October 2004

The Last Page: Pride in the Poorest Nation

Christopher Bauer
Colby College

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.colby.edu/colbymagazine

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://digitalcommons.colby.edu/colbymagazine/vol93/iss3/12

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by the College Archives: Colbiana Collection at Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Magazine by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Colby. For more information, please contact mfkelly@colby.edu.
PRIDE IN THE POOREST NATION

By Christopher Bauer ’02

“Roche nan dlo pa konn doule roche nan soley” (The rock in the water does not know the existence of the rock in the sun)

It is nearly 5 a.m., the sun is only just up, and I find myself awake unwillingly. From the dirt road that faces my house I hear the intermit- tent voices of women singing and laughing. You can tell it is market day because they balance baskets on their heads while they force their donkeys up into the hills to the next town. A colorful assortment of stuff haphazardly adorns their animals: mangoes, avocados, oranges, dried black beans, corn, homemade chairs, brooms, baskets in straw saddle packs. The women call out rhythmic morning greetings to the homes of extended family members as they pass. As I awake to a new day in the rural village of Roche Plate, Haiti, I feel I am looking at a people who have struggled in these hills without change since their independence, 200 years ago.

As a Peace Corps volunteer I arrived in this village nearly a year and a half ago with a conflicted conscience. How could I be an effective agroforesty extensionist when the differences between us were so vast and identifiable and the similarities so few? The most immediate difference, the difference in our wealth, was the one I felt most ill-equipped to handle beyond some vague sense of sympathy. As residents of the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere, the people of Haiti live at a level far below what I considered poverty. To my surprise it was the members of my community who made the first move towards bridging that gap. Upon my arrival I found a number of farmers cheerfully calling at my door, showing their appreciation with bags of the fruit that sustains them. I was struck dumb. Their unassuming generosity left me fumbling for ways to signify gratitude. In my travels around Haiti I saw this polite thoughtfulness everywhere. Many Haitians went out of their way to be helpful. More important, however, was that the farmers’ gestures wel- comed me to the networks of neighbors, friends and families that made up their community.

Gradually I began to see for myself where our differences ended. Working as an agroforestry extensionist, I saw how those same farmers couldn’t afford to save seeds from one season to the next. They needed all their crop revenues against the inevitable turn of ill health in their families. Their situation was made even more difficult by the denuded countryside that allowed their plots to erode into the sea with each rainfall. Separately, as a teacher in the local schools, I experienced the parents’ frustration when their children could not attend school for prolonged periods due to political roadblocks in the city that prevented teachers from reaching our class- rooms in the countryside.

Finally I let go of the barriers that I used to define and separate us, and in doing so I began to see their humanity in everything they did. I real- ized that these people were mothers who cared about their children and only wanted the best for their future. I recognized that these people were fathers who would overexert themselves on infertile plots just to put a meal on the table. These realizations gave me a painful sense of connection because they signified that these people, my friends, were like me. They were striving for the same basic goals in their lives that I or any one of my college classmates would seek in our own.

Haiti has, of late, drawn our attention once again, and predictably pictures of burning tires or violence seemed to dominate the media’s coverage. The main story covered the actions of rebel groups composed of poor urban political thugs who have been assembled and armed by exiled criminals. These groups succeeded in undermining the environment of relative security in the country and forced many to flee, including the Peace Corps volunteers. Yet these groups, galvanized by opposition to what they simply do not like, cannot blaze a path of prosperity for Haiti. Thugs with guns are able to grab the headlines. Unfortunately, those with donkeys and hand tools cannot manipulate the media in the same way to bolster their cause. These Haitian peasants, my friends, have struggled here one day at a time for all of their history. The violence and poverty that surrounds them and those stories that fill our news broadcasts only serve as a backdrop to their more immediate task of feeding them- selves and staying healthy today. While these political actions can only serve to strangle the hardworking rural poor in the short term, these unnoticed people, I learned, will persevere, as they have through their country’s history—proud to be Haitian.