

The Other Side:
A Morning Meeting Meditation
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How many of you have visited a Caribbean Island? Of those that have, who have left the confines of their resorts? Did you wonder what went on beyond those walls? Well even if you never have been to the Caribbean and never wondered what it was like to be a citizen of one of those Eden-like islands, you should know something about what life is like there – How after they stopped being colonies of great European nations they started to fester, with their citizens turning upon themselves. They were left with no means of survival in a global market place because they had nothing of any import to offer.

Jamaica - an island paradise, where honeymooners go and cruise ships stop; but also a place of complete poverty, where people build houses on the city dump and rifle through it for things to sell in order to eat. A place where children never learn to read because they are excluded from the educational system since their parents couldn't afford to register them at birth. A place where the children who do end up getting into the system are beaten by teachers for not remembering their ABC's or what "1 plus 1" is.

You are probably asking yourself, "how come she is talking to us about poverty and beatings in a country somewhere south of Florida?". It's because last summer I spent two weeks in Kingston, Jamaica living in a convent placed in the middle of a squatter settlement. Yes, I do know two weeks is not a long time, but in the space of those two weeks my life **did** change. I went with the naïve hope that somehow the group of 23 individuals I traveled with could cause great change and infinitely better the lives of those around us. Instead what we found was not a small case of a certain region that was impoverished but a whole city and, in fact, a whole country that was living in what we would call "squalor". Within a day of being at our assigned worksites, we realized that all we could do was help one person and, perhaps, make a difference to them.

Our solace in our apparent ineffectiveness was the story of a man who, walking along a beach at sunset, sees a man far ahead of him who would walk a bit, bend down, pick something up and then cast it into the sea. Seeing the man repeat this action many more times, the man got curious and hurried up to catch up with the man in front of him. He observed him bend down and pick up a starfish that had been left stranded high on the beach by a storm early that day and then cast it into the sea. He couldn't contain himself. He just had to tell the man about the futility of his task. He said "You know that what you are doing is really nothing. There are probably more than a thousand starfish washed up on this beach, and there are countless more thousands washed up on all the other beaches. You can't possibly make a difference." In response the man bent down picked up another starfish and cast it into the sea. Then turning to the man who questioned his actions he said "It made a difference to that one."

Each day except Sundays in those two weeks we tried to make a difference to the individuals we encountered. We worked at five different sites for two days each and then on the last day could chose which one we wanted to return to. The sites were Mother Theresa's, where the dying who couldn't be anywhere else were cared for; St. Margaret's, which was a school for children who were not in the system; the burn unit at the Children's Hospital; Riverton, a school for children from 2 to 6 years of age that was in the middle of a squatter settlement built on the city dump; and Poor Relief, which was

basically a homeless shelter for the mentally unwell and deportees. Each of these sites was eye opening.

At Mother Theresa's, which was a building that reeked of old urine and infection, we washed off plastic covered beds and helped distribute lunch. As I was dishing out the stew of sorts from the pot into bowls, I couldn't help but wonder how could people eat this? It looked as if a whole chicken had just been thrown into a pot with potatoes, some chopped carrots, and some water and then left to simmer, until the bird in question fell apart. I cringed as I handed out a bowl with obvious feathers and bones swirling at the bottom. But Mother Theresa's inhabitants seemed to enjoy this food. Once lunch was finished, we had to wash the faces and hands of the messy eaters and then help them slowly walk back to their beds, which they collapsed upon and went back to staring at the ceiling and picking at imaginary bugs on their skin. This place frightened me. Everyone was in various stages of death from AIDS, diabetes, or just the lack of a will to live and they were just abandoned on the streets until the Sisters found them and took them in.

Very much like the caring sisters of Mother Theresa's, St. Margaret's School took care of the underbelly of Kingston society – but this time its younger underbelly. This school was the place where children went who couldn't receive an education from the public system. Our job here was to spend time one on one with students and help them with their work. I was assigned to a 16 year old boy who could not spell his name and who could read no more than "I am a boy", and only that because he had used the book so many times he had memorized what each page contained. For two days I tried to teach him to read. Now, it is important to mark that I am not a teacher, and that I am only 17 years old. It was a challenge to try and explain to him about phonics and how to sound out words. Because, although he did know his alphabet, he didn't know what combinations of letters sounded like. Finally, when we were both so frustrated we barely could look at each other, he turned to me and said "Miss, could you teach me about tens and ones?" Then he pulled a math primer off the shelf and gave it to me and looked expectantly.

Here was this boy who had been abandoned by the government, and who was living on his own while his parents were in the United States trying to earn money to send it back so that he and his little brother could survive. Yet, he still wanted to learn even though he had no clue where even to start. I tried to imagine myself in his position – not being able to read the signs around me, not able to understand what the prices of things were, having no parents to protect me. How was this boy to survive in a job? This is one of the main problems Jamaica is facing – an uneducated labor force along with the lack of natural resources to support any sort of industry that would be of interest to the global market place.

A majority of Jamaica's population is unemployed, because of a lack of industry. This is why places like Poor Relief are necessary. Poor Relief was a place where the unemployable went when they no longer could manage to maintain a residence of their own. People just hung out under an overhang and played dominos and smoked "ganja", which was their name for marijuana. They were just waiting for their fortunes to change, but they probably never would. Some of these people were schizophrenic, some of them were epileptic, some of them were paranoid and some of them were deportees. The deportees were the most heart wrenching. One man had a bachelor's degree from Northwestern University, but he had committed real estate fraud. Since he was not a

citizen of the United States, he was exiled from the country back to Jamaica from which he had emigrated when he was five. Since he had never been made an American citizen by his parents, he could just be cast out of the United States which had been his home for so many years. Once he was forced back to Jamaica, however, he was condemned to never have a job and to live in poverty because he had a stamp on his papers that told all future employers that he was a deportee. No one could hire a deportee. Despite all his education, all he had left to do with his life was to spend it in a drugged haze playing dominos and card games.

After Poor Relief I was assigned to go to the Children's Hospital, where we helped the nurses in the Burn Unit. This was very shocking to us. Burned skin is very susceptible to infection but there seemed to be no infection control in the hospital. Each day the nurses (with our help) would take the burned children out to a tub in the middle of one of the many hospital courtyards and debride the burns on the child. They were then slathered with ointment, swaddled with bandages and left to wander the hospital, doing as they pleased. The thing that was disturbing was that the water in the tub was only changed after every two children had used it. But somehow some of these children were surviving.

One of the burned babies ended up choosing me as her companion. I had just entered the ward and was told to go and stand next to crib number four, which held the most badly burned child I ever hoped to see. Her whole head was covered in burns and her arms and the back of her legs as well were covered with healing scabs. She had only one small tuft of hair on her head and the rest was a mess of half healed, half oozing, half infected burns. I stood next to the crib unsure what to do – not wanting to touch her, afraid that I would hurt her in some way. Then this little girl, whom I found out from the nurses was named Abby, crawled over to the side of the crib, hauled herself up on the bars and preceded to grab my hair. When I turned to face her full on she held her little burned arms out and said “hug, hug” and then pulled my hair until I was close enough for her to wrap her arms halfway around me. She laid her head on my chest and just leaned into me. For the rest of my assignment there I stayed with this little girl who seemed to choose me.

I obviously was curious as to why she was so hideously burned and why she had no one with her. The nurse told me that her house had been fire bombed by a gang and that her mother and brother had died in the fire. Her father was in another hospital also badly burned. All of the children in that ward had similar horror stories about how they had been burned. One had her bed lit on fire by a jealous older sibling. Another was trying to steal electricity from a power line by throwing a wire up and over a high voltage line, while standing on top of a corrugated steel roof with no grounding. Needless to say, he was badly electrocuted and had to have one arm amputated and half of one foot as well.

The majority of the houses were like the house of the electrocuted boy, a corrugated steel roof on top of some cinderblocks. All of the houses were like that in Riverton, which was a squatter settlement that was built on top of the city dump and the place of the last worksite. Riverton had at its center a school that had a playground with a swing set with no swings, a set of climbing bars, and a water spigot that was not more than ten inches off the dusty ground, the main water supply for the 300 children who

attended school there. The school was the place of education for children from the surrounding neighborhood between the ages of 2 and 6.

As it turned out we were supposed to help the teachers with their classes. I was assigned to the class of 2 year olds. I was amazed that they were being taught the alphabet, but even more so by the fact that these toddlers were hit when they didn't pay direct attention to the teacher. These were babies who didn't have the attention span to stand perfectly still. The teacher got fed up with the class and just walked out, leaving me in charge of 15 little crazed children who ran around, hit each other, picked up the chairs, threw things, etc. Eventually, they calmed down when the teacher came back in and told them to wash their hands at the spigot so that lunch would be served.

The most amazing thing happened later that day at snack time. Though previously these kids had been fighting like cats and dogs, they made sure that if any one of them didn't have a snack, which had to be brought from home, they would share with that individual. So these children, who barely had anything, were still willing to share what they had so that no one would be left out. It is important to note that the teacher tried to discourage this practice but the kids did so anyway.

As I look back on this experience I realize that I left some of my naïveté on the tarmac at Kingston Airport. Never again will I hear of a hurricane bearing down on Jamaica without offering a prayer for all those people I meet. Never again will I complain about my comfortable suburban life. I have no right to do so, because I realize that everything I have is a privilege – that all that is needed to survive is bit of food, the care of another person and a place to lay one's head in safety.