

Haiti Earthquake 2010... Thoughts from the field (Jan 18-Feb 4)

I am almost home. Sitting in a North Carolina airport. I think at two weeks I hit my wall. It is now almost three, and I am ready to be done. But it is hard to reconcile walking out of so much devastation and loss for people with names and faces you now know. You just walk out and sit down in a restaurant in Florida and its gone. Incredible.

When you see the buildings, three concrete slab floors layered one on top of the other like stacks of paper you realize for many there wasn't a chance to get out. When you smell the air and the unfamiliar stench of Port au Prince, you realize hidden in the rubble are the graves of many. Of course some have been found as the rubble is cleared, mostly by the hands of desperate friends and relatives, now by machines and people looking to scavenge building material. The dead are frozen in time, arms up as if they were going to climb out. Sometimes it is just two feet or an arm you see between the layers of rubble. Some bodies have been retrieved with no one and no system to identify them. To avoid the stench and disease that comes with the abandoned bodies they are burned in the street or tossed into mass graves. People are everywhere, roaming the empty dusty streets, scrambling over fallen buildings. For a moment, Haitians could all relate to each other again. They were united in tragedy for a time.

We lost one more, young woman the day before I left. She wasn't even a tragic earthquake victim. She wasn't buried under rubble until her father found her by calling her name until she heard him under the 8 feet of rubble of her school. It took him and his son 3 days to dig her out. She didn't lose her spouse and her baby who were showering in the other room the moment of the earthquake, and then lay there for a day until she could pull herself out, knowing she was laying beside her dead baby and husband, not sure if she really wanted to pull herself out. She wasn't my friend who didn't come home from work that night so the next day her 75 year old pastor was climbing the rubble calling her name until they too found her and pulled her out. No, she was chronically and profoundly anemic, only minor wounds to her feet. She had made it.

But her eyes were white like the ceiling. I'd seen those eyes before... and lost the young patient. I thought to myself, I just can't do it again. I had already fought for and lost so many young men and women. She was about to go into cardiac arrest.

We raced down the hall with her on a stretcher to our mini ICU/OR. Dr Claude, our young Haitian colleague, came in immediately with his arm out saying "I am O+". I quickly took his blood and pushed it into her, but she was already arresting. With every chest compression I prayed, I plead, "please God save her," but after two rounds of CPR and a CXR showing a very large heart we knew we couldn't win. Again, death had won. I left the other anesthetists to finish. I couldn't lose one more person. She had come in with minor wounds to her feet, now 22 days old. She had sat there all day in our hallway waiting calmly. Then after moving her to a wheelchair and looking at her feet she suddenly went into heart failure and died. We could not resuscitate her. I don't know where their blood goes. The deaths are always unexpected. In the middle of the night you find yourself running up the hill in the dark to go to who knows who because the Haitian residents can only say 'the boy', only to find yourself kneeling over a young 18 yo boy you left only an hour ago, doing well, dying in front of you.

But we did a lot of good. Our team was simply a gift. I have never experienced medical people, strangers, working together so well. We became anything that was needed. Our general surgeon did only 2 surgeries but assisted and did dressing changes every day for dozens and dozens. He sat at bedsides, held patients hands, moved patients in and out of their beds. People washed their own instruments and cleaned floors, even the administrator of the local hospital. Surgeons brought and returned pts to their beds, anesthesia did nighttime rounds to be sure all the patients would make it comfortably through the night, people filled empty shelves and sorted through boxes for whatever was needed whenever they had a moment. There was not one "that's not my job". There was not a single showdown of wills or claiming of rights when it came to decisions. It is going to be hard to be home.

We didn't just do surgery and send them out. We cared for them post-op, did daily dressing changes, and turned them so they wouldn't get bed sores, took them outside until they were mobile on crutches, and drained most of our team's blood into them. We spent evenings sitting at their bedside. You would even find us singing songs. Their children would come visit and they'd send someone looking for us to meet them. I don't think these people have ever been cared for like that. Despite being emotionally spent and physically exhausted ourselves, you could not help but be blessed by witnessing the selflessness of the team around you, the missionaries for whom this work would continue for months to come, and the local staff working alongside us, many

with their own tragic stories. It was so humbling and beautiful to watch. We have done a very bad job being the church in this world, but if you want to see what the church is meant to be, being the hands and feet of Jesus, you had to witness these people serving these devastated individuals, sometimes unlovely but each one loved.

Looking at the conditions, there should have been so much more communicable sickness, infection of these open wounds, hardware to remove. But there was not. They are still in the same clothes and lay on the same sheets they came with. There is little water to wash anything in. Their beds are a chair width apart. They are immobile and personal hygiene is done in their beds. We have not had heparin since the day we arrived for all these femur fractures and pelvic fractures. Yet they heal. Our work has been multiplied and protected far beyond what should have been possible.

They came to us by 82nd Airborne helicopter or by truck. You can feel them when they come in. They are in chaos, emotions spent, anxiety wound, crying. But a day in our little hospital and they settle. I really believe it is a refuge for them. But there is peace here. There is so much more going on than healing their physical wounds. They have no homes, are missing family members to go back to or to be with in hospital, and they relive their memories of the moment they escaped but left loved ones behind, every day. I wonder how they are not angry with God. Haitians are very spiritual people. They believe in spirits good and bad. They live in fear of them. It is not a source of strength. The spirits control their lives despite them. They think it is unbelievable some of us don't believe in God. But God never ceases to amaze me. That he could show himself to these people in such a way that comforts them is incredible to me. That they can be comforted is amazing. That they could meet a God whom they don't need to fear but who knows and cares for them individually is life-changing for them. I am so thankful we could share that with them, carry some of that burden for them, take their load for just a while. I toured many other sites downtown and was met with the hustle and bustle of busy surgeons and nurses rhyming off all the cases they had done and all those they had yet to do. Bedside were void of someone to wash them, turn them, to hold their hand. Names were numbers. No stories were told. It might seem appropriate in such a setting, but, on second thought, to believe that saving a limb is all that is needed seems simplistic, even foolish.

So as I sit in this airport trying to reconcile the contrast between this world I am sitting in and the one I just left, I wonder why that last girl had to come to our hospital to die. All the way home as I tried to find a space of serenity in the midst of super bowl mania and the busy airport, I struggled with that. Why did I have to leave with that memory? Why did death keep winning? Why why why? Thinking of that along with the disturbing realization of how easy it was for us to just get on a plane and close the door on all the tragedy we have just experienced, leave it all behind, I found myself in tears. Then the Lord said to me, "If they call on me, Death does not win. I give them eternal life." And I realized that even when the fight feels so physical, with every chest compression and unit of blood you give, it is a spiritual battle we fight. The battle is no different than the one we fight afterward when we sit with the patients and pray with them, hear their story, feel their loss, encourage them. I realize it is a truth that seems strange to many of you. Some of you will call it a myth or "religion", and this letter has already crossed the 'comfortable line' in terms of spirituality for most of you. But I think I would fail to do justice to the suffering of these people if I neglected to tell you about the rest of their story. The one that plays in all of us. The one that will continue long after they've mourned their loved ones or learned to walk with their amputations. The story about wholeness, purpose and hope. The story that goes beyond limbs and loss of homes and family. Surely this must make you ask yourself what life is. What is it made of? What is it for?

There is really no mistaking the sense of urgency that exists in this small island country right now. An urgency for complete healing of this nation. To restore community, family, hope, and purpose. Whether this was 'the big one' that hit or whether the predictions are true and there is another bigger quake coming within a month, this is their chance to turn and call on God and be restored, before the clarity and truth that such tragedy brings, dies down, and they are overwhelmed again in the crippling hopelessness of the life they knew. Isaiah 55:6-9 came to my mind the day I landed in Haiti and it repeats in my mind even now. It says, roughly paraphrased, "Seek the Lord while you can find Him. Call on Him while He is near. His thoughts are completely different from yours, and His ways are far beyond anything you could imagine." It is not that He hides himself from us, but that we often bury ourselves in our own concerns so we can not find Him or the bigger picture. It would be a tragedy for the world to extend a life only for it to be

lived in hopelessness and lost for eternity. After all, what is life if it is merely the beating of a heart. There must be more to life than this. I know I would be a fool to think otherwise.

Thank you for listening.

Sincerely,

Kara Gibson