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“It’s Time to Tell - and to Learn - a Better Story about Haiti”

In the winter of 2020, just before Covid stopped the world, I sat with a friend on a hillside overlooking Deschapelles, Haiti on a clear starry night. There were scarcely any lights to be seen, for few people in that remote valley have electricity. But the world around us was alive with sounds. From numerous directions, we heard the sounds of Vodou drumming, as people conducted nighttime ceremonies. From other locations, we could hear the sounds of church services, with people singing hymns and worship songs. Occasionally the sound of conversation could be heard interspersed with the music, and sometimes laughter. The night was alive with a kind of sensual wonder, and even though vast poverty surrounded us, I couldn’t help but marvel at the richness of Haitian culture, and the gifts it has offered the world.

If only more people in the United States understood the beauty and vitality of Haiti and its people. The racist and xenophobic lies of Donald Trump and J.D. Vance have cruelly stigmatized Haitians in Springfield, Ohio, demonizing them simply for being there. It’s an ugly behavior with a long history from all sides of the political spectrum in the U.S. Such remarks render even more precarious a population that has already suffered, and survived, much. For the sake of Haiti and Haitians, it’s time to tell - and to learn - a different story.

There are, of course, Springfields all across the United States, where significant populations of Haitians live. But that’s especially true in Connecticut. In the southeastern corner of the state where I live, Norwich and New London have thriving Haitian communities. But the same is true of Hartford, New Haven, Bridgeport, Waterbury, and countless other cities throughout our state. Haitians are our neighbors, and they make the places that we live better and more vibrant for their very presence.

Now is the time to reach out to those communities. Now is the time to say that we’re glad that you’re here. Now is the time to offer our support in any way we can, as threats, rumors of violence, and slander directed toward Haitians have increased. Now is the time to thank our Haitian neighbors, for enduring so much, and for making our world, and our state, a more vibrant place.

But now is also the time to educate ourselves, and to celebrate the gifts of Haitian history and culture. We can do that by reading the monumental histories of the Haitian Revolution written by C.L.R. James (*The Black Jacobins*) or Laurent Dubois (*Avengers of the New World*). We can do that by queuing up exemplary music from Haiti and its diaspora on our streaming accounts (RAM, Boukman Eksperyans, Leyla McCalla, Lakou Mizik, or countless others). We can do that by understanding better the complex genius of Haitian Vodou (start by reading *The Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, but continue on to works such as *Nan Domi*, by Mimerose Beaubrun or *Tell My Horse*, by Zora Neal Hurston). We can study the beauty of Haitian art, and appreciate the

literature that has emerged from Haiti (start with the exquisite writings of Edwidge Danticat, but try others as well, like Jacques Roumain and René Depestre). Don't forget the searing and profound films of Raoul Peck (*Exterminate All the Brutes*, for example) one of the most innovative filmmakers on the planet today. And let us not forget to eat. You haven't lived until you've tried piklis, a spicy Haitian vegetable mixture that will elevate your consciousness. You can find it in Norwich, at Mommy's Delicious Food, or in Bridgeport, at Manje Lakay.

Above all, though, let us not forget the people, or neglect their stories. Let us not ignore the many gifts they have given to Connecticut, to the United States, and to the world itself.

I can't reproduce that night in Deschappelles, but in a way Connecticut is a lot like that hillside: if you know how to listen (and see, taste, touch, and smell), the gifts of Haitian culture are all around us.

Now is the time to listen well, that we might come to tell, and to learn, a better story about Haiti.

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Steve Jungkeit serves as the Senior Minister of The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme. The Crosby Fund for Haitian Education, one of the ministries of FCCOL, was founded twenty years ago by Becky and Ted Crosby to help Haitian young people receive an education, which is not free in Haiti, and is an expense that most Haitians cannot afford.