

Sometimes, the earth is cruel

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Sometimes, the earth is cruel.

That is ultimately the fundamental lesson here, as children wail, families sleep out of doors, and the dead lie unclaimed in the rubble that once was Port-au-Prince, Haiti.

Sometimes the rains fall and will not stop. Sometimes the skies turn barren and will not rain. Sometimes the seas rise and smack the shoreline like a fist. Sometimes the wind bullies the land. And sometimes, the land rattles and heaves and splits itself in two.

Sometimes, the earth is cruel. And always, when it is, we do the same thing. We dig ourselves out. We weep and mourn, we recover and memorialize the dead, we rebuild our homes. And we go on. This is the price of being human. And also, arguably, the noblest expression.

Sometimes, the earth is cruel, and you have no choice but to accept that as part of the bargain called life. And when it is your turn to deal with it, you do.

But what if it's always your turn?

Surely some homeless, dust-streaked Haitian can be forgiven for thinking it is always Haiti's turn, just days after the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere saw its capital city smashed by the strongest earthquake it has ever known, a 7.0-magnitude monster. Surely, the rest of us watching from afar, experiencing tragedy and devastation from the comfort of desk chairs and living room couches, are tempted to believe the same thing.

Bad enough, Haiti is wretchedly poor. Bad enough it has a history of political instability and colonialism, of being ignored by the major powers when it is not being exploited by them. Bad enough, all that, yet at the end of the day, those are disasters authored by human hands, by human greed, human corruption, human economic predation.

Sometimes, though, you have to wonder if the planet itself is not conspiring against this humble little nation.

After 1994, when Tropical Storm Gordon killed several hundred people, after 1998, when Hurricane Georges swept away more than 500 lives, after 2004, when the rains of Tropical Storm Jeanne claimed more than 2,000 souls, after 2005, when Hurricane Dennis took 25 lives in July and Tropical Storm Alpha snatched 17 in October, followed by Hurricane Wilma, which stole 11 more, after the double whammy of Hurricanes Fay and Gustav in 2008 killed more than 130 people and destroyed 3,100 homes, after all that, comes this latest insult - and a death toll officials cannot begin to even imagine. Perhaps as many as 100,000, they were saying on Wednesday.

Sometimes, the earth is cruel. To crawl the planet's skin, scanning for tornadoes in Oklahoma, charting storm tracks in Florida, running from wildfires in California, is to understand this in a primal, personal way. It is to breathe a prayer that begins, "There, but for the grace of God ...". It is to write relief checks, donate blood, volunteer material and time and to fear, even in the doing, that these gestures are small against the need, inconsequential against the ache of a people whose turn seems never to end.

But what else are you going to do? As the playwright put it, your arms too short to box with God. Even less have we the ability to answer the question that burns the moment: Why are the most vulnerable repeatedly assessed the highest price?

We are hamstrung by our own limitations, so we can only do what we always do, only send prayers and help. And watch, staggered by the courage it takes, as Haitians do what human beings always do, the thing at which they have become so terribly practiced.

Dig out. Weep and mourn. Memorialize the dead. Rebuild. Go on. And show the world once again a stubborn insistence on living, despite all the cruelties of the earth.

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