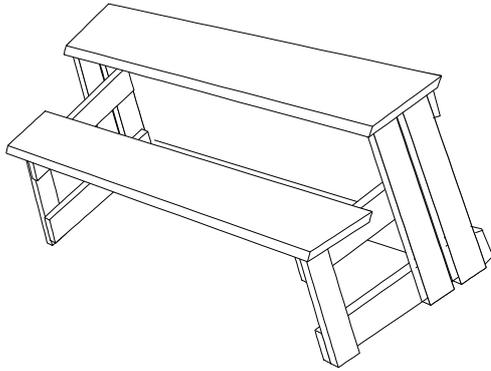


## A Week in Haiti

Haiti had an allure. It stands alone in the Americas for its purely African origins, its longtime independence and a reputation for poverty significantly worse than second-place Nicaragua. My reservations about its dangers were allayed by the fact that the 40-odd groups our church/school has sent over the course of 22 years had come back safe and sound. I had to see it.

Twenty five of us went. The three women in charge had each been there a number of times. One young man had been on three prior trips, a couple of others on one. The rest of us were newbies. Two guys (me old, another young), three ladies from another church, five female teachers, and a mixed group of teens.



While the overall mission is to foster amity between the churches in the two countries, each year's team goes with specific objectives. Last year's team had helped start construction of four new classrooms. We went to build "bancs", or study desks. Students sit side by side on the lower plank and use the upper plank as a desktop.

The school was supposed to have bought the wood before we came. That hadn't happened. Monday morning our leaders drove 20 miles down the mountain to the parish church dragging their key negotiator. They got an OK from the parish priest, sent their negotiator another 15 miles to the lumber store, agreed that the price was OK, went back to the church, had the priest horse-trade with the hospital for the loan of a truck, went to a money-changer (the lumberyard doesn't take US dollars, nobody takes travelers cheques), then went back to the lumberyard to pick up the lumber at the negotiated price.

That transaction went well. The lumber started coming from around the disorderly mish-mash of plumbing, painting, roofing and other supplies covering most of the floor. It was in 14 foot boards, a combination of 1x10s and 1x4s. This presented a bit of a lading problem. The truck bed was only about 12' long. It did, however, have foot-high hinged sides and a metal rack high over the cab at the front of the bed. The warehousemen wedged one end of the boards against the back of the bed and angled the other end over the cab.

The lumber kept coming. It reached the top of the gate at the back of the bed, finally rising about three inches above the gate. Nothing held the stack together except the friction of the rough boards, and at their 25° incline they would have quickly slid off the back of the truck. The driver used a few ratty ropes he kept behind the driver's seat to tie the load down. It still looked precarious. The store owner, at my request and in consideration of his \$1300 sale, threw in a small roll of bailing wire which the driver ran back and forth across the loose lumber ends projecting above the gate. With this questionable combination of stacking, tying and wiring we took off. Though at a prudent distance, our car followed the truck up the mountain without incident.

### **Our Ostensible Goal: Building the Benches**

The master carpenter started measuring and cutting next morning. The short pieces under the seat were 16" long. The two uprights that hold the desk-top plank were 27" long, the lateral ones holding the ends together also 27". The long planks themselves and the two pieces along the back of the banc were 55".

Things change. First they decided to change the length of the top and seat planks to 56 ½". That way they needed only two cuts and could use the entire length of a 170" board. Fair enough. Then they changed the uprights from 27" to 28". Then they decided that the long 1x4 connecting the tops of the end pieces should be 56 ½", to match the planks. The bottoms remained at 55".

All this was kind of confusing. Several benches acquired a rather knock-kneed appearance because the ends slanted out from vertical. On others, a side-on view was more trapezoidal than rectangular, giving a sort of a slouchy look to the product. American and the Haitian products were

## A Week in Haiti

equally flawed. The master carpenter wasn't bothered enough to fix his own errors or call ours to our attention.

All the wood pieces were just short of 1" thick. It would have been a great job for 6d nails, which measure about 1 3/4". What we bought, whether because that was all they had or just because, were 8d, which measure 2 1/2". Every nail used to connect the cross-members in the end pieces stuck out 3/4" and had to be pounded down. There was no standard approach. Although we could sink them deeper by pounding them with the grain, half the time they went across the grain in such a way that their little tips stuck out where they could snag a stocking. Nor was there a standard as to whether the bent ends went on the outside where they would show or the inside where they would catch the kids' feet.

While the bench seats are parallel to the ground, the desktops slope enough that a pencil laid sidewise would roll into the kid's lap. The angle is probably more natural for writing. In any case, the two upright pieces that support the top plank have to be sawed at an angle and the back one winds up a bit longer than the front one. The approach was to cut both pieces at 28", nail the end together, lay a straight edge across both uprights in the finished piece and saw again to get the angle. Most of the time – some of the later benches assembled by the Haitian workmen wound up with flat desktops because they omitted the second cut.

The master carpenter had a serviceable saw, hammer and carpenter's square. Ours were the only tape measures and the only carpenter's square with inch markings. Their technique was to figure out which lengths they were going to cut and start measuring from the end of the board. Measure 27", mark, draw a perpendicular line with the square. Measure 27" from that mark for the next one, and so on. Occasionally they would mark at 27" and 54". They never hit 81"... from 54 on they always measured from the previous mark, never by multiples of the length they were cutting. They kept a rough tally of how many of each length they had and cut what the nail pounders said they needed.

A funny thing happened with the sawing. This year for the first time they used a power saw driven by a generator. Their term for it, a "Delco", caused a bit of confusion. For what it's

worth they think that Honda makes the best "Delcos".

In any case they turned the Delco off for lunch to save gas and they couldn't get it started again. Big problem. They worked at it all afternoon, never mind my suggestion that we had four hand saws among us and ample labor to use them. The plan that evolved was either to have a Delco expert come out from town or send the Delco in next morning. When neither happened I cut the Gordian knot by picking up a hand saw and cutting some of the previously marked pieces. It takes maybe 2 minutes to cut a 1x10. Somewhat chagrined by my tolerable skill as a sawyer, they turned to and showed me they were better. They were, by maybe 20%. In any case the nail pounders were soon back in business and the Delco was silent for the rest of our stay.

By the end of the week we had our 50 benches made. There was enough wood left over for the Haitians to make 3 church pews. Characteristically, one had a seat of 3 1x4s chock-a-block, another two widely spaced 1x4s and the third three widely spaced.

A moderately skilled American carpenter would have done a few things differently. He would have started with a design. He would have figured the lengths of wood required for the project and figured how to cut the boards with the least amount of waste. He would have cut the angles on the uprights in the first place to avoid the second cut. He would have bought the right length of nails or in an absolute pinch used pliers to cut the 8d nails down to 1 3/4" rather than pound the ends down. He would have bought maybe 5% excess material instead of 20%. To him the uniform result would have been aesthetically more pleasing. From a practical perspective he would spend less on materials and the students wouldn't risk getting cut by the nails.

Haiti is vastly different from the US. Many in both countries judge the Haitian situation to be worse than the American, as a consequence of which American institutions and individuals expend a great many resources attempting to improve the Haitian condition. By consensus on both sides they have little to show for it. The question of why is a significant one. I'm going to push the incredibly short lever of this week-long project in Haiti against the fulcrum of

## A Week in Haiti

lifetime experience to make some sweeping generalizations.

### Agendas?

The benches represent agendas within agendas. Education is high on the American agenda. The belief is that widespread education will equip Haitians with skills that have value on the world market. The theory is that with more education they can and will make something of themselves in their own country, and as a consequence improve the country itself. Doing good for its own sake is the *raison d'être* of social and religious organizations, making Haiti an attractive target because so much appears to need to be done.

The Haitians had several agendas for the benches. The schools, which despite their church ties are for-profit ventures, will benefit their owners by enrolling more students. The Episcopal Church benefits by virtue of its association with the good cause of education and the fact that it controls this American largesse. The carpenters were paid for their work.

One has to wonder who benefited from the Delco fiasco. Suppose we hadn't persevered with the hand saws and a good part of that \$1,300 worth of lumber had sat unused until we left? Would it ever have found its way into benches, or would it have found its way back to market?

We used a Haitian from the church community to negotiate for the lumber, on the theory that the merchant would not have given us a fair price if he saw a white face or American dollars. We incidentally had to go through a money-changer he knew. He surely gained some prestige from the transaction. Was there any more tangible benefit?

The American presence brought a lot of employment. We hired four guardians to keep people out of the church area where we slept and kept our stuff. They were very accommodating, washing our clothes and dishes and hauling bathwater for us. They also did well both asking favors of us and accepting the shirts, tools and such that we offered them. The five women who cooked dinners for us made out well, though probably not as well.

The American presence gives power to both "Père" G, the lay leader of the community and

Père D the priest in the parish town of Léogâne 20 miles distant. Who benefits most is an ongoing tussle. The activist new Père D is gradually wresting power from G. G, who runs a pharmacy, gift shop, bar, and who knows what else in the community, is surely getting a markup on the food and sodas he sells to the team. Plus of course the items he begs off team members with sob stories whispered into your ear as he pulls you aside. From me he got a fanny pack and perhaps \$5 for some sodas I never collected from him.

### The Hustle

Money flows only one way through the semi-permeable membrane separating American from Haitian culture. From the guilty pressure of abundance on our side to the ample vacuum of poverty on theirs, through many different avenues. The crudest hustle is "Hey You. Give me one dolla" (mountains) to "Hey You, give me ten dolla" (city). Everybody is selling something. Keychains, carved soapstone, voodoo masks, wooden Madonna-and-child statuettes. Bright colored naïve paintings. None of it costs much, but none of it worth much either. The proportion is bad, execution haphazard, finish is so-so, and the items are dirty and shopworn from having been shoved in so many tourist faces. It is inconceivable that they could make as much as a dollar a day selling that stuff, but it probably beats the alternative of doing absolutely nothing, which seems to occupy a good many of their fellows.

There are better hustles. The most lucrative aim at the softest parts of American sensibilities, education and medicine. "Myen gen ti pwoblem" it starts. I have a small problem. (a) I need money for books for school, (b) I had to drop out of school when my 4<sup>th</sup> younger brother started because my father does not have enough to pay for everybody, (c) my father is dead and can't send me to school, (d) Miss Getty who was giving me a scholarship hasn't sent money this year, (e) I am out of notebooks and have nothing to write on, (f) I don't have any shoes to wear to school in the rainy season. And so on. The medical issues are (a) my grandfather needs to see an eye doctor. Oh, no need to send him to the clinic, just give me the \$15. (b) I have headaches all the time and can't work. (c) I'm having a baby and can't work. The sad facts are that most of these stories are probable, it would be hard to sort the true from the false, and

## A Week in Haiti

impossible to answer every need. After a while one is exhausted, with an immense wish that the culture included the pride not to beg. Sadly, however, begging pays.

### Arrival

The small community of St. E is defined by its church. It was packed as we arrived. Two rows of probably 15 pews each holding ten people, with more around the edges and back and a big choir up front. A few hundred people in a building maybe 50 x 100 feet. The music carried the service. French gospel hymns, a few with familiar tunes, sung by brassy sopranos backed by rich basses with a baritone singing harmony. Verse after verse, and the whole congregation seemed to know every one by heart. G's sermon, in Creole, was short and simple, as was the liturgy itself.

I had been studying Creole from a 5-page cheat sheet before the trip. It is a marvel of simplicity, stringing together the richness of the French vocabulary with the simplicity of African syntax. No genders, no conjugations. Those 5 pages prepared me for rudimentary conversation with anybody. More significantly, the similarity of the vocabularies makes it easy for Haitians to learn French. That being their first subject, it was fairly easy to converse with anyone with even a couple of years' schooling.

### A bit of History

Aping the success of the Portuguese in Brazil and the English in North America, the French developed a slave-based plantation economy on Haiti in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. "The Pearl of the Antilles" was their richest colony. Their grasp loosened by the Revolution and the Napoleonic wars, however, the French succumbed to the slave revolt that resulted in independence in 1804. The thin veneer of French culture was largely extinguished with the slaughter of the planters who had not managed to flee.

Haiti was ruled by a succession of strong men reminiscent of the kings and chiefs of their native lands. The major difference appears to be the lack of tribalism; slavery had turned them into a West African melting pot. Early efforts to imitate the American and French revolutionaries in establishing governmental institutions and systems of education quickly failed. The primary curb on despotism was a want of the

institutions needed to project power compounded by constant competition from other would-be despots. Most of the half-million inhabitants fell back onto a life of subsistence agriculture similar to what they had known in Africa. The land was rich and they prospered, growing to two million people by World War I and 7 million today. This despite ample mortality, ample emigration and almost no immigration.

### Life on the Mountain

Rural life such as that of St. E shows the Haitian people in far the best light. The people are handsome, healthy, charming, humorous, and generous. They raise children with lots of love and attention in stable families. Nobody smokes and they drink only rarely. They don't curse or shout. The children help and obey their parents.

The agricultural life demands consistent but not overwhelming work. The steep mountainsides of soft sandy stone are carved into terraces, with peanuts, beans and other legumes on top, corn and manioc in the pockets. Squash, bananas and a large variety of fruit, timber and firewood trees are dotted over the hillsides and in the steep draws cut by rainwater. They are out all day planting, hoeing, harvesting and tending the cattle, goats and pigs that are tied up here and there where forage is available.

The staple food is rice and beans (they call them black peas) as in almost all Caribbean countries. Beyond that is a good variety of other legumes, starches (manioc, potatoes, corn, plantain), squashes and an abundance of fruits reminiscent of the Garden of Eden. Fish brought to market from the nearby shores supplements the chicken, goat, beef and pork raised on the mountain itself. There are no fat people and equally no emaciated people. There are a handful of quite old people.

Rural houses grow a room at a time. There may be two or three of them, perhaps 10' x 15' each. The traditional log-and-chink construction is giving way in places to concrete; palm thatch roofs to corrugated steel. Wooden houses are built around their door and window frames, the only construction members in which the straight lines of milled lumber are an operational necessity. Though an adz reduces other building timbers from round to somewhat rectangular they retain whatever longitudinal curves came with the tree. The result is a delightfully wavy, irregular construct that looks far less substantial

## A Week in Haiti

than it is. The houses I saw are about the same size as those in rural Nicaragua and even Portugal.

A mountaintop location certainly aids health and sanitation. A paucity of standing water deters breeding mosquitoes and a constant breeze makes it hard for the bugs to land on you. Pure drinkable water gushes from artesian wells in the hillsides and cisterns collect enough rainwater for bathing and washing. Add the deep, deep outhouses that were introduced by outside sanitation experts and it makes for a fairly disease-free life. The people are on average almost as tall as Americans and certainly more slender and fit.

### Work

People spend huge amounts of time just standing around. Buyers loiter in the marketplace just talking. Sellers are almost as idle. They will spend a morning sitting on the muddy roadside with perhaps a dozen pineapples or a couple of bunches of bananas to sell. A crowd will gather to gawk, hawk and beg wherever they encounter blancs (whites). Accidents draw throngs of every kind of people except policemen.

Productivity, as we might put it, is not terribly high in the service sector. The tire repair specialists are all clustered together at the intersection of the coast and mountain highways. Each has a jack, a lug wrench, a compressor and a motley collection of bald truck and auto tires. They talk idly with each other as they wait for the occasional customer to come by. Vendors in the ubiquitous Père Eternel (Eternal Father) lottery kiosks are hardly any more busy. Even the businesses that seem most western in style and organization, gas stations, seem overmanned and underbusy.

Not content to do one thing badly, the adventuresome often do several things badly. Stores offer an eclectic combination of cosmetics, trinkets, beer, sodas and drugs. Not much selection but a huge range. We met every combination of tap-tap (jitney) driver / hospital worker / schoolteacher / merchant / artist. The only people who seemed to stick to one trade were the farmers and carpenter/cabinet maker/coffin makers. In justice, their cabinetry and furniture work is much finer than their “banc” work. Almost export quality, if you like the full-bodied rustic style of Gauguin. Strength

in artistry balances their weaknesses in design and function.

On Monday we drove 20 miles to get bread at a small street market in Léogâne. There we found a half dozen vendors side by side selling the same kind of bread. Like the cluster of tire-repair businesses at the intersection for the mountain. Wouldn't it make more sense to locate businesses where the customers are? The arrangement probably has its roots in the periodic markets. Since small settlements like St. E don't offer enough business to justify daily markets the vendors set up shop maybe twice a week, going to other towns on the off-days. It is characteristic for the meat vendors, fruit vendors, textile vendors and such to group together in these markets so a customer will know where to find them.

Belying the claim that it is impossible to run a business in Haiti are the hotels and guest houses run by foreigners. While Haiti is far from a tourist Mecca, there are always a significant number of foreigners in the country with international agencies, churches, non-governmental organizations and various companies contracted to assist in education, healthcare and building infrastructure. Seeing a need, several of these foreigners have established hotels to serve Westerners entering and leaving Haiti and those who need a beach break. Total investment in such a business is typically a couple of hundred thousand US. They not only provide employment for Haitians, they provide a sort of school in management. One wonders how it is that foreigners can pull this off while few Haitians seem to try.

### Credit

Financial accounting is a concept that finds itself in hostile terrain. Where we did encounter bookkeeping it presented an impediment to commerce. At the lumber store we told a clerk what we needed. He laboriously noted it on paper then manually extended the prices and came up with a total. He wrote a voucher on a separate piece of paper. We presented the voucher, with payment, at another desk – in a store hardly big enough to accommodate two desks. That clerk accepted payment, stamped three copies of the voucher tucking one in a drawer and giving us back the other two. We presented them back to the fellow who managed

## A Week in Haiti

the merchandise. He gave us the lumber, kept a copy and gave us one as a receipt.

The hospital uses the same approach. Have an emergency? Great. Get a voucher, stand in line to pay it, go back and wait to see a doctor, get a prescription for drugs, stand in the same line again to pay for the prescription, present the paper back to the druggist, get your medicine and go. That's an outline – the actual process is considerably more involved. The systems for paying the exit tax at the airport, and for matching departures from Haiti with arrivals (Haiti doesn't want illegal immigrants!) were similarly involved.

The accounting rationale (in Western terms) for systems such as these is to promote honesty by involving two people in each transaction. Management has to close the loop, matching paperwork on the merchandise and financial sides of the house, to make the system work. Otherwise it is no more than an elaborate and costly show. Given that every other attempt at imposing systems comes a cropper in Haiti, one wonders.

Credit is built on trust. Both trust and credit are almost nonexistent in Haiti. The carpenters we worked with could double their productivity if they had a \$500 generator and another \$200 in power tools and electric lights. They would improve the quality of their work, making more accurate cuts, substituting screws for nails, power sanding and so forth. There are similar returns to be found in ownership of cell phones, cattle for fattening, sewing machines and other inexpensive tools. The country could use a microcredit operation similar to the Grameen bank that has proven so successful in Bangladesh. A couple of aid agencies had signs that suggested they might have such offerings but nobody in St. E seemed to know about them. Their mindset is "You give me," not loans. Gifts don't involve accounting. You have the option of selling them for cash rather than seeking a return on investment. Since the Americans show up as regularly as Santa Claus, why not?

Credit is an abstraction – buying power without cash money. Abstractions don't figure prominently in Haitian thinking. A job description is an abstraction. The big man in charge is reality. A hierarchy is an abstraction. What you can get away with is reality. Traffic rules are an abstraction. An empty lane, on

whichever side of the street, is reality. The public good is an abstraction. Throwing trash in the street, peeing against the wall or denuding a hillside for firewood is reality – immediate benefit.

### Organization

Large scale organization requires a level of trust. The big boss depends on lesser bosses to execute his plans. He defines the authority of his subordinates, gives them responsibility, measures their results and holds them accountable. Peter Drucker 101. In addition to the managers who report to him, the big boss usually has a number of aides to manage his schedule, handle communications and the like. He himself usually has to submit to oversight by some sort of a board of directors.

This is far removed from the "big man" model. The honcho alone makes the decisions. The minions who carry them out are motivated by greed and fear. The honcho tends to be secretive and suspicious. Since power is an all-or-none proposition, losing a little is tantamount to losing it all. There is a tendency not to use aides because of the openness it would require. There is a tendency not to give subordinates too much information because they are all potential competitors. The result is arbitrary and inefficient management.

The Episcopal Church was the only hierarchy we could observe. Père D, the priest in Léogâne, was responsible for something like nine congregations within a 30 mile radius, each with hundreds of congregants. He also had charge of the affiliated schools and some responsibilities associated with the Episcopal hospital. So far as we could tell he had no staff. If you needed something you drove to Léogâne and sought an audience with Père D. himself.

Each congregation had its own lay leader and each school its headmaster. They had long been quite autonomous, as Père D.'s predecessor rarely ventured into the mountains. Their prerogatives included hiring staff, collecting tithes and tuitions and managing expenditures. Since all had private businesses on the side there was a little bit of money to be turned. Père D. had his hands full reining them in. To my knowledge he had to do it personality by personality, place by place. There did not seem to be any clear definition of the scope of

## A Week in Haiti

responsibility for a lay leader or headmaster; all was subject to contests of power. We, by dispensing our largesse through the church hierarchy, tipped the scales decidedly in favor of Père D over the unordained lay leader on the mountain, “Père” G.

### Infrastructure

Public works require large-scale planning, organization and cooperation and ongoing funding. Managing them involves using abstractions such as organization charts, diagrams, job descriptions, budgets, audits, contracts, and credit billing.

It is no surprise that telephones and electricity are sporadic to nonexistent in Haiti. Such good roads as exist have been built or recently restored by Americans, French or Dominicans. Haiti itself has no functioning department of public works. Trash collection, sewer systems, waterworks and postal service the same story. The mail takes a week and a half; many places have no delivery. Checks are routinely stolen from the mail. International freight and parcels run a similar gauntlet of delay, theft and extortion.

The only police we saw were directing traffic in a big intersection near the airport. None showed up for the fatal head-on outside the lumber store. Both cars remained in the roadway, crunched up to their windshields, the body behind the wheel, surrounded by gawkers, and nary a cop in sight. Our rental car instructions said to call the police in case of an accident. Good luck. No cops, no cars if there were cops, and probably no interest even if there were cops and cars.

“No rules” takes its toll on cars. On our way back to Port au Prince I started trying to spot a car with a single straight body panel. It was ten miles before I succeeded. There were new cars at a Toyota dealership. We saw numerous fender-benders. The drivers would say nasty things to each other, pry the metal away from their tires if necessary, and drive on. While we were parked at the lumber store I helpfully bent back our truck’s rear view mirror to allow passage of another truck who was going through it with or without my by-your-leave.

Some German claimed that the capacity for maintenance is the measure of a civilization. It requires training of one or more echelons of

repair technicians who may have different specialties. It takes a supply chain capable of delivering repair parts. Routine maintenance takes planning, budgeting and scheduling. Remedial repair takes communications and transportation resources. The capacity for maintenance distinguishes a great military such as that of the US from second-rate powers such as Russia and Iraq.

Haiti does remedial maintenance only. Whatever breaks is generally fixed on the spot by whoever is available. If it gets fixed. A disabled gasoline tanker straddled the main road as we drove to the mountain. Coming down two days later, in the same spot, there were several bodies at work underneath the beast. That afternoon we had to wait as it sprang back to life and crawled off to the side of the road. Our Delco never did get fixed. When our master carpenter felt the set of the teeth on our brand-new saws was too wide he hammered the teeth down. Saws are tempered metal. The teeth didn’t move much and three broke off.

### Education

Haiti has embraced some abstractions borrowed from abroad. One such is an official language. Until 30 years ago it was French, despite the fact that almost nobody spoke it well. Newspapers are still in French, though billboard advertising and radio are now in Creole. There is no standard for the Creole language. Spell Creole with K or C? Spell Léogâne with or without the accents? Take your pick.

Education is an abstract good. Law mandates free education up through one’s teens. Government, however, provides neither teachers nor schools. The gap is filled by entrepreneurs offering education at rates most families on the mountain can afford. Americans are appalled at the courseloads children will take: French, English, mathematics and social studies all in the same semester. The gap between the abstraction of course objectives and reality of what they actually learn is sobering. They succeed, as noted above, in French. This is no surprise because of the similarity between French and Creole vocabularies. English is another story. Nobody spoke it well, a few could carry on a limited pidgin conversation. There was not much evidence of mathematical literacy. Adults I taught had learned the formula  $a^n * a^m = a^{n+m}$  but could not apply it to find that  $(2x^2)^2 = 4x^4$ .

## A Week in Haiti

One of the nicest guys on the mountain, JL, probably approaching 20, invited me to his home. He and I conversed easily via his fluent French. He introduced me to his father and showed me pictures of his family. He showed me his English coursework, about a fourth semester level, which he understood fairly well though he spoke it poorly. Then he pulled out his Optics textbook. The first page of the French text included a diagram of light passing through a lens, with lines showing the angle of incidence, angle of refraction, focal point and other characteristics of a lens. The following pages were dense with algebraic and calculus expressions. JL showed me how far he had progressed in the book. He had finished all 70 pages of text and had gotten through four of the 15 pages of footnotes.

So many questions flew into my mind! How can he study such a book on his own, without a professor? How can he possibly understand all that calculus when nobody I had encountered could handle much algebra, and in my conversations with JL himself he had not understood the arithmetic of accounting? Who in the world reads footnotes in sequence rather than as clarification of points in the text itself? Even if he did learn optics, of what earthly good would it be in the mountains of Haiti? I praised JL for his industry and didn't ask a single question.

### Religion

Beyond a common name, common organizational structure (on paper) and belief in a common God, there is not much similarity between the Episcopal churches of Haiti and the US. The US is liberal and intellectual, concerned with theological issues such as the trinity and social issues such as ordaining homosexuals. The Haitian church echoes ours of a millennium ago, explaining such mysteries as death and disease as interpretations of God's will. "Dye vle" – if God wills – is as meaningful to Haitians as In sha' Allah to Muslims. They accept their lot fatalistically, putting themselves in God's hands and depending on Him for salvation in the life hereafter.

Folks on the mountain do a good job of living according to the good book. They are generous with one another. So far as we could see they care for family. Infidelities, if any, were

certainly not evident to us. They don't squander their time and money on drinking and gambling. The entertainment they presented us included a morality play pitting a priest against a witch doctor fighting for the soul of a drunken gambler.

### Is Haitian Society Successful?

Droves of well-intentioned foreigners think Haiti is a failure. By contemporary Western standards of material prosperity, health and longevity it is. By standards of personal development – education, access to culture, the world of ideas, it also fails.

By the standards of evolution that made Man dominant over the earth, however, they are quite successful. They are self-replicating both as a people and a culture. Whatever their health issues their numbers have increased 14-fold since independence, that despite sending many native sons to other lands. Their culture has not changed much since the founding of the Republic, and in fact remains true in many ways to that of their African cousins. West African culture, whether from Haiti or Africa itself, is a growing influence in America and Europe. It has always been present in music. African "attitude" increasingly affects the way young Caucasians talk, dress, think about sex and relate to their elders.

Curiously, by standards of evolution our Western society is not in such good shape. The United States stands alone among first-world countries in sustaining a birthrate that will maintain its population, and we do that primarily through the fertility of immigrants. Italy and Japan have replacement rates of 1.2 (children per two adults) versus the 2.1 needed to maintain a stable population. Western culture is also permuting via phenomena such as drug use, promiscuity and rampant materialism that threaten its ability to propagate itself intact.

History is full of instances in which supposedly more advanced societies are displaced by "barbarians". The Goths and Visigoths swept over Rome. The Huns swept over Europe. The Mongols conquered both China and Islam. Archeological evidence shows that advanced civilizations in Africa, Cambodia, Peru and many other lands abruptly ceased to exist. Should we be so confident of our superiority?

## A Week in Haiti

Haitian society does not appear to want to change. They absorb wave after wave of aid workers, infrastructure projects, educators and medics with little noticeable change to the culture. They gladly take the immediate benefits. The advice that comes along implicitly with the help – that they should improve their levels of trust, education, justice, etc. – goes for naught.

### Could They Change?

The interaction between a people and their culture is vastly complex. They undoubtedly go hand in hand. Culture must have changed radically at that point in evolution when the individuals within that culture developed the power of speech. Culture changed again when people became literate. One can assume that people changed also, to the extent that people capable of literacy became richer and had a better chance at reproduction than those who did not.

American experience shows that some peoples have great difficulty absorbing a foreign culture. While African American ex-slaves have had some difficulty adapting to European culture, Native Americans have fared far worse. Those on reservations are in no man's land, deprived of their hunting and gathering culture and largely unable or unwilling to enter the intensely commercial culture of America.

Americans are not all geniuses. As is well documented, our kids stack up poorly in international comparisons. Fortunately we produce enough Edisons, Henry Fords and Bill Gates' to found the enterprises that make us rich. They in turn find enough people with technical and management skills to build their empires and employ the vast bulk of the population whose major skills are the ability to execute following plans made by others. The geniuses, by enabling ordinary people to become highly productive specialists, make everybody well off.

To vastly simplify the argument, wealth requires organization, and organization requires superior intelligence at the top levels of society. That intelligence establishes and manages systems of infrastructure, education, production. The G factor, general intelligence, seems to be a key ingredient.

Researchers generally agree that a bell curve fairly accurately reflects the way intelligence is distributed within a society. Large numbers of studies demonstrate that it applies over different populations. The centers of distribution vary from study to study, but generally run about an IQ of 117 for Jewish populations, around 106 for Japanese and Chinese and 100 for Caucasian Americans. So far there is little dispute. Murray and Herrnstein, however, stirred up a hornet's nest when they reported in "The Bell Curve" that research consistently places the centers of the curves for Native, Latin and Afro-Americans below 100. *NB: In 2009 I add an extensive bibliography which appears at the end of the article,*

To them the question is of interest because it affects public policy. Is the fact that Jews are vastly overrepresented in the legal and medical professions and underrepresented among hod carriers an indication of discrimination? Or that the converse is true of Latinos and blacks? Discrimination is illegal and immoral, but our Constitution guarantees the freedom for each person to rise to the limits of their personal ability. Which is it?

For all the catcalls that greeted "The Bell Curve," and despite the authors' own frequently repeated call for further research, there is little new research and no refutation has appeared with near the gravitas of their work. American culture and political life is very deeply invested in the proposition that while many people and peoples are above average, nobody is below average.

Connecting the dots back to Haiti. The people I worked with had difficulty with abstract geometric concepts in their carpentry, abstract mathematical notions and abstract concepts such as accounting and the separation of jobs from personalities. Evidence suggests that the problem dogs every type of organization in the country. To ask whether the people are cognitively capable of more complex organization seems to be an obvious question, aside from the fact that the question itself undermines the precepts of the aid givers and the societies that send them.

Murray and Herrnstein guess on the basis of studies that they consider inadequate, but nonetheless the only ones available, that the median IQ of native Africans is around 75. If that turned out to be true of Haiti it would go a

## A Week in Haiti

long way towards explaining the observed phenomena. Making the gross assumption that a bell curve distribution could be applied to both societies, and the equally gross assumption that one person in 100 is 2.5 standard deviations above the mean (that is, if the average is 100, of 1% of the population has an IQ of 140), America would have 300,000 people with IQs in the 140 range, about the average of corporate CEOs. Haiti, with a smaller population and lower mean, would have 7.

It would further mean that a person with an IQ of 100, the average in our society, was in the top 5% of Haitian society. Whereas the average Joe in America functions well as a cog in the American productivity machine, taking food orders, selling insurance, fixing cars, such people would be relatively scarcer in Haiti. Compound that by the fact that the American works with systems designed and managed by relatively more capable people and we would have an overwhelming advantage.

If true, these hypotheses alone, absent any other differences, could explain the lack of organization and enterprise in Haiti. Culture, education, and resources also surely play a role. While it would be incredibly premature to jump to any conclusions regarding the limits of progress that are possible in Haiti, it seems very naïve to continue to pour resources into solving “problems” without analyzing whether or not our perceived solutions are feasible in a Haitian context.

### **What development would be possible?**

Few enterprises are able to take advantage of cheap labor in an environment that is almost wholly lacking in infrastructure and education. Those that can are often, ironically, in the technology area. Data is far easier to transport than raw materials and finished goods.

Affiliated Computer Services of Dallas bypassed local telecommunications to set up a modern data entry operation in Ghana. They were able to offer a piecework rate substantially below labor costs in more developed markets, yet with wages and working conditions substantially above Ghanaian standards.

One can imagine such an operation in Haiti as well. A facility in the countryside would put minimum demands on the infrastructure and

impose minimum expectations on the people. If need be all the infrastructure could be brought by helicopter: a microturbine, portable buildings, data entry computers and a microwave or satellite link. Only one thing would be required of the Haitian officials: a willingness not to interfere.

Profit-making operations are grounded in the reality of the bottom line instead of hopes. They take advantage of known resources, in this case inexpensive labor, and present the opportunity for other resources to demonstrate themselves. The company and Haiti itself would benefit to the extent that Haitians could move into programming, network administration and management. The business would not, however, be predicated on the unproven assumption that Haitians could assume these functions.

I am probably naïvely optimistic in the hope that any for-profit enterprise might locate in Haiti. However, until that starts to happen all of our attempts to improve the country via education and infrastructure investments will continue to be based on unsubstantiated assumptions grounded more in our idealism than Haitian reality.

### **What are we doing here?**

Like every other American, I had my own motives for going to Haiti. I wanted to see it, to compare it to very poor countries I have seen on other continents (Nicaragua, Nepal, Cambodia, Philippines...) I wanted to answer for myself, as I had (positively) in Nicaragua, whether outside assistance there can be effective.

Most volunteers have purer motives. Many are driven to do something by Christian conviction. Though a large number despair of being able to improve the society, they hope to improve a few individual lives. Non-governmental organizations look a development as a kind of religion. Their objective is to raise all of humankind to a certain (though undefined) standard of living.

My sense is that it works for us because we feel good. It works for the Haitians because they walk away with material benefits. Nobody seems to care that nothing changes.

## A Week in Haiti

### Postscript

When I wrote this in 2003, I had read "The Bell Curve" and had been teaching high school for about three years. My observations were the same as everybody else's: Black students underperform white students in American schools. There are a vast number of reasons given for this phenomenon. Since my trip to Haiti I have done a fair amount of reading on the subject. It is worth providing a comprehensive bibliography of related books. Here is how intelligence is generally defined: the ability to function in a modern literate, numerate, agricultural and mechanical society. Many find this definition to be intuitively unfair, because certain peoples have entered only recently into modern society. That is a valid observation. Whether or not it is fair to ask the question of whether or not all people are equally capable is one issue. Having decided to ask, what researchers find is another.

Departing from the convention for scholarly writing, I offer only the titles. You can search for them on Amazon.com, where you will find reviews written by me for many of them. Or, follow the link on my home page to my Amazon reviews.

### Statistical analyses of human intelligence, correlating by income, criminality, race and other factors

The Bell curve

The G. factor

IQ and the wealth of Nations

Race differences in intelligence

Race, Environment, And Behavior

Note: *The issue is Haiti is race, all of these statistical analyses find that there are significant differences in intelligence among peoples.*

*Extensive research brought to light no books refuting these analyses on statistical grounds.*

### Books rejecting theories of racial difference on other than statistical grounds

The mismeasure of man

The bell curve wars

The race myth

### Books on human evolution

The journey of Man

Genes, Languages, And People

Before the dawn

Guns, Germs, And Steel

### Books On Human Mental and Language Capacity and Evolution

The Blank Slate

The Language Instinct

Eve Spoke

The Talking Ape

The Power of Babel

### Books On The Sociology And Behavior Of Blacks in America and elsewhere

Black students in an affluent American suburb

Et si l'Afrique refusait le développement?

A Historia do escravidão

America in Black and White

Diversity in America

Forced justice