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Dr. Paul Farmer sits with a young leukemia patient, Marta Cassmand, in Cange, Haiti, in January 2004. Marta's father, Sanoit Valceus (foreground), had cut a tendon in his hand with a machete and was asking Farmer for advice. (Newscom/PSG/St. Petersburg Times/Daniel Wallace)



by Jennie Weiss Block

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February 28, 2022
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> Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave ... and humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross (Philippians 2:3-8).

In the early morning hours of Feb. 20, 2022, a band of angels and saints, among them some familiar faces, made their way to a humble room in rural Rwanda to bring Paul Farmer home to God. The room was filled with light and peace and there was much joy and rejoicing in the heavens as God's good and faithful servant entered the kingdom of God.

As the word of Farmer's death quickly spread around the world, thousands upon thousands of people from all walks of life were shocked and heartbroken as they received the news of his untimely passing at the age of 62. Many knew Paul as friend, colleague, doctor, mentor and teacher, and, yes, as a personal hero. Still millions of others knew him through his exemplary reputation.

For his wonderful close-knit family — his mother, Ginny, his wife, Didi, his children, Catherine, Sebastian* and Elisabeth, and his siblings Jim, Jeff, Katie, Peggy and Jennifer — he was just "Dad" or "PJ" or "Bro," and his death is a searing and irreversible loss.

> Paul Farmer was a man of great faith who loved God wildly and with his whole heart, and he set the standard for loving his neighbor as himself.
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The news of Farmer's death has been reported widely in every major news outlet including The New York Times, The Washington Post and The Wall Street Journal, and social media feeds in many languages. The accomplishments of his extraordinary life have been reported in detail using words like visionary, genius, humanity's hero, a radical pioneer, fighter, poet and healer — just to name a few.

I have seen his 120-page curriculum vitae that details his educational successes at Duke University and Harvard Medical School; his exemplary academic, teaching and administration career; his prolific publishing history with a dozen books and hundreds of scholarly articles; and the long list of the many prestigious awards he received over the years, including the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Fellowship and most recently the million-dollar Berggruen Prize (which he promptly gave away to the poor and then cheerfully quipped, "I was a millionaire for almost a week!").

And of course, among his greatest achievements is the amazing nongovernmental organization Partners in Health that Paul founded more than 30 years ago with the late Tom White, and his dearest friends, Ophelia Dahl, Jim Kim and Todd McCormack. Partners in Health provides high-quality health care globally to those who need it most and strives to ease suffering by also providing access to food, transportation, housing and other key components of healing. It established clinics in Haiti and Rwanda and later expanded to Lesotho, Liberia, Malawi, Mexico, Peru, Russia, Sierra Leone and the Navajo Nation in the United States.



On Jan. 10, 2012, Dr. Paul Farmer, center, plants a palm tree during the inauguration of a national referral and teaching hospital in Mirebalais, 30 miles north of Port-au-Prince, Haiti. (AP/Dieu Nalio Chery)

I was Farmer's spiritual director (or as he liked to joke, "his interior decorator"), and I can tell you that even these most impressive credentials pale in comparison to his interior life. To put it quite simply, Paul Farmer was a man of great faith who loved God wildly and with his whole heart, and he set the standard for loving his neighbor as himself.

Paul loved to give nicknames to his friends and even his patients. He affectionally called me his "BFF," but sometimes his nicknames could be cryptic or could have even come across as irreverent if one didn't understand the context and the love with which they were used. For example, "pus boy" was a young patient with a severe infection, and "land mine boy" was a young man injured by stepping on a landmine in post-genocide Rwanda — but these nicknames were always with said

with an affection that mirrored the tender care he offered his patients.

Since Paul died, the quote from Philippians at the beginning of this essay keeps running through my head. The passage, of course, refers to the way Jesus did not cling to godliness but emptied himself unto death out of love for humanity — an emptying best expressed by the Greek word *kenosis*. And now "kenosis man" is my nickname for my beloved friend Paul, because he did not cling to prestige or wealth or reputation — no, he emptied himself, each and every day, in love and service to others, especially the world's poorest people. Kenosis man, indeed.

Dominican Sr. Barbara Reid, president of Catholic Theological Union, told me it was her great privilege to moderate a discussion between Paul and his great friend and mentor Dominican Fr. Gustavo Gutiérrez, to launch their best-selling book, *In the Company of the Poor*.

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Reid recounts, "The synergy between Paul and Gustavo was electric. There were more than 2,000 people at that gathering and most of them lined up to talk with Paul after the panel presentation. He stayed until every person who wanted to talk with him did so."

That was Paul. I was with him on many occasions as we closed out many venues late at night after book signings or speeches where he stood for hours, for as long as he could, and then finally sat down when his leg — injured long ago in an accident, would start to ache. He always chatted in an unhurried manner with every person who had patiently stood in line to meet him, and now I am so glad for the thousands of pictures of Paul I took with young people — whom he often referred to as "his retirement plan." I am sure these photos are now treasured relics.

Paul loved to be around nuns and priests and he very much admired Reid for her graciousness and her academic rigor. Sometimes he would say, "Wow! Did she really edit a hundred-volume Scripture series?"

Reid was right on point when she noted, "Paul had a way of making every person he ever met feel like they were among his best friends. He gave everyone that kind of attention, a most extraordinary gift. He truly had an enormous impact on me and I'm

sure everyone else who was part of his life in any way would say the same."



Dr. Paul Farmer with his oldest daughter, Catherine, at Christ Church, Oxford, England, during the 2011 Skoll World Forum (Flickr/Skoll Foundation)

The last years of Paul's life were very happy. The pandemic gave him long stretches of months at a time at home with his family engaged in ordinary activities — making dinner and playing Scrabble with his children, watching movies, and sometimes grocery shopping and driving his daughter to her swim lessons. He even spent a few weekends away with his beautiful wife, Didi, whom he greatly admired for her work with the Women and Girls Initiative she founded in Haiti.

In between endless Zoom sessions for teaching and meetings, he was able to carve out long hours of silence, of planting in his garden, of sitting at his koi pond nurturing his contemplative leanings. In the past months, I sensed a profound growth of his religious imagination.

He was in Rwanda for the last month of his life doing want he loved best: teaching and seeing patients. The comments and emails that he sent me during the last weeks of his life were filled with pictures of his patients with requests for prayers and updates on their conditions. The last pictures he sent me showed him sitting on the bed with a beautiful little girl named Josiane who was being treated for cancer. He was so happy that he had made her smile.

He had lost a patient just a few days ago, a young man named Faustin. He had sent me a picture of him a few days earlier to ask for prayers and told me there was a "sliver of hope." He was so sad when he wrote and told me, "We lost Faustin at midnight."

He sent me a picture of him with Faustin's father and a forlorn image of four men carrying Faustin's casket. I told him that his accompaniment of Faustin and his family was a sign of God's love and mercy.

I was supposed to have been on this trip with Paul, but we put it off because of the omicron situation. When I said I wished I was there with him and asked if he was OK, his response was: "But you are here because you know. I am OK deep down and love this work so much."

There are so many images throughout the years of Paul with his patients throughout the world — young and old people — many of whom he gave many extra years of life. His love and his compassion for all of humanity is the subtext of all these beautiful photos. Really, is it any wonder that his heart gave out?



Writer Jennie Weiss Block, center, with Dr. Paul Farmer and a young patient in Haiti (Courtesy of Jennie Weiss Block)

Paul loved his work, his patients, his wife and his children, his mother and his siblings, and his many friends around the globe fiercely and unconditionally. Both publicly and privately, thousands of people are grief-stricken by trying to imagine our lives without Paul. For me, I know with great certainty that he is with God, and I actually know, too, that he is happy and in good spirits.

Jesuit Fr. Jim Keenan of Boston College was a great friend of Paul's for many years and they shared much in common — they were both gifted intellectuals and writers with deeply moral compasses, and an especially an uncommon dedication to their students. When I asked Jim for a comment for this obituary, I was not surprised how he captured the essence of Paul's spirit.

"From the very first time I met Paul some 20 years ago, I always thought of him as playful; it was that playfulness that made him so accessible. By that playfulness, he made you believe that you were fun to be with. He helped you, wherever you were, to laugh. That playfulness was infectious. He helped each of us to be childlike," Keenan said.

"I am not trying to romanticize his work or his death," he added. "To know Paul was to know a man who faced disease and death more than anyone we knew. He was fearless; if for instance, you read his recent book on Ebola, *Fevers, Feuds and Diamonds*, you knew how incredibly courageous he was."

"It is said that what makes us vulnerable to one another is when we recognize the child in each other," Keenan said. "Paul saw the world as a world of children. Against the backdrop of disease, threat and death he wanted the children to flourish. And that was all of us. I imagine he is right now playing with God. And, I imagine, everyone else around the kingdom of God is watching. And they are probably thinking that he's helping God to feel that God is fun to be with."

Although I believe that Paul is happy and in good spirits, I also know that for me, and so many others, his passing leaves a massive void. We will miss Paul for the rest of our lives. I pray that we can all dig deep and enter this void with grace and courage by trying to emulate Paul, so we too, might someday laugh with him in the kingdom of God.



Dr. Paul Farmer is seen at Koidu Government Hospital in Kono, Sierra Leone, July 3, 2019. (CNS/Courtesy of Partners in Health/John Ra)

What now? For sure, we must go forward with hope and courage — Paul would expect nothing else and, believe me, no one in his orbit would want to disappoint Paul. But I feel I must share some comments that I have received in the three long days since Paul died. More than one person has told me that when they started to pray for Paul, they felt themselves shifting and beginning to pray to Paul.

One of these people, the internationally known Dominican theologian Fr. Vivian Boland, wrote to say: "I was very saddened to read about the sudden death of Paul Farmer. It was one of the highlights of my time at St. Louis to learn about his work and then to have the honor of meeting him. I remembered him and his family at Mass this morning. In fact, I prayed '*to*' him and not just '*for*' him, believing him to be already among the saints, asking him to intercede for a little girl called Martha, whom I was also praying for this morning: she is just 2 years old and has been living with cancer for practically all of her short life. I hope her recovery might be Paul's

first miracle!"

In the Catholic tradition, we know that one of the signs that mark a saint is when people begin to pray to them for their intercessions. Paul would be the last person who would ever have thought of himself as a saint. He was far too aware of his faults and human failings, and, like most of us, he knew he had many.

He would likely have chuckled and shrugged his shoulders, but then turned serious and said something like, "Hey, if it will make people think how they make a preferential option for the poor and work together to build the kingdom of God in the here and now, call me anything you want."

Rest in peace, kenosis man. Thank you for drawing all of us closer to the kingdom of God. And please, Paul, pray for us so we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ.

**This story has been updated to correct a misspelled name.*

A version of this story appeared in the **March 18-31, 2022** print issue under the headline: Dr. Paul Farmer, aka 'kenosis man,' emptied himself in love and service to others.