

Where Hope Hides

By David Diggs

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I put my life at risk for my meal tonight. Crime was one risk, but the far greater danger was that I'd be hit by one of the cars careening down the hill.

I'm in Haiti for the annual meeting of Beyond Borders' sister organization, the *Limyè Lavi* Foundation. I'm working late at their office tonight and forgot to make any arrangements for dinner. It was dark by the time my stomach began to growl.

Nadine, the office caretaker's wife, told me about a little sidewalk restaurant near the taxi station down the hill. They serve *poule boukane*—Haitian barbecued chicken. Even if I hadn't been so hungry, the thought of this would have made my mouth water. So I headed down the street that leads to the taxi station.

On this stretch of road there are no sidewalks. Walls extend right up to the edge of the pavement, forcing pedestrians into the street, which is completely unlit. There may be streetlights, but the city is supplied with only two or three hours of electricity a day right now. Port-au-Prince must be the darkest capital city in the world. Nearly two million people are crowded together on the side of these mountains that encircle a once-beautiful bay. Even so, it is dark enough to pick out constellations.

In spite of the night's darkness, the street was crowded with pedestrians heading up and down the mountain. The headlights of oncoming cars periodically provided enough light to keep me from bumping into other pedestrians or stumbling into potholes. But these cars that lit the way were also the biggest danger.

Just around a gentle bend, the street passed through an oasis of light. Light poured through the open doorway and windows of a church, blazing with at least a dozen bare light bulbs. The congregation was standing and singing, but I could barely hear them above the roar of the generator that feeds the lights and loudspeaker.

Next door and even more brightly lit was a lottery house called *Chez Toto*—Toto's Place. Brightly painted lottery houses are everywhere in Port-au-Prince as well as all the smaller towns of Haiti. A few are big, most are smaller—but even the tiniest and most remote Haitian villages seem to have at least one little lottery stand or little table set up at an intersection of two footpaths.

I'm not much of a gambler, though, so I kept to my search for food, following the street back into the darkness and on down the hill.

A couple hundred yards later I arrived at an intersection where the taxis turn around and load up with passengers. This was the station Nadine had mentioned. I wandered around for a moment in the darkness trying to locate the restaurant. It didn't take long for all my senses to converge on something promising. I saw a smoky orange glow emanating from charcoal embers in an old oil barrel that's been cut in half and turned on to its side. Chicken was sizzling over the big makeshift cooker.

The smell of this food alone would have been worth the seventy-five gourdes (almost \$2) that I gave the young woman who assisted the cook. Somehow in the dark she managed to fill a Styrofoam carry-out box full of chicken, deep-fried plantains, and boiled manioc. She put *pikliz*, a kind of super-spicy pickled slaw, into a little plastic cup. It goes with the fried plantains.

I was tempted to plunge into my meal right there on the street. But I resisted that urge and, instead, turned and began carrying my box of food back up the road toward the office.

As I approached the oasis of light again, the street was suddenly jammed full of people. I could barely push my way through the crowd. I wondered what had happened. Only a fight or an accident or a fire could draw such a large crowd so quickly. For a moment, I thought maybe a pedestrian had been hit by a car, but

the crowd wasn't gathered around anyone in particular. Everyone was just milling around, waiting.

"What's going on?" I asked a man at the edge of the crowd. "What is everyone doing in the street?" He was wearing a grimy straw hat pressed flat down on his head. Judging from his muscular frame and the dirty, tattered clothes that clung to his body, I assume he is a market porter who had spent the day working in the open market nearby, carrying heavy bags and boxes to and from the trucks that bring the goods in for the sidewalk merchants. I've been told that a strong, aggressive porter can make "good money," though "good money" may mean less than a dollar a day.

A day of hot, backbreaking work probably didn't earn this man enough to buy this meal I was inadvertently holding right under his nose. I moved the box to my side. The porter then looked up at me vacantly, without answering my question.

I rephrased my question, "What is this big crowd doing here in the street?"

"Oh. We're waiting on the drawing," he said, looking into the lottery house across the street. There was a big television mounted to a wall inside. It was linked via satellite to a station in New York. I should have guessed.

The private lotteries in Haiti all depend on the numbers drawn in lotteries outside the country—the New York State lottery and the lottery in Santo Domingo. Years ago when I first lived in Haiti I asked a friend about this. "Why does Haiti use the New York lottery? Why can't they have their own?" His response gave me a new word and a new thought, "Haiti has too much magic and too much *magouy*." *Magouy*, I learned, means corruption through trickery. It's a local specialty.

I waited for a moment with the porter and then asked him if he had a lot riding on tonight's draw. "I bet everything I could," he said with a worried smile. "I had a dream," he continued, looking down at his ticket.

The little white levitating Lotto balls in New York float and bounce far beyond the influence of Haiti's magic and *magouy*. But local dreams in Haitian heads are often trusted to divine which numbers will pop up in the next day's drawing. See a rooster in your dream? Select 32 for your first number. A fish? Select 17. See something on fire in your dream? Select 27.

Back when my wife and I were still living in Haiti, a local pharmacy gave us a promotional calendar for the year. Printed at the top, above the detachable months, was a detailed list of possible archetypal elements of a dream and the corresponding numbers that each archetype represented. Only in Haiti could numerology and pharmacology mix so naturally.

I waited a few more seconds beside the market porter as he waited for the drawing. But I couldn't stand the tension. Witnessing this man lose his hard-earned money didn't appeal to me. Besides, I was hungry, and the food was going to get cold.

"Good luck!" I wished him and turned back up the street. He said nothing, keeping his eyes fixed on his ticket.

I passed by the church with the generator and light bulbs again and noticed that a man was now standing in the pulpit, speaking into a microphone held in one hand and waving the other hand in the air. His eyes were closed, and his head was tilted heavenward.

I made it back to the office without getting hit by a car. I devoured my meal, enjoying it and trying not to think too much about all the hungry people in the streets and houses surrounding me.

While eating I reflected back on the meeting I had participated in earlier this afternoon. About thirty Haitian women who are part of a much larger women's cooperative have been engaging in weekly Reflection Circles as a way of further developing their problem-solving, reading, and communication skills. My Haitian colleague Guerda and I arrived at the meeting just as they were finishing their discussion.

We were eager to talk with them about their experience with Reflection Circles. They were happy to

stay and talk with us. They pulled two more chairs into their circle.

Somehow we got onto the subject of hope, and I asked them how they found hope in the midst of so many economic, social, and political difficulties.

One woman in the group, a person who I knew had endured a particularly difficult life, stood and began to explain how hope would sometimes hide its face. When her children get sent home from school because she's behind on paying tuition, and there's not even a grain of rice left in the house to feed them, it can feel like life's difficulties have knocked her down and kicked all the hope out of her. Sometimes she sends her children to bed with a grain of rock salt to suck on to distract them from their hunger. On nights like that, she sometimes lies down wishing to never wake up again. But she does wake up the next morning, and she remembers then that her only hope is in the solidarity of the other women in this group and the love of God expressed through them. When she is really struggling, she knows she can turn to them and they will help her. In turn, she helps them when they are in trouble.

When this woman finished speaking, an older woman raised her voice and stood to her feet. "When hope tries to hide from me, I go to hope's door and pound on it." She mimed vigorous pounding on an imaginary door. "If hope locks itself inside and won't let me in, I gather up all my strength and break that door down." She then threw all her weight into and through the imaginary door. The women in the group laughed and applauded as she continued: "Despair won't defeat us, because we have each other."

These women ended their meeting with a powerful prayer and a stirring song that spoke both of God's faithfulness and the power available to poor people united by love and the struggle for justice.

Guerda and I were both deeply moved by our encounter with these women. Many in this group had been victims of sexual and political violence. Many live close to the edge of survival. In spite of this, or perhaps because of this, they possess a strength and firmness that I've only ever encountered in other groups of poor, struggling people like them.

Together these women, with almost no outside help, had built a cooperative that did everything from making jam to sell in the market to supporting victims of repression. The hope they possessed was the product of love compressed under the weight of great hardship.

These women were like the long-suffering community of Christians in Rome to whom Paul wrote, "...we rejoice in our afflictions, because we know that affliction produces endurance, endurance produces proven character, and proven character produces hope. This hope does not disappoint, because God's love has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us." (Romans 5:3-6)

The porter I met in front of the lottery house had spent his last dime to buy a bit of hope. But it was a very different kind of hope from what Paul described. It was not the solid hope forged in affliction possessed by the women in the cooperative. The porter's lottery-house hope was so passive and flimsy that the bad bounce of a single Lotto ball could bring it tumbling down.

The people in the well-lit church next door to the lottery house were probably searching for hope too. I couldn't hear the sermon, but judging from the years I've spent visiting Haitian churches, it wouldn't have surprised me if the preacher was offering a spiritualized version of the same instantaneous, passive, low-carb hope on sale at the lottery house.

Like too many North American churches, some Haitian churches preach what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace" and others call "easy believism." Hope is in heaven, and all that is required is to believe the right things. Like the lottery-house hope, this sort of hope is quick, painless, and demands little, but it also offers little that can stand up to the struggles of today.

When people get hungry enough they'll eat just about anything. Markets in Haiti sell dried chunks of chalky gray clay. Hungry people buy and eat these when they can't afford real food. Likewise, people who hunger for hope are more easily lured into putting their hope in empty, unsustaining, or even dangerous things.

Poor people aren't the only ones who hunger for hope. People with lots of money to spare buy new cars and clothes and bigger houses all to fill the void of despair that growls inside. But the satisfaction is ephemeral; the emptiness returns when the newness wears off.

Perhaps poor people just have a better excuse for their despair. Everywhere they turn they face schemes that prey on their need for hope. The lottery is only the most obvious example. There are many others.

In Haiti where there are only enough public schools for about a tenth of school-aged children, most poor parents have no choice but to send their children to private schools that charge monthly tuition. Most of these schools are notoriously bad and offer children little that will serve them as adults. But poor parents have few options. So those who are able will often place their bet in the form of tuition paid to what are derisively called *lekòl bòlèt*—lottery schools—because they offer such a slim chance for a real education. Sending your child to one of these schools is like playing the lottery with your child's future.

Other poor parents in rural areas put their children at even greater risk when they send a child away to work as a domestic servant in an urban home. The bright lights of the city, the relative abundance of schools, the presence of clinics and markets full of food—all give these parents hope that if they can just get their children to the city, their lives will be better. Occasionally this is true. But most children sent into servitude end up being badly exploited and abused. They can see the schools, but are not allowed to attend. They see the clinics, but never enter. And the lights, when there is electricity, are a curse, because they allow their masters to work them even later into the night.

I spent the past week in very encouraging meetings with the staff of the *Limyè Lavi* Foundation. *Limyè Lavi* is Beyond Borders' main partner organization in Haiti and directs our efforts here. *Limyè Lavi* is Creole for Life's Light, and the name seems especially appropriate. Hope is a light that can lead us either to what gives life or into all kinds of hazards and loss. The light can be faint, like the dim glow of charcoal embers, or bright, like the lights of the lottery house.

Through *Limyè Lavi* we work to shine more light on things worthy of hope, to give Haitians better alternatives for their hope. We improve the odds that Haitians get a good education by training teachers in liberating teaching methods and by providing some of the poorest children and adults with quality schooling and literacy training. We make schools better so parents don't have to gamble with their children's future. We work to end the practice of child servitude. We help Haitian leaders unleash the wisdom, passion, and commitment of their people so they can realize their dreams. And we promote participatory leadership in Haiti's churches, equipping ordinary Christians to nurture themselves spiritually and to overcome distrust, denominational divisiveness, and spiritual passivity in themselves and their communities.

Along with our work to build hope among poor Haitians, we encourage privileged people to invest their hope not in the pursuit of more money and possessions but in the pursuit of God's reign of justice.

So much in our dark world shines with bright lights, falsely promising to satisfy our hopes. But those women gathered in that circle of solidarity today show us where hope really hides. They have found the only lasting source of hope—the community of shared suffering and joy that is bound together by God's love.