Passage to Haiti

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At 1000 hrs. on December 10, 2014, 13 days after our snowy departure from Martha's Vineyard, Mass. we sighted the steep verdant mountains of Hispaniola rising from the tropical sea, piercing the hazy cerulean sky. Landfall is a momentous occasion aboard an ocean sailing vessel. It is a welcome reward following the continuous cycles of life underway, standing watch day and night, observing the constant changing shades of water and sky on the far horizon. All hands shared in the duties required to manage the delivery south-- tending sail and taking the helm; navigating, cooking, cleaning, mending as we drove our 50' schooner, *Charlotte*, through the vagaries of wind and ocean–-living and working together with a common goal to arrive safely at a distant land. Landfall is a time for celebration and gratitude.

However, the journey was not yet over. After sighting this majestic island 50 miles to the south we now had to approach the Windward Passage, sail southwest along the western coast of Haiti to Cap Dame Marie then head east to our final destination, a small island called, Île-à-Vache.

With our eyes focused on this new attraction, we arrived at the Northwest coast of Haiti at twilight. Close reaching a half- mile or so off shore we observed, as if through an ancient lens, the inaccessible rugged terrain plunging to the sea, shrouded in a smoky, mysterious veil. Casting and hauling nets from locally hand built working sail boats, dozens of fisherman waved pleasantly to us as we slid silently along from one coastal village to the next. As the light faded, I stood further off shore to avoid collision with these capable but primitive, unlit and engineless watercraft. Haiti became black as the surrounding night save for an occasional fire on the beach or in the hills above and her distant mountainous outline backlit by a waxing moon. We had sailed into another time zone centuries past, a quiet, still, dreamlike place.

A moderate easterly katabatic night wind slid down the high volcanic slopes and across the water making our way south through the Windward Passage between Haiti and Cuba a pleasant reach with sheets eased on an easy sea. Shortly after midnight we rounded Cap Dame Marie and set our course for Île-à-Vache some 20 nautical miles to the ENE. The cooperative breeze backed a few points to the north, allowing us to make our heading in one tack and by 0300 we rounded up in the lee of a pristine uninhabited cove and set our anchor in the white sand below 20 feet of clear moonlit water. With sails stowed and *Charlotte* finally at rest, all hands walked about the deck in quiet conversation observing this wonder of the natural world unchanged by man. For all of us, this was a landfall like no other.

Since my first visit to Haiti in 2011 I've had a strong desire to return. At that time, we sailed to the North coastal town of Labadie where my friends Ted Okie and Tracy Jonsson were spending the winter while Tracy documented the classic and crumbling French colonial architecture in Cap Haitian for her masters degree in historic preservation. My shipmates and I were struck by the kindness and generosity of the people, their good nature, work ethic and resolve in the face of abject poverty and little opportunity. But there was a much deeper feeling that seemed to penetrate the ground itself—powerful, mysterious and soulful – a magnetic pull to the visceral texture of this Afro- French West Indian culture.

Stumbling around the Internet one winter evening in 2013, I noticed the "Free cruising guide to Haiti" online. I contacted the author, Frank Virgintino, and, as so often happens on our ever-

shrinking planet, we re-connected 30 years after he had sold a large quantity of bronze hardware to our boatyard (at ten cents on the dollar). When I informed Frank that I wanted to return to Haiti on *Charlotte*, he made it very clear that if we liked the north coast we would love the south. "You must sail to Île-à-Vache," he implored. Taking his advice I sent an email to his Haitian friend Sam Alteme in Kai Kok, the little village in Port Morgan harbor. Sam responded quickly and informed us of the various needs of his community, the impressive work of Sister Flora and her orphanage and what we might bring to Haiti aboard *Charlotte*. My wife, Pam, reached out to the database of her non-profit organization Sense of Wonder Creations.org and our boatyard office manager, Angela Park, notified the friends of Gannon and Benjamin Marine Railway of our intentions. Virginia Jones enlisted local fishermen to contribute a generous supply of hook and line and before long we had an enthusiastic band of donors bringing clothes, books, games, art materials and cash to be delivered to the orphanage. I collected bags of old sails to supplement the fishing gear destined for the Haitian watermen as well as used tools and rigging for the boat builders. By late October 2014 *Charlotte* was laden with a cargo liberated from America's dumpsters, mostly, stowed below deck in every available space, including the bilge.

Preparing for a December offshore passage from New England to the lower latitudes requires careful examination of your vessel and its multitude of parts from the masthead to the bottom of her keel. A long "to do" list was prioritized and, with the help of my companions, the work was accomplished over several weeks with only a few minor projects left for another time. Essential items for the journey included nautical charts, plotting instruments, cruising guides, nautical almanac and sight reduction tables for celestial navigation, sextant, courtesy flags for every country we intended to visit, pelagic bird and tropical fish guides, tide books, tackle box, first aid kit, sail repair sewing and rigging bag, spare parts for the engine, water pumps and other mechanical/ electrical equipment, backgammon board, dominoes, playing cards, music, and don't forget toilet paper. Diesel fuel, potable water, propane for the galley stove and the provisioning of staples of food, rounded out the commissioning task.

We hauled our wooden rowing tender aboard using the fisherman halyards and lashed it securely to the stanchions and deck house grab rails along the port side deck. Jack lines were bound taught along the deck to provide quick access for clipping in the safety harness lanyards. Life lines at the rail, foot ropes on the bowsprit, man overboard pole, life ring and strobe light were all tested for sea. I prepared an emergency "go" bag to include the EPIRB, first aid kit, distress flares, water bottles and some dark chocolate. The life raft was made fast to the cabin top amidships.

Selecting your shipmates is an easy task on Martha's Vineyard given the vast pool of competent sailors who easily succumb to the lure of mysterious tropical islands and all their enticing possibilities over the alternative to old man winter who grips our northern terminal moraine and its captive inhabitants with such unbridled enthusiasm. My first requirement was to find a mate who could look after *Charlotte* when I was back up north. My friend Ian Ridgeway and I had been talking about this eventuality for several years and now the planets were aligned in their proper order, terrestrial bonds were laid aside and Ian committed himself to the care of *Charlotte* for the forthcoming five months. Knowing that *Charlotte* would be in good hands when we were not aboard was a great relief to me and Pam. Ian started sailing on the 108 foot square topsail schooner, *Shenandoah* on a 5th grade class trip and continued every year working his way up "thru the hawse hole." At the age of 24 he became master of the 90 foot pilot schooner, *Alabama*. His knowledge of the sea and the way of a ship, his musical ability, good humor and gracious nature put him at the top of his game. Without Ian to fill this vital role, we could not have made the voyage.

The Gannon & Benjamin boatyard is also a recruiting station for sailors in a casual, serendipitous arrangement where shipwrights occasionally disappear from their usual place at the workbench to a position aboard a vessel outward bound. Usually, we (the managers) are aware of such departures. To my great relief, Brad Abbott and Zoli Clarke were both willing to abdicate their earthly responsibilities and join the jolly crew of *Charlotte*, proving once again that no one is indispensible, or, to paraphrase one astute psychologist, "the cemeteries are full of indispensible people." Brad, our recent partner in the boatyard, has survived previous excursions to the tropics aboard *Charlotte* as well as on his own 48 foot yawl, *Aurora*, and brings capable expertise in all aspects of offshore cruising. Zoli, another charter member of the G&B crew since he received his working papers at age 13, has sailed on *Charlotte* as first mate and chief maintenance coordinator for six years and he knows the boat in every detail. Both of these men are nimble sailors and know how to cook.

While the Commanders' Weather service continued to advise us to postpone our departure due to a succession of frontal systems producing unpleasant southerly gales, and the psychological effect those predictions foster, I decided to take on another crew member at the 11th hour to ease the burden for the rest of us. I called on my old friend Malcolm Boyd the day before Thanksgiving to see if he would join us – a simple request, I thought and much less alarming than specifically asking him to leave his job and family for an unknown period of time with no pay to go thrash about in the North Atlantic in December. He replied, "*When do we leave*?"
I suggested, "*Tomorrow"* in light of the recent more promising weather forecast. Of course no one wants to leave family and friends, turkey and yams on Thanksgiving Day and so, weather oracles notwithstanding, we set our ETD for the day after holiday stuffing.

There is a history of migratory sailing vessels casting off from Vineyard Haven when the daylight shrinks to darkness before dinner and the cold north wind begins to moan in the rigging. The 65' Gannon and Benjamin schooner," *Juno*" is a veritable commuter to the West Indies, missing only one season in 13 years when Captain Scotty DiBiaso sailed her to Europe for a summer in the Mediterranean. My partner, Ross Gannon, and his family migrated to the islands aboard their 45' sloop *Eleda* for the winter of 2013-14. Rick and Chrissy Haslet have completed two round trips aboard the impeccable ketch, *Destiny* and Todd Bassett and Lee Taylor continue to cruise south in their classic yawl, *Magic Carpet* after sufficient recovery from their previous escapades.

Is there a pattern here? Why do we do this?

Rest assured, when the wind begins to howl, the seas build into mountains and toss your precious varnished cockle shell like a cork in a washtub while the lee rail beckons for the contents of your last meal and suddenly all those indestructible cast bronze fittings, stainless steel wire rigging and the basket of boards screwed to frames with cotton string caulked into the seams… (the vessel)… begins to take on an esoteric eastern philosophical atmosphere --as in the impermanence of all things… nothing, absolutely nothing will convince you that this ocean voyaging business is a good idea. But there is no time to dwell on the regrets of the unraveling situation but rather deal with the elemental present reality knowing that you are in your right place to keep your vessel and shipmates secure for the duration. Eventually, the storm ends, the sun appears and the mercifully short memory of the sailor allows us to carry on with impunity.

With those cheerful thoughts forgotten, we set sail on November 28th with a forecast of freshening north wind and snow flurries building to what the old timers used to call a "pleasant gale" from the northwest, or well abaft the beam. The reefed mainsail, foresail and forestaysail provided plenty of canvas to drive *Charlotte*'s 58,000 pound displacement out of the harbor and fly her along at hull speed up Vineyard Sound with a fair tide past the Gay Head light where we set our course for

Bermuda, 650 nautical miles to the south southeast. The first bitter cold night gave way to a blustery sunny day as *Charlotte* charged southward with all hands adjusting to the rollicking motion and post Thanksgiving digestive cycles. By the end of the second day the wind moderated and all sail was set—mainsail, foresail, forestaysail, jib and fisherman staysail. That borderless river of tropical water known as the Gulf Stream greeted us with leaping dolphins, a welcome of warm air and a favorable current. We shed our winter woolies and set our inner clocks to the rhythm of our watery world. I had set a watch system with two men on deck for three hour shifts around the clock. A careful record of compass heading, average speed, wind force/direction, barometric pressure, bilge condition, engine hours, battery voltage, sails set and the ship's position were entered into the logbook at the end of each watch.

The mariner's mantra is "Constant Vigilance." To let down your guard is an invitation to trouble, and all shipmates must be alert to the relentless demands of the sea as she works the vessel with forces beyond measure. A watchful eye on deck and aloft will detect an unfair lead, fouled line or chafing sail before the dreaded sound of shredding cloth tells you it's too late. Keen observation of the sea and sky can keep you clear of a waterspout by day or merchant ship at night.

By the third day at sea our routine was second nature and more activities filled our hours. We took sun, moon and star sights with the trusty old sextant that has guided me across the ocean for 45 years. GPS may be more accurate, but when the screen goes blank or the batteries die, the sextant will never fail you. From the galley a stream of gastronomical achievements were delivered by our collection of accomplished sea cooks with welcome regularity. We were well provisioned with locally grown Vineyard produce and rarely was something delectable not bubbling and squeaking on the galley stove to nourish five ravenous bodies.

We approached Bermuda in fair weather and light air and sailed through the cut to St. Georges harbor on December 2, 2014, four days after our frigid departure from Vineyard Haven. We had completed the first leg of our voyage with all hands in fine form and the schooner *Charlotte* at her best. With our American ensign flying from the taff rail and the Bermuda courtesy flag above the "Q" (quarantine) flag at the starboard foremast spreader, we came alongside the customs dock for clearance.

The schooner rig evolved during the 18th and 19th centuries and became very popular for its relative ease of handling by a small crew. These working vessels were used for fishing and carrying cargo coastwise as well as offshore. They were known for their good turn of speed, ability to windward and seaworthiness. The early racing yachts such as the legendary *America* were schooner rigged and in recent years the schooner has been rediscovered by yacht designers for its desirable characteristics in a cruising boat. The larger the vessel the more sail is required to drive the heavier hull through the water. By dividing up the sail area into smaller pieces spread out upon 2 masts, the easier it is to set, trim and lower each one. Although there are more strings to pull than on a boat with one mast (sloop or cutter) there are also more options in sail combinations. I designed *Charlotte* to fit a job description that ranges from a family boat capable of cruising with as many as 10 close relatives onboard, day sailing with a dozen or more friends, chartering with 6 guests having no sailing experience among them as well as ocean sailing to distant ports. Compromise is the one constant in yacht design and *Charlotte* has met her multifaceted purpose mission with high marks. She is a low tech, semi-gloss comfortable creature that sails easily and works so well for us—and she is easy on the helm and pleasant to the eye.

The courteous welcome from the Bermudian customs officials set the tone for our reception in this lonely mid Atlantic volcanic archipelago surrounded by pale turquoise sea lapping at pink

white sand or colliding against rugged rock faced bluffs and nourishing the thriving coral terrace. We set off on a hike to stretch our legs and soak up the rich variety of color and aroma along the trails of this gardener's paradise. Meandering out to the Fort that once protected the harbor entrance, we looked out to sea and reflected on the stunning change from the winter landscape we had left four days ago. Voyaging under sail was man's earliest method to discover new lands and such adventure stirs one's primordial foundation like a lost prehistoric memory rekindled.

Our bus and ferry ride to The Dockyard Museum brought home the historical significance of this colorful pastel outpost. Dockyard is a major fortification constructed by the British shortly after their embarrassing defeat by a hardscrabble
collection of American colonial rebels in the war of independence. Desperately in need of a military presence in the western Atlantic, the once indomitable Brits resolved to construct an ingenious fortification and naval base out of locally cut stone. A masterpiece of architectural and engineering expertise, regretfully, it was built at the expense of countless Bermudian lives subjected to the appalling cruelty and inhuman labor and living conditions employed by the masters of war. This recently restored impenetrable rock bound bulwark will soon be the center stage for another battle named for the victorious schooner "America " in 1851--the America's Cup. This yacht race between captains of industry is slated for 2017 in the windy environs of Dockyard.

After a flurry of provisioning, filling tanks, Brad replacing a water pump and a thorough check of the rig, engine and ships gear we said farewell to sailmakers Stevie and Suzanne Hollis, our dear old friends and the main reason for our visit to this secluded emerald jewel in the western ocean. We were all eager to get underway again and ride the north Atlantic 1100 nautical miles south to our winter home, Haiti, It felt good to be back in our sea rolling world, standing watch with our pals, five bonded boys in a boat.

A fair wind from the North bolstered by a steep confused sea kept the helmsman alert and some appetites reduced as *Charlotte* boiled along, ticking off the miles day after day. We became reacquainted with the night sky overflowing with stars and observed the wonders above in the coolness of the tropical darkness. For every 60 nautical miles gained on our southerly course, Polaris, the North Star, slid down towards the horizon astern one degree in altitude, mimicking our latitude. On rare occasions a ship would appear on the horizon and the watch captain would take a bearing to the vessel to determine its course. If your bearing doesn't change it's a collision situation and time to alter your heading. *Constant Vigilance!*

The dawn watch is my favorite, if only for the relief of light following darkness, which in foul weather, can be very nerve racking. After a long and harrowing visionless night watch, a welcome sunrise restores your ability to observe the ship and see how this complex contraption of lumber, line, bronze and canvas survived the thrashing and pitching in blindness --as if she needs to see. Those lucky souls who enjoy the rosy fingers are also expected to conduct a general cleanup aboard—washing down the cockpit, sweeping up below deck, organizing the galley and any other tasks required to keep the vessel shipshape.

The traditional midday ritual of calculating our noon sight position got everyone on deck and inviting estimates on the previous 24 hour days run. We had some good ones, the best logging just over 200 nautical miles – an average speed of 8 knots.

At sunset we strained our eyes in search of the "green flash"- the visual phenomenon that rarely occurs just as the upper limb of the sun touches the horizon before sinking beneath the sea. No flash on this voyage but stunning pre- prandial entertainment with the evening sky exploding with colors

and composition that painters can only wish for. The divine fish guardians were clearly in control of our yellow and pink feathered lures trolling astern, fouling the hooks with Sargasso weed and protecting the scaly creatures from our baking dish. No fresh barracuda, wahoo or bonito on this passage, just a comforting sense of our ecological commitment in mitigating the catastrophic overfishing of the world's oceans as we sank our forks into another bowl of rice and beans, again. *Hot sauce, anyone?*

At noon on December 8, four days after departing Bermuda, we were located at Latitude 22 20 North and Longitude 69 49 West --or 100 nautical miles Northeast of Grand Turk Island. I set a course to take us between the reef strewn Mouchoir Bank and the Turks islands and from there on to Le Mole at the Northwest cape of Haiti. Although still 350 miles from our destination, I sensed a slight sea change in our attitudes and expectations. The attentive companionship, communal friendship and shared experience on an ocean voyage is unique to the exclusive nature of its special environment and purpose. Approaching soundings, where the sea floor rises to a measurable distance below the keel --from miles of depth in mid ocean to fathoms or feet and eventually breaking the liquid surface to be called land –we aboard began to shift our thoughts to anticipation of the excitement of eventual landfall and the bittersweet knowledge that our freedom from worldly events, a significant part of the attraction of the passage, would also end. But the friendships made on a sea voyage endure with a timeless quality, like a bond with an old school mate from long before you had a care in the world.

We awakened in our secluded anchorage on the south coast of Île-à-Vache to a light breeze sifting across a palm- fringed white sand beach as captivating and beautiful as it had been a few hours earlier when we arrived under moonlight at 3 o'clock in the morning. All hands dove over the side for a long swim, something we had been trying our best to avoid during the previous 6 ½ days since leaving Bermuda. Now we had new freedoms and swimming in this effervescent cove was a welcome change. Before the sun peeked over the hills to the east, a Haitian fisherman paddled out to *Charlotte* in his dugout canoe to investigate the rare arrival of an American yacht. He greeted us cheerfully and gestured to the delectable display of fresh fruit and fish on the sole of his vessel. The mangos and papayas looked like a good complement to the eggs and beans simmering on the galley stove. Conversing in French, I explained to him that we had yet to arrive at the port of entry, Port Morgan to clear customs and change money so I had no Haitian currency to pay for the fruit. He asked if we had an old piece of line for trade, which of course we did, and he parted smiling and wishing us a fine visit. Not a bad first encounter in a country so distorted by foreign media as dangerous and troubled.

At midday we left this idyllic anchorage and steamed around the west side of Île-à-Vache to our homeport for the next four weeks, Port Morgan in the Baie de Ferret. This protected harbor, named for the notorious pirate Henry Morgan, is conveniently tucked in behind reefs and a headland on the northwest corner of Île-à-Vache, about six miles south of mainland Haiti. While our anchor chain stretched out along the hard sand bottom, three dugout canoes came alongside manned by grinning 10-12 year old Haitian boys excited to see a new arrival in their mostly vacant anchorage. We chatted with these polite lads who told us that the mayor would be out soon to check us in. Official customs agents were in Les Cayes on the main island but they were closed until later in the week. A $5 bill took care of the mayor who informed us that we could take the water taxi to Les Cayes if we wished to clear customs officially or we could send someone over to do it for us – no hurry. Now it was time to launch the dinghy, row ashore and search for Sam Alteme, our advisor and email correspondent over the past year.

Like many Haitian villages, Kai Kok and, for that matter, all of Île-à-Vache, has no cars or electricity. Without the ambient noise that is subtly pervasive in even rural areas of most first world nations, the peaceful, natural quality greets the visitor like a calming infusion. Walking the waterfront along palm, mango and sea grape shaded trails with the usual entourage of curious but respectful local lads to guide us, we became acquainted with this purely authentic Haitian village. A dozen or more hand crafted colorfully painted wooden sloops ranging from 18 to 30 feet lay at anchor while others sailed off with a patchwork of cloth set on crooked spars for a day of fishing in the waters between Île-à-Vache and the mountainous main island to the north. Sounds of wood chopping and a caulker's mallet led us down the beach to three boat builders who were shaping timbers for a new vessel and repairing an old one. The design of these sloops has evolved over the centuries through form, function and the shapes of the crooks from which the frames are cut with a machete and axe. They are crude but solid and well proportioned and appear to sail well in most conditions using a sprit mainsail and jib. An oar is the only auxiliary power. Scattered along the sand and mangrove shore are the ubiquitous dugout canoes – man's earliest conveyance on water that are still chopped out of logs by skillful men with primitive tools.

Meandering through the village along hard packed dirt paths, we exchanged a smile and polite "bonjour" with everyone we passed. Donkeys, goats, pigs, horses, cows and island dogs greeted us with sleepy eyes and docile temper. The hipped roofed Haitian houses are small and well built of wood, cement block, locally cut stone and metal roofs. Separate woven wooden kitchen structures contain cleverly crafted re-bar potholders over fire pits where homemade charcoal burns in carefully measured quantity for cooking. The yards are planted with fruit trees and small gardens with chickens clucking and ladies washing children and laundry in plastic tubs. Swept clean and neat, there are only the essentials for living – no clutter of "*stuff*."

Back aboard at dusk, we saw a yellow dugout was heading our way with a smiling Haitian maneuvering his craft with a palm branch in one hand and talking on his cell phone in the other – a confluence of millennium. It's Sam in the canoe. At 28 years old, Sam Alteme, like most of his generation, is looking for a less laborious life than his parents. He's a good looking guy with a pleasant smile, fluent command of English and an entrepreneurial spirit that complements his helpful friendly nature. After nearly a year of correspondence it was a pleasure to meet and talk with him about the challenging issues that loom over a nation still recovering from the cataclysmic earthquake of 2010. Brad and Malcolm had to return to the snowdrifts of New England so Sam arranged for an escort to get them safely to Port au Prince, departing the following morning.

By 0800, Ian, Zoli, Sam and I were dragging piles of vacuum packaged clothing and other stowed items out of *Charlotte*'s make shift cargo space and loading them into a 25 foot utility vessel owned by the Sister Flora Orphanage. The sputtering Yamaha outboard motor pushed us out of Port Morgan and along the north coast several miles east to a town named Madame Bernard, capital of Île-à-Vache. This bustling harbor surrounded by reefs and shoal water was teeming with activity in many forms. Burdensome 45 foot cargo sloops arriving from Les Cayes and other Haitian ports off-loaded their contents on dilapidated piers or directly on shore while fishermen stood waist deep on the reef hauling heavy nets in unison, excited about a bountiful catch. Unlike Kai Kok, this port is chaotic with construction projects underway and a sprawling open market randomly spread upon the unsheltered mud streets along the waterfront—shopping on a rainy day not recommended. We loaded our offerings onto wagons, which we pushed up the hill past a shaded parking area for a dozen donkeys carrying market produce and through the gate to the orphanage.

Founded in 1968 by Sister Flora, a French Canadian Catholic, this extraordinary facility has become a paradigm of success for the benefit of countless orphaned and handicapped Haitian

children. Unreliably funded by government and private organizations, Sister Flora continues to struggle to make ends meet. Our donations from the Vineyard were gratefully received and dispersed among the 78 needy residents, 26 of them wheelchair bound. It does not take a lot to make a big difference in Haiti. Our meeting with the devoted staff was cut short as the pre-Christmas Mass was about to begin and we were ushered to our seats in the Orphanage Abbey.

Attired in flowing white robes and seasonally appropriate liturgical accoutrement and surrounded by shimmering synthetic Christmas decorations and a black nativity scene, two distinguished Haitian priests began the service with praise in patois and blessings to the 78 orphaned children with us in the congregation. Whenever the priestly ramblings seemed to be droning on excessively, Huguette, a lovely young Haitian woman who was raised in the orphanage, would break into song and lead us all in joyful Creole Christmas carols. This kept the clergy in check and the congregation engaged and awake for an hour and a half of pleasantly confusing entertainment, occasionally interrupted by the sanctimonious remarks from a portly local dignitary dressed in a pea green leisure suit and white golf cap.

Without warning, a perspiring Frenchman in full Santa Claus costume bounded through the door ringing a bell and carrying a large sack over his shoulder, to squeals of delight from the children and an indication to the rest of us that the formal part of the service was over. A small present was given to each child until all were quietly clutching their package waiting for the signal to unwrap. Zoli, Ian and I, sitting in the midst of these kids with some of them on our laps, watched as they carefully and patiently opened their yearly gifts, taking great care not to tear the precious paper and then beamed with gratitude clutching a toy or stuffed animal to their breast. Thank you, sister Flora, for your immeasurable gift to the Haitian children and to visitors from afar. Before we had begun to process this cathartic experience, two large tables were rolled into the back of the room piled high with rice, beans, fried chicken, grated cabbage, plantain, a Christmas cake and cases of beer and soda. It was time for the feast to begin and the wonders of Haiti to continue to unfold.

We spent the next few days in Port Morgan doing chores aboard *Charlotte* and making friends with many of the local characters. A Sunday dinner with Sam and his extended family gave us a close look into their home life, sibling relationships and shared values so similar to our own without the overwhelming distraction of excessive possessions or conflicting schedules.

At last, Zoli and I had to return to Martha's Vineyard for work at the boatyard and Christmas holidays with our families, leaving Ian and *Charlotte* to look after each other. The water taxi, an outboard- powered pirogue type of vessel (narrow, wet and tippy without the basic equipment such as compass or life jackets) came alongside *Charlotte* at 0500 with a dozen or more Haitians stoically clutching their offspring (all most likely incapable of swimming) and Sam aboard to escort us across the sound to Les Cayes on the main island and then on to Port au Prince where we hoped to find our flight home.

In pre dawn haze our trusty transport nosed into a mangrove bordered dumpsite replete with snorting pigs and fresh loads of city garbage. After negotiating the municipal landfill, we hopped on the backs of waiting motorbikes and sped through town en route to the bus stop, dodging dogs and small children scampering across the pot holed streets along the way. After some diplomacy, Sam had us all aboard for the 3 ½ hour journey through arable farmland and mountainous terrain on decent roads sadly littered with industrial nations most prolific export, plastic. When our bus lurched into the heart of post earthquake Port au Prince, we witnessed the shocking consequences of a nation exploited and abandoned by most of the "developed" world. Statistically, Haitians struggle with 70% unemployment --but everyone is working to stay alive. Discharged from our bus

into the chaotic, shattered city, we exchanged farewells with our fellow travelers with pleasantries, smiles and promises to return; hopped in a dilapidated cab and headed to the airport. And, to another world.

Two days after Christmas Pam and I returned to Île-à-Vache, once again navigating the vicissitudes of third world transportation carrying duffel bags stuffed with art supplies, more clothing and $8,000 in cash raised for the orphanage. Sister Flora greeted us warmly and explained how auspicious our arrival was since she was unable to make the monthly payroll for her staff. We also learned of the school (450 students) and hospital that she founded and continues to manage. At 4'6" this pale white energetic 70 –year- old woman has made a significant difference in the lives of so many. The people of Île-à-Vache revere her.

On New Year's Eve, Roberta Kirn and Boyd Petersen flew in to join us aboard *Charlotte*, bearing gifts to capacity for the local community center in Kai Kok. Boyd signed on as a crew member and would stay aboard for the rest of the winter voyaging to Jamaica and Cuba later in January and then sailing home to Massachusetts in April. Roberta's specialty is connecting with children through song—our universal (one verse) language. Before charging out into the community Roberta would prepare for her day with a 20 minute workout on deck, stand on her head and then plunge over the side and swim somewhere to the north of our anchorage well out of sight. She always returned with a broad grin and ready for a hearty breakfast usually prepared by master chef Bo (Boyd). The rest of us would do our stretches and exercises on occasion but not quite to the level of the bar set by Roberta. Then Pam and Roberta would be off to the village with energy and expertise to share with the children at the community center. Pam nurtured the naturally talented kids in drawing, understanding primary colors, perspective and shading. This activity dovetails nicely with the outreach mission of her non-profit organization: Sense of Wonder Creations. Org., which, through the creative arts, explores environmental and ethnic diversity, community service, leadership and how each one can make a difference. The youngsters were always receptive and thankful. Roberta would share songs from Kenya, where she also travels, and she enjoyed learning the local Creole folk ballads of Haiti. Commuting to the orphanage required a two- hour trek each way and the work involved caring for the children's most basic needs. This assignment was emotionally challenging given the large number of handicapped and the minimal staff. By late afternoon, we were all ready to take the 20- minute hike to Akaba Bay for a long swim and enjoy the sunset by the conveniently situated eponymous hotel where cold drinks and intermittent Internet service were available.

Hiking on Île-à-Vache is the best way to get around unless you have a donkey at your disposal. This suits our peripatetic nature and Pam and I had some wonderful excursions through the hilly countryside. One afternoon, with some help from an 11- year -old local guide, we headed east from Akaba beach in search of a small fishing/farming village that I had noticed with the binoculars when we first arrived. Bo and Ian had also been near this hamlet on one of their surfing expeditions, and they agreed that we could find it without donkey or boat. We wove our way along shore and inland trails then past a spectacular mile- long beach with a lone bull in residence and on through fields and valley until we finally saw from a high bluff our desired destination in the distance. This picturesque encampment with smoke rising from charcoal fires and a fleet of lovely local sloops rocking at anchor in a crescent cove, was as alluring as it was unattainable given the rapidly fading daylight. I knew we couldn't achieve our goal to reach the village on this day.

A short distance away, however, a family farm looked inviting with adults and children scurrying about doing chores before dinner, which was simmering on the outdoor kitchen fire. As we approached this bucolic homestead the occupants greeted us with welcome curiosity as well as smiles and laughter, which we returned. Strong fit young sons and, I surmise, extended family

members were working in the gardens and tending livestock in the fields to the east while the women cared for the domestic functions of the compound. Silhouetted on a knoll against the dimming western sky stood an older man whom I presumed to be the patriarch of the clan. Looking like an old testament Prophet commanding his people, he held a newly crafted oar in his left hand while he finished shaping the shaft with a tool grasped in his right. A professional boatbuilder myself, I naturally could not resist walking over to see what sort of plane or spoke shave he was using to create such a well proportioned and properly tapered source of auxiliary power for his boat. A kindred spirit, he must have sensed my intentions and before I finished wishing him "*Bonsoir*", he grinned, opened his weathered, calloused hand and proudly showed me a piece of broken glass that served as his tool.

When I enthusiastically recounted this story to Sam the next morning, he calmly gazed at me and said, "*Yes, that's Haiti*".

Nat Benjamin
Vineyard Haven, MA September 22, 2015