

Tout moun se moun*

I am not a nurse or a journalist; I do not even have any particularly useful disaster relief training. In an orphanage in Port-au-Prince a medic from Pasadena, California with a Firefighters for Christ t-shirt came to the conclusion that I am a nothing. He says that: "So you are a nothing?" And I say yes. I do not think he means this pejoratively; he just needs to establish my classification. Most of the year I am a film editor, occasional director and writer, but for ten days three weeks after the earthquake, I am a gopher, water bearer, delivery room assistant, pharmacist, babysitter, juggler, counselor, day laborer and disaster zone tourist in Haiti.

The night before we drive into Port-au-Prince I can't sleep. I sit up beside the edge of a backyard pool at the base of a Christian mission in Santo Domingo clandestinely sipping a rum cocktail from a Sigg bottle, wondering why I am here. I do not think that I am unique in feeling disconnected from much of the real suffering that people around the world endure. My ability to feel empathy has been dulled by numbers. 2,000,000 Cambodians killed by the Khmer Rouge, at about the same time I and 93,000 other Who fans crowded into the LA coliseum. 1,500,000 casualties in the Iran-Iraq war, the year it ended I graduated High School with 800 other students. While 800,000 people died in Rwanda, I studied with 23,000 other undergraduates at my University. There were 4,000,000 victims of the Congolese civil war and 2,000 riders that could fit standing with me in the 10 car subway train I took to work during those years. 230,000 died in the Asian Tsunami, the day it hit all 25 people at the production studio where I worked stood silent in front of the TV. Two years ago I sat in the stands of Invesco Field with 84,000 other flag waving Americans to watch Obama accept his party's nomination, that number is about 20,000 short of the best civilian casualty estimates in Iraq and a third of the number of people who are now thought to have died in the 35 seconds the earth shook in Haiti. Type a zero on a page and keep hitting the key until you have filled 62 single spaced pages with zeros. Now imagine that each one of those represent a life ended in the earthquake. I can't.

I realize that this numbness to numbers has made me numb to the reality of the suffering they are meant to convey. Even on an individual level I know that life in a society where the media incessantly probes the lives of celebrities and gives short shrift to conditions of the unfortunate has better conditioned me to feel empathy for someone tormented by paparazzi than crushed under a slab of concrete. Everyday I make choices, personal, economic, political based on my understanding of the world and the slice of that world that I understand personally is shockingly narrow. If I am honest I know I am going to Haiti to be helped as much as help.

The devastation that I encountered exceeds description. Buildings have not just been broken in pieces, but pulverized to dust. The entire city sleeps on the street. Everyone lost someone. The scope and scale of the disaster cannot fit into the frame of my consciousness much less the frame of a camera; the panorama cannot find the horizon. The only thing larger and more difficult to capture is the humanity and resilience of the Haitian people.

Every day I am back I fight the narrowing of the frame to remember how much exists outside.

– Gabriel Wrye

* "Tout moun se moun" means "Every person is a person" in Haitian Kreole