

COMMENT – *Imaginative Identification and Human Rights in Haiti*

Matt West, Webster University – Saint Louis

In *Inventing Human Rights: A History*, Lynn Hunt (2008) describes how imaginative identification allows people to feel empathy and sympathy to those experiencing dire suffering. She writes: “This process of imaginative identification – sympathy – permits the observer to feel what a torture victim feels” (p. 65). This term helps us better understand the role of human rights, since it requires stepping outside oneself in order to better understand our relationships and responsibilities to each other as part of the human family.

Hunt’s concept of “imaginative identification” helps me process my own experiences in Haiti, as well as better understand the value and impact of human rights norms. I had the privilege of traveling to Haiti in April 2017 on an educational, cultural immersion trip that allowed me to learn from the country’s amazing people and culture. (Lisa Brown, a social justice and human rights teacher at Nauset Regional High School in Massachusetts, organized the experience. She has been taking students to Haiti for more than 18 years.) As an outsider looking in, I had trouble understanding some of the cultural differences I encountered until I stood back and put myself in the position of those I interacted with during the trip. By engaging in imaginative identification, I was able to comprehend the rights violations occurring in Haiti – and the role that human rights play in protecting the dignity and respect that every individual deserves. The core human rights issues that I encountered in Haiti can be classified according to three articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR): Articles 4 (prohibits slavery), Article 18 (freedom of thought and religion), and

Article 26 (the right to education). My experiences in Haiti helped me understand the concepts underpinning these fundamental rights – as well as to consider potential solutions, grow a sense of shared empathy, and hopefully move us toward facilitating real change.

Although Article 4 of the UDHR stipulates that “no one shall be held in slavery or servitude,” a child slave in Haiti are known as a *restavek*. Child slaves are not necessarily forced into the hard labor that Americans often associate with slavery, but they do undertake servitude in a variety of ways. Since Haiti is a poor country (one of the poorest in the world, in fact), families often lack access to contraceptives and reproductive care, as well as the resources necessary to care for babies and children. As a result, some children are sold into slavery as a way to support their remaining siblings. In some cases, parents are tricked into offering up their children; for example, a rich uncle may offer to take in a child and give them a “better” life, but then use the child as a family servant rather than sending them to school as promised. These challenges infringe on a child’s human dignity and deny them their childhood, in essence, while forcing parents to make impossible decisions in order to protect themselves and their other family members from extreme poverty and perhaps even death.

The Matenwa Youth Association for Development (AJMPD) is a group of teachers, students, and members of the community who are working to educate people on the rights of children. AJMPD reached out to my high school – and the student-driven human rights organization that I led during my time there – to help address these human rights challenges. The organization teaches children all about theater and music, for instance, and hosts plays. Members of the community are invited to watch the plays and to take part in a question-and-answer session. For example, AJMPD organized a performance during my trip about the treatment of children in homes, including a freeze-frame segment (where the play stopped at particular scenes) where the audience was asked to discuss problems they observed. A facilitator for AJMPD sat in the crowd and played devil's advocate, causing the audience to express their opinions and highlighting how situations of child abuse are unacceptable and wrong. In line with Article 4 of the UDHR, events hosted by AJMPD help

people understand that child slavery is not a viable solution ever. The organization helps communities collectively understand the rights of children and to empathize with children who are experiencing hardship and suffering from harm. As I sat watching this particular play, I was extremely uncomfortable simply because this issue is so prevalent that it requires such debate. Yet once I stepped beyond my own preconceptions, based on my experiences living in the United States, I realized that talks like these are necessary for shifting cultural norms and to making long-term changes. Imaginative identification was necessary so that I could stop judging people for the prevalence of child slavery in their country and begin to identify the social, cultural, and economic realities that facilitated these violations. Only by understanding those perspectives can anyone work to protect children's rights in Haiti.

Freedom of expression and religion is another human rights issue that I comprehend in new ways thanks to my time in Haiti. After a devastating earthquake in 2010, nearly 200,000 bodies were unidentified in Haiti and placed into a mass grave. Many people were upset by the idea of all these bodies being forgotten, inspiring a group of artists to establish "Art de Rezistance" – an organization that utilized voodoo-inspired artwork, including bones from mass graves. The re-purposed human remains are made into magnificent works of art. As an outsider coming in and walking through this gallery, however, I was overwhelmed with negative emotions. Viewing this work through my own cultural lens as an American, I felt that this approach was disrespectful and inhumane. Yet again, once I stepped back and used imaginative identification, something deeper began to emerge. For many survivors, loved ones were never going to be identified from mass graves – but the use of human remains in these works of art emphasized the message that those people were never forgotten. Notably, I also had to expand my viewpoint to consider the importance of voodoo in Haiti; although this religion is not common in my hometown, its cultural and spiritual value in Haiti influences how people view death and the afterlife. By moving outside of my own cultural norms, I was able to more fully empathize with people who had experienced the grief of the 2010 earthquake – and who needed some way to honor their dead in ways that made sense to them. As a person of a

different background and faith, my first reaction was “this is not right,” yet I came to realize that we mourn in different ways – especially when it comes to our religious ties and perspectives – and that our humanity is shown not necessarily in understanding why, but just accepting different choices.

Article 26 of the UDHR outlines the human right to education and, when applied to Haiti, I began to see how education comes in different forms and faces vast challenges. A poor family in Haiti may keep children out of school because they cannot afford it or they believe working in the family business (or working in general to make money for the family) is more beneficial. In Haiti, when a child goes to school their end goal is not necessarily to go to college; it may just be to acquire the tools needed to successfully live within their current situation and to better provide for their families. The Matenwa Community Learning Center (LKM), for instance, is a school located on an island off the coast of Haiti, within a small mountain village. Educators at LKM strongly believe in teaching children how to express their artistic and musical talents, while also providing practical tools for life after their schooling ends. The school promotes the right to education by offering scholarships for poorer children, as well as offering a program that allows farming families to pay for education through crops. The school uses imaginative identification to approach every family situation with the utmost care and respect, even when teachers must plead with parents to allow their children to attend school. In many cases, parents need help taking care of their children but are too embarrassed to ask for help. When I visited LKM, I was told that it costs \$25 USD per year to send a child to school; coming from the U.S., I was surprised by this “small” amount and couldn’t believe that a family wouldn’t afford to send a child to school. Yet imaginative identification forces us to think more broadly about survival strategies and basic needs; for many people in Haiti and elsewhere in the developing world, \$25 USD is a vast sum of money. I was impressed that the whole Matenwa community works together to protect educational rights, which includes the understanding that suffering and hardship takes place daily – and that the help of outside groups can lessen the burden on families and help them make the choice to send their children to school.

Empathy requires a level of understanding that is more than surface-deep. In Haiti, for instance, combatting child slavery requires community members to identify the suffering forced servitude requires and to acknowledge that the practice is wrong. Freedom of expression and religion is only relevant if people stop imposing their beliefs on others and instead work toward embracing differences in each other. The right to education is most powerful when there is collective agreement on the importance of education, including teaching tools for survival and supporting struggling families. Imaginative identification allows people to collectively understand what it is like to have rights stripped away, or to feel as though something isn't right, perhaps based on the basic premise that they wouldn't want those violations done to them. I personally struggled with the cultural differences I experienced in Haiti until I stopped trying to be the person with all of the answers. Instead, I tried to embrace difference and care about the people I met without trying to "save" them. Human rights unify all people by asserting that we all deserve respect and dignity; imaginative identification is one way to understand the role of human rights and to work toward making them a universal reality.

References

Hunt, L. A. (2008). *Inventing Human Rights: A History*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

United Nations. (1948). Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Retrieved from <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>

© Copyright 2018 *Righting Wrongs: A Journal of Human Rights*. All rights reserved.

Righting Wrongs: A Journal of Human Rights is an academic journal that provides space for undergraduate students to explore human rights issues, challenge current actions and frameworks, and engage in problem-solving aimed at tackling some of the world's most pressing issues. This open-access journal is available online at www.webster.edu/rightingwrongs.