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From the Selected Works of David J Malebranche

October 26, 2011

With His Hands

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/david_malebranche/18/
With His Hands

When I was a child, my father, a practicing surgeon in upstate New York, would reminisce fondly about Haiti, the small Caribbean island that raised him from the 1930s to the 1960s before he emigrated to the United States. Raised in the town of Anse-à-Veau, a rustic province in southwest Haiti adorned by pristine beaches and azure water, my father often spoke of the majestic beauty of his native country: as the first independent black republic in the world; of its abundant resources and fertile land; and of the resilience of the Haitian people despite decades of repeated social, economic, and political hardships. These remembrances, always told in his rich accent and with a vibrant joie de vivre, starkly contrasted with the uniformly depressing media narratives of Haiti as merely an island of poverty, HIV, political corruption, and natural disasters. My mother, a beautifully phenomenal woman of Ukrainian descent whose family had been in the United States for generations, worked alongside my father as his nurse and business manager for many years before their retirement. Despite our parents’ amazing job of raising us, my sister and I had a curious time navigating what it meant to be biracial in the United States during the 1970s, much less figuring out what it meant to be bicultural as well. Between my father’s hectic work schedule and my mother’s native tongue, we never learned Haitian Kreyòl during our youth, and, because we were raised in the United States, we were somewhat distanced from identifying as Haitian American.

When I was growing up, my family often discussed taking a trip to my father’s birthplace, but it never seemed to be the right time—outbreaks of violence, infectious diseases, or political instability always made traveling to Haiti an unappealing option for a family vacation. As the years went on, my schooling and career path took me to New Jersey, Chicago, Michigan, and New York City before finally landing in Atlanta to pursue an academic medical career; my sister traveled to California to practice law and raise her own family; and my parents remained in upstate New York, the place they have called home for more than 40 years. We never went to Haiti as we had hoped, and I never learned Kreyòl. I was a first-generation Haitian American without much of a connection to Haiti the country, and I feared that a trip to the home of part of my ancestral heritage would never happen.

That all changed in 2011 when I was presented with the opportunity to be part of an academic medical team that goes to Haiti twice a year to do relief work. It was the chance of a lifetime to use my medical expertise in addressing the lingering medical and public health consequences of the devastating earthquake of 2010 and to walk on the soil that nurtured my father. He taught me a tenacious work ethic and sense of resiliency during adversity at an early age. These sensibilities that course through my veins, comprise the air I breathe, and constitute the intricate fabric of my being—they exist in me because of him. They exist in me because Haiti exists. The decision to return to my father’s homeland at the ripe age of 42 was an easy one to make.

Working at our mobile clinic sites each day in the rural Central Plateau area of Haiti was a professional and personal challenge. The lingering devastation of the 2010 earthquake hung in the air like thick caustic fumes, and an emerging cholera epidemic inundated the local hospitals with sick people. I tried my best to address every patient’s concern and teach the eager young medical students, despite fumbling through my broken Kreyòl and relying heavily on the translators to compensate for my linguistic limitations. Even with my training and experience, I felt woefully inadequate and ill-prepared—not only as a foreign physician who could merely put the proverbial Band-Aid of acetaminophen, antibiotics, and oral rehydration solution on the hemorrhaging gunshot wound of Haiti’s devastating medical, social, and structural ills, but also as a slightly paranoid and insecure first-generation Haitian American: I could see the disappointment in the customs officer’s face when he read my last name and subsequently learned I didn’t speak Kreyòl, and I could hear the disdain in our van drivers’ voices when they realized the same thing. Yes, my clinical acumen was intact, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that I was somehow dishonoring my family name by being the Americanized Malebranche who was blatantly displaying his cultural incompetence in his father’s homeland. My colleagues and the translators joked that my English-Kreyòl handbook never left my side the entire week of our trip, but for me, this was much more than a professional medical mission.

After our third day in clinic, during a quiet evening of games and good conversation at our compound, one of the community health workers brought in a local young man who reportedly had something stuck in his ear. I sat quietly on the periphery as everyone surrounded this new and unexpected patient, setting up a makeshift examining room on a dining table. We discovered that the end of a cotton swab had broken off in his ear and was causing him...
a great deal of pain. Clinicians at one of the local hospitals had seen him earlier, only to send him home because they didn’t have sufficient light and were unable to extract it from his ear.

Our pediatrician began irrigating his ear in an attempt to expand the cotton tip and make it easier to remove, while several medical students grabbed some lighting equipment and a hemostat from our van. My irrational embarrassment and feelings of inadequacy had me paralyzed, however, so I simply sat back, secretly hoping that they wouldn’t call me over. Our medical team and several local townpeople hovered over the young man, I consciously chose to be an impartial observer on the other side of the room, commenting to a medical student sitting next to me, “I’m not getting involved in this.”

No sooner had those words escaped my lips when someone bellowed from the crowd, almost as if on cue: “David, we need you over here!”

I walked over and looked in the young man’s right ear, the cotton swab lodged deeply in front of his eardrum. The area around the swab was red and inflamed and appeared to be very painful. Remembering my manners, I stopped looking and introduced myself to him, shaking his hand:

“Mwen rele David Malebranche. Kijan ou rele?”

“M’rele Patrice,” he replied, doing an admirable job of masking his discomfort amidst his situation and the growing spectacle swirling around him. And was that me speaking Kreyòl without a stutter? Our pediatrician’s concerned glance snapped me back into focus.

“You have any other ideas on how to get this out?”

I had none, so she said she would let me know if she needed any help. I sat back down across the room and watched as she continued working on Patrice’s ear. The whole scene reminded me of how American newscasts cover a small scene reminded me of how American newscasts cover a small case of a child’s untimely fall down a well, complete with a concerned crowd waiting in anticipatory silence as the rescue workers concentrate on their efforts. It wasn’t long before I was called back over.

“David, we need you again.”

Our pediatrician looked at me in an exasperated fashion, wiping the sweat trickling down her forehead from the oppressively humid night air.

“I’ve tried a couple of times, but I’m worried about puncturing his eardrum. Want to give it a shot?”

Before I had time to think, my dry mouth had already fixed itself to say “Sure” as I made my way over to Patrice, hemostat in hand. One of the medical students helped fix my headlight as I looked down at his strained youthful face, desperately trying to swallow my wounded pride of the past few days and focus on the task at hand. I took a slow, deep breath and instead of thinking about myself, the social problems in Haiti, or out-of-place cotton swabs, I thought about my father. I thought about his animated stories of riding horseback as a young physician to local Haitian villages with medical bag in hand, providing care to those with tuberculosis, cholera, and other infectious diseases. I thought about his journey to the United States and his surgical training in New York City, the fellowship he did in upstate New York, and how he set up a private practice despite English not being his first language. I thought about him unsentimentally raising me and my sister with my mother so we could stand on their shoulders and see the world. I thought about the thousands of times he took a hemostat, scalpel, or other surgical instrument in his capable hands to help someone in far more dire circumstances than what Patrice was experiencing. I felt those same hands guiding mine as I reached in Patrice’s ear with the hemostat and, on the second attempt, slowly extracted a large, wax-covered swab. Everyone cheered as Patrice looked up at me, flashing the brightest smile of surprise, relief, and excitement as only an 18-year-old can. He quickly stood up and shook my hand firmly and we embraced.

I found out later that Patrice is actually the son of the community health worker who had brought him to our compound that night, is the brightest student in his class, and plans on going to Cuba after he finishes school to study medicine. I watched intently as his family enveloped him with love, pride, and investment in his unlimited potential, similar to how I imagined the family of a young man from Anse-à-Veau investing in his future 60 years ago. Patrice left our compound that evening to return to his teenage life, not realizing that a 79-year-old retired Haitian surgeon in upstate New York had just indirectly laid hands on him.

On our last night in the Central Plateau, one of our translators, a daughter of Haiti herself, pulled me away from the group after dinner.

“David, I know you were not born here like your father, and we don’t always hear good things about black men in America here in Haiti—but it has been a joy to work with you, to witness you as one of the head physicians on this trip, and the way you have picked up Kreyòl in the past week has been amazing.”

She paused, her eyes becoming misty.

“You have inspired me, and I’m proud to call you my Haitian brother.”

Tears streamed down my own face as she hugged me, and I felt my father’s embrace from 1600 miles away.

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Conflict of Interest Disclosures: The author has completed and submitted the ICMJE Form for Disclosure of Potential Conflicts of Interest and none were reported.