

With Dr. Paul Farmer at Harvard

John Dear | Nov. 4, 2008 | On the Road to Peace

What a boost it was to spend All Saints' Day in Boston, just before the election, with hundreds of Pax Christi friends, all of us reflecting on the Sermon on the Mount. And what a privilege to speak about *A Persistent Peace*, my recent autobiography, at St Paul's on Harvard Square, to be introduced by one of Harvard's brightest stars, my old friend Dr. Paul Farmer, a doctor who reinvented international healthcare as a call to abolish poverty. Dr. Paul, a living saint.

Paul and I go back some 30 years, when we were fraternity brothers at Duke University, both of us 18. From freshmen to seniors, we are all in awe of him. He seemed to me then the smartest person I had met; and nothing over the years has changed my opinion.

He and I graduated finally. I entered the Jesuits. Paul went on to Harvard Medical School, where he is now a full professor of medical anthropology and an attending physician at Brigham and Women's hospital in Boston. But that barely describes Paul's incredible journey.

It begins on a quirky note. Paul, the youngest of six, spent his earliest years living on a bus and his adolescent years on a boat moored at a marina. He graduated at the top of his high school class in Alabama, and Duke made a quick offer for a full scholarship. Within months of his arrival, as I recall, he was one of the most popular, influential students on campus. Even the faculty were in awe.

He and I reminisced Friday night about the night Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero was assassinated. At the Duke campus, a small prayer vigil was held, an event that Paul identifies as a turning point in his life. It was the first time he realized that Christianity meant siding with the poor, advocating for the poor, speaking out on behalf of the poor, and abolishing poverty itself.

Some of his story has been recounted already in the best-selling biography, *Mountains beyond Mountains: The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer, A Man Who Would Cure the World*, by the Pulitzer prize-winning author Tracy Kidder. He calls Paul "brilliant, charismatic, charming, both a leader in international health and a doctor who finds time to make house calls in Boston and the mountains of Haiti."

A great book but there's so much more to him. If you heard him in person, you would find not the stern professor, but a hilarious, down-to-earth human being, who happens to have a photographic memory, a heart as wide as the world, and a vision that reaches beyond the horizon of things-as-usual toward a new world without

poverty, hunger and war.

Through a series of events, in the mid-1980s Paul found his way to Haiti. While studying infectious diseases at Harvard, he commuted back and forth and then started a clinic in central Haiti. In 1987, with his friends, he founded Partners in Health, an international agency that promotes healthcare for the poorest of the poor in Haiti, Rwanda, Russia, Peru, Mexico and other nations. Their mission, Paul writes, is both "medical and moral."

Today, PIH (see: www.pih.org [1]) has a budget of some \$50 million and the support of the most influential people on the planet in its campaign to heal the poor and eradicate poverty. In particular, PIH works to cure drug-resistant tuberculosis among prisoners in Siberia and in the slums of Lima, Peru. Bill Clinton calls Paul "the Albert Schweitzer of his generation."

Today, Paul commutes every other week it seems between Harvard, Haiti and Rwanda, where his wife and three children live full time -- that is, when Paul is not addressing the United Nations, giving commencement addresses at Princeton or lecturing in medical schools around the world.

His many books include *AIDS and Accusation: Haiti and the Geography of Blame*; *The Uses of Haiti*; *Infections and Inequalities: The Modern Plagues*; *Pathologies of Power: Health, Human Rights, and the New War on the Poor*; and *Women, Poverty & AIDS: Sex, Drugs and Structural Violence*. Next year, the University of California press will publish *The Paul Farmer Reader*.

Last month, Paul was one of the first internationals to get into Haiti after the devastating hurricane destroyed the only bridges up to the north. It left perhaps a million people homeless, killed perhaps 5,000 people, and flung the suffering people into agony. It was, he said, "the worst suffering I have seen in my life." This week, he's on his way back to do what he can to help. There, Paul is revered as a saint.

"Paul Farmer is a superb physician, a penetrating anthropologist, and a prophet of social justice," Jeffrey Sachs writes. "He combines an unflinching moral stance -- that the poor deserve healthcare just as much as the rich do -- with scientific expertise and boundless dedication. He has saved the lives of countless destitute patients in Haiti, Peru, and Russia, and he has shown that effective health services, even complex medical regimens, can be put in place in impoverish communities."

Paul shows us what healthcare could be. His life opens the real possibility that every human being in the United States -- and in the entire world -- can have free access to excellent healthcare if we but create the political will to make it happen.

For me, Paul shows us that every one of us can make a difference, if we give our lives to the Gospel mission to which Jesus calls us. Paul's passion and commitment have inspired thousands of doctors, and perhaps changed modern international healthcare, but he didn't know that when he began. He just did what he could, even in the face of death and seemingly insurmountable poverty and injustice. And he keeps at it.

Paul shows us how to follow Jesus by siding with the poor, advocating for social justice, and healing those in need. He models for us how to be a Christian, how to be human in these inhuman times. He gives me real hope.

Paul gets embarrassed by such talk. His philosophy is summed up in his motto, "The only real nation is humanity."

In light of today's election, Paul's life summons us to redouble our efforts on behalf of the whole human race. He calls us once again back to the real ongoing suffering of billions of people around the planet.

He wants us to get involved and stay involved with actual poor people and do what we can to help end poverty, hunger, disease and war. In this way humanity can move closer toward a new world of social and economic justice.

Thank you, brother Paul. May your vision come true.

This week, John Dear will speak at the Call to Action conference in Milwaukee (see: www.cta-usa.org [2]), as well as in Minneapolis, Pittsburgh and Rochester. John's autobiography, *A Persistent Peace*, (Loyola Press), and a new collection of these NCR Cafe columns, *Put Down Your Sword* (Eerdmans), are available from www.amazon.com. For further information, see: www.johndear.org [3] and www.persistentpeace.com [4].

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[1] <http://www.pih.org>

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