

A Letter from Jamaica

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Jamaica is both heaven and hell. My partner Suzanne, and I, are just back from a wonderful two week trip to Jamaica – part work and part holiday. I used to work there and have many Jamaican friends. It could be paradise on Earth. It was both inspiring, moving **and** shocking to us.

My work assignment first: Customer Service is a big issue for Jamaica. At its best, customer service is outstanding – as we experienced at Sandals Beach Resorts, the Ritz Carlton, Grace Kennedy and on Air Jamaica. However, generally customer service is poor. As in the UK, there is a tradition of confusing service with servitude. Yet Jamaica also has a natural competitive advantage because of the inherent smiling friendliness, warmth, empathy, responsiveness and enterprise of most Jamaicans.

I was giving a Keynote Talk on *Creating a Customer Service Culture* and helping to facilitate at the Jamaica Customer Service Association Annual Conference. My theme was *Releasing Spirit, Energy and Creativity for Customer Service Excellence*.

So we began with 80 or so people up and dancing to Bob Marley! Then I invited people to collect as many reasons as they could on why they love Jamaica, from as many different people as they could, in 3 minutes. Energy in practice. After my talk, we got everyone involved and talking with passion, listening to each other in co-counselling mode - about what hit the mark, what they would add and what they want to do as a result. We re-arranged the room had been from traditional classroom, lecture style and podium to semi-circles of eight.

After lunch, we used Appreciative Inquiry, a way of learning from success, from what works. We introduced people to the “*talking stick*” to help them really listen to each other in their groups.

Jamaicans don't seem to hold back and they really went for it!

I was invited to help design the conference ending on the second day. We used Open Space, as the ending process. Out of this, emerged four important project groups who planned to continue meeting – two to support parents, especially mothers at work – they determine the wellbeing of future generations of Jamaicans; another to bring peace and security to people in the no go areas; and one to improve customer service throughout Jamaica. In addition, everyone made commitments to the individual actions they would take and the support they would get for themselves. Such receptive and exciting people!

There were beautiful dance and drama performances at the conference. Jamaicans seem naturally talented and beautiful in both media. I was tremendously impressed

with the quality of Jamaican speakers too - World Class would be accurate for many of the presentations.

Prior to the conference I did a short interview on radio – *Breakfast Club* – hosted by the 3rd wife of ex Premier, the late Michael Manley, to promote it while my Jamaican colleague, Ilsa duVerney, did one 10 minutes before me on another station.

I also met with the new Vice Chancellor of the excellent but strapped for cash University of West Indies at its beautiful site below the Blue Mountains. His analysis of the situation and his ideas for the future were inspiring and fascinating. This year they suffered a 25% budget cut and more is to come. There is growing competition from new tertiary institutions. Meanwhile, I reflected, billions are spent on the so called “*war on terror*” and regime change.

Articles in the two excellent national papers, Gleaner and Observer, are often amazingly bold, erudite but accessible, about the situation in their country and the world, often contributed by academics at UWI. Pillars of their democracy.

As I said, Jamaica is both heaven and hell.

An enormous colonial Georgian and Nineteenth century architectural heritage, comparable with Williamsburg or Richmond in USA, could be a huge attraction but it is decaying for lack of money - not ideas - to restore it. We visited the excellent National Art Gallery in Kingston where there was a large exhibition of Rasta Everald Brown and much of Edna Manley’s work. Yet, it was almost devoid of visitors. Was this because of fear of crime and violence in down town Kingston and lack of publicity amongst tourists? Is it in the wrong place? In any European city it would be packed and if it had a café and restaurant, it would be a prime meeting place. The once renowned Kingston Botanical Gardens have deteriorated greatly in recent years.

Jamaica is extraordinarily beautiful - mountains, hills, shores, clear blue sea, an ideal climate bar hurricanes, fertility, a great variety of vegetables and fruit and beautiful flowering shrubs and trees. Exciting, resourceful, warm, brave and intelligent people.

But there is huge poverty and a very large gap between rich and poor; haves and have nots. Upper Kingston is affluent and beautiful. There is money, but wealthy Jamaicans seem reluctant to invest in Jamaica. Down Town and places like Trench Town are awful - some really no go; old stores in once beautiful Down Town are declining or gone. Violence and crime are a great worry to Jamaicans. Poverty in lower Kingston and places like Spanish Town is shocking. Here, shootings are common - mostly gangs killing each other, not other people, though there are horrifying exceptions. Nearly 1300 have been killed by shooting already this year in a country with about 2.7 M people.

As visitors we felt very insecure, especially after dark, except with wiley friends who can spot trouble or someone following their car.

We listened to dozens of Jamaicans in many different walks of life and levels in society, including Rastafarians. The first thing everyone talks about is violence and crime and the effect it has on attempts to rejuvenate the economy. Fishermen complain that their nets and traps are stolen or raided. There is a vicious downward

spiral. Violence, crime and corruption result from an unjust society and lack of opportunity. They obstruct efforts to bring investment and create enterprises and employment. There is much talk of corruption in Government, the police, the civil service and unfairness in the courts. Health and education have deteriorated over the past years. Teachers are now on shifts to save money so the afternoon children get tired and worn out teachers. We saw an injured person lying in the road after an accident. I was concerned that people were moving him but our driver said, there was little chance of getting an ambulance to come promptly.

Teenage women destroy their chances by getting pregnant as a way of gaining financial support - they hope.

Many of the issues are ours too. The same issues exist in affluent UK, including my home town Berkhamsted. But in Jamaica they are vastly more severe and damaging.

We stayed all over including in a cabin 4000 feet up in the Blue Mountains. The wind blew, the rain lashed down and the clouds wet our clothes overnight, rather like Wales, except when the clouds clear you see a tropical city and the Caribbean below.

Later we stayed in a cottage at Treasure Beach on the South Coast, hot and dry and not much visited by tourists. Very friendly, civil and kindly people. People on the South Coast - the agricultural breadbasket of Jamaica - suffered badly from the Hurricane. But their attitude is *"thank God it was not worse and be thankful for our blessings."* They get on with rebuilding their homes, businesses and lives. They are so enterprising. Most Jamaicans are religious - part of how they cope I think, by thanking God for their blessings eg *"Hurricane Ivan could have been worse."* It wrecked some shops, restaurants, hotels and houses. It ruined beaches; moving the sand away in some cases; tore down the coconut palms and stripped all the leaves off every tree in some places. So there was hardly any local fruit, fruit juices or vegetables at the roadside or in shops. There will not be much fruit for a year, though the leaves have come back rapidly. Waves 20 - 30 feet high, rushed through houses and the wind took roofs off. The water tank was blown off our cottage near the beach. So we had no hot water - it was warm anyway though not drinkable without boiling. There were landslides on mountain roads and fallen trees blocked trails in Blue Mountains.

Rastas said the West is Babylon – excessive consumption, greedy lifestyle, creating shortage, pollution of the air and the seas and land! Seems pretty astute to me! Because I was nervous and stressed, I gave one Rasta a \$1000 note instead of \$100 as part of the payment for a carved button wood paper knife. Rasta Stanley, as he is named, asked me to show him my money. He replaced the wrong note and picked out the correct one. I asked him **not** to tell my wife as I felt so silly. He gave me a little lesson. *"Sir, you I needed to learn to handle your money"* and *"honesty is the best policy."* Next day, we met again and Suzanne bought from him a beautiful carved pendant, representing the harmony of male and female. As the sun set over the Caribbean, we sat down together and had a long, deep talk by the beach.

A short demonstration of the benefits of Corporate Social Responsibility!

Naturally some people resort to growing the marijuana or working for drug barons who at least provide employment. We complain of local people pestering. Is it surprising in the circumstances? In essence it is the same here - all those intrusive TV advertisements, paper in our letter boxes and telephone and internet intrusions. Consultants like me have to hustle to get work. What is the difference for heavens sake? And there is plenty of boardroom corruption in the West.

Unemployment is 40 per cent. The national debt burden is enormous and interest on loans from the International Monetary Fund and other sources, not repayments, amounts to over 60 per cent of GDP. In 1996, Jamaica paid out \$17.05 in debt service for every \$1 received in aid grants. The US and the European Union, whilst dumping their own heavily subsidised products, impose free trade on countries like this. Yet, they also charge heavy import duties on their products. Jamaica struggles to compete against the products of cheaper labour in Asia and Latin America. Of course the lingering aftermath of colonisation and slavery still pervades at a deeper level. But the root of the problem is an unfair trading regime that benefits rich countries at the expense of poor. Structural Adjustment Programmes, requiring privatisation, imposed by the IMF as a condition for loans, have undermined public health and education in the Third World.

Bush is much disliked as he is seen to be bad for business because he causes instability in the world - apart from US perceived greed, arrogance, interference and domination everywhere. US people seem generally not to be liked. There was no comment on the English! Italians are liked for their warmth and liveliness - like Jamaicans!

There can be no peace or peace of mind whilst there is such injustice.

We were deeply affected by the generosity we experienced and the realisation of how dire things are in Jamaica. Despite their talent, enterprise and inspiring efforts, they really do not have a fair chance, given the debt and unfair global trading system. It shocked us deeply.

Here, in UK, most people simply have no idea how fortunate we are or what a small minority we are. ***You have to experience it to understand.*** One very intelligent waiter at an affluent hotel - a kind of US colony, just like USA but in the Caribbean, with almost all the guests behaving like Americans do, eating as they do, amongst Americans, in surroundings Americans like everywhere - except outside it looks different - said US people are "innocent." I think that is too kind - it applies to UK people too. Countries like Jamaica simply have little chance under the current global trading regime. They cannot compete. Most people in US, UK and EU are completely ignorant of the realities of the situation. But is ignorance an adequate excuse for what boils down to the exploitation and oppression of imperialism in a new form?

Surely it is time to give something back. When you look at our stately homes and Georgian and Victorian cities in UK, consider where that wealth came from, and how our banking system and industrial revolution were financed. Jamaica made Britain rich. Slavery, Empire and Colonisation were brilliant ideas for making a lot of money. Banking was another brilliant invention. The latest brilliant idea for a few people making a lot of money at the expense of poor countries, is a combination of imposed free trade, subsidised dumping, structural adjustment, lending and

globalisation! Oh, I forgot, and “regime change, and “freedom” (to do what is not explained) for “freedom loving peoples.” These are new forms of Empire. The Brits were masters of it. USA has succeeded us.

The discredited trickle down theories of the World Trade Organisation, World Bank and the IMF are un-researched and unproven. Are they convenient dogmas, driven essentially by Western greed, arrogance, lack of respect and imposition - however unwaresly or “innocently,” as our Jamaican friend said? It is time to listen, to respect and give back – especially if we really want a more peaceful and secure world for ourselves. Poverty, unfairness, destruction of the natural environment and climate change are far greater threats than international terrorism.

I wondered why Fair Trade are not involved in Jamaica. Jamaica was once our major source of bananas and sugar but not now. Jamaican fruit and vegetables are rarely seen here now. Why is there no Jamaican Fair Trade coffee or chocolate or Percol Blue Mountain coffee? Why are Jamaican products like these not in Waitrose supermarkets?

What can we do? Do we want a just and sustainable World in which every young person has the prospect of a fulfilling, safe and healthy life? Do we want billions spent on wars on terror and regime change or on people? Time to lobby your MP and MEP using www.FaxYourMP.com; PM and Ministers, the World Trade Organisation, World Bank and join the many campaigns for fair trade, cancelling third world debt and global trade justice? Keep up the pressure on Chancellor Gordon Brown and Prime Minister Tony Blair, especially as he approaches his forthcoming Presidency of G8 and the EU, to fulfil their promises. Find the World Development Movement www.wdm.org.uk, Jubilee 2000 www.jubilee2000uk.org, Oxfam www.oxfam.org and Christian Aid www.christianaid.org.uk, International Simultaneous Policy Organisation www.simpol.org etc and support their campaigns. Take a look at http://www.infid.be/hypocrisy_imf.html to see what Joseph Stiglitz says about the IMF. Use your people power and purchasing choices! If you are a business leader, include these issues in your strategic review. Sustainability – not just pollution, climate change and ecological diversity **but also** global issues like fairness, poverty, respect for human diversity in all its forms, and quality of life – is the big issue for business and society in the 21st Century. Get sustainability into the heart of your organisation. See the big issues as opportunities. Every little action helps, however insignificant it may seem.

"Whatever you do may seem insignificant, but it is most important that you do it."

Mahatma Gandhi

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