In Mountains Beyond Mountains, Pulitzer Prize winner and bestselling author Tracy Kidder weaves an inspirational book that illuminates the life of Paul Farmer, an infectious-disease specialist, Harvard professor, and anthropologist, renowned for his lifelong goal of making the world a better place to live, one person at a time. Kidder profiles Farmer’s life describing how passion and ingenuity can indeed change the world. Farmer has dedicated his life to diagnosing and treating the world’s poorest populations and bringing them the modern medicine that many of us take for granted. Kidder brilliantly shows how Farmer’s idealism is simultaneously both angelic and frustrating as he tirelessly healed the world’s poor for many years. But even upon being inspired by Farmer’s work, the reader may find himself frustrated that he lacks the conviction, intelligence, or pure genius to be as effective as Farmer.

Kidder takes the reader through much of Farmer’s eclectic life from growing up on a bus and boat in a Florida bayou to becoming fascinated with anthropology and Haiti at Duke, to a decorated professional career at Harvard. In the mid-1980’s, Farmer began his Haitian clinic, Zanmi Lasante (“Partners in Health”), in one of the poorest and most disease-ridden regions of Haiti, the Central Plateau. In a world that believed public health programs for tuberculosis (TB) and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) could not be accomplished in such poor areas, Farmer’s compassion and dedication have prevailed. Partners in Health not only employs local Haitian people for the provision of healthcare, including the vaccination of most children, reduction of HIV transmission from mothers to babies to 4% (half that of the US), and stop the seemingly uncontrollable mortality due to TB (there has been no TB death in the central plateau since 1988), but has also managed to build schools, homes, and sanitation and water facilities.

Farmer practices evidence-based medicine to illustrate how one’s circumstance can affect science. One of Farmer’s clinic experiments indicated that TB patients who received free treatment along with money and extra support fared significantly better than TB patients who received only free treatment. This difference was independent of whether or not the patient believed they got TB from germs or sorcery.

Farmer sees epidemics as mass disturbances in mass life. These disturbances can be pathological, social, political, or anthropological. He applies this notion to the TB epidemic in which the worst cases tend to arise in poverty-stricken areas in which the poor get some treatment but never enough, and ultimately develop multi-drug resistant TB at higher rates than those infected with TB in non-impoverished areas. TB has all but been eradicated from the wealthy parts of the world, but has become rampant in the poor sections and seems to illustrate an unfortunate synergy with the HIV epidemic. Farmer has worked on TB and HIV in the poorest parts of the world including the Central Plateau of Haiti, the barrios of Peru, and the prisons of Russia. TB and HIV often occur synergistically, devastating the world’s poorest and most underserved populations. Farmer has now expanded to a global focus, teaming with the Gates Foundation and the World Health Organization to combat the global pandemics of TB and HIV. Farmer truly believes that TB and HIV will be the diseases that most affect this generation, and the medical and cultural response will historically define us.

In this novel, Kidder smoothly alternates between personal accounts of time with Farmer and third person descriptive details of Farmer’s life as a youth. At times, Kidder’s opinion of Farmer’s personality overwhelms his story-telling. However, for this reader it often mirrored personal thoughts on the situation. Overall, the light and easy language of the book made reading fun and interesting even when describing the harsh conditions of Farmer’s work environment. Kidder’s opinions even made for some light and fun personality conflict.

For health care professionals, students, and those interested in the well being of humanity, Kidder’s book is an inspiration as to how one person can make a difference. Farmer embodies the tireless work of countless medical professionals who take care of the individual patients, educate themselves about the surrounding political and social environments, construct epidemiological studies to better understand the interaction
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between human circumstance and science, and practice medicine with public health in mind. But if you still finish this book feeling frustrated about the seemingly small changes you are able to make or the obstacles you face, the point is that you must continue to try. As Kidder observed, “Farmer wasn’t put on earth to make anyone feel comfortable, except for those lucky enough to be his patients.”

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