



L'Union Fait La Force

A stone in the water

I knew this was going to be huge, and I was right. I liken its impact to throwing a stone in the water. This was a really big stone, and it went all the way to the bottom with quite a force. Of course, there's a repercussion - an equal and opposite reaction of the water to the stone. All the little bubbles come rushing up to the surface, but there were too many and they were too fast to make sense of. The ideas and lessons began to coalesce with their like-minded neighbors and things started to simplify, but it's not until now, nearly two years later, when the bubbles have disappeared and just a few ripples are left on the surface that the event is understood in its entirety. Those ripples will continue to reverberate against the shore and come back to be understood in a different way, by someone changed by their presence.

My job is to be invisible

One of my talents is invisibility. I've found that, when photographing, most people treat me like a ghost - either dismissed as your dearly departed Aunt Mildred, who walks around the place and does goofy stuff but is otherwise harmless, or recoiled from as some kind of mirror of horror that melts your face (a la *Raiders of the Lost Ark*) while simultaneously adding ten pounds and twenty-five years to it.

I've gotten pretty used to being invisible, and it's served me quite well as a photographer. I get the luxury of being on the outside of situations, dispassionately observing, choosing what to emphasize. Given the right conditions, things take on a painterly quality, a little bit in how the light interacts with the textures of the objects in the scene, but more from the gestures and interactions of the people and animals.

One of the qualities of a painting is that it's still. You may feel motion upon looking at it, but it does not move. It is also not sentient. You can see it, but it has no awareness or your existence, nor can it look back at you. In all my time of invisibility, I have come to trust this concept as being pretty darn consistent.

Except in Haiti. There, I could be invisible no longer.

This is one of my favorite images as it not only exemplifies the “painterly” quality, it also invokes in me a keen sense of gratitude. This gentleman was the “cow man.” His cow had been hit by a car some time before. Remarkably, she was still up and moving around, but still had some superficial injuries. Sarah treated the injuries, and the man was so pleased that he gifted us with coconuts he cut himself from a nearby tree. It was such a lovely, personal gesture. He showed us his house, and told us how his brother had died in the earthquake, so he and his wife had inherited his brother’s children. They have a total of seven to care for, which is quite a task in their economic state. Still, he gave what he had in appreciation for what he received.



When the painting looks back, it tells a deeper story



I was ghosted by most people at first, which was perfect because I was not capable of much coherent thought in French. But the more I shot, the more absorbed I became. And then, the painting turned and looked back at me. And it grinned. It was like being in a dream, and the thing that’s simply impossible just actually happened. I was now fully absorbed into the painting. I was responsible for my part in it, just like all the other characters.

Those characters, they are flesh-and-blood *people*. The veterinary team included Dr. Judy Batker and her son Seth, Dr. Jessica Gunby and her daughter Charlotte, vet tech Sarah Uecker, Dr. Lloyd Jarmon from Houston, Texas, and Dr. Kelly



Crowdis, who lives in Port Au Prince and organizes these trips. Of the Haitians: Fabien, who helped organize the people coming to the clinics and also ran errands; Stefan, one of the next generation of horse handlers, who excels with his even temperament and sense of humor; Jean Baptiste, the saddle maker and also a vet agent (a vet in training); Wislinde, one of the few female vet



agents, and Robinson, a dedicated vet agent with his hands full of responsibility. There were so many others, too many to introduce here.



So much beauty

The expansive, mountainous beauty is astonishing. Much of Haiti has been deforested, but in the north, in Milot, there is still a tropical forest. Surrounded by the forest is the architecture, which has a Spanish and a French influence, and both are from the turn of the century. As such, many of the buildings are made in an artful way, with lots of color, especially in the city. Belle Maison (beautiful house), the bed and breakfast where we stayed for the first part of the trip, had a lovely little courtyard with wrought iron details. It felt really good - a curious feeling of relief, actually - to be in a place where people put art into their structures. I think it's noteworthy that a place with art as an everyday incorporation can bring a sense of relief.



The Sans-Souci Palace (“carefree” palace, main image and top left) was mostly ruined in an earthquake in 1842, but it had been compared to the Palace of Versailles when it was still alive.

Citadelle Laferrière, Citadelle Henri Christophe, or The Citadelle (citadel, in English, shown at top right, its church at middle), doesn't look that big from the little town a few miles away. Up close, it's a massive structure, constructed with quicklime, molasses, and the blood of local cows and goats. It's from these monuments that the people and horses of the citadel earn their living: by assisting tourists up the mountain to view them and learn their history.



The word of the day, kids, is contrast

There are so many contrasts between the absolute beauty and the absolute neglect of the land and animals.

One horse was being butchered while the vets were working to keep others alive. I remember the smell of the cookfires, earthy and a little salty, and mixed with Haiti's own unique, mountain-sweet aroma. I remember seeing the partially defleshed skull resting on a low wall. It seemed like it was the wrong message at the time, but in retrospect I wish I'd photographed the skull; it had its own beauty to it, the way the filtered spring light wrapped lightly around it.

It's a tropical paradise in many ways: palm and banana trees, ocean beaches, but there's garbage nearly everywhere you look. People have cell phones and Michael Jordan watches, but not enough to eat. The people have such close family and friend relationships, but can't quite work together to help everyone collectively succeed.

Saddles, like everything else, are made from available materials. Many were covered with fleece blankets with various Disney characters, which were nailed to the tree of the saddle. These whimsical characters are often laid over massive saddle sores.



The problems for Haitian horses are simple

The primary problem is poverty. The owner's lack of resources, primarily food, education, and medical supplies. Consequently, the horses suffer from hunger, so they don't get nutrition they need to keep up with the very hard work they do. For a mare, getting pregnant can be a death sentence, as she can't consume enough to feed herself and her foal. Haitian horses also suffer from a profound epidemic of tick-borne diseases that inevitably go untreated due to a lack of tick repellent. In fact, 100% of the 71 horses tested were found to be positive for Babesia, a disease similar to West Nile Virus, which led the vets to question if the tests were even accurate.

Just one of these issues is enough to rob a horse of their ability to work, but combined, the odds are stacked up against them, and the horses barely even have a chance to live, not to mention thrive. The lack of the handler's horse behaviour knowledge leads to less humane horse handling and "domination" instead of taking advantage of the horse's ability to cooperate. They endure ill-fitting tack made from inferior materials, causing horrific saddle sores over the withers. Add to that the Haitian people's general view of animals as tools to be used, and the situation for both horses and people is grim.

And yet, they abide. They survive. They continue to work, carrying heavy tourists up the mountain. Nationwide, they carry what the Haitian farmers can squeeze from the arid soil. Unable to protest, they do what they must.



↑ It looks like dust, but each white speck is a tick.



↑ Debriding of a saddle sore. Most Haitian horses have them.



← An unusual display of behavior: this horse has learned how to avoid unpleasant interaction with people. This handler does well with him.



Yes, it's as steep as it looks! This is toward the beginning of the ascent from the place where the tourists mount the horses. A big horse is fourteen hands, and a big tourist can be much larger than us riding here. Even with adequate nutrition, these horses work incredibly hard climbing this path more than once a day.





A can embedded in a cactus hedge. The hedges are used as fencing, and speaking from personal experience, they are very caustic. Thus, effective.

For the Haitian people, it's far more complex

It's tempting to believe that people are willfully ignorant and cruel, and to blame them for not trying harder. Unfortunately, the answer is not that simple. The Haitian people themselves have basic needs that are not being met. Deforestation, drought, floods, and other natural disasters have dramatically reduced agriculture, reducing the amount of food available. Political unrest means there are no government programs for agriculture or education, so people remain hungry, and technological advance and therefore education is stagnant. Without technology and the education to use it, few businesses are available to create jobs, so few people are able to get a job to support their family.

They do have solutions to their problems, but because of long-standing instability, they're based in short-term thinking. Some people have found resources by using "orphaning" as a job. They approach tourists and explain

how their relatives died in the earthquake, and they have no way to feed the families the relatives left behind. Although stories like that are all too common, and all too true, they are sometimes used as a "sales pitch," playing on the tourists' sympathy. Unfortunately, they are successful just often enough that it works only to perpetuate the cycle developed over more than a century of political and economic repression.

They do have control, but they don't know it. Despite the many creative innovations they've developed out of the recycled resources they do have, the overall environment serves as a reminder of their current condition. People assume they choose unemployment and unsanitary streets. As a nation, they are treated as simply poor and too lazy to change their lives. It's an unfortunate case of words being true because they're so often spoken, not because they're inherently true. This "truth" is so ingrained the Haitians become powerless through learned helplessness to overcome it, therefore confirming the "truth."

It's a cycle that repeats indefinitely with no long-term benefit. One of the visual manifestations of this are the innumerable piles of trash blanketing the otherwise beautiful landscape.

On top of those obstacles, the horse handlers at the Citadel also face a lack of control over horse operations - most handlers are not owners, so income is split between owner and handler, with the handler also feeding the horse. Everyone's income is dependent on tourism - if there are no tourists, there is no income. It's largely political unrest that deters tourists from even visiting, and rain can also keep the visitors indoors as well. This is by no means a comprehensive account of Haiti's struggles, but it does explain the general atmosphere of apathy you can see in some parts of

the country.

Didn't it make you sad?

Someone asked me this question after seeing an image of an emaciated horse. The answer? In the moment, no. My job involves compartmentalizing, disassociating. If I get emotionally involved I may get distracted and miss something significant.

However, it does now, a little bit. I recall a moment with a small goat that was non-weightbearing on a front leg. The owner of the goat kept moving the leg vigorously to show that the goat wasn't using it. The most heartbreaking part was that the goat had no reaction whatsoever. After I returned home and was reflecting on that moment and knowing the kind of injury the goat must have sustained, I had a moment of panic for its pain.

There was also an intimate moment between a young mare and Dr. Judy. (below). It was a bit unusual for any of the horses to show interest in a person, but this mare turned her attention to Dr. Judy while they waited for the owner to return. It was such a small but striking realization of the difference in our equestrian cultures. In the Western world, where most horses are kept for pleasure, this interaction is often celebrated, if not at least an accepted cultural norm. Generally, the Haitian horses and handlers have a far more business-like relationship. However, found myself really noticing with a sense of relief the moments of interaction that did happen, as though I'd found something I was looking for.





You can't fix it with sadness

To sit in sadness is to focus on the problem, not to find a solution. You fix it with action. You fortify it with education, and coordinating resources, and using perseverance in the right direction to create lasting effects. Drs. Judy and Kelly are doing just that. Among the accomplishments so far, they have coordinated with a program that teaches people how to build good saddles that will prevent saddle sores. They have created a Veterinary “Agent” program that allows people to learn how to diagnose and treat the most common ailments of the Haitian horses, as well as give them startup supplies to allow them to make a living caring for horses. They’ve created a brand with the hibiscus flower, Haiti’s national flower. It’s used only on the Citadel horses, which instills a sense of pride in the people’s work and provides visual evidence of people working together. They also have plans to create a feeding station at the Citadel itself, where tourists

can purchase feed for the horse that just carried them up the mountain. All of these efforts are forward-looking and self-sustaining; exactly what’s needed to help solve the problems the Haitian people and horses are experiencing.

L'union fait la force (unity builds strength)

As I had mentioned before, I found myself looking for threads of connection with which to make images. This was underscored in the last days of the trip, when we stayed with Rodesanie Cadet in Limbe.



Rosedanie has created Helping Hands Noramise, an organization focused on education. Young people learn skills such as growing healthy food

from seed and cooking that food into healthy meals, as well as computer skills to allow them to study their interests and continue their general education.



In addition, she's the founder of the Limbe rugby team, one requirement of which is service to the greater community. Again, this creates a positive connection to other people, instilling a sense of community and responsibility. This is quite a challenge where the prevailing norm doesn't automatically include interest in helping others. However, if anyone can do it, it's Rosedanie; she's an amazing powerhouse of will and wisdom.

Rosedanie has also developed a sewing group that makes and sells sanitary napkins for women so they can continue to go to work and school

while menstruating. Some of the ladies in this group also teach other young women about health and reproduction, allowing them to make healthy decisions for their bodies.



One of the projects we worked on as a group was to make pinwheels to raise money for refugees of war. We left America with shets of origami paper,

pins, and chopsticks, and we left Haiti with a huge stack of finished pinwheels to be sent in exchange for donations to war-torn families in other parts of the world. It served to teach us that yes, there are problems, but *these* are the solutions. Haiti's national motto, l'union fait la force, is true. Unity, coming together in a community, really does make us stronger.

A thousand thanks could never be enough

L'union fait la force. Nothing could have brought this more powerfully home for me than this trip. It was not a thing I could have done on my own in the comparatively impoverished condition I was in before this profoundly life-changing event. It took not only the action of other people to help me, but me allowing them to do so; an immense challenge for me personally. There are no appropriate words to describe the gratitude I feel for the experiences I had and the lessons I continue to learn from them.

How to help

These are the individuals and organizations that made this trip possible:

Equitarian Initiative and Dr. Judy Batker

www.equitarianinitiative.org



Mission Statement: Equitarian Initiative prepares volunteer veterinarians worldwide to deliver health care

and education to improve the health, nutrition, productivity, and welfare of horses, donkeys and mules, and to empower their care providers for sustainable change.

Christian Veterinary Mission and Dr. Kelly Crowdis

www.cvmusa.org



Christian Veterinary Mission exists to share

the love of Christ through veterinary medicine. Working in communities worldwide, CVM equips and encourages veterinary professionals and students to build relationships with others through the use of their veterinary knowledge and skills so that lives are transformed.

Helping Hands Noramise and Rosedanie Cadet

www.noramise.org



Empowering the Haitian People in Developing and Sustaining Intentional Local Industries

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