



Paul E. Farmer



Photograph courtesy of Stephanie Mitchell / Harvard University

Paul E. Farmer, Kolokotronis University Professor at Harvard and Chair, Department of Global Health and Social Medicine at HMS, and Chief of the Division of Global Health Equity at Brigham and Women's Hospital, died on February 21, 2022. He was also the Chancellor of the University of Global Health Equity in Butaro, Rwanda, where he was teaching medical students when he died at the age of 62. The entirely unanticipated death of this world-historical global health champion shocked people around the world.

Working at the intersection of social medicine and health, Farmer was a true revolutionary: a scholar, an activist, and a practitioner. His scholarship in medical anthropology laid bare the social forces that resulted in the devastatingly poor health outcomes for the destitute in Haiti and beyond. His critique of the pathologies of power, specifically structural violence, neoliberal economic theory,

immodest claims of causality, and the false dichotomy of prevention versus treatment became the foundational social theories supporting the modern movement for global health equity. Farmer's moral philosophy and the scholarship from which it emanated were linked uniquely to action. In 1984 as an HMS student in rural Haiti, Farmer co-founded Zanmi Lasante (Partners In Health or PIH), a medical and social justice organization committed to treating the poor. Led by Farmer's scholarship and connection with the tenets of liberation theology, PIH sought to provide a preferential option for the poor through accompaniment in health care.

Farmer shifted the paradigm from prevention-only to comprehensive care, which captivated a generation of scholars, health care workers, and government leaders from across the globe. Most notably Farmer's scholarship on treatment of HIV in Haiti and drug-resistant TB in Peru garnered the attention of a large global social movement for health equity. The movement was successful in mobilizing billions of dollars of new money that could be used by governments and community organizations to provide AIDS drugs as a basic human right. The scale up of AIDS treatment was one of the great medical and social policy successes of the 21st century. In 2000, fewer than 50,000 people on the African continent who needed the

*In tribute to their dedicated efforts to science and medicine, deceased members of the Harvard Faculty of Medicine (those at the rank of full or emeritus professor) receive a review of their life and contributions with a complete reflection, a **Memorial Minute**.*

AIDS cocktail received the drugs. By the time of Farmer's untimely death, more than 27 million people were receiving AIDS treatment.

Farmer was also on the Board of Directors or Trustees of the Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti, the National Economic and Social Rights Initiative, Village Health Works in New York City, Millenium Campus Network, the Clinton Health Access Initiative, and Duke University, among many others. In addition, he had been Special Advisor to the UN Secretary General. It is no exaggeration to claim that Paul Farmer had become one of the most, if not the most, visible leader(s) of global health and of social justice in America and the world.

Farmer was born October 26, 1959 in North Adams, Massachusetts. The second of six children, his father "Paul Senior" and mother Ginny raised Paul and his siblings in rural Alabama and Florida in unusual conditions, reflecting their limited finances and independent spirit, including living on buses, and later on a houseboat moored in alligator- and snake-infested waters. Paul Farmer graduated in 1982 from Duke University, which he attended on a full scholarship, with a BA in anthropology. Originally interested in cultural psychiatry, he was shocked to the core during visits to Haiti over the deepest poverty and absence of medical care in rural areas. This moral outrage was deepened and made more operational by the readiness of local leaders and ordinary people to act once they had the resources they needed. Farmer focused his education thereafter—as a medical student at HMS and as a PhD student in Harvard's Anthropology Department—on medical anthropology and global health activities aimed at relieving social suffering and delivering high-level care in rural Haiti. After training in Infectious Diseases at Brigham and Women's Hospital, Farmer built his academic career in HMS's Department of Social Medicine, beginning as an Instructor in 1990 and becoming a full Professor in 2000. In 2002, he followed his mentors, Eisenberg and Kleinman, as Maude and Lillian Presley Professor of Social Medicine and in 2010 was appointed by then Harvard President, Drew Faust, as Kolokotronis University Professor.

Farmer was an outstanding and highly productive scholar, a medical anthropologist and infectious disease expert who published eleven single-authored, peer-reviewed books, another five co-authored or co-edited peer-reviewed volumes, as well as 188 peer-reviewed authored or co-authored articles and yet another 85 non-peer-reviewed essays. He also published 145 reviews, chapters, monographs, and editorials. His many, many awards and honors include the Wellcome Medal of the Royal Institute of Anthropology of Great Britain and Northern Ireland; a MacArthur "Genius" Fellowship; the Margaret Mead Award of the American Anthropological Association; the Nathan Davis Outstanding International Physician Award of the American Medical Association; Yale's Peter Parker Medal; the Rudolph Virchow Award of the Society of Medical Anthropology; the Edward Barskey Award of the American Public Health Association; the Salk Institute Medal for Health and Humanity; Duke's Distinguished Alumni Award; the Humanitarian Prize of the Conrad Hilton Foundation; the Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter Award of the National Foundation for Infectious Diseases; the McGovern Award of the American Association of Colleges of Nursing; the Public Welfare Award of the National Academy of Sciences; the Gold Medal of the National Institute of Social Sciences; the Berggruen Prize for Philosophy and Culture; the Aurora Humanitarian Award of the Republic of Armenia; the Igihango National Order of the Republic of Rwanda; and the Global Health Leader's Award of the World Health Organization. As long as this list is, it leaves out most of his awards. Paul Farmer received 32 honorary doctorates from universities including Princeton, Brown, Columbia, Penn, Amherst, Wesleyan, Wellesley, Emory, Notre Dame, Georgetown, Miami, Northwestern, as well as the University of Oslo. This extraordinary list of awards signals that Paul Farmer was the most recognized humanitarian of his time as well as a highly

praised scholarly leader in medical anthropology, global health, and infectious disease. His ethnography, *AIDS and Accusation*, was widely regarded as the best ethnography of the first period of the epidemic. His co-edited, *Reimagining Global Health*, was a leading textbook in that field. *In the Company of the Poor*, his co-edited intellectual conversation with the founder of Liberation Theology, has been a best seller in religious studies and in the medical humanities. *Fevers, Feuds, and Diamonds* is the definitive account of the Ebola epidemic in West Africa. These publications, along with his other books and many articles in popular media, made Farmer one of the most widely read and influential figures in the global movement for social justice.

Yet, his on-the-ground accomplishments in global health delivery outstripped these major academic contributions. Farmer and his colleagues were the first to demonstrate conclusively that high technology-based treatments for AIDS and TB could be provided to the poorest patients in low-resource societies such as Haiti, Rwanda, Malawi, Lesotho, and in slums and prisons in middle-resource societies like Peru and Siberia, Russia, with results equivalent to those that had been achieved in wealthy societies such as the United States and Western European nations. This extraordinary work radically changed the attitudes and policies of leaders in health, healthcare, and social welfare across the world, who prior to this work were committed to the opposite point of view. At the United Nations, the World Health Organization, and in many other international organizations, Farmer popularized the idea of accompaniment of the poorest and most vulnerable people as a form of social and individual care. This was based on his earlier analyses of the consequences of structural violence for social and health inequalities. Tracy Kidder's best-selling early biography cast Farmer as a global healer, and his career-long advocacy and real successes in global health delivery meant that, by the time of his death, he had achieved this exalted status.

But to bend the arc of his career and life and that of so many others toward social justice meant that Farmer first had to effectively critique the then taken-for-granted public health 'truth' that the poorest people could only receive what scarcity would allow. He also challenged the social science common sense that applied knowledge and advocacy had only a marginal place in the academy. Instead, his work came to exemplify the primacy of moral action, of addressing the structural inequality that sickened the poor, and of rooting global health in equity as its foundational value. He insisted that ethics and human rights discourses had to be grounded in the radical empiricism of social experience in historically shaped local contexts. He held that the core problem of our broken world was that some people were considered lesser. At Harvard, the Brigham, and PIH, he inspired entire generations of young professionals to take on the moral medical task of healing an unjust world through long-term accompaniment and the quest for equity. This was and still is a radical departure from what health research and health care systems have been socially constructed to be by corporate, governmental, and academic power in our own society. It is also a fundamental reimagining of what social development, bioethics, public policy, and medicine itself should mean.

That Farmer was so successful in drawing people and resources to this vision was due as much to his innate charm and lightness of being as it was to the fierceness and steadfastness of his moral commitment. He exemplified what Hannah Arendt wrote in another perilous time: "Every so often someone emerges among us who realizes human existence in an exemplary way and is the bodily incarnation of something that we would otherwise know only as the concept or ideal... Because his existence was governed by the passion for light itself, he was able to be like a light in the darkness glowing from some hidden source of luminosity."¹

Paul Farmer's extraordinary legacy exists at PIH in 17,000 staff (including 11,000 community health workers) working in twelve countries to transform care for people living with HIV, TB, non-communicable disease, mental illness, cholera, Ebola, and more. His legacy exists at HMS in the Paul Farmer Professorship attached to the Chair of the Department of Global Health and Social Medicine and the Paul Farmer Collaborative with the University of Global Health Equity in Rwanda and in the several professorships that donors funded to support his vision for medical education and health delivery. That everyday legacy also exists in the Brigham's Division of Global Health Equity. In the broader sense, however, Paul Farmer's world-historical legacy is embodied in the careers and lives of tens—if not hundreds—of thousands of students, faculty, practitioners, patients, and ordinary human beings from Boston to the wider world. And it exists in his writings and videos, which continue to convert people, even in a dark time, to the unending but, as he showed us, still not impossible quest to remake and heal the world.

Paul is survive by his Haitian-born wife Didi Bertrand Farmer, who is also a medical anthropologist, and their daughters Catherine and Elizabeth, and their son Charles-Sebastian.

Respectfully submitted,

Anne Becker
Mercedes Becerra
Allan Brandt
Salmaan Keshavjee
Joia Mukherjee
Arthur Kleinman, *Chairperson*

1. Anne C. Heller: Hannah Arendt: A Life in Dark Times. Houghton, Mifflin, Harcourt: Boston, 2015. p. 108.