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# CAN HAITI'S CRISIS CHANGE THE GLOBAL COMMUNITY?

A HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONAL'S REAL-LIFE EXPERIENCES WITH HAITIAN REFUGEES



**Barbara Harris Whitfield**

## HIGHLIGHTS

- ✓ The Haitian earthquake is sending refugees to America.
- ✓ It is not a "Local Problem"
- ✓ They set sail in inadequate boats and it may be worse than the "boat people" events over the last decades.
- ✓ Haitians have a long history of trauma. They're bringing that here in-person.
- ✓ Do we have the capacity to help?



## We Were Told It Was "A Local Problem"

**It hurt when I recently read an op-ed by Author and adventurer James S. Gardner. He was commenting on refugees from the Haitian earthquake. He said, "Make no mistake about it, they are coming."**

My heart sunk as I read that because I know the repercussions of refugees coming to our shores. I lived through it as a health care provider in the late 70s during the Mariel Boat Landing in south east Florida. I worked at Mt. Sinai Medical Center on South Miami Beach as an emergency room respiratory therapist. I was in regular contact with these "boat people," as they were then called. We were their first contact after the EMTs, police or Coast Guard brought them to the hospital. We cared for their physical wounds, tried to comfort their emotional terror and watched helplessly as some of them died on our gurneys before we could even find out why they were dying. I held many hands back then and listened to their pleading in a language I couldn't understand. But our eyes and clutching hands held a communication that can't be expressed in words. The most heartbreaking complaint I made to my superiors was that we didn't have anyone on our healthcare team that spoke the languages of the "boat people," and they were afraid, sick and dying with no one who understood them.

There were Cubans and Haitian refugees. I heard recently that during the 70's two thirds of the "boat people" drowned while trying to flee to freedom. Dade County processed 200,000 boat people back then. (That could possibly mean that 400,000 people drowned in the Mariel Boat event.) We pleaded with Washington to help us. Our health care and our educational system were bulging, splitting at the seams. Then President, Jimmy Carter continuously told us it was "a local problem." We were unable to handle the sudden influx of people and the tragedy worsened.

*"WE COULD BE TREATING MURDERERS, POLITICAL PRISONERS, DOCTORS AND LAWYERS AT THE SAME TIME."*

YakRider Media  
Media Contact: 404.286.9117

[www.BarbaraWhitfield.com](http://www.BarbaraWhitfield.com)  
[Barbara-Whitfield.blogspot.com](http://Barbara-Whitfield.blogspot.com)

## IT WAS A SCENE WE HAD NEVER EXPERIENCED BEFORE

Needless to say, every one of those “boat people” was heavily traumatized. They lost loved ones along the way. The Cubans were 90 miles from Key West but many of them didn’t come ashore until they reached Miami 160 miles further. We never knew who we might be caring for. The Castro regime let out many prisoners. We may have been treating murderers, political prisoners, doctors and lawyers all at the same time. Some of their fellow refugees had washed overboard during the journey and the survivors were in shock and were grieving for those who were lost.

A few who came ashore were physicians but could provide no immediate proof of their medical training. All they had was the clothes they were wearing. Some had been brought in naked because their clothes had washed away in the storms at sea. Those doctors would plead with hospital administration to give them jobs painting or even mopping floors – anything to be able to work in a hospital again. Fortunately, some of them eventually recovered their documentation, went through residency and reestablished their professional status and regained their sense of dignity.

After we had given them the best medical care that we could provide, the refugees were transferred to one of the a “tent cities” which had been hastily set up under the overpasses of Miami’s highway system. These tent cities were large cages with high chain-link fences and barbed wire at the top. I often drove past them on the way to work.

It was heartbreaking to see how they had risked everything, including their lives and the lives of their children to make it to America. I shudder now to think that the Haitian people are also leaving, trying to reach our shores. Their trip is much longer than the Cubans –over 700 miles and my experiences with them back in the late 70s were even more heartbreaking to witness than the Cubans. The Cubans that came appeared to assimilate into the local culture quicker. Many of those that found work took care of the ones that were struggling. I quickly learned to respect that ethic. When I was a respiratory therapy student, I remember having classmates that were part of the local Cuban community. After school fathers, brothers or uncles would be waiting outside for their young family members who were in my class. Many of them were regularly chaperoned – protected – and they didn’t seem to mind. It was a part of their rich culture. The Cuban families that I knew then were “tight” –everyone cared for everyone regardless of whether they were blood family or part of the Cuban diaspora.

I had a different experience with the Haitian people, however. Many of those that I cared for appeared to have a hard time assimilating in to our culture. At first, many of our health care staff were frightened to care for the Haitians because of the ancient and unfamiliar rituals that they brought into our “modern” hospital setting. Many of us felt uncomfortable when they burnt incense in the hallways and chanted Haitian Vodou songs. It was a vastly different experience than most of us been trained to handle.

Years later, I discovered a wonderful international group of woman called “The Council of 13 Indigenous Grandmothers.” It was through them that I learned that these indigenous rituals often help people to heal on a spiritual level that we don’t understand. It wasn’t the western medicine that I had been trained in, but it works.

Somewhere between their unfamiliar rituals and our medicine, the Haitian refugees got the care they needed and our hearts grew.

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## Haiti Quick Facts<sup>1</sup>

- The death toll after the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake was 230,000 spread over 14 countries.
- The death toll after the 2010 Haitian earthquake is above 100,000 in one small island country.
- Before the earthquake, nearly half of deaths in Haiti were caused by HIV/AIDS, respiratory disease, meningial and diarrheal diseases.
- Ninety percent of Haiti's children suffer from waterborne diseases and intestinal parasites.
- Four major storms struck Haiti in August and September 2008, leaving nearly 1,000 dead and a million people homeless.
- Fleeing Haitians again seek refuge in the United States.

<sup>1</sup>Source: Cable News Network, IPS News

## THEY ARE COMING

I cringe now, just like James Gardner does, at the thought that many Haitians will attempt the long, perilous crossing using inadequate boats to reach our shores in the coming months. If they wait until the seas calm down from the Atlantic winter season, hurricane season will be fast upon them. They may not be able to measure the weather before they leave. Further danger may loom for them: I observed in the late 70s that many people from the Bahamas, where they would stop during the journey, were hostile toward the fleeing Haitians. Hopefully times have changed.

Their flight to reach our shores will be extraordinarily difficult and the ones that make it – having little education or understanding of American culture – will have a more difficult time. Haitians have a long history of societal trauma. Now with the catastrophe of the recent earthquake and the harrowing experience of the journey to get here we will have a large population of traumatized people landing on our shores. They will need our compassion and our help.

I hope this time Washington doesn't tell the people of Florida that this is a "local" problem. I hope this time we, as a nation, will open our hearts to these people. I know that as a nation we have mobilized to help in the initial crisis. Can we as a people keep our hearts open to another group of people that has never had the opportunities that we have in our society? Can we find the patience to help train them to support themselves? Can we open our hearts to them like we have the other immigrants that have come to our shores? I'm not advocating unrestricted borders. Speaking as a health care provider, I believe that would allow us to be taken advantage of. But what we have here is another possible exodus and they're going to come whether we say "yes" or "no." America leads the world in many ways. If we lead with our compassion, perhaps other countries can follow by opening their borders to the refugees, as well.

As a therapist who works with traumatized people, I find that healing comes when we can express our pain and grief and then make meaning out of what happened. We are about to receive a lot of people with immense pain and grief over a series of unimaginable tragedies. Perhaps as a global community we can express our pain along with the Haitians, help them to grieve and then help them –and us make meaning out of this crisis.

**“I hope this time Washington doesn't tell the people of Florida that this is a “local” problem”**

*“Can we find the patience to help train them to support themselves?”*

# GETTING TO KNOW BARBARA HARRIS WHITFIELD

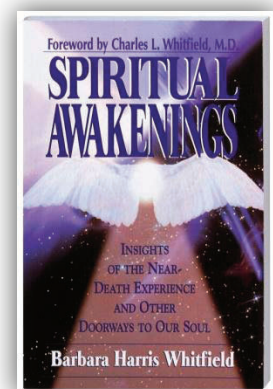
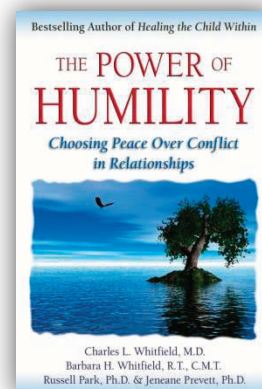
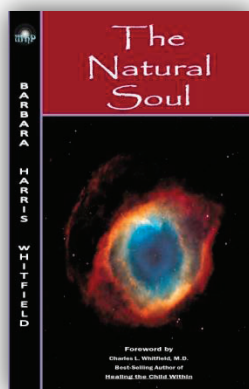
**Barbara Harris Whitfield** was interviewed on CNN Medical News when she was a researcher at the University of Connecticut, School of Medicine studying the after effects of people who have had a near-death experience. She has appeared on Larry King Live twice, CNN Airport News, Oprah and was also interviewed by Sonia Freedman on her research. She taught recovery from trauma and addiction at Rutgers University's Institute for Alcohol and Drug Studies for 12 years. She is the author of five books on near-death experiences, death and dying, and natural spirituality. She is in private practice in Atlanta, Georgia with Charles L. Whitfield, MD helping adults that were repeatedly traumatized as children. They specialize in post-traumatic stress disorder. Her latest book *The Natural Soul* has just been released. It explains natural spirituality as the generic umbrella term for our own intimate personal relationship with our self, others and if we choose – the God of our understanding. **Barbara is available for interviews.**



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[www.YakRiderMedia.com](http://www.YakRiderMedia.com)

Contact: 404.286.9117  
[inquiry@yakridermedia.com](mailto:inquiry@yakridermedia.com)



Barbara's Books Include *The Natural Soul*, *Spiritual Awakenings* and *The Power of Humility* co-authored by her husband, Best-Selling author Charles Whitfield, M.D.

*"Whitfield shows us not how to 'understand' reality but how to live it."*

*—Bruce Greyson, M.D. University of Virginia*

*"In The Natural Soul Barbara Whitfield takes us on a journey to our Essence, Our True selves."*

*—Maurie D. Pressman, M.D., Emeritus Chairman of Psychiatry, Albert Einstein Medical Center*