" I asked Philomise, the attractive girl who sits in the front seat, second row.

She wrinkled her brow, tilted her head and sighed. "Aliette is not good. She went to the clinic for tests. They fear she has typhoid."

"Typhoid?" I remembered Michelle saying it's a disease they see fairly often, spread by ingesting food or water contaminated by feces. Oh, for better sewage systems. But we've yet to find a student with a passion for sewage/sanitation who will consider a career in civil engineering.

It was Aliette's day to pray to begin class so I prayed for her. The next class she was present. It had not been typhoid after all, she said, or our prayer had healed her. Aliette, Philomise and most of their class are well below grade level in English. Because they are promoted based on the accumulative

average of all their courses, they can fail English year after year and still be promoted to the next grade if their other courses together can give them the minimum passing average. In my view, such institutional dysfunction affirms mediocrity in student and teacher alike. The average teacher teaches the material without regard to student comprehension because so many students are below grade level. My solution has been to assign two different levels of homework, one at grade level and one remedial, using the same vocabulary. Also, I speak in English during class and call on the students at grade level to serve as translators for the benefit of the remedial majority who cannot understand. Not plan A, but I have lived with it for all these years now.

Every spring we lose some students because they simply can no longer keep up academically. One such student was Willy, a tall thin fellow whose mother abandoned him as a toddler to an older woman, of no family relation. Willy and his adoptive grandmother live one block southwest of UMC in a tiny two-room house. Three years ago, at the end of his 11th grade year, Willy flunked out of Univer, and, as often happens with IU drop-outs, transferred to Oswald Durand High School, several blocks east of UMC. OD has a lower minimum passing grade than IU so Willy was able to be promoted to 12th grade at OD. I would see him from time to time in the street, wearing his OD solid cyan blue shirt instead of the white shirt with navy vest and plaid tie of Univer. The OD uniform always jarred me, remembering him always as I saw him in class at IU. Then I saw Willy this past Wednesday near the town square as I walked home from school. He was all smiles, greeting me warmly.

"I heard you've enrolled for the mechanics course at the Univer Vo-Ed school," I said. Hugues had been disappointed by the low enrollment for the two courses of study offered this first year of the Vo-Ed school's operation. Even after slashing the tuition fees, few signed up for sewing and auto mechanics. Perhaps we misjudged how the society perceived training for these fields should be gained. Currently family businesses provide sewing services and mechanical repair services, with young people learning in an informal apprentice arrangement. People don't think of going to school to learn these skills. Then Hugues learned from the Levi's factory in the tax-free zone by the Massacre River that they would hire any industrial sewing machine maintenance technicians he could train. So he has added that component to the sewing curriculum with the hiring of a sewing machine expert from Port-au-Prince.

Willy's face lit up with a toothy smile, ignoring the afternoon traffic which slipped by us. "I am excited about this program. Working on engines seems like just the thing for me. Univer has a nice facility equipped with tools and teachers so I could someday have a business providing a service that is really needed here."

His hopeful countenance was heartening, after Hugues' discouragement over low enrollment, and I prayed his enthusiasm would be contagious. Maybe if we start small with the Vo-Ed program, it will grow.

I suppose a lot of what we do at IU and UMC involves experimentation on a small scale with hopes of expanding, testing the waters and then reevaluating. Poverty and inefficiency seem to have ubiquitous inertia in Haiti, an ever-expanding quicksand swamp. What if there are limits to the depth and width of that mire? And, in the interim, as we explore survival in the suffocating muck, don't we find the surprise of God's presence with us? He is not far off, but actually WITH us, no stranger to sorrow but, in fact, a co-sufferer, able to redeem and transform what scoffers have abandoned. We have to trust Him in the dark, even when we've sunk up to our necks. Being Himself the solid rock, He cannot fail us. We need not understand the rescue plan to believe that, to His glory, nothing touches us that has not first passed through the loving hands of our mighty God.

*Meanwhile, live in such a way  
that you are a credit to the Message of Christ...  
Stand united, singular in vision,  
contending for people's trust in the Message, the good news,  
not flinching or dodging in the slightest before the opposition....  
There's far more to this life than trusting in Christ.  
There's also suffering for him.  
And the suffering is as much a gift as the trusting.*

Philippians 1:27-29  
The Message