

I hope that everyone who has grown up between worlds has had a Madame Martineau as a part of their life.

Madame Martineau was not Haitian – she lived in Haiti, married there, raised her kids there, and spent most of her life in Haiti, but Madame Martineau was not born Haitian. She became one because she had a passion and a love for the country of Haiti and its people. And her greatest gift to us, her students, was her fascination and wonder for a country not her own.

Electives were scarce at Quisqueya Christian School, our small English-speaking international school in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Over the years – I recall at least two or three times – Madame Martineau would put together a “Haitian History” class as an elective. By “elective,” I don’t mean we got to choose the course from a range of options. I mean it was one of the few filler classes we would take in addition to basic academic classes. Our whole class went as a group, and Madame Martineau taught us the history and culture of the country we lived in.

I will never forget some of the stories and lessons we learned in her classes. Much of the class was discussion-based. We would watch a film or read a book and discuss certain aspects of Haitian culture. We’d spend class after class telling stories and recounting events in our life when we’d gotten a glimpse into the complexity and vibrancy of Haitian culture.

*On one of our trips out to the beaches, I got sick as a dog. I don’t know what I ate, but something was eating at my insides. I tend to get sick off the salads, surprisingly, because they’re washed improperly and some of the “ti bet” (little bugs) don’t get killed. At one point my nausea peaked and I knew I was going to throw up. We pulled the car over to the side of the road, and I emptied my stomach onto the ground. As I knelt there with my head swimming, a small group of onlookers gathered. It’s humbling enough to retch your guts out without*

# Madame

By Brendan Blowers

*needing an audience to critique and comment on your performance. “Why don’t they just let me suffer in peace?” I thought angrily.*

*A large elder woman wrapped in a large dress with a purple floral pattern approached me timidly. “Lavé figi-ou,” she said, and held out a small bucket of water to me.*

*“No, no,” I pushed it away, shaking my head. There’s no way I could drink that water. It would make me even sicker.*

*She shook her head and demonstrated what she meant - “pou figi-ou,” she repeated, and motioned as if she were cleaning her face.*

*I nodded gratefully and took the bucket, splashing the cool water on my face and feeling the relief of its cleansing freshness. As I handed it back to her I noticed the many young girls standing around with buckets of water on their heads. I don’t know how far this water had been carried, but this kind woman had offered me to wash with what they had walked miles to get in order to use for drinking.*

*“Mesi, mesi anpil madame,” I thanked her, wishing I had something to offer back.*

Madame Martineau taught us of Haitian heroes, Haitian legends – the good and the bad. Haiti has had a violent and bloody history, struggling to maintain stability and unite its people toward a common goal. We learned about how the different religions – voodoo, Catholicism, and evangelical Christianity – were practiced and how they affected the people. We learned how the Haitian flag was first made and how it has changed over the years.

*Jean-Jacques Dessalines took the flag of the French plantation owners and tore the white out from the middle, symbolizing the beginning of the*

*world’s first independent black republic. His goddaughter sewed the remaining blue and red stripes together, forming the first flag of the liberated Haiti.*

She gave us a fascination for the land, an appreciation for the beauty of Haiti that still remains after the land has been largely ravaged of 99% of its greenery and most of its natural resources. We visited cool evergreen forests in the mountains, waterfalls thundering into blue-green basins in the midst of lush jungles, beautiful oceans teeming with colorful corals, rice plains covering the central plateau like a patchwork quilt. Madame Martineau helped cultivate in us a love and fascination for the country of Haiti, one that has not left my blood and I doubt left the blood of my classmates.

She gave us an appreciation and respect for the Haitian people, a people more generous and loyal than I can ever aspire to be.

*A man I know was going through a terribly rough time. He was walking home that night telling his friend he had no food for his family and not a single ‘santim’ to provide for them. His friend dug in his pockets and handed him a couple of dollars. “Here’s all I have. Take it,” he said. “What will you do?” asked his friend. “God will provide,” he shrugged.*

I wish I knew what it is like to truly give all I have away to someone in need. I will never need to take out a loan to feed a guest. I will never give someone the last handful of dollars to my name. I am blessed with abundance far beyond my needs, and I can only hope to spend the rest of my life giving to others out of appreciation and gratitude to those who have given me so much.

# Martineau

*...her greatest gift to us, her students, was her fascination and wonder for a country not her own.*

We went to visit one of the children's hospitals up in Fond Verette. As we visited and talked with some of the patients, I watched Katie begin to get very close to one of the girls with a terminal illness. They could hardly even speak the same language, but Katie sat next to her and held her hand. They would smile at each other and make gestures. As Katie turned to leave, she looked at what she had and gave the bedridden girl the doll she had with her. The girl smiled and nodded in thanks, clutching the doll to her chest joyfully.

When we visited again a few days later, Katie's friend had died, still clutching her doll close to her heart.

I'm not sure what gifts I have to offer to others. From listening to the stories of others and thinking about how Madame Martineau touched my life, I'm going to do my best to offer of myself as regularly as I can. Any gifts I give that leave a lasting impression will doubtfully seem significant at the time. Already, I am blessed far beyond anything I deserve or could even ask for. I hope and pray that acting out of that sense of peace and provision will meet others at their point of greatest need, in ways they might not even expect.

~AW~

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The best thing to give to your enemy is forgiveness;  
to an opponent, tolerance;  
to a friend, your heart;  
to your child, a good example;  
to a father, deference;  
to your mother, conduct that will make her proud of you;  
to yourself, respect;  
to all men, charity.

**Francis Maitland Balfour**

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