

# St. Vincent Update

A Warm 'Hello' from St. Vincent,

17 Apr., 1983

Very warm.... the last few days its been close to 90°. Though I doubt you all will give us much sympathy. As I understand it, its still winter up there. Well, I think I'd trade places with you for a while (as long as I could take Deb). Its a little warmer than average and a little dryer than average. Normally, a temp of 90° or above is unusual. We've been nearer that than average. The hot month is suppose to be august. Wonderful! I'll be a walking mildew factory by then.

Outside of the weather, nothing is really exciting or different. Well, its not quite that boring (things are rarely boring here). Our Easter probably provided the most tension and subsequent thought. Since I have written to most of our families about our experience, I'll try to keep it short... Good Friday and Saturday were typical days for us. We spent most of our time washing, cleaning, baking and in general, we were domestic for most of the day. Saturday we took some time off to go swimming over in Autley Hall beach with Dick and Ann Bienemen who are another BC couple. Following a rushed dinner, we hurried off to the Easter Vigil Service at the Catholic Church. It was a very joyful service and we left feeling refreshed and filled. Easter Sunday was an other story. Deb had made a banner for the church and we went early so that we could hang it up (and also get a seat). Well, we did not get there early enough so we had to hang the banner in front of hundreds of watchful eyes. To make matters worse, a young person who we have befriended (Desreen), gave us the usual Vincentian "SSSSSSSTT" to get us to acknowledge her presence (very embarrassing and obnoxious). The service, too, added to our anxiety. The birthrates are very high in St. Vincent and no where is that more noticeable than in baptisms at church. So far this year we have had four sets of baptisms. Each consisting of about 13 infants (and rarely any fathers). On Easter Sunday there were another 13 mothers and newborns. Directly in front of us sat one mother with a very small, sickly-looking child. What 'bothers' us is that the numbers of poorly cared for children are many, due to the ~~young~~ age of the mothers. The children are, by and large, conceived out of wedlock. Though I can (and will) object to that on purely moral grounds, the added complication is that most children are raised without a male role model. Without a consistent nurturing male role model, the development of children (emotional) will be incomplete and will result in emotional 'handicaps' who display inappropriate sexual behaviours and have trouble in becoming nurturing parents themselves. The cycle repeats itself. So the large numbers of children we saw baptised symbolised the emotional, physical and spiritual malnourishment we saw all around us. All that is 'wrong' with St. Vincent. As if that wasn't enough, as we left church we saw a small boy, being led by his brother, with a herniated umbilicus. Needless to say, we both had a good cry over that when we got home. Also we felt guilty for having judged (morally) the behaviours of the mothers we saw. But its difficult to understand this society. Bearing large numbers of children into a community of possible malnourishment, emotional stress and spiritual paradox seems cruel to me. I cannot fathom the reasons.

Now I don't wish to dwell on 'negatives' but there has been a growing realisation that there is more to adjusting to living in a foreign country than adjusting to climate and foods. Even getting used to homesickness and being out of regular phone contact with family is not enough to say "I am adjusted". It goes beyond even that.

The 'adjustment' comes in understanding why a society functions as it does. Or perhaps in accepting the 'realities' of living in that country. I am assuming that one is 'adjusted' when either the reasons for the ideoyncracies or the ideoyncracies themselves are found acceptable. I say assume because I don't know when I'll be 'adjusted' to living in St. Vincent. Perhaps, I never will. So the big question is if indeed I will never 'be adjusted', can I at least function at a level where I'm not a borderline schizophrenic: half-in and half-out of the United States? I don't know. Thats what I'm dealing with now. Debbie has had an easier time of it (I think). I was also asked a very important question this month which kind of summed up my musings in a 'nutshell': "Am I happy?". The answer is: "Yes and No". The difficulty in giving a single answer is from the complexities and 'ambiguities' of living in a third world country. It is also tough to answer because happiness is relative and is both a statement about emotions and satisfaction with the status quo. Emotionally, I think I am pretty happy. Pretty "up" in general. As a statement of satisfaction, well no, I am not really satisfied with living here. But these catagories are not mutually exclusive. That is, my day to day satisfaction influences my emotional state (as with the unwed mother story). So, though I try to maintain a positive, happy outlook (which is, by the way, bound up with my Christian faith and the staus of my spiritual happiness), the realities of life in St. Vincent can make me unhappy. Or, I can be unhappy with my confrontation with those realities because of ~~their~~ apparent permanence (and futility in the face of change), or because it personally offends me. There is the rub. How far am I willing to 'bend' before I become alienated in this society (by my own values and social 'history'). And what if I am? ~~unhappy~~ If I am feeling so alienated. Feeling so out of place that it affects my ability to function, ~~Is~~ that reason enough to return home? ~~What is~~ compelling is that Christ has asked us to 'suffer' with Him. In service to Him there is bound to be some suffering (and perhaps, more than we would like). What keeps me here (and sane, so far) is that something good will come of this experience. Those "somethings" have, in fact, already begun. And, if I can continue to concentrate on those benefits, the 'shock' of the Vincentian culture will be diminished. The economist in me constantly weighs those pluses and minuses and, so far, the reasons to stay outweigh the reasons to go. So if I 'sound' negative (or less positive) from time to time, it is the transitory stage of learning to deal with Vincentian life.

As for the positive things... we had the opportunity to have one of Debbies patients over last week (Sunday). Alan, is a thirteen year old amputee who has been in the Kingstown General Hospital, for nearly a year. His original doctor took a 'permanent vacation' out of here last year after only a few months (so you can imagine what this place could do to someone). That left many orthopaedic patients, including Alan, without a doctor until doctor Harvey came in Feb. Alan had had a pile of concrete blocks fall on his legs, which remained unset for almost a year, when Dr. Harvey arrived. One leg was so badly damaged that it had to be amputated. The other leg is still in question. Anyway, after being cooped up in a hospital for nearly a year, Alan was ready for a break. So we brought him over for a day. After a bumpy trip up and over the hill to our home, Alan spent most of the time sitting on our sea-side porch. We did put him to work mixing cookie dough and helping cut vegies for our pizza, but he was mostly content to just watch us garden or watch the waves roll in and out. He didn't say much, but you could tell the change did him (and us) good.

In the last month we also made another trip to Bequia. Again we took the trusty (but rusty), Perica. However, a lot of people were having trouble in keeping their breakfasts inside themselves. I didn't think the trip was much rougher than last time but the sea-sickness was almost epidemic. Bequia, as always, was quiet and nearly deserted. It didn't look any more deserted than it did at the peak of the tourist season. But we enjoyed our 'vacation' away from St. Vincent. We also got terribly sunburned (as is usual for us indoor types...). We are still peeling and plan to go back.

The garden is still a mixed bag. Current 'winners' are the cherry tomatoes and the cabbage. The corn has come and gone and left us with about a cup of corn kernals (the ears were as big as a 'D' size battery). The peas produced about 3 pods and withered from the ground up. The beans are only doing fair (at best). The carrots are still in the ground, not quite ready. The cukes produced 4 fruit then appeared to wither, but they have rallied somewhat as of late. We are going to plant some more (and different) veggies soon. We'll keep you breathlessly informed...

We are about to pass a 'milestone' of sorts. On April 29th, Debbie and I will have been gone for 6 months. Its very hard to believe!! Seems like an eternity and a week all at once. We will have our 6 month reunion in St. Lucia in June which will mark our 6 mo. anniversary in being Peace Corps Volunteers (the 5 weeks of training doesn't count as 'service'). So we have two milestones in actuality. One is our 6mo. passing since we left the states. The other, on June 4th, is our 6 mo. as PCV's. Our landlady brought me a six-pack of 'TAB' from N.Y. last month. I have been guarding it ruthlessly and plan to consume one each month at whatever special date I can dream up. I may even try to find something like "Frito's" and french onion dip to go with them. Oh, that's also what I miss. Junk food!

Well, time for Debbie's 2¢ worth. Thanks so much for all the letters. We really appreciate your thoughtfulness. For those who wish to write but have lost our address, here it is: P.O. Box 884, Kingstown, St. Vincent, West Indies. God Bless you all. He has us!

I won't add much as my tid-bits on work aren't all that different and I can throw them in the next letter. Each time I re-read our "mass-mailers" I think of how impersonal they may seem to each of you, and of course I'm sorry for that. I hope no one is "offended" - it is very important that we "keep in touch" and while this is a sorry excuse for personal correspondence, it helps us. It helps to feel a little closer to home... we know many of our good friends and relatives are holding this letter, reading it through and maybe even thinking of "life in St. Vincent." So there it is... these mass-mailings are for selfish reasons and we thank you all.

May you all be well.

God's blessings of peace & joy to each of you.

Debbie & Fred