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"First Lecture" on *Mountains Beyond Mountains*

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"Paul Farmer is such an amazing person, and I want to be just like him."

I can't tell you how many times I've heard people tell me this, or something like it, over the years. Especially young people, particularly my students. For the record, I think Paul Farmer is an amazing person, too.

And yet, while Farmer's example is inspiring, I found it difficult and often painful to read *Mountains Beyond Mountains*. Partly this is because of how Tracy Kidder so unflinchingly depicts the suffering of people in rural Haiti. But, for me at least, such misery was not the hardest thing to bear. Rather, because, like Paul Farmer, I was also raised Catholic, I was transported, reluctantly, to my childhood encounters with the life of Christ, and stories of the prophets, apostles, and saints. In a similar way, Paul Farmer's story made me feel as if my own life had so little meaning. After all, Whose life did I save today? Whose life have I touched? What legacy will I leave? Who will remember me? Do I need to change? *Why can't I be good?*

I don't think it's just my own neurosis causing me to project such existential concerns onto Paul Farmer. He purposely fashions himself as a Christ-like figure: an extraordinary man, alone in the world, making extreme sacrifices, to heal the sick. Like many Christian saints of yore, he doesn't eat much, he wanders the countryside on foot, and he doesn't change his clothes. He tends to be very sanctimonious—you know, *preachy*. As Farmer himself, puts it: "People call me a saint and I think, I have to work harder. Because a saint would be a great thing to be."

So, as I read *Mountains Beyond Mountains* I felt a growing sense of despair. First, about my own inadequacies of character and action, and then a deepening sense of guilt for being so self-centered that I would frame this inspiring story in terms of these inadequacies. Tracy Kidder sums up this kind of reaction with the term "moral envy." As Kidder writes near the end of the book:

Some people have read *Mountains Beyond Mountains* and said, in effect, 'Damn, I wasted my life. I should have done what Paul Farmer's done.' That's in the best cases. In the worst few cases I know about, readers seem to have thought, 'I'm going to get even with him for making me feel like a failure.' And they've looked around for flaws, and when they haven't found any that are important, they've simply made them up. (p. 311)

At the other extreme from "moral envy" we can find the impulse to submit to Paul Farmer, to emulate him, and to become, perhaps, his disciple. At this point in your lives, I think many of you have this option. You might invest yourselves in saving the world, in his manner. It's hard to do but--in theory at least--you could follow in his footsteps.

You could study medicine, you could find donors, you could start an NGO or open a medical clinic—you could help a lot of people in that way. But to my mind, the hard part would not be the studying, or the hours of work, or the dizzying schedule, or dealing with the miserable spectacle of the poor, the hungry, and the sick. The hardest part, to me, would be setting aside the rules of the world as we know it, which are predicated on our tendency to be concerned for our own selves above all else; and to somehow do what is right, rather than what is easy, or expedient, or efficient. To be like Paul Farmer would require a radical change of mindset, not just building a skill set.

Is it reasonable to follow his path? Jim Kim, the other driving force behind Partners in Health, has one answer:

If Paul is the model, we're fucked.... Let's celebrate him. Let's make sure people are inspired by him. But we can't say anybody should or could be just like him ... if the poor have to wait for a lot of people like Paul to come along before they get good health care, they are totally fucked. (p. 244)

As we can see, Farmer, like many people who seem to serve a higher calling, is a tough act to follow. Thus is the dilemma of the disciple: how does an ordinary person follow the path of a saint? Although I have set up a comparison between

Farmer and Christ, I want to emphasize that the problem is not particular to Christianity. Faithful people everywhere deal with this dilemma. The Buddha, the Prophet Mohammed, Moses, and countless others serve as models of righteousness and wisdom; even as we try to follow in their footsteps, their extraordinary natures underscore our own ordinariness, our imperfection. Every faith tries to deal with this dilemma of the disciple in its own way.

But whether you are religious, secular, or undecided, let's assume that you want to do good in the world, and you even want to do some things that Paul Farmer has done, but you know you can't be quite like him. Who will be your example?

In the time that remains, I want to take the spotlight off Paul Farmer, and instead reflect on the lives of three marginal characters from the book, using them as models for other ways of living ethically and intelligently in this world. Each one of these people represents a different realm of life: first, politics, which I define—perhaps somewhat charitably—as the art of bringing disparate groups together for a common purpose; second, economics, which I boil down to how we make a living in the world; and third, the intellectual realm, or the life of the mind.

Making an exception for the life of the mind, these are three realms of living that Farmer consistently subordinates to his principal vocation of delivering the best health care possible to the marginalized people of Haiti, Peru, and many other places, what he calls "the preferential option for the poor." I think you'll agree that Farmer tends to delegate the hard work of dealing with these often mundane aspects of life to other people. And so, I want to emphasize that Farmer's success comes from coordination and collaboration with his partners, not some solo effort. In other words, we all have a role to play in this world, and we can do good in many different ways.

As depicted in *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, Jim Kim played a pivotal role bringing Partners in Health into the complex arena of international health policy. While Paul Farmer tends to prefer confrontation over compromise, and maintaining ideological purity over negotiation, Jim Kim is willing to wade into the political fray. As he tells Farmer at one point, "Political work is interesting to me, and it has to be done."

Tracy Kidder portrays Jim as Paul Farmer's loyal lieutenant, his sounding board, and the voice of reason. From time to time, they lock horns over tuberculosis policy and whether to make compromises with donors. Unfortunately, Jim, as the "organization man," so to speak, may come across as less interesting, and as less of a vital force, than Farmer. Even Farmer doesn't think enough of Jim to pick him up at the airport, as Kidder mentions several times.

But, by plugging away, and navigating the difficult politics of global health, international development, and academia, Jim Kim has built a career that arguably makes him more influential than Farmer is today. After many years with Partners in Health, and then the WHO, Jim served as the president of Dartmouth College, and last year he became the President of the World Bank, one of the most powerful institutions on earth. The World Bank channels billions of dollars in aid and loans from wealthy countries to less developed countries, and to a large extent helps to set the agenda for international development policy. Jim's leadership promises to advance the cause of global health, a trend that Partners in Health helped to spark with their work starting in the 1980s.

The World Bank is a gigantic, slow-moving institution, and it is hard to say how much Jim has changed its policies. But surely, if we feel that improving the lives of the world's poor is a priority, isn't it better to have someone like Jim Kim on the inside, even if he must constantly negotiate, bargain, and compromise?

Paul Farmer has a distaste for compromise; he also seems indifferent to money. More precisely, he thinks that money should be no object in providing care—that is, the poor and the rich alike are deserving of the same level of care. In a nutshell, that is his "preferential option for the poor," a philosophy that defies the utilitarian, efficiency-based principles at the heart of most public health policy. In the world of public health, policymakers live under conditions of scarce resources, and strive to get the most "bang for the buck." Farmer disregards this logic, and seemingly all financial reality, in the way he seeks to provide care for the poor.

In one of the book's most memorable stories, the young Haitian boy John is airlifted to the U.S. for a cancer treatment that comes too late to save him, at a cost

of tens of thousands of dollars. This is a poignant and challenging example of Farmer's principles taken to their logical end—Was the cost of trying to save this one child worth it? Could the same money have been spent to save dozens of other children with less expensive problems?

Paul Farmer can be unconcerned about money thanks, in large part, to the action of Tom White, the Boston philanthropist who provided the seed money and an almost continuous stream of income for Partners in Health. White, who died at the age of 90 in 2011, reportedly gave away \$75 million during his lifetime. He himself was not born into wealth, but rather built his fortune as a capitalist, in the construction industry.

There is an irony here: while global capitalism creates the unequal world that Farmer is trying to transform through his work, Farmer's own mission could not be sustained without Tom White's life work of managing, investing, and building enterprise in the private sector. White is not the only capitalist behind the scenes of Partners in Health; later, they come to depend on the philanthropy of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, created by one of the wealthiest men in the world, a man whose net worth, around \$50 billion, is approximately seven times the GNP, or national income, of all of Haiti, which has 10 million people.

So, Tom White and Bill Gates represent another path to take: that of the socially conscious capitalist. But, while such philanthropic efforts seek to solve specific problems in a decisive way, the relationship between global capitalism and social development is much more complicated. Capitalism can build fortunes that allow for huge philanthropic ventures. But, as needy as they are, should the poor of Haiti be consigned to be the objects of charity forever? Or, does Haiti need political and social change that allows for more broad-based economic development? On the other hand, while Farmer tends to portray Haiti as a victim of global economic forces, we could also make the argument that globalization has, on the whole, been good for the world's poor. Arguably, the most globalized of developing countries, such as China, have managed to lift hundreds of millions of people out of poverty and ill health not so much through acts of charity, or through development aid, but with capitalist investment and industrial production.

In his own strategy for health care, Paul Farmer recognizes that the poor need more than medicine—they need food, shelter, jobs, income. How to make these things possible, and to make these opportunities widely available, and growth sustainable: these are not simple questions.

My last alternative model for living a good life requires me to violate my premise a little bit. Here, the figure I'm referring to is another side of Paul Farmer himself, which he expresses through his academic work, thus modeling for us the intellectual life, or the life of the mind. Most people encounter Paul Farmer for the first time through *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, or through his activism and leadership of Partners in Health. I first came to know Farmer through his academic writing—books such as *AIDS and Accusation* or *Pathologies of Power*. When I came to find out that Farmer possessed not only an M.D. but also a Ph.D. in Anthropology, and that he could write important, well received books, while also attending to Partners in Health in several different countries, along with working at one of the leading teaching hospitals in the U.S.—well, this inspired in me not moral envy, but just ordinary, run-of-the-mill professional envy.

But in all honesty, his academic work deserves the accolades it has received, and that work in itself has helped to initiate important conversations that alter certain paradigms in the world of international health. Kidder makes mention of Farmer's writing but it is not central to the narrative; readers are more likely to "form an impression of Farmer as a maverick medic invested in a messianic mission of saving everyone he personally touches," as the geographer Matthew Sparke has written.

Indeed, many of the bureaucrats at the WHO and other influential institutions are initially dismissive of Farmer due to his status as a "mere clinician"—for a clinician, the patient standing in front of him (or her) is the most important person in the world, and no effort should be spared to save that patient. Farmer, his critics say, fails to see "the big picture," by ignoring the financial challenges of providing care to the world's poor.

This is a distorted picture; Farmer, through his academic work, has demonstrated, time and again, a penetrating and far-ranging analysis of the causes of global

inequalities in health. His contributions are numerous. As reflected in the work of Partners in Health, on the ground, Farmer has insisted on an approach to health care that transcends the merely biological aspects of disease and instead accounts for the social causes of ill health. As Farmer makes clear, time and again, poverty and marginalization and powerlessness are just as much causes of tuberculosis or HIV/AIDS as a bacterium or a virus. In dialogue with other anthropologists, Farmer has developed a theory of "structural violence," a kind of violence that works through social hierarchies and global circuits of power, to limit people's life chances and destroy their health, but without requiring any overt acts of physical violence or oppression. As discussed in *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, the mechanisms of structural violence are political and sometimes even well intentioned, ranging from the dam project on the Artibonite River to the International Monetary Fund's structural adjustment policies, which in the 1980s and 1990s compelled many developing countries to take a step backwards in providing health care to their citizens.

It's fair to ask why Paul Farmer would even bother engaging with the world of academic scholarship – he doesn't *need* to publish critical social science research to sustain and promote Partners in Health. But I think that Paul Farmer wants to subject his ideas to some test of reasonableness, of logical rigor, and also to show that Haiti, or Peru, or Rwanda, are just instances of much more general, global-scale processes. He wants to break down those walls that put theory here, and practice there, and he wants to make the world of medicine more attentive to politics. And, he needs to theorize, analyze, and write, to make sense of the world. Through such intellectual engagements, Farmer, a religious man, but also a scientist, frees himself of dogma, and orthodoxy.

At Macalester, I hope you'll embrace and try to balance all of these examples for living in an ethical, intelligent, and engaged way. I hope you'll see the virtues of the life of the mind, the necessity of disconnecting, sometimes, to find your own version of Farmer's mountaintop retreat—a place to observe, to contemplate, and to analyze. I hope, like Jim Kim, you'll understand that reasonable people will disagree, that resources are limited, and that allies are necessary to getting things done – in short, I hope you'll be politically engaged. And, like Tom White, I hope you'll realize that, no matter what line of work you go into, money in itself is

neither good, nor bad—but the choice of putting it to ethically good, or bad, uses, is ours to make. Lastly, you'll recognize soon enough that there are no saints here at Macalester, and just as importantly, no particular idea or philosophy is sacred. It's up to you to find your own path towards an ethical, intelligent, and engaged way of living. Welcome to Macalester.