

Bioethics Book Club



Mountains Beyond Mountains: The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer, A Man Who Would Cure the World by Tracy Kidder

Alfred A. Knopf, 2007

Summary¹

Pulitzer Prize-winning author Tracy Kidder tells the true story of Paul Farmer, a gifted physician who loves the world and has set out to do all he can to cure it. In medical school, Paul Farmer found his life's calling: to cure infectious diseases and to bring the lifesaving tools of modern medicine to those who need them most. The book takes us from Harvard to Haiti, Peru, Cuba, and Russia as Farmer changes minds and practices through his dedication to the philosophy that "the only real nation is humanity." At the heart of this book is the example of a life based on hope and on an understanding of the truth of the Haitian proverb "Beyond mountains there are mountains" - as you solve one problem, another problem presents itself, and so you go on and try to solve that one too.

Ethics Issues

- Social justice
- Population health ethics
- Social determinants of health
- Global health ethics
- Resource allocation
- Health inequality

Discussion Questions

1. This book discusses situations that take place in other countries, far from where we live and work. Discuss its relevance to your own practice.
2. Why should we help strangers in need? What are our moral obligations to help others? What are the limits of our obligation? Are some of us more obligated to help than others?
3. What is the value of community service, both to those who are serving and those being served? What values and ethical issues underlie these relationships? Is it always clear who is serving and who is being served?
4. The relationships between service and activism in health care are sometimes complementary and sometimes contentious. What are the values that underlie each and how might they conflict and/or align?
5. What issues does this book raise around individual versus collective action for the common good? Are alleviating disease and suffering personal or social responsibilities?
6. This book is written by a Caucasian American man about another Caucasian American man who seeks to improve the lives of poor people of color in Haiti and other parts of the so-called developing world. What issues, assumptions, values and ethical issues regarding race, class and ethnicity are implicitly and explicitly raised in the book?
7. How should we ethically allocate the distribution of benefits owed to those in need?
8. What motivates someone to assist or provide a service to strangers?
9. When considering the ethics of providing service, one can consider the motivations of the person serving or the value of that service for the person being served? Can/ should one be prioritized over the other? How can we reconcile conflicts between the two?

¹ Adapted from the publisher's summary

10. Health care providers deliver care and provide service as part of their profession. Is service more meaningful or ethical if it is done within a paid position or without financial compensation? At risk to your own welfare or in a safe environment? For the benefit of strangers or for those you know well?
11. Discuss the assumption that providing service to others necessarily involves a sacrifice by the person providing service.
12. Discuss this statement by Farmer: "I didn't say you should do what I do. I just said these things should be done!" (p. 244)
13. Discuss how Farmer seeks to shift the discourse away from what costs are believed "reasonable" to alleviate poverty and poor health toward the idea that poverty itself is unacceptable.
14. How do human rights and health ethics align and/or conflict in discussions of global health inequality?
15. Farmer is clear that providing health care requires an understanding of the political and economic environments that influence poor health outcomes. Do you agree? How can you relate this view to your own work and community?
16. What perspectives and issues of justice are explored in this book?
17. After reading this book, have your views on global health inequalities, privilege, and our relationship to them changed in any way?