

In the light of faith I am strong, constant, and persevering. In the light of faith I hope. Do not allow me to faint by the way.

--Catherine of Siena

“piti piti plen kay,” A little lamp (or light) can fill the whole house...

I came across the quote from Catherine of Siena in my morning reflection on the day after I returned from Haiti. I posted it to my facebook page, along with the photos I took of my experience. Of course it was a Haitian who posted a response just seconds later, “piti piti plen kay,” A little lamp (or light) can fill the whole house...

I’ve intended to sit down and write about my experience of the January 12, 2010 earthquake in Haiti for over a week now. It is a story I want to tell. It is the story of one horrible afternoon in an office of close-knit workers in Port-au-Prince. It is the story of a U.S. citizen working abroad during a crisis, and how she managed to return home. It is the story of Haiti’s Alternative Bank for the Poor. For me, it is many things...some of which I probably do not fully understand yet. So, here goes:

It had been an incredibly busy day at Fonkoze headquarters in Port-au-Prince. I was in Haiti to work at the Port-au-Prince headquarters for a week, and then lead a delegation of individuals to see Fonkoze’s projects in the Central Plateau during my second week. My daily schedule for the first week filled quickly, and meetings were planned for every evening as well. On Tuesday, I worked with a Creole instructor for two hours, gave a power point presentation on Fonkoze, had a wonderful lunch at the Olafsson Hotel with a group of enthusiastic visitors from Richmond, VA, and met with Fonkoze’s new foundation Director, Carine Roenen.

At 4 p.m., I settled down at a borrowed desk in the second floor Administration office to work until the next meeting at 6 p.m. Just at 5:00 p.m. the office rumbled. I guess I always imagined an earthquake would start as a tremor and work its way up to a 7.0. But, that’s not the reality. We heard a little groan, then we were **AT** 7.0 very suddenly, being thrown violently around the office with everything moving, falling, and crashing around us. Concrete pulverizes, turns to a fine dust and makes it hard to breathe and see. I didn’t grow up in an earthquake zone, so I wasn’t aware of the drill. But, everything in my being knew we had to get out of the building.

We ran to the door of our office (I was in an office with Giles Charleston, Fonkoze Chief Information Officer, and a new employee, who was the Director of Administration), but the shifting building jammed the doors. We were kicking, pounding on the door to no avail. We tried to break the glass, but nothing. I turned and saw a hole had opened in the wall of our office and I believe said to Giles, we have to go out this hole, lower ourselves down as much as possible, and drop. I think I remember Giles asking me if I

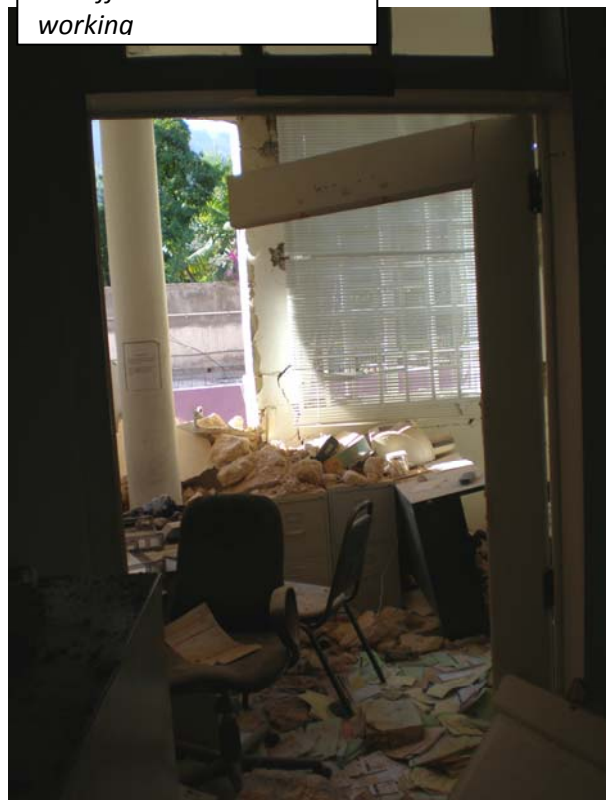
thought I could do it, and I climbed out. Once on the other side, however, the wall crumbled and I fell to the ground from the second floor.



The hole I climbed from, the rubble pile I fell to, and the office where I was working

I landed in a pile of rubble, some rubble fell on me. I remember laying there in a fetal position saying to myself, "I'm ok, I'm ok, I'm ok." In Haiti, the staff does not usually call me Leigh, because the word "li" is Creole for "he, she, or it." People always look at me funny when I introduce myself in Haiti, because really what I'm saying to them is, "hello, my name is she." So, in Haiti, the staff calls me Leighcarter...kind of run together, with that wonderful French/Creole accent. Out of the dust I could hear everyone shouting, "leighcarter, leighcarter, leighcarter." The next thing I knew someone was climbing into the rubble, scooping me up, and taking off for the courtyard of the offices because we feared the building would come down.

In the aftermath, we all stood in shock in the courtyard. All you could hear throughout the city was screaming and wailing, and that pretty much continued throughout the night. Once



we determined everyone had fled the building safely, we huddled together for the strong aftershocks and began to make plans. The sun was going down, and we had to decide whether or not to leave the campus of Fonkoze. We did decide to leave. After all, most people were frantically trying to reach their children, but all phone communication was down. Can you imagine? Most employees didn't reach home until around midnight to see their families.



The Headquarters building stood, but is unsafe for the future. Our new offices, where Anne and Carine were moving this week, pancaked.

Anne and Carine and others organized the vehicles we had, and made sure everyone was in a vehicle headed in the direction of their home. For most, vehicles were eventually abandoned in traffic jams or impassable roads, and employees walked the remaining miles by foot to reach their homes and families. For some 25 employees, there was no home standing when they arrived. Their spouses and children, mothers, fathers, sisters and brothers, were on the street.

I'd say there were three types of people in that courtyard. The ones who took a problem-solving approach and began to organize our departure. The ones who were pretty much in shock and simply holding on to one another (I fell into that category...I'd done all the problem-solving I could take for the moment). And, sadly, one who lost it altogether. Unfortunately, he was the one that was armed. Our security guard began to scream and cry and wave his weapons around, putting one to his head, saying he could not live if his children were dead. We all scrambled for cover. In one of the bravest personal gestures I have ever seen, Nelson Cyprien and Alexandre Hector wrestled him to the ground and disarmed him.



Anne and I, and eventually the students from Tufts University's Fletcher School ended up at Anne's apartment. The students were attending a meeting at Fonkoze when the quake hit. Most of us slept outside (well, not really slept) that evening. Everyone slept in the streets that night, of course. Either their homes were destroyed, or they were afraid to return to damaged homes. I'll never forget that evening. It was strangely beautiful. A cool, clear, evening. Star-filled sky. Shooting stars. Haitians outside Anne's house sang all night. I didn't understand the words, but I certainly recognized the tunes...How Great Thou Art, What a Friend We Have in Jesus, I Walk Through the Garden Alone. Every once in a while the singing would be punctuated by someone wailing and crying. The ground continued to rumble throughout the night. Those old church hymns were comforting to me.

The following day, Anne prepared to stay in Haiti to rebuild Fonkoze while the rest of us began to plan how we might make our way to the US Embassy for evacuation. Anne and I, and two of the Tufts students returned first to the office to see if we could retrieve thousands of dollars of server equipment, and the database banking records of our 200,000 clients. We then tried to reach the hotel of the Fletcher students to no avail, checked on some friends at the Olafsson, and returned to Anne's.



While two of the students set out to walk to the home of the US Ambassador in Petionville, the rest of us began to assist Anne organize her stay. The students pitched to haul water up from the swimming pool into Anne's apartment, the landlord began to limit inverter power in preparation for its eventual



demise, and Anne took stock of her food supplies. I hated to leave her there, but I made the decision to leave because I didn't know the extent of my injuries, because I would be more of a burden (drain on resources) than a help, and because I knew I could be more effective in the U.S. rallying the funds we would need to recover. So, I left for the US Embassy.



On the way, it was everything you saw on television. People lying in the streets wounded. Bodies piled by the side of the road. But, mostly, everyone was in shock, helping one another, calm. Eerily calm.



I won't go into my evacuation experience that much. We slept outside one more night at the Embassy, the US Government took care of us, and saw we made it to the Dominican Republic in a military plane. In my case, they ushered me to a hospital in the Dominican Republic. I ended up with a broken back (compression fracture at T12), a fairly bad chest wall contusion, dehydration, and many cuts and scraps.

But, I was spared, and I will heal. I've been

dealing with quite a bit of guilt I have from getting so much care and medical assistance when Haitians have little. I guess that is a fairly normal reaction.

Back in Haiti, Anne, Carine, and the leadership staff began to take stock of the damage to our institution. As we frantically took inventory of staff in Port-au-Prince and beyond (Fonkoze has more than 750 employees), we discovered five women had died. One, Mirlande Vainquiere, left work on Tuesday for choir practice at the Cathedral Sacre Coeur where she was killed when it collapsed. She is the beloved daughter of our long-time employee Milot Vainquiere. Of our five employees that died, three worked in a single department – Fonkoze's Transfer Service. All of them work in a small room together all day. I imagine they are very close friends, as is most of the Fonkoze staff.



The ruins of Sacre Coeur

I heard that day before yesterday, Natacha Blanc (the supervisor of Transfer) was working furiously despite losing three of her employees. After all, the Transfer service is our most important service right now as family and friends frantically try to get funds to their loved ones in Haiti. I heard that the Director of the Miragwan branch opened the office despite losing his home, his mother, and his niece in the quake. And, everyday, Fonkoze employees, some who lost homes and loved ones show up in the courtyard of Fonkoze to figure out how to move the institution ahead. That is just how Haitians are. They will move forward.



And, Fonkoze is moving forward. Just over a week later, and despite the loss of life and most of our Port-au-Prince facilities, the institution is open for business. 34 of 42 branches are functioning. After all, we are the “*bank of which the poor of Haiti can truly rely.*” And, of course, we are operating before even the commercial banks have managed to do so. Many people and organizations have come to our side with support and solidarity, and we are grateful.

There is much to be done. But, all the Haitian people need, all Fonkoze needs, is “a little light,” and we can find our way. *Piti piti plen kay.*



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