

Haiti Healing Arts: Program Coordinator's Perspective

- Chantal Paret Antoine

*"Stranger who walks in my city
remember that the land you set your foot on
is of the poets and the noblest
and the most beautiful
since it is above all my native land"*

-Anthony Phelps

Introduction

As the New York Borough that houses the largest public library system in the United States with one of the U.S largest collections of books and materials, Queens is also the most culturally and ethnically diverse county in the country. Anyone walking these streets becomes accustomed to kaleidoscopic sights, entrancing aromas, and a cacophony of sounds. It is not unusual to hear a myriad of languages being spoken within one city block. For example, in a harmonious and musically pleasant hodgepodge of sounds, the accentuated French of the African immigrants easily mixes with the sing-song and lilting cadence of the Caribbean English spoken by the Jamaicans and the Barbadians; the Koreans' rhythmic language, which is different from the sharpened and tonal Chinese, sails smoothly in this linguistic medley; the English intonation of the Pakistanis and the Indians, who are so dissimilar to that of the Indian Guyanese and Trinidadian, although these groups share the same phenotype, graces one's hearing. The sights are even more exhilarating. In a patchwork of dress styles, a person's eye goes from the women of the Middle East covered up in their black burkas to the vibrant saffron of the Punjabi women's saris, the eclectic

mixes of patterns worn by the Mexican vendors of sweet and hot mangoes freshly cut as you wait, to the faux Vogue uniforms of the Spanish teenagers. This is the universe in which I evolve daily as an architectural planner for the Queens library. Are these crazy-quilt and mélange of sights, sounds and smell some utopia of perceived, imagined, and not so real differences within humanity?

Tragedy Strikes

My workday on Tuesday, January 12, 2010 ended later than usual. I noticed an eerie quietness in place of the usual bustle of Jamaica, Queens in New York, as I hurried to the parking lot before it closes at 8:00pm. The store owners always cautious at this time begin pulling down their steel gates. At the traffic light, I stood and smiled easily when I recognized the familiar Creole of my native land. A young woman on her cell phone behind me could be heard in a loud and agitated voice, “What happened in Haiti?” followed by “I spoke to my Mother on Thursday, I’ll call her when I get home, after I buy a phone card.” For a second I thought what now? I admit I had become desensitized over the years by the goings on in Haiti – another political assassination, a coup attempt, a new “Haitian in origin” plague, all those negative things that we of Haitian descent have learned to expect from the media. When it comes to Haiti, the positives are hardly ever shared. Driving home to Long Island, I never gave that young woman’s conversation another thought.

My evening progressed as usual till I noticed the breaking news on CNN and the word HAITI, which I recognized before seeing the word earthquake. As I fixated on the enfolding tragedy, I felt that something of incredible proportion was happening, and my thoughts went to my parents, now both deceased, thankful, that they would not witness what I was watching. This

maligned, poor, often misunderstood country was struck by a 7.0 earthquake, one of the most catastrophic disasters ever experienced in the Caribbean region, leaving Port-Au Prince and its nearby provinces in one big pile of falling concrete, debris, scattered, lost and frightened children, amputees and unknown casualties. Given all the nation has been through in the past 200 years – previous natural disasters, poverty, illiteracy, malnutrition, rampant diseases, deforestation, lack of infrastructure, social, racial and gender inequality, political corruption and unrest – this earthquake was something different. It was a complete disaster.

I spent the rest of the week glued to every TV channel, written account, and internet accessible story watching and reading in horror. Celebrities were asking for doctors, food, water, anesthetics, while the proud Haitian people were put on display before the world to see. Questions from my colleagues, who recoiled a bit inquiring “Did you have any one back home?” and then seemingly relieved, as I gratefully added “ fortunately, no”, and then emphasized that it doesn’t make a real difference, all Haitians across the world are affected profoundly regardless. And I added “We are all Haitians at this time mourning our beautiful “Motherland” and countless brothers and sisters collectively”. It is unexplainable that even the young children of Haitians across the Diaspora, who have never set foot in Haiti, and can utter only a few Creole words in a heavy accent of their adopted countries felt a profound loss. As the song of one of our famous singers goes: “you can take me out of ‘the insides’ of my country but you can’t take out my country ‘inside’ of me”.

Hope in the catastrophe

For the days and weeks that followed the earthquake, the U.S. media was suffused with images of Haiti. Most were tragic and desperate, others, however, offered hope for the future. One image that will remain in my

memory for the rest of my life was that of Kiki, a seven year old boy who was pulled out from the rubble several days later by a group of American firefighters. The dust covered boy, dehydrated, presumably scared, hungry and traumatized, was handed over by a firefighter to the boy's uncle, his only surviving relative. Suddenly the boy raised both his hands way up high! This was a symbolic gesture Haitians will tell you they felt instantly, knowingly, that their pride intact and hope affirmed was seen, that we all knew what that boy was saying by raising his hands high, "Mwen la"! (I stand firm). Haitians collectively were all crying at this wonderful moment right along with Kiki, for what his courage meant, the resiliency of this child and of Haiti. This, no one else, the journalists, the rescuers, the scientists or the politicians could convey.

Art and Healing

Nine years ago, I was walking those same Queens streets, that Tuesday morning to begin my Masters Program in Art Therapy at Hofstra University. The day had commenced with an unusually beautiful, cloudless sky, crisp, with a gentle breeze. I was excited that finally a passion that I had for many years harbored as an impossibility, but knowing that art and the creative pursuit is healing and transformative was going to be tested and hopefully affirmed. Classes were to begin that evening, and I felt empowered that I had finally taken the first steps as whatever sacrifice to go back to school, reentering as a 43 years old. I felt all of the excitement, fears and tingles a child feels on the very first day of school.

But when I entered my office, this beautiful September 11, 2001, my secretary standing over her workstation listening to the radio was an odd sight. Soon after we were all standing over her. Our director's wife had phoned to verify the location of his meeting with architects that morning in

Manhattan, the downtown Wall Street area. She was concerned because she had seen from the breaking news of an accident; indeed a plane, taking an unfathomable wrong trajectory hit one of the towers at the World Trade Center. As the drama of that day gradually unfolded, we could not believe what we were listening to. In this small department of the library that dealt with construction drawings and details, endless meetings with engineers, and was accustomed to naming all of the great, and not so great buildings in Manhattan, we huddled speechlessly around her, and then silently left the office, shocked, to gather some bearing, to make some sense of it all, and to hug our families and children. I would not be attending school that night, all shut down, all cancelled. New York was in shock, two planes had directly targeted these two monuments. The buildings fell down, countless were stuck there, most perished in them, in the subways, on the streets, some emerged hurt, horrified, dazed. Countless people wondering about their loved ones, waiting for their phones to ring, as the death toll emerged and emergency aid was arriving from all across the country, and soon from all over the world.

Among the volunteers and first responders were artists and art therapists. Ground Zero was becoming, in addition to a horrific site, an endless urban canvas of art. The photographic montages, the embellished writings, the spontaneous memorials pasted on the nearby fences of hospitals, all were communicating what words could not convey. When I saw the cover of the New York Times magazine, with an illustration of a child's drawing of a plane hitting a building, the flames, the dark sky, the black frenzied smoke, I trembled at the timing of what I would be studying, and its impact. When Hofstra resumed classes, all we could do was discuss the role of art, the importance and healing capabilities of expressing ourselves, grounding ourselves, comforting ourselves with images in the most horrific of times.

That night I became an “art therapist” and never looked back, secure in the fact more now than even then, that art heals.

Trauma of a different kind

I was born in Haiti in 1957, a few months before the election that year when Duvalier assumed power. The legacy of that election would in a few years traumatize my life, those of my parents and family, those of my country in countless ways for the next decades. And profoundly affect generations to come. My memories of Haiti are haunting and few, as I survived my first five years. My Father, an active member of the military, but that part of the corps that aligned with Duvalier’s opponent, was now in line for the upheaval and genocide that quickly followed. After fleeing to the nearby Dominican Republic, My Mother, sister and I were forced to hide for the next three years at first in distant relatives homes, and then with courageous strangers who to this day we owe our lives to.

I was eight when we arrived in New York, to begin a new life, reunited with my Father, residency in hand, to form new lives as immigrants. We watched as our entire families re-settled away from their beloved homeland here in the states, in Canada, France and as far away as Zaire. We lived in trauma, in self-imposed isolation, and in hope that this would only be temporary. Forty four years later, I am an American citizen, still residing in New York. My Father died without ever assimilating here, without ever seeing his beloved Haiti again. My Mother who also died recently, harboring the trauma of what she endured in Haiti with a mixture of longing and loathing, sadness covered by anger. Her last dreams were filled with shrieks and screams as she called “Mamman” the mother who died when she found out her daughter was being sought to be killed, the mother whose funeral passed by the window beneath where we were hiding. I still remember the

pillow that they put on her face to muffle the screams she could not afford to lash out even at death, lest we would be discovered.

Yet, somehow I emerged with a memory of my country reinforced daily by my insatiable love of Haiti, reading all that is written about it, reading its novels, living its beauty through its artistic legacy, its food, music, its humor, wisdom and resiliency from its incredible history, its folk tales, its proverbs. Now as an architectural designer, planning libraries, in possession of an art therapy degree; I am also a divorced mother of two young adults in college, a Haitian born woman still intact with my innate charms, my pride, my vulnerability, and my innate talents which allow me to depict those aspects of my culture and heritage through art as an artist. I emerge also still armored with wanting to make a difference, with the belief that many things can be addressed, tempered, changed by investing in the future generations. I am convinced that these creative pursuits are the primordial way to communicate with others, to contemplate, to navigate, on that which we can't make sense of and have to come to terms with one way or another, and continue with some aspect of Joy! They can also help us top comprehend that which here is no understanding for, to come to terms with the vagaries of life, and to continue to face life with determination and resolve!

Haiti and art

Haitians are all collectively imaginative and artistic. "Bondye bay chak moun pa li", God gave each person her own. Their lot, and living conditions demand that they be. Nothing in Haiti is done without an aspect of art, a joy of creating. To explain to the world at large the paradox that an art of joy originated and sustains itself in the poorest nation of the Western Hemisphere is a task that is known to many, believed by few, and at times futile to do. In no other country has a way of life, a population of so many

self-taught painters and sculptors renewing itself year after year, generation after generation, inside Haiti, and abroad such a legacy exists. Haitian art and its expression yet does not belong only to the artist, and his canvas. It is everywhere. In this poor country, art and creative expression is a need as important and life affirming in which without its expression or with its blockage would result in making dire circumstances unbearable. This is at the core of the Haitian psyche. IT is in its food, its folklore, its music and dance, its art, its stories and history in which its heroes are depicted again and again. Haitian art and creativity is both its best ambassador, and its most stable and abundant national product.

Art is everywhere in Haiti. It is found in the depiction of the market women, their bright colored scarves securing their large sisal handmade baskets of mangoes and sour oranges, to the childishly rendered “tap-tap, the method of transportation in Haiti, and simultaneously a hopeful prayer, which many think should become the iconic symbol of Port-Au -Prince. It is also in its brightly decorated homes in the provinces, in the tombstones of its cemeteries, to the child who upon seeing a tin can hammers it into shape, creating a “Loa”, an animal, a totem. The murals of the old cathedrals, the imagery of the billboards, denoting an animal, a plant, fire, a symbol of a political party recognizable to a highly illiterate mass. Art is seen in its primitive form, to its most wonderful old gingerbread homes of the South, and the decoration of the Hougan’s peristyle in a Voodoo ceremony. Haiti, can be said that “God” himself must have painted with his own brush, and having seen the result, one could argue to have been jealous.. Being Haitian and continuing to want to live regardless of innumerable obstacles is in itself a work of art.

Trauma

Trauma is defined as the lasting psychological impact on a person or child which results from an occurrence. These occurrences can be of one incident such as a natural disaster, hurricanes, a tsunami, a mass shooting, a terrorist attack, a major airplane accident, etc, or one of chronic abuses, ongoing for a long duration. Chronic trauma includes the ongoing results of creating a life in terms of many issues such as political uprisings and unrest, poverty, diseases, famine, loss of home, possessions, and family members or support systems and can cause major trauma seen or not, identified or not, on its own. Substantial impact of one natural disaster can only add to pre-existing established chronic trauma and color a once in a lifetime tragedy even more so. Impacts of a natural disaster, such as a massive earthquake cannot only add to pre-existing established chronic traumas, they can also result in long-lasting conditions psychologist and mental health professionals refer to as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD.

PTSD refers to Posttraumatic stress disorder, and a list of symptoms which in a cluster identifies PTSD as defined in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV-TR; American Psychiatric Association, 2010)*. Some of the symptoms noted which are known to affect children especially includes: *Hyper-arousal, Re-experiencing, Avoidance* (Malchiodi, 2008). While trauma is universal, it is culture that tells us how it is shaped. The local culture and symbolism of the children lives should be of primary importance and be a major responsibility of mental health care professional in the understanding of traumatic experiences with children, before adapting a check list of symptoms within days notice into a tragedy.

Haiti's medical and social universes

The Haitian proverb *tout maladi pa maladi doktè*, not every disease can be cured by a doctor, sums up not only the co-habitation of both western medicine and the indigenous leaf doctors reinforced by the Voodoo religion and rites, but also of a resignation in a country where access to medicine for all illnesses, physical or emotional is not only not affordable, but also non-existent. In Haiti one learns quickly about the limitations of western medicine and technology so readily available in the United States. There are no easy solutions, and the problems are quite complex. While access to contraception is important, it will not decrease birth rates. Starvation cannot be eradicated by importing free food. A country's economic fitness is of much more importance to the equation, then the number of doctors in the country, and on duty in hospitals. And it need not be said that no major improvements will come to Haiti until a political system is developed that allows people to prosper from the fruits of their own labor. Also with an illiteracy rate above 90%, Haiti lacks the secured foundation of any healthy populace, which is an educated populace, a healthy State, economic stability and basic human rights.

Yet, Haiti does not want people from the outside "experts" to tell them what to do. Haitians are intensely proud people, and everyone from starving peasants to the wealthy elite know that Haiti is the only country to successfully overthrow slavery. The typical Haitian would rather starve than have a foreign government dictate their policies, especially if those people are white. Anyone who wants to help Haiti must understand this. Bashing Haiti for its inability to establish representative government is also counterproductive. Although Haiti has benefited from the kindness of strangers in the past and at this juncture in its history, and millions of dollars have been spent, Haiti remains the same, with little improvement. More are starving than before. The poor are willing to sell all their possessions in a desperate attempt to leave the country. Haiti is a land of defunct projects. Everybody wants to help, and is helping but little is

being accomplished. There is no coordination, no communication; each group is in its own little act.

Haitian children and trauma

Children in Haiti were traumatized already before the January earthquake occurred. The main theme in this collage of their lives was despair. The majority of them lived in small shacks no bigger than a college dormitory room made out of mud, animal dung, and cardboard. Sheets of corrugated tin serve as roofs even though most have rust-eroded holes. A well-placed kick could easily flatten one. The better shacks also have metal sheets as siding and luxury complexes have cement bricks. The floors are coarse dirt and because of overcrowding the occupants sleep in shifts. There is no privacy and sex education in Haiti is by observation. Clothes lines are suspended between the shacks. Pans, kettles, shovels are stored on the roof tops. Garbage is heaped up at the entrances, spewing into the narrow streets along with human excrement, orange and banana peels, scraps of sharp metal, cans, and broken glass imbedded in the mud. Puddles of stagnant water coalesce forming a stream - the sewage system. The slowly oozing water is covered by a thick brown reflective film occasionally pierced with proliferating green algae. The children abound with their shiny pot bellies, naked or hardly covered, stick legs, read hair, a sign of malnutrition, which in many cases have stunted their growth. Most were delayed developmentally and learned to crawl, stand, and walk later than American children. Children who could not be taken care of at home were often given up for adoption. These children were sent to an industrialized nation such as Belgium, Canada with a ticket to a fulfilling life. Rarely did they go to the United States because of the multiple demands required to get the paperwork through the bureaucracy.

Believing that an art intervention can and is sufficient to make a difference for a large numbers of children affected by this tragedy would be naive. The

complexity of Haiti's problems is manifold and layered. To have a strong foundation and make a difference however small it may be, any intervention which is rooted on respect, common ground, compromise and empathy is as good as any other viable mechanism in place for concrete and effective impact. Empathy is a natural or learned ability to place one in another's place. To understand and try to understand another's lot much different than yours by observation, feelings, thoughts, understanding the motives or situations both physical and emotional of another. One does not need to compromise or accept another's situation but to be able to relate it to a loss or a moment, similar in one aspect of our own lives, to just understand. Empathy is an important ingredient free of judgment, not losing our sense of observation and emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995) is the ability to identify and express one's own emotions and simultaneously be able to read and identify another's. The use of art and creativity can be an effective tool to develop and share empathy for those who are traumatized, marginalized and add value to one's life as arduous it may be after a disaster.

The circumstances and implications of a disaster are different from one set of events to another, one country to another. Experience after the New York World Trade Center attack in 2001, the tsunami in Asia in 2004, the hurricane of Katrina at New Orleans and the US Gulf Coast of 2005, although very different from another has helped us observe, learn and be re-affirmed that the children among us can benefit greatly with art as an aid, a tool for healing. Now after such a catastrophic event now acute in the aftermath of the earthquake which occurred in Haiti 2010, unique and experienced organizations such as ICAF are poised to share their knowledge and their useful tools gained from the tragedies they have witnessed, and the children's lives they have touched. As written in the abstract *Prosperity and Peace Through Art* (Ishaq, 2004) key steps are the blueprint for effective tools in such a cause, and aiding in community building and reconstruction, which are:

- *Develop training materials.* To describe best practices and provide practical suggestion on what children should be encouraged to paint or draw, and helpful coping strategies to avoid traumatizing children by other children's stories or art
- *Identify, train and coordinate volunteers.* Enlist and mobilize expert to work on different components of the program, and coordinate art therapy workshops in schools, orphanages and shelters
- *Identify, collect and ship art and school supplies.* Determine what teachers and artists in the affected areas need and ship art and school supplies to them
- *Promote empathy through encouragement art.* Encourage children not affected by the disaster to create "encouragement art" that provides hope to the children affected by the disaster. Such art creation, international exchange and exhibitions to help promote empathy and awareness
- *Psychological Intervention for the traumatized.* Identify the most severe cases for psychological treatment, in consultation with local teachers and parents and suggested remedial action
- *Evaluation of response.* Evaluate the program and determine the need for program extension and modification.

These guidelines noted above and established from the experience obtained through the response to three major natural disasters that shocked the world as mentioned before, from the tsunami, to hurricane Katrina, all observed in their immediacy. Although ICAF's core mission is not disaster relief, the Foundation has gained an excellent track record based on its work with children and art interventions.

Conclusion

Haitians are all collectively imaginative and artistic. “*Bondye bay chak moun pa li*”, God gave each person her own. Their lot, and living conditions demand that they be. Nothing in Haiti is done without an aspect of art, a joy of creating. The paradox that an art of joy originated during slavery and has sustained itself through two centuries in the poorest nation of the Western Hemisphere is a task that is known to many, believed by few, and at times futile to explain. In no other country has a way of life, a population of so many self-taught painters and sculptors renewing itself year after year, generation after generation, inside Haiti, and abroad such a legacy exists. Haitian art and its expression yet do not belong only to the artist, and his canvas. It is everywhere. In this poor country, art and creative expression is a need as important and life affirming in which without its expression or with its blockage would result in making dire circumstances unbearable. This is at the core of the Haitian psyche. Whether it is in its food, its folklore, its music and dance, its art, its stories and history in which its heroes are depicted again and again. Haitian art and creativity is both its best ambassador, and Haiti’s most stable and abundant national product. For these reasons, this initiative makes me hopeful that the Haiti Healing Arts Program will make a tremendous difference among a population so affected by such a tragic calamity.

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