

“Essays may be written in the formal or informal voice: more importantly, your individual voice must be represented.”

--An impossible command for an even more impossibly powerful book. That, I think, is my central reaction to *Mountains Beyond Mountains*. What is my personal voice? How will I use it to change the world?

First, what do I do after enjoying this book? *Mountains Beyond Mountains* leaves one feeling guilty or inadequate (emotions that are, in retrospect, probably necessary for us freshmen, still sailing on the high of getting in to Dartmouth). Reading this book made me feel almost gluttonous. After all, I bought the book in a nice bookstore in New Hampshire and read it on the couch on a lazy summer day. The Haitian poor, in the words of Jean-Bertrand Aristide, “will never be able to buy the books that hold the words that might deliver them” (qtd. in Farmer 373). If *Mountains Beyond Mountains* is a book that will help these beleaguered people, then a discussion on it must include what the reader does *after* reading it.

What should be done? There are a variety of responses. Even Paul Farmer, in his lengthy book entitled “The Uses of Haiti,” dedicates only a few paragraphs to this question. The question, although never explicitly stated in Kidder’s book, surfaces at every description of the health crisis in Haiti, or of the deplorable conditions in Russian prisons. In a Cuban hotel, Farmer says to Kidder: “When others write about people who live on the edge, who challenge their comfortable lives—and it has happened to me—they usually do it in a way that allows the reader a way out [...] I want other people to feel unhappy about Lazarus and all the others who are shafted” (qtd. in Kidder 207). Clearly Farmer cares less about the sales of the book and more about what the book will do to the worldview of others. He wants us to feel his challenge: to find a “voice” that will adequately address the problems laid out in this book.

It seems that the first response to this book would be to follow in Farmer's footsteps. This is a natural and even admirable impulse. But it is not a practical one. Haiti doesn't need a thousand Dartmouth freshmen attempting to perform spinal taps or trekking miles into the Haitian countryside. The message for us is different. The book, and the global AIDS crisis, call for an individual voice—a special passion that each one of us has. The message of the book is irresistibly linked to our task as entering first-years: so what are we going to do to improve the world? Some of us may become Paul Farmers, and some of us Ophelia Dahls and Jim Kims and Tom Whites. How, individually, will we make a difference?

There is the temptation to take this line of thinking a little too far—to say that since we can't all be Paul Farmers, we need not try to alleviate the grave situations described in the book. Since we all won't earn millions like Tom White, we won't be able to finance global health projects. To say that, after finding our voice at Dartmouth, we should sit back and rest on our laurels. Or, even more dangerously, to say that *Mountains Beyond Mountains* was just a good book and wouldn't it be nice if everyone was like Farmer and his colleagues. This thinking belies the true message Kidder is trying to convey—an urgent message to help, and help now.

The literary aftertaste I experienced while ruminating over the message of this book was one of urgency. Unlike the majority of biographies, the subject is still alive and still working. Kidder reveals to the reader a different world, one that is often forgotten in the midst of the incredible health and wealth that is the First World. It is only a glimpse away, even, as Kidder references the high rates of TB in some parts of New York City. I sense that there exists a plush curtain (not unlike the Iron Curtain of the Cold War era) between the haves and the have-nots of the world, and that Kidder's book is like a glimpse beyond that curtain. Quoted by Farmer in "The Uses of Haiti", Noam Chomsky observes that "[...] the world's privileged are protected from suffering violence, they are protected from having to perpetrate it-directly-and they are

protected from having to apologize for it” (qtd. in Farmer 307). Our personal voice becomes focused on the here-and-now and the day-to-day: classes, jobs, relationships, etc.

Along with the limitations of our abilities (we cannot all be doctors), this plush curtain softens the urgency of our response to *Mountains Beyond Mountains*. In a way, it is both our limitations and our much-lauded abilities that cloud the picture. After all, we the class of 2009 made it to the steps of the Ivy League and for four years we will be surrounded by the excitement of an elite American college. But Farmer is there, reminding us that “a minor error in one setting of power and privilege could have an enormous impact on the poor in another” (qtd. in Kidder 78). How do we remember that we’re living a privileged life? We will receive an excellent education. But will we remember to tear down that plush curtain?

What, then, should be done? Paul Farmer encourages us to get our hands dirty (or gummy, as the case may be), and even to be critical of exclusively academic pursuits, claiming that “allologies fail us at some point” (qtd. in Kidder 195). He remarks, “The poor don’t want you to look at them. They want you to dress in a suit and go get them food and water” (qtd. in Kidder 100). If Farmer seems rash or his life unplanned, it is because he forgoes excessive rules and bureaucracy for passion and action. This is the key: education and passion—the individual voice. Heart, along with head, will help tear down the plush curtain.

We will receive an education, and it is our job to find our passion to make this education meaningful. The heart is sometimes more effective than the head, especially when finding a personal voice. Cornell West has written: “[...] it has always bothered me that Socrates never cries—he never sheds a tear. His profound yet insufficient rationalism refuses to connect noble self-mastery to a heartfelt solidarity with the agony and anguish of oppressed peoples” (West 213). “Socrates” is a symbol for the intellectual, and West is saying that the problem with academics is its insularity—the way it is shielded from action and the real world of poverty.

Mountains Beyond Mountains reminds me that Dartmouth is a meeting place for representatives. Every member of the class of 2009 is a representative: of their neighborhood, their country, their city, or their town. For every Dartmouth student here there are many people counting on that person, directly or indirectly, to make a difference.

The book acts as a consciousness that we as entering students desperately need. A conscience helps in finding a voice, and it helps in realizing that we can't assume someone else will solve the problem for us. As Kidder documents, there are mountains and mountains of problems waiting to be solved in the international health field, and it seems as if there are relatively few people with the passion and the individual voice needed to solve them.

Haiti doesn't need a thousand Dartmouth freshmen trekking into the hills of Cange: what it needs is for these freshmen to become intellectuals with a conscience. It needs enthusiastic men and women, who won't trust someone else to solve their world's problems. It needs them to pursue what they love, with the moral obligation to help others. It needs them to be true voices crying out in the wilderness. Haiti needs two things from us: passion and action. They form the individual voice. We need to tear down the plush curtain that separates ourselves from the needy. We need to find our individual voices, and when we do, we need to speak for others.

Works Cited

Farmer, Paul. (1994). *The uses of Haiti*. Monroe, Maine: Common Courage Press.

Kidder, Tracy. (2003). *Mountains beyond mountains*. New York: Random House.

West, Cornell. (2004). *Democracy matters: Winning the fight against imperialism*. New York: The Penguin Press.