

A VISIT TO HAITI
MARCH 6-11. 2006
By Dick Bernard

The views and opinions expressed below are solely those of the author.

“So, when a man travels and passes through different regions and numerous countries with system and method, it is certainly a means of his acquiring perfection; for he will see places, scenes, and countries, from which he will discover the conditions and states of other nations. He will thus become acquainted with the geography of countries, and their wonders and arts; he will familiarize himself with the habits, customs, and usages of peoples; he will see the civilization and progress of the epoch; he will become aware of the policy of governments, and the power and capacity of each country....” (Abdu’l-Baha, Baha’I World Faith – Abdu’l-Baha Section, p. 313) With gratitude to my “cousin-in-law” Marcia Brehmer, who sent this quotation on our return from Haiti.

Map comparing Minnesota and Haiti at www.chez-nous.net/haiti.html

“BE SAFE”

We fourteen delegation members had gathered at our hotel in Ench (Hinche in French) in the late afternoon of March 6, and were listening to Thomas Prophil, the first of a number of articulate spokespeople for Fonkoze, a micro credit organization in Haiti., give an overview of the Fonkoze program.

During his presentation I heard some loud sounds, like singing, coming from somewhere in the city, and I asked the question, “what is that?”

Thomas: “are you worried?”

“No.”

He told us that the sound was likely a group of women at an afternoon religious service in the small city of about 50,000 in the central plateau of Haiti.

We were to hear the sound again during our visit, and a number of times as we visited classrooms, the class would sing a hymn, or say a prayer. I have never heard such a moving rendition of How Great Thou Art, as sung a capella by ordinary Haitian women in their native Kreyol before their class began at Fonkoze in Ench..

Thomas’ question “are you worried?” seems an appropriate way to begin a report on a truly remarkable program, Fonkoze, and the people it serves in the interior of Haiti.

Far and away the dominant ‘bon voyage’ as we left for Haiti was variations on the theme, “be safe”.

Were we to have believed the U.S. State Department advisories, we wouldn’t have got on the plane to Port-au-Prince.

Haitians are ‘beneficiaries’ of what has to be close to the worst, most negative, imposed-from-outside public relations in the world. It is external ‘public relations’ orchestrated, unfortunately, by our own government. To go by what was suggested in the travel advisories, there’d be a kidnapper on every street corner, or a guy with a gun or a machete just waiting to do us ‘blan’s’ in. (I believe that you’re called a blan – white – if you’re an American, regardless of skin color. Haitians know Haitians.)

This negative overtone of an entire country has a distinct racial and class undertone: to be black and poor and Haitian is not good.

Saturday, March 18, 2006, in the 'safe' and vibrant and upscale Uptown area of Minneapolis, an out-of-town visitor was shot and killed in what seemed to be a purse-snatching run amok. The killer is at large. The victim was with his mother and sister and they had been out to dinner at one of the many restaurants there. I had been two blocks from the site of the killing just a few hours before. Violence at home. We often are in that neighborhood, and doubtless will be again.

As in December, 2003, I never had a single nervous moment in Haiti in March, 2006.

There was not a single threatening situation experienced, there were heard no gunshots (sound travels well in rural Haiti); and except for the few United Nations guys we saw relaxing in a Mirebalais park across from the local church, I saw only one person with a gun, and his weapon was a shotgun. He was relaxing on a chair, protecting the soda cases at a closed gas station in the Port-au-Prince suburb of Tabarre.

One of our presenters, a Fonkoze employee, had been kidnapped a few months earlier, and described what happened in detail; another of our presenters had a friend who was also kidnapped. In both cases, the motivation was a ransom – economic desperation. In both cases, the captives were quite well treated in captivity, and all ended well, one with an escape, the other with a ransom being paid. Both had been in the wrong place at the wrong time. One had made what probably even he would acknowledge was a foolish decision which put him in harms way.

I also know a twin citizen who was kidnapped in the Port-au-Prince area in January – to my knowledge, all ended well there, too, with no ransom or loss of any kind: Wrong place, wrong time.

I had cause to think back to a 1994 trip to the Philippines, where a travel warning was also in place.

Then, too, there was not even a 'close call' incident.

That year, when I got back home, on a whim I checked violence statistics for the Philippines and the world. The source I happened upon that time identified the most violent city in the world as...Washington D.C.

(After the 2003 trip to Haiti, population 8,000,000, I was particularly struck by some breathless comment in the newspaper that there had been 50 killings in Haiti in the run-up to the coup d'etat of Feb 29, 2004. For some reason I remembered 1996 in Minneapolis, population 500,000, where there were over 100 homicides in that year. Minneapolis picked up the name 'Murderapolis' that year, and to my knowledge no one, including myself, stopped traveling to Minneapolis. As is always prudent, everywhere, you just have to use some common sense in your choice of environment, but as the murder on March 18 in Minneapolis emphasizes, no place is ever completely safe.)

Enroute to Haiti, at the Minneapolis airport, a helpful sign at American Airlines advised specifically that the Port-au-Prince airport was insecure. Going into the Port-au-Prince airport, our bags were scanned once. Enroute out of the Haiti, the security was so tight at that airport as to be almost laughable. We went through the gauntlet of at least four x-ray scanners, with all the irritation that generates.

Other than the throng of hoping-to-be-helpful-for-a-fee 'redcaps', the airport at Port-au-Prince didn't seem perceptibly less secure than anywhere else I've visited.

It is important to me to begin with, and emphasize, this aspect of the Haiti story since in this and other instances over the last two years, I have learned that Haiti and its people have long been subject to institutional character assassination, particularly by our own U.S. government. This is then picked up and translated to the general public by the international media. It has worked very well.

Why else would almost everyone who wished us well, including ourselves, frankly, have been a bit worried about our security in Haiti?

“Be safe”?

We were.

And we weren't cloistered, either.

FONKOZE

We were on this trip to central Haiti as part of a delegation of 14 people from several states, invited to learn more about Fonkoze, a marvelous micro credit institution in Haiti (www.fonkoze.org if you wish to learn more.) We are actively involved in Fonkoze, traveling on our own 'dime', and we'd invite your involvement too.

Fonkoze is a bank founded with the specific purpose of giving credit and other financial services to poor people, who can get no credit anywhere else, and the purpose of the credit is to help develop local business and the economy in rural Haiti. It is about 10 years old. Fonkoze is not a charity and it supports and encourages self-reliance. It is basically a mirror of any traditional business anywhere in the world, except that its clients would not be able to go in the door of any ordinary bank for a loan, even in Haiti. Its average loan is probably still about \$100 American, given for a short period of time, usually a year or less.

Fonkoze is a business, but a business with a real difference. Not only does it give loans to the poor, and is planning to pilot a program directed towards those deepest in poverty, but it trains its clients in literacy, and business, and health skills as well. In a country with still a very high degree of illiteracy, Fonkoze is a gift to the country, a gift given by its founder, a Haitian Catholic Priest, and a dedicated supporting cast of staff.

During our time in Haiti we visited Fonkoze facilities and clients in Ench (Hinche), Tomonn (Thommond), Mayisad (Maissade), and Kanj (Cange). (The first word is the town name in Kreyol, the second in French). French is, I think, the legal language of diplomacy, law, big business and the elite in Haiti; while the majority of the citizens know only spoken Kreyol. This has a powerful historical message of its own.

We visited stores, homes, markets; talked with workers, customers, merchants ('ti marchand' is the local term for street merchants).

We heard descriptions of how people qualify for loans, the kinds of loans that are given, and carefully planned expansion of Fonkoze's programs and client base to larger businesses and even poorer people – those in deepest poverty - than those who now qualify for loans.

We saw what loans were given for: someone had used a loan to buy a small corn processing machine in Mayisad. The machine reminded me of the North Dakota farm (see section below on Old Time North Dakota as Metaphor).

Someone else had been given a loan to put a tin roof on their home; another loan was for an outhouse (latrine).

The three basic needs for a relatively healthy home environment in Haiti are a concrete floor, a roof that doesn't leak, and a latrine. None of these are universal in Haiti; all are expensive in Haitian terms. In the Haitian context, the equivalent of Habitat for Humanity meant these three bare basics. Safe water is another need. These and many other things we take for granted, are not givens particularly in rural Haiti.

At one store, a Fonkoze client, I bought some Haitian ketchup for a friend back home, who remembered Haitian ketchup as the best he had ever tasted. It is good.

Access to health care is a major problem. This too reminded me of frontier days in our country: if one got sick, they were basically on their own and either got well or died. Haitian life expectancy is 49 years – lower than a few years ago - (ours is well over 70), and this is largely a function of the conditions under which Haitians live, which is poverty and its consequences. It is not a routine matter to get sick or injured in Haiti, and warnings about that aspect of travel are certainly worthy of note. It is not a given that there will be an emergency room or medical professional close by.

The prosperous world – our world - could do much more than it chooses to, at very little cost in relative terms, to help alleviate these conditions in Haiti and in other poor countries, but politics, always politics, gets in the way. More on that in the section on U.S. AID.

It is one thing to look at a place like Haiti in the abstract, from far away; it is something else entirely to view it up close and personal, and see that the people are just like us, and that so much could be done with so little resource (and not as a 'handout' either, rather a helping hand.)

KANJ AND ZANMI LASANTE

We spent some hours at the world-famous medical hospital and clinic founded by Harvard physician Dr. Paul Farmer.

You won't see the name on most maps, but between Ench and Port-au-Prince, both on the map, you might find Peligre Lake. Kanj and the clinic is far above the lake, on the north side.

I've read a bit about Zanmi Lasante (Partners in Health) www.pih.org; and am an admirer of Dr. Farmer, whose biography, *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, by Tracy Kidder, and whose book *The Uses of Haiti*, are two must-reads for anyone interested in Haiti.

I was really not prepared for the scope of the operation I saw at Kanj. There were hundreds of people lined up on the sidewalks of the campus, patiently waiting to be seen for maladies like tuberculosis, AIDS, malnutrition and other diseases. There were numerous medical staff, though not nearly enough. All medical care is free, so one way or another people find their way from all over Haiti to hopefully get treatment.

All I have about the Hospital/Clinic complex is visual memories. It felt too intrusive to take photos of the human misery lining the sidewalks on either side of me.

There was no banter or even conversation amongst the people lining the sidewalks on which we walked. People there were very sick. The place was crowded. Some hospitalized patients lay on blankets on the floor. The medical professionals were definitely professional. I had long wanted to actually see Kanj. I was very impressed...and moved...and inspired, all at the same time.

Dr. Farmer was not there during our visit. He is most recently doing much work in Africa on the same endemic diseases. He is also well known in Russia for his work with tuberculosis.

GETTING HERE AND THERE IN HAITI:

I'm trained in geography, and knew that we were going to a section called the Central Plateau, and knew from a previous visit that there are fairly high mountains in Haiti, but geography is something that needs to be seen up close and in person to be truly appreciated. We were given that opportunity to see the countryside of Haiti.

We flew into Ench from Port-au-Prince in two single engine planes, and landed on what passed for a runway – really more a straight gravel street, on either side of which were houses and pedestrians, etc. The plane kicked up a cloud of dust as it landed, and took off as soon as we had disembarked. It was perhaps a 20 minute flight..

The 'plateau' description was apt; we drove the terra firma, and saw the terrain from an airplane as well.

We were in Haiti during the dry season, so we became very familiar with Haitian dust. We traveled in a caravan of four SUV's, the lucky ones being in the lead car (which I never 'drew').

Haiti is a small country, one-eighth the size of Minnesota, and 'as the crow flies' it is probably 50 miles or so from Port-au-Prince to Ench.

I'll never know for sure how far we actually drove in Haiti: it seemed like a thousand miles; more likely it was less than 200.

A road from Ench to Port-au-Prince does show on the map of Haiti, but often it appeared more like some mountain trails I've experienced in the western U.S.

A Nepalese UN soldier in Mirebalais, which seemed about half-way between Ench and Port-au-Prince, said we were 60 kilometers from the city (36 miles), so maybe our drive between the two cities was 75 miles, or maybe it was more, or less.

We made shorter road trips the previous days, and for each most of our time was spent getting to and from the towns we were visiting.

We at least had cars. Most travelers we saw were walking along the roadside. A short trip by car, even on bad roads, is very long on foot.

I think I would be close if I estimated our average speed at 10 miles an hour, often less. The roads were mostly rock based, and even the best parts seldom compared to the regular gravel roads I'm familiar with in rural North Dakota.

Cars are to drive to the right, as in this country, but that was a somewhat novel concept in actual practice. Decisions were constantly being made about what part of the road was most drivable. Sometimes cars met and passed on the left; often there was a very deep and impassable pothole or washout, and driving on the right was not an option. Basically, you 'went with the flow', and, besides, you weren't going very fast. The road was not a place for an absent-minded driver.

There was vehicular traffic on this road, really quite a lot, since goods need to be transported from Port-au-Prince into the interior, and this is done by large open trucks which are filled with people and assorted goods going here and there. There is apparently some incidence of banditry, and I can understand the why and the how. Occasionally we would see a truck broken down, with passengers waiting...probably for hours...for help. I marveled that the trucks could even make some of the grades they encountered.

(The last night we were in Haiti, Cathy couldn't sleep because she was worried we'd have to take those mountain roads in an open bus back to the airport, but she was visualizing a route such as we had traveled through the mountains from Ench. Once she knew that she didn't have to go back there, no problem! She particularly noticed the news of recent days about the bus load of tourists which went over the edge on a mountain road in Chile. Had that happened before we left, anxiety levels would have been much higher. As it was, we took a bus down the mountain on our last day. It was a slow and very safe journey to the airport.)

Everywhere we went by road, there were lots of small houses, and plenty of pedestrian traffic – people walking, on donkeys, on bicycles, occasionally on motor scooters. There were open spaces, but not many. The roadside was its own almost continuous community.

Lots of kids go to school, as was evidenced by kids, always in uniform, we saw walking to or from or at some school or other. Under the deposed president Aristide, public education was a big priority, and that legacy is obvious.

The parents of the children were generally not so lucky. The peasant's life was and is a hard life, of limited use to the rich oligarchy. Education is not valued by people who prefer a docile population. Educated people ask questions...and maybe even expect some role in running things. Such people are dangerous to a dictator.

Noteworthy by its absence was electricity. Most don't have electricity, I'd guess. Our hotel in Ench had electricity, but it was primarily generated on site with gas run generators. (Our group leader called our hotel a Three Star hotel, which was probably true. Clean, comfortable.) Radios are battery operated; we saw a TV and satellite dish at our hotel, but I never actually saw the TV on. The radio played, carrying Haitian music and some 'talk radio' kinds of programming.

I don't recall seeing a single newspaper or billboard anywhere, except for an occasional sign or banner welcoming us to Ench or some other place. I don't recall seeing any evidence of a postal service either, though I'm sure it exists in some form. Some people we saw did have cell phones.

Houses were uniformly very small – maybe one room or perhaps two; often they were quite colorful, even if thatched with banana leaves. There is a sense of color in the Haitian spirit, I would guess, and if somebody could get their hands on some kind of colorful paint (white and black were not colors I saw, assorted pastels were common, often two-tone), they'd slap it on their house. Some were really quite beautiful.

Most houses along the road also had a small building on stilts. This was, I learned, a granary. It was on stilts to keep out the rats. Sometimes the stilts would have cone-shaped skirts, the better to keep out the nocturnal marauders.

We saw donkeys, mules, oxen, chickens, guinea fowl, ducks, turkeys, pigs, goats. I don't recall seeing a single cow, and not till our last night high above Port-au-Prince did I see a horse. (Coming up the mountain road to our Kenscoff hotel the last day, a casually trotting horse easily 'bested' our vehicle.)

A cow would not have much utility in this land without refrigeration; a horse is not necessary. Dogs seemed quite common, but I don't recall seeing a single cat. Cathy remarked that all the Haitian dogs she saw looked alike. Again on this trip, as last, I have almost no memory of seeing birds of any sort. Cathy noticed this too. I'm sure they exist, but where?

The evidence of poverty was everywhere, but not a sense of hopelessness. There was a sense of quiet dignity, and genuine community, amongst the people we saw. Perhaps there might be some analogies to the community esprit during the Great Depression in our own country. These are folks who might be excused for giving up, or lashing out, but they struggle on as best they can, regardless of their circumstances.

January 29 of this year Haitians voted en masse for their president, and we saw remnants of political signs everywhere. These people are engaged in their destiny. They're not quitters, even with the deck seemingly stacked against them.

One derives meaning from the descriptor of Haitians I heard on my last trip: "every Haitian is an entrepreneur" some one said, and it is believable. They are entrepreneurs because survival depends on it.

While many Haitians have relatives 'in the states' or in the teeming city of Port-au-Prince, I got a sense that most of our negative exports have not really reached the interior of the country. (Contrary to popular belief, AIDS was an export from the U.S. to Haiti, not vice versa.) I saw only one person smoking a cigarette. It's likely a luxury.

Ench, I learned from a retired Canadian RCMP in town to help train the local police force, had over 50,000 people, 60 police and only one police car (two more were pending). But it didn't seem to have a particular need for more. It was a country town.

When we came down the mountain heading into Port-au-Prince from Ench we entered a wonderful, flat, paved two-lane highway, which was our final ten miles or so into the city. I was delighted at the comfort it provided, but found myself thinking, will this be a benefit, or a curse, if is completed all the way to Ench? After all, it is not only legitimate commerce that is exported over these roads. And such benefits ultimately can have their extreme social costs as well.

WHITE RICE, HAITIAN PIGS, CHICKENS, AND THE CONSEQUENCES FOR THE POOR OF GLOBALIZATION AND FREE MARKET ECONOMIES.

One of the more powerful stories I heard was one evening at the hotel in Ench, when one of the Fonkoze reps described for us what he felt was the worst single decision ever made to really hurt Haiti's people – the 1987 rice dumping on Haiti.

More on that in a moment.

White rice in one form or another, mostly with beans, was an integral part of most every main meal during our week.

Bags of rice were ubiquitous in the local markets. It is the staple food.

The big trucks we met coming from Port-au-Prince quite likely had many bags of white rice, on top of which sat the ti marchands or their middlemen who were taking their product home for market.

Frequently we saw a Haitian pig tethered in a yard.

On return home, an article I read identified these pigs as equivalent of a family 'savings account'. When an important economic need came up, the pig could be sold – money on the hoof. And, of course, it often earned 'interest' – piglets. Coming as I do, one generation removed from farm stock, with lots of direct interaction with an old-time North Dakota farm, I could relate to this farmyard economy – Grandma's 'pin money' was, I think, eggs from the farmyard chickens. It came in handy for extras.

Our host told us with some passion what he said had happened with domestic rice production in Haiti in 1987: In the chaotic period between the fall of Baby Doc Duvalier

(1986) and free elections in 1990, someone made the decision in the U.S. to dump extra American rice into the Haiti market at below market costs, and the then-Haitian ‘government’ approved this free-market gambit. It was a recipe for catastrophe for much of the local economy.

Rice is a staple of the Haitian diet, and prior to 1987, it was primarily provided by small Haitian farmers who, like most non-affluent people live from one harvest season to the next, getting by, but not in a position to take a loss, and certainly not in a position to have no market at all for their own product (which one of our group said often was far more nutritious than the current white rice.)

Haitians are no different than anyone else: when they saw a good deal in 1987, they took it, leaving the Haitian rice unbought, and driving the rice farmers out of business. It was what I would call the “Walmart effect” on the Haitian rice producers – good for a certain segment of U.S. agriculture, very bad for some poor domestic rice producers in Haiti.

Coming home I learned that impoverished Haiti is now among the top customers in the entire world for American domestic rice, where it had once been self-sufficient. The local Haitian rice growers never recovered. Today it is American white rice that you find in the warehouses in the small towns, and the cost is not cut-rate.

Those six months in 1987 fundamentally changed the entire Haitian economy, suggested our speaker.

Regarding Haitian Pigs: they were a common animal we saw around rural Haiti. (Perhaps because of the time of year, I remember seeing only a single pig at a time.) Haitian pigs are built for the tropics, and are smaller and probably more rugged than, say, Iowa pigs.

About the same time as the rice debacle – the 1980s - an outbreak of swine flu gave rise to the mandated destruction of every Haitian pig. The reasoning was that they were a threat to American pigs.

After this catastrophe, there was some equally catastrophic planning: some planners, for instance, decided to replace the Haitian pigs with American pigs: Another new market for American agribusiness. There was only one small problem: American pigs cannot live in tropical conditions. It was a very bad plan with bad results. The American pigs could not survive without better living accommodations than their Haitian owners.

Today, apparently, the Haitian pigs are making a comeback.

Today chicken, I understand, is being imported at a cost less than the rural Haitians can produce them, and a new chapter of undercutting a local market has begun.

Moral of the story? The reader can fill in the blanks.

THE UNITED NATIONS

Through someone’s infinite wisdom (or lack of same), after the 2004 coup, United Nations ‘peacekeepers’ were brought into the country, and quite frequently, including at our hotel in Ench, we saw UN personnel or vehicles.

The UN has been labeled as contributing to the violence in Haiti, supporting a ‘shoot first and ask questions later’ policy in particular in the desperate slums of Port-au-Prince, and supporting a national police of very dubious reputation. There seems some considerable credence to the accusations.

Where we were, the UN presence seemed much quieter. The Canadian referred to above was in Haiti under the auspices of the UN, and he, along with some others, including a French police officer, seemed engaged in positive liaison work.

Because of a flat tire on one of the vehicles, we had a brief opportunity to visit with some Nepalese UN peacekeepers relaxing in a local park in Mirebalais. They seemed neither tense nor violence prone. And the Haitians in their vicinity did not seem particularly impressed...or distressed. The Nepalese were like most soldiers, young men far away from home.

One of our delegation remarked about a visit she had made to Nepal years earlier. It was a country that seemed, if anything, even poorer than Haiti. Why did Nepalese go into the military, she asked someone then. Because it is a job, she was told, in a place where a job is hard to come by.

I didn't get the impression, even slightly, that the presence of the UN Peacekeepers in the areas we visited had any positive or negative impact on keeping the peace. Their presence was liked by some, and not liked by others. I suspect the reaction would have been much different – more negative – in the city, and especially in the slums.

I am not at all certain that the UN's presence is generally welcome amongst the common Haitians. It is just another intrusion into a country trying to develop.

JEAN-BERTRAND ARISTIDE

Three years ago I knew almost nothing about Haiti, and even less about then-president Aristide, and nothing at all about his party Lavalas.

All that has changed, in large part because I used the intervening two years to learn as much about Haiti as I could, and learn from all 'sides'.

At Kanj, I asked somebody about Aristide, a native-born Haitian now in exile in South Africa. "I hope he doesn't come back", the lady said.

I asked why. "If he returns there'll be a bloodbath." And nothing more was said.

I have learned a lot about the political dynamics in Haiti in the last two years, and I know more than most about political dynamics from the United States to Haiti.

I have never seen a single person more demonized (in recent U.S. parlance "swift-boated") than President Aristide and his party.

Every sin, real and imagined, petty or serious, is in some way attributed to Aristide, even today. The wildest rumor is given credence by some who should know better.

I have been amazed at how people lap up the negative without any corroborating evidence.

Aristide's worst sin, I think, was that he came from among the poor in Haiti, advocated aggressively for the poor, and was elected by the poor. He was viewed as a big threat to the small and extremely wealthy elite of Haiti, and their patrons, our own government. He needed to be stopped by any means necessary, and he was. But the Haitians who elected him were not defeated.

Edikasyon Sivik

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Aksyon Sivik

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Demokrasi

**On the back of a Haitian man's
t-shirt at our hotel**

I have had an opportunity to analyze a number of the allegations lodged personally against him, and they are in large part fiction, or grossly dramatized partial 'facts' or allegations, including civil 'lawsuits' that seem to have far more the purpose of public relations than substance.

Even among his early supporters there are his detractors. This is due in large part, I think, because he was caught in a vise beyond his control, and 'character assassinated' by his enemies. The outside influences (i.e. the United States and others) made demands on him, which led to compromises his supporters did not like.

His is not a simple one-sided one-dimensional story.

Basically, we get only one side – the very negative side.

One of the allegations against him was 'corruption'. I knew from the beginning there would be corruption in a place like Haiti – it is, after all, a very poor country. But responsibility for all of it seemed laid at the feet of a single man. Ditto for violence. Ditto for anything negative, and nothing positive. Our own country has plenty of examples of our own – and much greater – corruption. Enron comes immediately to mind. And it's not alone.

Caveat emptor is the phrase that comes to mind when being advised about Aristide and Lavalas supposed-sins.

I think the lady at Kanj was less concerned about Aristide's coming back, than the possibility that a spontaneous eruption of celebration that would erupt across the country if he came back would deteriorate into violence. He was very much a supporter of Zanmi Lasante, and Paul Farmer a supporter of his.

Would there be a 'bloodbath'? Who knows. Certainly not the lady. Nor me.

Is Aristide or his party perfect? No more than any one of us.

Only time will tell if he is allowed to come back to his native land.

OLD-TIME NORTH DAKOTA AS METAPHOR FOR PRESENT DAY HAITI

It was when I was looking at the corn-milling machine in a Mayisad store, which had been purchased by a Fonkoze loan, that it occurred to me that there may be some analogies to old-time North Dakota, where my grandparents started to farm 101 years ago this month.

Last summer I rewrote a history of that farm family, and among the treasures was a stack of over 100 handwritten letters sent in 1905-06 to that farm by my grandmother and grandfather's siblings and friends, all living on farms in southwestern Wisconsin.

More recently, I read through over 300 postcards sent to that farm in the early 1900s. These were less personal, but as descriptive of the environment 100 years ago.

There were, granted, big differences between the conditions my grandparents encountered, and the contemporary rural Haitian life. They and their siblings had some schooling, and could read and write. They had benefited from an uncle who was a land entrepreneur and had likely found the land they ultimately purchased in North Dakota.

Grandpa's father bought the land for his son, which Grandpa later repaid. They came and went to the area of the farm by railroad.

All of these and possibly many other factors were different than present day Haiti..

But I was struck by the similarities in the pace of life, the simple circumstances of farming with horses, and gardening, the sense of community, the reality of limited resources, that was a fact of life in early North Dakota, and is still a reality in Haiti.

The rural Haitian by and large does not have the 'rich uncle' or the 'prosperous father' to provide a jump start to his or her economic future.

Perhaps, I thought to myself as I looked at that hand operated mill in the corner of the building, Fonkoze is the beginning of the long march to progress for the people of rural Haiti.

Perhaps.

A WORD ABOUT FOREIGN AID

Shortly after I returned from Haiti in 2003, the U.S. State Department issued a news release patting itself on the back: the U.S. was Haiti's most generous foreign aid donor (more in the next section).

I did some quick math: the generous Aid we said we had given Haiti amounted to about 20 cents per American for the most recent year; and amounted to about \$7 per American.

While I am short of specifics still (more below), it also has become apparent that the Aid did not go to the Haiti government, and at least some of it was in fact devoted to destabilizing and eliminating the democratically elected government.

After the first trip to Haiti, someone told me that there is a rule of thumb about American foreign aid, and that is that at least 80% of the aid comes directly back to the United States in the forms of wages paid, American products purchases, etc. The most recent (and bad) example of this is in Iraq, where Halliburton gets rich on what is probably listed somewhere as foreign aid to repair destroyed water systems, etc.

A recent best-selling book by John Perkins, Confessions of an Economic Hitman, gives an even more depressing account. Perkins was an "Economic Hitman" for American companies in third world poor countries beginning in the late 70s, and he suggests that the objective of 'loans' back then was to not only make a profit on the backs of the poor countries, but to make the countries permanently dependent on the lender, and the leaders of these nations essentially becoming kept men or women, through payoffs (corruption), or real threats on their lives.

In short, our generosity needs to be taken with a huge grain of salt, and may be much less generous than it appears.

Perkins book is well worth reading.

Sometimes I hear the argument that foreign aid is throwing money down the proverbial rat-hole.

I disagree.

Just as personal and business loans are ubiquitous in the American context, and most everyone, even those of means, has a major loan called a mortgage on his or her own property, so do the poorest of the poor need a helping hand to rise out of poverty.

One of the most remarkable facts, to me, when I learned of Fonkoze, was the amazing rate of pay-backs on loans, for all intents and purposes, almost every loan is paid back in time, with interest – probably a far better record than under our own banking system in the United States.

Fonkoze's Ann Hastings recounted a particularly grim time in Fonkoze, a couple of years ago when a devastating hurricane wreaked massive destruction on the small city of Gonaives on the coast of Haiti. Many of Fonkoze's customers were completely wiped out by the hurricane, and the bank had to decide how to deal with the major crisis there. They decided to pitch in and help, and the long term effect was that not only were the loans paid off, but the savings rate increased.

It was a remarkable testimony to the goodness and reliability of the people they served.

WHAT IT ALL MEANS...AT LEAST TO ME.

Three years ago I would have to say that I knew virtually nothing about Haiti, its politics, or its geopolitical relationship with the rest of the world, especially the United States.

I came back determined to learn all that I could, from as many perspectives as possible.

I have not been impressed with the United States role in the dilemma of Haiti, both historically and, especially, the last five years.

Succinctly, Haiti was a threat to the slave-holding oligarchs of the early U.S., our 'founding fathers'. Haiti was, after all, a slave colony of France that threw off its shackles and declared its independence in 1804, much to the alarm of the then-very young United States. The U.S. didn't even recognize it as a country until the 1860s, and the relationship has been an exploitive one ever since. It and its people were a resource to be mined.

In our nation of immigrants, Haitians are not especially welcome. I think race plays a big part in this.

It is hard to find out anything even approximating the truth about Haiti and our relations with the country from usual sources: government or international or mainstream media.

Less than a month after my return to the United States from my first trip, in January, 2004, I decided to look up what the U.S. State Department said about Haiti. This was about two months prior to the coup.

I found on State's website, three news releases, all dated December 29, 2003. (I would give cites, but none of these releases remain on the web. Luckily, I made copies.)

I took a particular interest in one of the news releases, entitled U.S. Assistance to Haiti. In relevant part, the release said "The U.S. Government is Haiti's largest donor...During fiscal years 1995 to 2003, the U.S. gave Haiti more than \$850 million in direct bilateral assistance, and the U.S. is seeking \$55 million for fiscal year 2004...."

It did not take higher mathematics to figure out that this generous aid in FY 2004 amounted to about \$7 per Haitian, and 20 cents per American. Much of the purported aid was likely for military expense when we finally put down the 1991-94 coup d'etat – a coup which was probably covertly aided and abetted by our own country, and didn't turn out well.

Because I was interested in the topic, on January 9, 2004, I wrote a letter to the Department of State making what I thought was a very routine request: *“...I am very interested in the nature of U.S. government funds going to Haiti, their purpose, and who controls their use, and I am specifically interested in a breakdown of the \$850 million bilateral assistance, specifically who received what amounts of money for what purpose(s). I’d like this broken down by fiscal year. Also, I would like to know how much of this money, by year, went directly to the Haitian government for its purposes. Certainly there must exist an already prepared report which would provide the detail without need for further research by your office.”*

A few weeks later I got a phone call from a person at the Haiti desk of the State Department, who essentially tried to talk me out of my request for information; when that didn’t work, a month or two later I got some general documents which didn’t respond to my questions.

I put in a Freedom of Information Act request in November, 2004.

To make a long story very short, over two years later, I still do not have an answer to my question, which now has been referred to U.S. Agency for International Development and the Department of Defense.

I continue to believe that, as I stated January 9, 2004, “there must exist an already prepared report which would provide the detail without need for further research by your office.”

Why no information?

I think the reason is very simple: the State Department (and the others) do not want me to know for what the money was spent, and to whom it was given. One thing is almost certain: none of it was given to the Haitian government. Another thing is equally certain: considerable dollars were expended specifically to undercut and destabilize the democratically elected government of Haiti.

With ‘friends’ like the United States government, the people of Haiti need no enemies.

CONCLUDING COMMENT:

At our closing dinner, high above Port-au-Prince on March 11, Fonkoze Director Ann Hastings asked us to share our thoughts at the close of our week in Haiti.

One of our group members expressed with emotion and sadness the seeming hopelessness of it all for the people we had just spent quality time with. We all admired her candor.

Ann asked Fonkoze employee Alexandre Hector if he would respond, and he did, eloquently, in Kreyol. “Hope”, he said, “is a belief”, and went on from there.

The Haitians we met, seemingly against all odds, have hope. They believe.

During the trip I had been carrying the latest issue of Tikkun magazine. I hadn’t opened it during the journey, but enroute to Denver the same day we returned from Haiti, I pulled it out of my briefcase and found a marvelous article by Rabbi Michael Lerner, “The Voice of Fear and the Voice of Hope”, which I would encourage all to read. It is at www.tikkun.org/magazine/tik0603/lerner-fear/base_view .

Through this all, all I can urge is START SEEING HAITI, and read one or more of those books I noted earlier.

And if you are interested in promoting self-reliance, actively consider supporting Fonkoze or some similar micro-credit institution in another third-world country. Such institutions are true gifts to the people of their countries.

The views and opinions expressed above are solely those of the author.

For the authors reflections on his December, 2003 visit to Port-au-Prince, see www.chez-nous.net/haitibicentennial.pdf and www.chez-nous.net/peace_haiti.html