

Jane Austen and Paul Farmer
By Nora Hutchinson

I've been asked to speak about books that inspire me. In so doing, I have chosen one biography, Tracy Kidder's bioptic about Paul Farmer, and one author, Jane Austen:

“It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.

However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighborhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families, that he is considered as the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters.”

This is how Jane Austen begins, *Pride and Prejudice*. I think it provides a nice example of the insightful, and amusing, quality of her writing.

While Jane Austen's novels may not immediately come across as inspiring, there is a reason why people, myself included, continually return to her books. While I am certainly drawn to the romance of Darcy and Elizabeth, and that of Marianne and Mr. Willoughby, Jane Austen's appeal goes beyond simple love stories.

Indeed, it is her humorous descriptions of society and her vivid characters that are her strength. Austen truly understood the intricate politics of social interaction and possessed a shrewd appreciation for the flawed nature of the human character. Here is another example from *Pride and Prejudice*, in which the author describes the protagonists' parents, Mr. and Mrs. Bennett:

“Mr. Bennett was so odd a mixture of quick parts, sarcastic humour, reserve, and caprice, that the experience of three and twenty years had been insufficient to make his wife understand his character. Her mind was less difficult to develop. She was a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper. When she was discontented she fancied herself nervous. The business of her life was to get her daughters married; its solace was visiting and news.”

Jane Austen did not mince words when it came to the faults of her characters.

But, how is this inspirational and what does it have to do with medicine?

If politics is the art of interacting with others, then medicine is truly a political endeavour. It requires the ability to communicate and to appreciate another's concerns, hopes and fears. Jane Austen grasped the importance of the unspoken elements in every social interaction. She also recognized the flawed nature of humanity.

As medicine is truly a human endeavour, it must also be inherently flawed. Yet, rather than becoming oppressed by the weight of such a realization, Jane Austen would have us recognize the humour in our daily lives. She would also encourage us to gain a little comfort, and perhaps some lightness of spirit, from our own unique imperfections and of those who surround us.

If Jane Austen is a wonderful observer of human nature, then Paul Farmer is certainly more of an action man. A graduate of Harvard Medical School with Ph.D. in medical anthropology, Farmer is an infectious disease specialist who gained international recognition for his success and commitment to treating seemingly intractable diseases, such as multiple-drug resistant tuberculosis in incredibly under-resourced areas.

In his biography of Paul Farmer, *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, Tracy Kidder describes Farmer in action at the Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston, Massachusetts:

“Farmer moved through the Brigham in a long-legged stride, making intermittent headway. He'd pause to receive a hug from a nurse's aide, then to exchange quips in Haitian Creole with a janitor. Then his beeper would go off. Answering the page, he'd greet the hospital operator - whichever of the dozen or so came on line - and quickly ask about her blood pressure, or her husband's heart condition, or her mother's diabetes. Then he'd have to stop at a nurses' station to answer an e-mail about a patient, then to answer a question from a cardiologist. Finally, stethoscope around his neck and singing in creative German, “We are the world. We are das Welt,” Farmer led the infectious disease team to the patient's door. Then everything slowed down.”

Certainly a colourful character and a workaholic without a doubt, Paul Farmer is above all a clinician, and one who seems to thrive in social interactions with his patients, colleagues and students. His organization, Partners' in Health, attempts to redress the world's healthcare inequalities - a difficult task, no doubt, and one that Farmer describes as “fighting the long defeat.”

What amazes me about Farmer is his ability to recognize the difficulty of his task, but to not be constrained by that knowledge or to become jaded by the enormity of the pursuit. Describing Farmer's approach to medical fees at his hospital complex in Haiti, Kidder writes:

“At Zanmi Lasante, too, patients were supposed to pay user fees, the equivalent of about eighty American cents for a visit. Haitian colleagues of Farmer's had insisted on this. Farmer was the medical director, but he hadn't argued. Instead - this was often his way, I would learn - he had simply subverted the policy. Every patient had to pay the eighty cents, except for women and children, the destitute, and anyone who was seriously ill. Everyone had to pay, that is, except for almost everyone. And no one - Farmer's rule - could be turned away.”

I think this characterizes Farmer's stance as an action man. Rather than admitting defeat in the face of opposition, he finds a way to circumvent obstacles, all the while maintaining his dedication to those who are most in need - his patients. Indeed, as stated by Kidder: “Farmer wasn't put on earth to make anyone feel comfortable, except for those lucky enough to be his patients ...”. Farmer's goal, in a sense, is to challenge people in their complacency, disrupt their comfortable lives, and incite them to action.

And I do feel incited to action when I read this book. Farmer's unwavering commitment to his cause makes me feel a little inadequate. But, I think that this is ultimately positive. His story excites me, awakens me to the possibilities in the world and in the medical profession and allows me to envision a medical career that has clear purpose, is grounded in serving others and is above all hopeful.

In fighting the long defeat, Farmer recognizes that medicine itself is not a perfect system. As Jane Austen would remind us, it is a human creation and thus inherently flawed. Yet, if Austen would have us rejoice in its flaws, Farmer would have us work like crazy to try and address them.

You need both observation and action in medicine; I think that the combination is part of what makes an excellent clinician. So, perhaps Paul Farmer and Jane Austen are not so different. In a sense, they represent two important aspects of the medical profession and the pairing of the two is what is really important.

Author Bio: Nora Hutchinson is a second year medical student at McGill University in Montreal, Quebec. She previously completed a joint Bachelors of Arts in history and anthropology at McGill. In the future, she hopes to combine a career in clinical medicine with research in the social studies of medicine. Nora is a member of the McGill University squash team and also enjoys playing soccer, hiking and reading. Email: nora.hutchinson@mail.mcgill.ca