Mountains Beyond Mountains

This is an excellently composed book written by Tracy Kidder (2003) which centers around the tale of a truly inspiring doctor. The title "Mountains Beyond Mountains" aptly fits this book as it serves as a metaphor for life - once you have scaled one mountain or challenge, there are more to come. This is especially true for Dr. Paul Farmer, who has devoted his life to what most people call the impossible. He has faced mountain after mountain in his quest to help mankind. He is a Massachusetts native that has been working in Haiti since 1982 and founds Zanmi Lasante (it is Creole for Partners in Health). The product of an unconventional childhood, spent in a camper bus and a houseboat, Farmer is brilliant and tireless in his quest to help others. He passes his medical school years (as an enrollee in Harvard Medical School) mostly in Haiti and still graduates near the top of his class. The portrayal of Haiti's poverty is staggering. Farmer rejects the existing inadequate, bureaucracy-ridden clinics, and establishes his own public health clinic in a remote, mountainous area. Haiti's Zanmi Lasante (Partners in Health) develops from its position as Farmer's home base, to the place where he still practices hands-on medicine between worldwide jaunts promoting TB and AIDs policies and raising money. Throughout Farmer's travels to Moscow, Lima, Peru, Boston, he relentlessly seeks funding and educates people about the harsh conditions in Haiti. During his work in Haiti, Farmer pioneers a community-based treatment method for patients with tuberculosis. For this work, Farmer is recognized in 1993 with a MacArthur Foundation "genius grant," all of which he donated to Zanmi Lasante. Kidder paints a beautiful picture of Farmer's life, as an almost saintly figure because of the admirable effect Farmer has on those whom he treats.

Farmer is a charming doctor who doesn't hesitate to impose his views. He abhors the uncaring material world amidst the sea of poverty. He inspires many, yet at the same time is intimidating, often leaving his close friends feeling inadequate and sometimes resentful and guilty. He's also sunny-natured, highly emotional and captivating. By the age of 27, he has treated more illnesses than most doctors would see in a lifetime. With time, he finds himself on the world stage trying to find a cure for drug resistant tuberculosis, undertaking the difficult role of a global fundraiser, and fighting big pharmacy for lower drug prices. I think Dr. Farmer is a great representative of a modern day medical hero; what medicine is supposed to be all about. Farmer serves as reminder of what medicine aspires to be - the buck as only a means to an end, most importantly ending poverty, ending tuberculosis, ending the plights of many humans who cannot receive treatment from a qualified and trained doctor. This relates perfectly to what we have read in class because it shows the vast gap between the developed world and the developing world. In the end I believe that books like these give hope to the readers that a few good men still exist in the world; namely those that put helping others and positively impacting mankind above anything else.