

The Earthquake

January 14, 2010

It was hard, at first, to take the whole thing seriously. We were violently shaken in the office as we closed for the day. One or two members of the staff fled outside. But when the first shock of it was over, we quickly checked the building for major damage. (We found none.) We called our supervisor, who is based nearby in Jakmèl, and we proceeded through the regular step-by-step process we follow to close our office at the end of the day. More like a carnival attraction than an act of god. It never occurred to me to contact anyone at home to let them know I was alright. Of course I was. I always am.

But then we started to hear things. There had been damage in Jakmèl and Port au Prince. When we tried to call people on the phone, we discovered that it was hard, very hard, to get through. And rumors kept sounding more and more serious.

Job finally reached me at 10:15 PM. He lives in Delmas, the populous suburb north of Port au Prince. He said there had been a lot of damage. He was fine, and asked me how I was. Then he gave me the news: Elie and his brothers had not heard from Apocalypse since the latter had left for classes earlier in the day.

Elie has been my neighbor in Kaglo since 1998. That was the year his mother died. His aunt, Madan Jean Claude, who lives in Kaglo, went down the mountain to Metivier and took him away from his father, Bòs St. Martin. She claimed that the boy's mother had told her that if Elie did not go away with his aunt, his mother would return from the grave to take him herself. So she and her husband raised Elie from that time, and she credits herself with saving his life. Meanwhile, his three older brothers – Maxène, Josue, and Apocalypse – stayed with their father. The brothers remained very close, even though Elie would see them only every few weeks.

A few years ago, Elie graduated from high school and decided to study medicine. It would have been very hard for him to succeed commuting every day from Kaglo. The travel would have left him little time to study. So I introduced him to Job, who was already in medical school and was living in an apartment in Delmas with his sisters, also students. They hit it off, and Elie moved in.

Since then, they've all become very close. So when Job's older brother Ronal was to be married in Ench, Elie was invited. He brought Josue and one of their cousins as well.

The wedding was Saturday, and Saturday night Maxène, the oldest brother, called them to tell them their father had died. He had been sick for a long time, and had been deteriorating rapidly in recent weeks, so it wasn't exactly a surprise, but sad nonetheless. Bòs St. Martin was a warm, loving father and a friendly and charming man. The guys left Ench early Sunday morning to rush back to Port au Prince.

Tuesday, they had a lot of work to do arranging things for the funeral, so they were in the streets of Port au Prince together. Except for the third brother, Apocalypse. He's an architecture student, and he just couldn't afford to miss class. So he went his own way.

The earthquake leveled the college he attends. When I spoke to Elie at almost 11:30 PM, he and his other brothers had no news. All through yesterday, I had no news, but when Job was finally able to reach me this morning, he let me know that Apocalypse's body had been found.

So the gravity of circumstances began to weigh on me over the course of what seemed like a very long night, and when I went to the office the next morning, thinking less of opening than of figuring out how things stood, I was able to get on the internet and discover how very bad things are. The worst Caribbean earthquake in 200 years. Thousands dead. Ten of thousands homeless.

Just walking through Marigo at midday was enough to give the beginnings of a concrete sense of the devastation. Young people were gathered in small groups here and there around the town, listing friends who were away at school in Port au Prince and were either missing or confirmed as dead. Marigo is a small town, yet if you count only its Port au Prince college students, the death toll would have to be at least a dozen. And "college students from Marigo" is a very small subset of the population of Port au Prince. Even on our small Marigo staff, we have two who may have lost siblings.

And then I went to Jakmèl. It's one of Haiti's larger cities, about ten miles west of Marigo. Though it's no closer to where the quake's epicenter is said to have been, the impact could not have been more different. Jakmèl was devastated. Whole neighborhoods had been turned into rubble. My driver and I saw schools and hospitals that had collapsed with heavy casualties. Here and there we saw corpses in the streets or the rubble, most of them covered by sheets, but some still in whatever position the earthquake, which had struck about 24 hours earlier, had left them in. We saw what had once been an old man, one his hands grasping the railing of his front porch and one of his feet stepping into the street when the roof pinned where he was and where he will remain until someone moves him to his grave.

The enormity of the disaster here will only emerge slowly in the coming days. I have no news of most of my Port au Prince friends, and may have to go there to get any. Part of me is afraid to find out.