The Fast for Haiti - in the Context of U.S. Anti-Community Culture

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
29 January 2010

In mid-January I organized the Fast for Haiti, and ended mine after 10 1/2 days. Just on water, getting plenty of rest, I did some healing and contemplation that otherwise could not have happened. What about other participants in the Fast for Haiti, and what has been the effect?

It was clear to me that breaking through to millions of people in TV land or other realms of mass corporate media would have required I fast at least 20 days. Perhaps another faster is doing that at this very moment. The popular Portland listener-supported radio station, KBOO-FM, aired this report on the fast:

[Before you listen, be aware that this report continues and draws upon feedback as well as two excellent articles that point to the deliberate disempowering of the American people: (1) Dmitry Orlov's analysis of community organizing (noted below) and (2) Professor Robert Jensen's recent analysis of Haiti news-coverage (in its entirety here). So do come back after you listen to my show, and pick up the thread here.]

Fast for Haiti

Categories: Economic imperialism [emphasis added]

program date: Mon, 01/25/2010

program: Evening News

Four fascinating less-than-encouraging pieces of feedback on my fast from readers and contacts came in:

• A major radio network producer got angry with my telling him about my fasting, rejecting its necessity and accusing me of liking to fast. The story was not picked up.

• Why wasn't I fasting for America's homeless and unemployed? I responded, "Go for it."

• "Aristide absconded with $900 million" -- this bolstered the reader's argument that the Haitian people have dug their own grave through overpopulating and being incompetent. If he's reading this, know that I checked on that Aristide allegation. What did happen was that Aristide was kicked out of the country by the U.S. He seems to be most needed now in his homeland, and perhaps he'll return from South Africa soon.

• I was engaging in "mortification of the flesh." Actually, I was renewing my flesh, but such is the cultural gap between even critics of society. Yeah, I admit I was pulling a stunt involving some sacrifice and was saving money. Regardless, a fast has relevance for long term issues of food security and for dramatizing the gap in wealth distribution between nations. And buddy, it puts lead in your pencil.

Reflecting on grassroots activism's changing fortunes over recent decades, during this fast and the effort to promote it, it is clear that U.S. society manages to limit more and more one's participation in civic affairs. A radical sociology professor already may have a name for this syndrome, such as "Unparticipation for Maintaining the Status Quo." This joins such revelations as Professor Herbert Marcuse's on society's tolerance of dissent, that he formulated some four decades ago. Done carefully, it's manipulation that props up the myth of equality and democracy while the corporate state and the war machine get more powerful.

The decimating of participants in grassroots action is done best through undermining community. Divide and Conquer. A fine analysis of what constitutes community building in these times, and how it's not happening, is a new article by Dmitry Orlov "Real Communities are Self-Organizing" Dmitry always cuts through the BS, as he's able to place himself outside both the conventional thinking of activism and senseless participation in the political system.

As with the aftermath of Katrina in New Orleans, in Haiti it will be community activists on the ground who ultimately make the difference between survival and death, and solidarity and despair. The reported actions of the U.S. military to limit relief efforts is not a surprise to those who were puzzled by the Katrina reaction by the U.S. government. Whether Haiti is being set up to be a dependent colony for more exploitation, or the people can achieve more equity and get closer to the land and their own families as a culture, depends on many factors. An individual in the U.S. can't do much, apparently, but can at least keep in mind we are all in this together: helping out each other has been the human being's only success-strategy proven over time.

Why did I break the fast when I did? My heightened energy and return of hunger seemed like it was going to be a distraction, and I realized joyfully that I had achieved a state that I expected would take maybe 15 or 20 days instead. I did not attain my goal of saving as much food money, eventually donating it to Haiti relief organizations, as I hoped. I did go long enough to give the concept a chance and involve who knows how many people. Fasting is alien in modern culture, despite the daily words "breakfast" in English and 'ayuno" in Spanish. A mass movement based on fasting, then, might be a doubtful proposition for now. But we've reminded people of the tactic and this method of healing that is on many levels.

We still maintain the Fast's Participation List, and we urge you to join it. To sign up for the fast and be listed among participants on our website and
in emailed lists, contact me via email at jan "at" culturechange.org.

Background on the Fast for Haiti and donating food-money for key aid groups is at

Fast for Haiti to Raise $ for Aid

Participants in Fast for Haiti to Raise $ for Aid / Relief Organizations Recommended

Day 4 of the Fast for Haiti

My 9th Day of the Fast for Haiti

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Listen online to
kboo.org for news analysis, music and more: at a true community station serving a large, dynamic American city. If you're in Oregon or southern Washington, tune in on the FM dial and please support the station.

Further reading:

Great television/bad journalism: Media failures in Haiti coverage

by Robert Jensen

CNN's star anchor Anderson Cooper narrates a chaotic street scene in Port-au-Prince. A boy is struck in the head by a rock thrown by a looter from a roof. Cooper helps him to the side of the road, and then realizes the boy is disoriented and unable to get away. Laying down his digital camera (but still being filmed by another CNN camera), Cooper picks up the boy and lifts him over a barricade to safety, we hope.

"We don't know what happened to that little boy," Cooper says in his report. "All we know now is, there's blood in the streets." (To view the CNN story, go to http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Unh4v1lFU0.)

This is great television, but it's not great journalism. In fact, it's irresponsible journalism.

Cooper goes on to point out there is no widespread looting in the city and that the violence in the scene that viewers have just witnessed appears to be idiosyncratic. The obvious question: If it's not representative of what's happening, why did CNN put it on the air? Given that Haitians generally have been organizing themselves into neighborhood committees to take care of each other in the absence a functioning central government, isn't that violent scene an isolated incident that distorts the larger reality?

Cooper tries to rescue the piece by pointing out that while such violence is not common, if it were to become common, well, that would be bad -- "it is a fear of what might come." But people are more likely to remember the dramatic images than his fumbling attempt to put the images in context.

Unfortunately, CNN and Cooper's combination of great TV and bad journalism are not idiosyncratic; television news routinely falls into the trap of emphasizing visually compelling and dramatic stories at the expense of important information that is crucial but more complex.

The absence of crucial historical and political context describes the print coverage as well; the facts, analysis, and opinion that U.S. citizens need to understand these events are rarely provided. For example, in the past week we've heard journalists repeat endlessly the observation that Haiti is the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. Did it ever occur to editors to assign reporters to ask why?

The immediate suffering in Haiti is the result of a natural disaster, but that suffering is compounded by political disasters of the past two centuries, and considerable responsibility for those disasters lies not only with Haitian elites but also with U.S. policymakers.

Journalists have noted that a slave revolt led to the founding of an independent Haiti in 1804 and have made passing reference to how France's subsequent demand for "reparations" (to compensate the French for their lost property, the slaves) crippled Haiti economically for more than a century. Some journalists have even pointed out that while it was a slave society, the United States backed France in that cruel policy and didn't recognize Haitian independence until the Civil War. Occasional references also have been made to the 1915 U.S. invasion under the "liberal" Woodrow Wilson and an occupation that lasted until 1934, and to the support the U.S. government gave to the two brutal Duvalier dictatorships (the infamous "Papa Doc" and "Baby Doc") that ravaged the country from 1957-86. But there's little discussion of how the problems of contemporary Haiti can be traced to those policies.

Even more glaring is the absence of discussion of more recent Haiti-U.S. relations, especially U.S. support for the two coups (1991 and 2004) against a democratically elected president. Jean-Bertrand Aristide won a stunning victory in 1990 by articulating the aspirations of Haiti's poorest citizens, and his populist economic program irritated both Haitian elites and U.S. policy-makers. The first Bush administration nominally condemned the 1991 military coup but gave tacit support to the generals. President Clinton eventually helped Artistide return to power Haiti in 1994, but not until the Haitian leader had been forced to capitulate to business-friendly economic policies demanded by the United States. When Aristide won another election in 2000 and continued to advocate for ordinary Haitians, the second Bush administration blocked crucial loans to his government and supported the violent reactionary forces attacking Aristide's party. The sad conclusion to that policy came in 2004, when the U.S. military effectively kidnapped Aristide and flew him out of the country. Aristide today lives in South Africa, blocked by the United States from returning to his country, where he still has many supporters and could help with relief efforts.

How many people watching Cooper's mass-mediated heroism on CNN know that U.S. policy makers have actively undermined Haitian democracy and opposed that country's most successful grassroots political movement? During the first days of coverage of the earthquake, it's understandable that news organizations focused on the immediate crisis. But more than a week later, what excuse do journalists have?

Shouldn't TV pundits demand that the United States accept responsibility for our contribution to this state of affairs? As politicians express concern about Haitian poverty and bemoan the lack of a competent Haitian government to mobilize during the disaster, shouldn't journalists ask why they have not supported the Haitian people in the past? When Bill Clinton and George W. Bush are appointed to head up the humanitarian effort, should not journalists ask the obvious, if impolite, questions about those former presidents' contributions to Haitian suffering?

When mainstream journalists dare to mention this political history, they tend to scrub clean the uglier aspects of U.S. policy, absolving U.S. policymakers of responsibility in "the star-crossed relationship" between the two nations, as a Washington Post reporter put it. When news reporters explain away Haiti's problems as a result of some kind of intrinsic "political dysfunction," as the Post reporter termed it, then readers are more likely to accept the overtly reactionary arguments of op/ed writers who blame Haiti's problems of its "poverty culture" (Jonah Goldberg, Los Angeles Times) or "progress-resistant cultural influences" rooted in voodoo (David Brooks, New York Times).

One can learn more by monitoring the independent media in the United States ("Democracy Now," for example, has done extensive reporting, http://www.democracynow.org/) or reading the foreign press (such as this political analysis by Peter Hallward in the British daily "The Guardian," http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/jan/13/our-role-in-haitis-plight). When will journalists in the U.S. corporate commercial media provide the same kind of honest accounting?

The news media, of course, have a right to make their own choices about what to cover. But we citizens have a right to expect more.

Robert Jensen is a journalism professor at the University of Texas at Austin and board member of the Third Coast Activist Resource Center. His latest book is All My Bones Shake: Seeking a Progressive Path to the Prophetic Voice (Soft Skull Press, 2009). He also is the author of Getting Off: Pornography and the End of Masculinity (South End Press, 2007); The Heart of Whiteness: Confronting Race, Racism and White Privilege (City Lights, 2005); Citizens of the Empire: The Struggle to Claim Our Humanity (City Lights, 2004); and Writing Dissent: Taking Radical Ideas from the Margins to the Mainstream (Peter Lang, 2002). Jensen can be reached at rjensen "at" uts.cc.utexas.edu and his articles can be found online here.