

“Echoes of the Heart”

Reflections on Life and Community Living

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Haiti: beyond the human loss and devastation. The tragic consequences of the recent earthquake in Haiti continue to leave us numb and groping for answers. With reports of mass burials in the thousands and upwards, the magnitude of the loss of human life boggles the mind.

On the human level, the level of feelings and the well being of family and friends, the suffering and the pain are too much. Amidst such horror, our words are inadequate. The depths of the calamity outdistance our ability to describe it. There's simply too much destruction, too much death.

In the aftermath of one of the worst natural disasters in recent times, the question eventually becomes, what to do?

First, some context: in 1804, following thirteen years of bloody revolt, Haiti gained its independence from France. Former slave Jean-Jacques Dessalines assumed the title of Emperor. Two years later, rebels killed him and civil war broke out.

This snapshot glimpse of the *birth-of-a-nation* lives on as a sort of microcosm of Haiti's embattled 200-plus year history. With periodic foreign occupation (the United States occupied Haiti from 1915 to 1934), coupled with corrupt, repressive leadership (Francois Duvalier and his son Jean-Claude—Pap Doc and Baby Doc—ruled from 1957 to 1986), Haiti has managed to dig itself deeper and deeper into an unending nightmare.

The poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, Haiti's per capita GDP is \$1,300—six times less that of the Dominican Republic, the Spanish-speaking country with which it shares the island of Hispaniola.

Haiti's legendary poverty is not incidental to her seemingly cursed fate. John Mutter, a seismologist at Columbia University, says: *Earthquakes don't kill people. Bad buildings kill people. And buildings are bad because people are poor.*

What to do? At first glance, Haiti's challenge for the future seems overwhelming. Ultimately, however, it will not be about foreign aid and money. As we are already seeing, relief aid and resources are coming in. What this will come down to is the willingness of the Haitian people and the international community, working together, to *do things right*.

The rebuilding of Haiti, along with the redevelopment, must be shaped in a *relational* manner. It must be implemented, therefore, under the guiding hand of some instrument of the United Nations (who already has an active presence in Haiti). As many have noted, Haiti can't simply *do her own thing* in the name of freedom and independence. High standards of accountability and transparency must be in place.

Former President, Bill Clinton, the United Nations special envoy to Haiti, in a recent *Viewpoint* article in Time Magazine (January 25, 2010), sounded a chord of optimism: *Haiti isn't doomed*, he said. He then went on to point out how, if we are both visionary and disciplined, the rebuilding process can be successful.

Clearly, the guiding vision for the rebuilding/redevelopment process needs to be long-term. With that in mind, already a ten-year plan was approved recently by the United States and a number of allied nations and organizations. That may not be long enough, but it is at least a start.

What's at stake for Haiti is rebuilding in the *right* way so that when future disasters come (and there's no assurance they will not), we won't be singing this same lament all over again. As Roger Bilham, a seismologist at the University of Colorado notes, *The world can't afford more of these disasters. It's worth investing in these problems now, while we can.*

Over the years, with the world becoming increasingly smaller every day, the poverty and vulnerability to natural disaster of any nation affects the international community. As we're seeing in response to the current destruction, at the end of the day, we're all in this life together—all co-inhabitants of the earth.

As Haiti works its way through the enormity of the human loss and as she seeks to pick herself up again out of the rubble with widespread international support, let's hope the sun rises on her prospects with new hope and new promise.