

Ouanaminthe, Northeast Haiti, Before and Right after the January 12 Earthquake in Port-au-Prince Area. By: Pam Mann

7:15 a.m. Friday, January 8, 2010

Squish. Slurp. Squish. Slurp. With each step my mud-pasted shoes adhere to the road. Impatient motorcyclists yell and toot horns. Ahead of me, annoyed women grumble, each head crowned with a laundry bundle for river washing. Where puddles grow wide and deep, the more agile I.U. students hop from one makeshift stepping stone to the next. Such is the morning traffic on Rue Lamine. Ah, it's good to be back!

Since our return last weekend, we have had the longest running rainy, cold spell of our tenure. Students and staff wear an assortment of sweaters and jackets, giving the school the look of a refugee camp. The sun has shone so rarely that we get only a dim beam from our solar-charged flashlight.

The gray provides all the more reason to appreciate the shining faces around us. With the new year we were greeted by kisses on the cheek and best wishes for *santé* (health), *prospérité* (prosperity), and even *dollarité* (dollar-ness?). That last one Mèt Lafleur made up two years ago. He says it with great amusement each year. Sometimes when you say Happy New Year (*Bonne Année*), people respond: *Partagez* (share). I'm guessing this is in reference to the Haitian Independence Day tradition of January 1st when they make and share pumpkin soup.

It's been a week of pondering the forces of fatalism and voodoo practice. While we were in Ohio, Hugues was hard at work with *Aide et Action* funds continuing the local trash clean-up. The eyesore trash heap outside our preschool fence has disappeared! When people have a fatalistic view that everything that happens is God's will, it's tough to motivate them into action. But Hugues organized lots of students to clean up trash during the break! Several of my 11th graders wrote with pride about it in their What-I-Did-during-Vacation essay.

While paying two translators for helping out in a chiropractic clinic at UMC this past week, Dave noted that it was January 6th. "Happy Epiphany!" he said to them. The two young men glanced uneasily at each other. Then Junior gently explained that in the days prior to *la Fête des Rois* (Kings' Day, i.e. Epiphany) people are known to die unexpectedly due to voodoo curses. There's not really anything "happy" about it. That night Dave recounted this conversation to me. It was our turn to exchange uneasy glances. We were both thinking of Jacques, our older next-door neighbor. On the morning of the 5th, we had greeted him in his yard. He was as chipper as ever. Then we learned that very evening he had dropped dead in the afternoon while doing laundry at the river. He was buried before sundown without a funeral. When there is no funeral, people suspect foul play, perhaps a zombie in the making.

I thought I'd get to the bottom of the Fête des Rois business by quizzing Jacob. He heads the Univers evening adult ed. program as well as working as a part-time judge, high school teacher, and occasional preacher at the Baptist church on the main road.

"Nah, we don't celebrate that here," he assured me. "It's a satanic holiday. The sorcery centers are in Gonaives, Carisse, Léogâne, Mont Organisé..." He mentioned several other cities, but I don't recall them. His point was that Ouanaminthe is not on that list. "It's poor uneducated people who are taken in by the empty promises of sorcery," Jacob continued. "They think the right fetish or incantation will get them a lottery win or a U.S. visa."

"So you consider it mere superstition?"

"No." He let a deep, thoughtful breath in and out. "The power of the devil is real but I see how rarely magic works. And I know the power of God is far superior so that Christians need not trouble themselves about sorcery. So let's practice speaking English."

Fair enough. I'd taken his time with my agenda. I owed him a few minutes of English practice.

+++++

5:00 a.m., Wednesday, January 13, 2010

Yesterday I came home after teaching my last class to iron. The laundry was musty-smelling. We had to hang it inside the apartment to dry because the rain has been so constant this month. Monday

was the heaviest rain yet – over 24 hours non-stop and steady. Lamine, the street on which I.U. is located, became Lake Lamine – 10” of standing water across its entire width for about 15 yards. Maybe 20% of our students braved the elements to be at school at 7:00 a.m. on Monday morning. Hugues honored their perseverance by ferrying them in groups across Lake Lamine in the I.U. Toyota Tundra pick-up. We have a 15-member surgical and general medical team here this week from TN, MN, and CA. The foul weather and market day reduced their patient flow on Monday, but the group, mostly seasoned, remained positive.

11:00 a.m., Wednesday, January 13, 2010

Yesterday the rain stopped so more patients kept their surgery appointments. Then, after I'd finished ironing in our clinic apartment, the earthquake hit. It was 4:50 by our apartment clock. The floor rocked back and forth less than a minute, probably not even 30 seconds. I thought immediately of the earthquake we experienced in Pasadena in 1988. That prior experience enabled me to recognize at once the floor's rocking back and forth as an earthquake. Plus on the floor above where two CA surgeons were operating, I heard the shout in English, "Earthquake!" One of our neighbors laughed later about how all the American came running out of the clinic.

Little did we know at the time how blessed we were to have a small fright while major buildings were crumbling in Port-au-Prince. The large Catholic cathedral, the National Palace, a major hospital, U.N. headquarters are among the toppled structures. It is believed the death toll will be in the tens of thousands. What's heart-wrenching for people in Ouanaminthe is that many have family members in Port. Digicel, the main cell phone company in Haiti, has not functioned since the quake. No one can get news about the fate of their loved ones.

"I'm going to Port-au-Prince," Mèt Arne said at lunch today. We were about eight teachers, discussing the disaster over beans and rice.

"Is your wife living near the buildings that we know were collapsed?" I asked.

"No, in the suburbs." He was actually able to eat.

"It will be chaos in Port-au-Prince," someone else commented gently to Arne.

"I know, but what else am I going to do? The phone doesn't work. If I don't go, I won't know if she's alive or not."

The rest of us nodded mutely. Mèt Joe's sister and her family live in Port. Many I.U. students have relatives, even parents there. Due to the lack of communication, the capital's disaster is our disaster.

"How badly was Léogâne hit?" I asked, thinking of our four I.U. grads in nursing school there.

"I heard," Arne offered, "that both Léogâne and Gonaïves were damaged, though not as bad, nothing like Port-au-Prince."

Then conversation turned into an argument about how many aftershocks we felt between 8:20 and 9:20 last night. I thought it was seven or eight which put me in the median of all numbers suggested.

"It's amazing, isn't it?" Arne remained the loquacious one at the table. "If anything is solid in this life, it's the earth. And yesterday that shook. Imagine huge mountains trembling."

"It makes you rethink where you have foundation," I said.

"You better be right with God," came a voice from the end of the table. "You never know what day will be your last."

Arne smiled. "You know, I actually slept a full night's sleep last night. I prayed. I realized no matter what, my wife is in the hands of God. The roof might fall on me but I too am in God's hands – the safest place there is."

+++++

Hugues and Joe decided to close I.U. for the rest of the week. Too many teachers and staff are distracted by concern for their loved ones in Port-au-Prince. I did find it very difficult to keep my third graders on task this morning. Their young lives have already seen so much disaster: last school year several cyclones and two students kidnapped; now an earthquake. Maybe the Haitian evangelicals are

right, who say, "Surely these are the last days." Come, Lord Jesus. May we be found eagerly working in the Light, waiting in God's hands.