Coping With Natural Disaster: Haiti Earthquake

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Two hours in Port-au-Prince in the hot days after the quake was enough to give me as a surgeon a view of how devastating the natural disasters can be, for human life and for tragedy. In the grand scheme of things, I recognize that what I did was negligible. People who said “God bless you” were not aware of the paucity of either my contribution or the immense contribution of others who gave so much more. Still, this experience paints a portrait of our frail humanity and our incomplete ability to deal with adversity such as the natural disasters.

On Thursday, January 21, 2010, I had the privilege of traveling to Haiti on a MedEvac mission, to reunite a family and transport their 2 injured children and 2 others to Jackson Memorial Hospital. Fortuitously, whatever injuries they had had already stabilized by the time of our arrival. Authorities insisted that their travel be accompanied by a doctor. By sheer chance, I became the anointed physician, accompanying another individual whose compassion for human suffering far exceeds mine. As a doctor for almost 40 years, I admit to having become desensitized to pathology, condescendingly able to distinguish between genuine deprivation and its pretension. Nevertheless, this experience left in me a void that may never be filled. Perhaps that is the conflict between our divinity and our humanity.

Our mission was to return 5 Haitians to the United State to reunite a divided family and allow their injured members to receive needed medical care, a simple mission, yet potentially complex, because it occurred 9 days after a major earthquake, one that jarred the soul of an already impoverished nation. We stowed aboard a plane chartered by (Miami’s) Jackson Memorial Hospital and Children’s Hospital. These fine physicians and nurses would remain for an extended period and sacrifice infinity more than us, who were on a plane chartered by (Miami’s) Jackson Memorial Hospital and Children’s Hospital. Our mission was to return 5 Haitians to the United State to reunite a divided family and transport their 2 injured children and 2 others to Jackson Memorial Hospital. Laden with the same uncertainty that gripped us, they were not too pleased since we delayed their departure. None of us knew what to expect. On board was the famous Paul Farmer, MD, the genius infectious disease specialist, who had started a hospital in Haiti against amazing odds and now battles drug-resistant tuberculosis worldwide. I had read his book. He has accomplished great things. He smiled when I pointed out that he must be on Harvard’s faculty because he was the only person on the airplane wearing a white shirt and a blue blazer. At least it wasn’t tweed, probably not the best attire when traveling into Dante’s Seventh Circle of Hell. But his experience with Haiti far exceeded mine.

The airplane made a soft landing and pulled up at dusk, next to a Galaxy Star Lifter. We were warned to prepare for the acrid odor of putrefaction when the cabin door opened. Teams were organized to help unload the airplane because no other help was available and Miami’s supplies would be transported to their encampment. My companion and I were told to find our charges and return to the airplane as quickly as possible. If we did not return within 2 hours, we would be left behind.

The cabin door opened, offering only the faint hint of smoke, neither oppressive nor fetid. The 100,000 dead bodies having already been stacked, buried in mass graves, or burned, their aroma did not provoke recollection, so fast does nature purify itself. My friend and I were at last allowed to leave the plane to seek our evacuees and return as quickly as possible, not knowing what obstacles bureaucracy would place in our way. Thrusting through several cordons of uniformed Haitian border policemen, we asked guards to remember our faces to facilitate reentry. Because their patois contained little English, our entreaties only partially cushioned our reentry.

The airplane itself, destitute by third-world standards before the earthquake, now resembled a shattered cavern with cracks in the wall and piles of rubble and water puddles littering the floor. Provocative advertisements of tourist attractions featuring oiled, sunburned, partially clad female bodies were not present. The dimly lighted terminal challenged us to find a functioning exit. After twisting and turning, we exited the sanctity of the terminal only through a pitch-black, broken parking lot, a facility lighted only by infrequent automobile headlights. Columns of dust billowed up through a pitch-black, broken parking lot, a facility lighted only by infrequent automobile headlights. Columns of dust billowed up each time an army Humvee darted past. Using a satellite cellular phone, we connected with local ground forces to locate our evacuees. We found them in a darkened corner of the parking lot between cars, 2 adults and 3 children waiting, uncomplaining, with the patience of Job for their 2 saviors (Figs. 1 and 2). Transfer of medical information was minimalistic at best. Wounds were haphazardly redressed, and intravenous lines restarted
on the one child. Contrary to our expectations, the children uttered not a peep and silently accepted every pain and indignity without protest. Obviously, their life experience could not have prepared them for this calamity or its aftermath. My partner relates a story that the week before he had transported a 5-year-old from this same family to Miami. The child had a gaping, infected head injury and crushed right arm (since amputated). When talking to physicians at Jackson Memorial Hospital upon arrival, the Jackson resident surgeon (appropriately) asked what the computed tomography scan revealed. The young doctor obviously was uncomprehending of the depravity of conditions in Haiti.

Gathering up the 3 children and 2 adults, we made our way back through the smoky, dusty, potholed parking lot to gaps in the perimeter fence. Haitians without food, water, jobs, homes, beds, or hope clutched at us, asking us to take them with us. When the need is so great and the resources so little, one’s mind focuses only on a singular image: a starfish on the beach. For those of you who have not heard the metaphor, a boy walked along a beach where thousands of starfish had been left on the shore by a receding tide. He picked one up and tossed it back into the ocean. Then another. A man walked up to the boy and said, “Surely you don’t expect to save them all?” The boy said, “No, but I sure can make a difference in the lives of a few.”

At the first gap in the fence, our party was greeted by a representative of the State Department and several assault-rifle-bearing Federal agents. We explained our mission. The mother and her 2 injured children were being allowed to return to reunite with her injured son in Miami and her husband and to receive medical treatment. The other man and his son had green cards and seats on the airplane. One Federal agent had lived in Miami and understood its complex cultural composition. They let us pass, wishing us a “God bless you for what you’re doing.” I heard this repeated many more times during the remainder of the evening and still only partially comprehend the profundity of their blessing. We passed through 2 cordons of Haitian border guards who could do little but permit the egress of humanity and wish us “God speed.”

We arrived back at the tarmac, standing at the nose of our chartered 737, joined by 150 other émigrés desperately trying to exit the ravaged country. Although we were on the passenger manifest, we were told to wait at the back of the line until they could accommodate us. The 3 children, although scared and tired, uttered not a word.

My partner, who organized this minievacuation, and who possesses leadership capabilities of unimagined proportions, helped to load the sparse baggage carried by the departing Haitians. Although there was no security, one bag was unaccounted for and was finally identified by an elderly Creole-speaking woman who would have abandoned her few meager possessions in this earthquake-ravaged country. Opening the bag revealed a family photograph that securely identified her and her family, an heirloom that would otherwise have been irretrievably lost.

A few minutes past the 2-hour deadline, our Sky King 737 was wheels up. Kathy and Seth, the 2 airline employees who made this evacuation possible, were overjoyed by the success of “our” mission. And they should be. Without them, it would not have been possible.

Approaching 11 PM, we made our landing at Miami International, a straggly group of passengers who have ever deplaned. We woke up the children to face our last series of hurdles, American immigration. Whereas 2 of our evacuees had valid American visas, the mother and her 2 children traveling with us did not. The mother was returning to see her severely injured son and husband who had been taken to Jackson a week earlier. The 5-year-old had undergone a craniotomy for a depressed, infected skull fracture and amputation of his arm. The mother was not aware of the loss of her son’s arm, and we worried about her reaction.

Deplaning, we presented ourselves in front of the first of 3 series of immigration officers. Marc, the organizer of the rescue mission, pleaded our case. The mother and her children had no identifying documents. The immigration officer, a Haitian-American woman asked, “Do they have passports?” The answer, “Probably, inside the pile of rubble that was once in their home.” These people came with only the clothes on their backs and the family’s expectation of seeing their father and brother. Two TSA supervisors were called over. Our only documentation was an e-mail from US Senator George Lemieux authorizing their admittance. I was holding the young girl and her intravenous bag, and I showed the ravages of our trip. Wearing scrubs, with my white hair and with all the
surgical officialdom I could muster, I spoke up: “We have 2 injured children, one with an epidural hematoma concussion and dehydration, the other with a fractured radius and dehydration. We sure wish you could help us. We are taking them to Jackson Memorial Hospital.” After a moment’s pause, the senior officer offered, “Do you need a wheelchair?” I should have said yes, not knowing the distance between immigration and the exit. I was proud that I, a 66-year-old, could carry a 40-lb child a quarter mile without stopping.

We declined an ambulance. Mark’s wife Astrid, picked us up in their family SUV; they have 5 children. If they have any more, they will need a school bus. Astrid brought us to Jackson Memorial Hospital. Late that night, we marched onto the pediatric floor and, with the benign indulgence of the head nurse, quietly knocked on the door of the 5-year-old who had undergone the craniotomy and arm amputation. His father was staying with him. Joy slowly spread over his features as he became aware of the presence of his family. The 3-year-old girl, who had snuggled into my arms for warmth, yelled, “Pappi!” and jumped from my arms to his. The face of the boy with the amputated arm lighted up like national Christmas tree at the White House.

We had done our job. I’m sure that their medical injuries will be well treated, and their wounds will heal. I’m not so certain about their country, only the future can tell.

I arrived home, exhausted, in the way after midnight. A half hour later, famished, I sat down to a warm bowl of fettuccine and a glass of wine but could not help thinking that I had a home to go to and a meal to eat. Those people who clutched my sleeve earlier in the evening had no such reprieve. Stiff and tired, I arose at usual hour in the morning to do an operation and help an elderly man. The contrast puts things in perspective; we do have great health facilities and super help in the operating theater.

In all humility, I understand that my contribution pales to insignificance. Others have given so much more that I am a mere pretender. They, and the people of Haiti, who are overcoming this tragedy with superhuman acceptance, are the true heroes.