

# *An SfAA Oral History Interview with Paul Farmer*

On the Evolution of an Applied Anthropologist and Healer

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Paul Farmer is a medical anthropologist and physician who has dedicated his life to improving health care for the world's poorest people. He is a co-founder and chief strategist of Partners in Health (PIH), an international non-profit organization whose mission is to provide a preferential option for the poor in health care, to bring the benefits of modern medical science to those living in great poverty, and to undertake research and advocacy activities on behalf of the destitute sick. PIH has operations in twelve sites in Haiti, as well as major programs in nine other countries, including Rwanda and Sierra Leone. Paul Farmer and his colleagues have pioneered community-based treatment strategies for AIDS, TB, and other infectious and chronic diseases, thus demonstrating the delivery of sustainable, high-quality health care in resource-poor settings.

Paul Farmer holds an M.D. and Ph.D. from Harvard University, where he is Kolokotronis University Professor and chair of the Department of Global Health and Social Medicine at Harvard Medical School. He also serves as Chief of the Division of Global Health Equity at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston, and as U.N. Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on Community-based Medicine and Lessons from Haiti. He has written extensively on health, human rights, and the consequences of social inequality and his books have garnered major awards in anthropology, including the Wellcome Medal, the Eileen Basker Prize, the Margaret Mead Award, and the J. I. Staley Prize. His most recent books include *In the Company of the Poor: Conversations with Dr. Paul Farmer and Fr. Gustavo Gutiérrez*, *Reimagining Global Health: An Introduction*, and *To Repair the World: Paul Farmer Speaks to the Next Generation*.

This interview was conducted for the Society for Applied Anthropology Oral History Collection which is archived at the Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History at the University of Kentucky Libraries. The interview was conducted by Barbara Rylko-Bauer on April 2, 2016, in Vancouver, British Columbia during the annual SfAA meetings, when Paul Farmer was honored as the 2016 recipient of the Bronislaw Malinowski Award. His lecture, "The Second Life of Sickness: On Structural Violence and Cultural Humility," was given on April 1, 2016 and subsequently published in *Human Organization* (Winter 2016, vol. 75, no. 4, pp. 279-288).

The interview was edited for accuracy and continuity by Barbara Rylko-Bauer; added material is presented in brackets.

**Barbara Rylko-Bauer:** This is Barbara Rylko-Bauer, a member of the Society for Applied Anthropology's Oral History Committee. Today is April 2, 2016. And I am interviewing Dr. Paul Farmer, who is this year's recipient of the Bronislaw Malinowski Award. The interview is taking place in Vancouver, British Columbia, during the annual SfAA meetings.

First of all, Paul, it's wonderful to see you.

**Paul Farmer:** It's great to be back in your presence.

**Rylko-Bauer:** And it's great to have this opportunity the day after you gave this really amazing lecture.

**Farmer:** Thank you.

**Rylko-Bauer:** In fact, my first question is linked to the lecture, because [in it] you noted that as an undergrad at Duke, you were a biochem major before you discovered medical anthropology. And you related an incident that occurred in the dining hall, where—and I'm paraphrasing—you had a conversion experience. You were engaged in a heated conversation with a friend about, you know, racial intelligence or disparities in intelligence testing, and offered, kind of naively, what we would now term an argument in biological determinism. And some stranger, who was either seated at the table behind you or walking by, said—and now I'm quoting: 'It's because their grandparents were slaves, asshole.'

So, how did that experience actually lead you into anthropology?

**Farmer:** Well, you know, I misspoke a little bit, not alas about the ...

**Rylko-Bauer:** Asshole part? [chuckle]

**Farmer:** Asshole part [chuckle], or the kind of foolish things that I must have been saying. That was not a conversion experience. Anthropology was a conversion experience. And as I said, I'm not even sure what year that was, that exchange.

**Rylko-Bauer:** But it was at Duke?

**Farmer:** It was at Duke and I'd like to think it was early in my undergraduate education and not later than freshman year. But, you walk into a university with the prejudices and experiences of your first 18 years of life, and then, you know, the whole point of the liberal arts education is to ... the books that cracked my mind open. That really happened later in anthropology. In fact, I've never even recalled or certainly [never] shared publicly that somewhat embarrassing story of personal ignorance. But it was really in the classroom, in the course of semesters.

**Rylko-Bauer:** But that was actually a very important story to share, because I think people forget that we—those who have become conscientized [about these issues]—don't spring out of the womb that way.

**Farmer:** Yeah.

**Rylko-Bauer:** And that we all, at some point in our lives, you know, had blinders, didn't understand.

**Farmer:** That's right. And I think that another wonder of anthropology, which I didn't really comment on, is that part of what we do is look for how other people are socialized or conscientized, as you just said, the people that we're living with and studying, and in my case, happily taking care of. I can't help thinking, that was last night, about Michael Jackson's warning (our colleague, not the singer) that that process—of looking for how people are socialized, what worldviews, cosmologies, understandings, beliefs, praxis they bring to their everyday life, and trying to set that in stone, set it as a coherent system of logic—is also a kind of symbolic violence to the messiness of everyday life.

**Rylko-Bauer:** Un-huh.

**Farmer:** So it's, you know, inevitably a multi-step process. That's why I was talking about the second life of sickness, and the third life, and the fourth—as stories, as recountings, as recollections. And you know, we get to collect those, just as you did with your mother. And if you remember that the bedrock is human experience, lived human experience—and that includes the willingness to collect, listen to, understand people's life stories—[then] you're going to get what they say they felt or say they thought, which is not necessarily the same, of course, as what they felt or thought.

**Rylko-Bauer:** Right.

**Farmer:** We don't have a way of finding out what people [think]... there's no diagnostic for that except through conversation and experience. And you know, that's a sophisticated and difficult process. And one that you can only start to learn about as a student or as a fieldworker. And then come all those ex-post-facto interpretations. So, you know, I've been lucky enough to have some formal training in that, as an anthropology student, whereas most people have to figure it out in other ways.

**Rylko-Bauer:** Right.

**Farmer:** That's probably one of the greatest debts I have to anthropology, the notion that we come with our own prejudices or experiences, and so does everyone else, and we can try to decipher that. I tried to do that, as you know, with the "hermeneutics of generosity," toward the people I was living with and getting to know in Haiti. And it's come in handy as a physician as well.

**Rylko-Bauer:** Why don't you explain what that phrase means for people who have not heard it before—the hermeneutics of generosity.

**Farmer:** Well, I think anthropologists write more about hermeneutics of suspicion, at least the anthropologists that I've read. And a lot of the people we've been writing about have endured historically and personally a great deal of misfortune compared to, for example, the anthropologists who are studying them. And that's true not just if you're working in rural Haiti or rural Sierra Leone, but also in Detroit, or Flint, you know. The anthropologists are studying down very often, and much less rarely, studying up. Laura Nader has written about this.

So, people who are subjected to marginalization, poverty, exclusion, the long sorry list we all know, often see the world in a negative way. They project suspicion, doubt, fear, but again, these are crude generalizations; but sometimes those feelings are projected on their fellows, people they live with—sorcery accusations, witchcraft accusations. Or you can look at the United States right now and you can say: well, what is it about demagogic political claims that are appealing to so many Americans right now?

**Rylko-Bauer:** Right.

**Farmer:** Unemployment is low, it's an affluent country. That's what I meant by the hermeneutics of suspicion. For example, to look at politicians, American politicians and expect the worst of them, or think the worst of them. In a way, a sorcery accusation is pretty similar.

**Rylko-Bauer:** It is actually.

**Farmer:** You know, when I was a grad student it was all so different and new. [It was] wonderful to learn a new language, and learn about a new place that was so different from where I'd grown up and where I studied, that I found even sorcery accusations fascinating, certainly, but also there was a kind of immature thrill in hearing them. That fades with time, you know. And then you think, well, they're projecting a hermeneutic of suspicion on their own neighbors or family members. But, projecting a hermeneutics of generosity toward the people who are displaying or sharing what is fundamentally a pretty uncharitable reading of human behavior, that was a struggle for me. And it's still a struggle.

When I hear something along those lines, whether it's AIDS in rural Haiti or Ebola in Sierra Leone now, there is that disturbing side of the equation, right? Anytime you accuse a neighbor or friend of somehow wishing you ill, it's not a very pleasant thing to contemplate. Extending that hermeneutics of generosity to people living in deep poverty or experiencing illness is easier in some ways than extending it to fellow Americans who are drawn to an anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim, anti-Black ... that's been harder for me, it's a harder project.

**Rylko-Bauer:** Yeah, it's a real challenge. I agree with you. What, um ...

**Farmer:** Anytime I don't answer your question, just push me back.

**Rylko-Bauer:** No, no, no. That was great, because you really expanded on a lot of stuff that I probably wouldn't of even asked you. But, let me put it this way. What came first, anthropology or medicine?

**Farmer:** Well, in a sense, I've never been able to choose between those, one [a] profession, one [a] discipline. I always wanted to be a doctor. I say always. Why on earth? I don't know. In fact, I never really met any doctors [when young]. I never received any real medical care, except for when I had broken my arm and that was like an hour in the emergency room. And that was it. So, I must have been enchanted with the idea of being a physician. I certainly was set on it by the time I went off to college. But that wasn't a very reflective process, you know. It wasn't as if I did soul searching and ended up deciding I wanted to be a physician. I didn't have a soul to search really back then, not in the sense of the maturity required.

**Rylko-Bauer:** Do you think many medical students do?

**Farmer:** No, I don't. And in fact, I wish ... you know, some of the best students we have at Harvard Medical School are those that have spent a little time doing something other than being a student. You know, working as a nurses aide, working as what are these days called a scribe in the emergency room, working in the Peace Corps. Or anything, you know, that broadens their experience. Sometimes these kids, because they seem like kids, have had the experience of serious illness in their family.

**Rylko-Bauer:** Yeah

**Farmer:** But the numbers are not ... I mean, how many 22 year-old Americans have lost a sibling? Not many, you know. But sometimes they've been deeply involved in the care of a parent or a grandparent. And so, they have a deeper claim on being reflective about it. Now fortunately they're young, they're talented, it doesn't matter that they didn't worked it out. They do by the end of their medical training. But for me, in a way I chose anthropology much more carefully, much more thoughtfully—and later.

**Rylko-Bauer:** And later ... OK.

**Farmer:** Not later than the real discernment of ... it's almost as if I said I wanted to be a doctor and then I grew into it. I grew up into that aspiration.

**Rylko-Bauer:** What was your first course in anthropology?

**Farmer:** Medical anthropology. With Patricia Pessar and Teresa Graedon at Duke. It was the first time, I think, that it had been offered at Duke. And they had never taught it before, but they pulled together a wonderful syllabus. And there was a terrific physician-anthropology graduate student, Virginia Nichols is her name, who was a teaching fellow. And it just opened a whole new world to me. That's when I read Shirley Lindenbaum. [Note: Farmer's Malinowski Award Lecture is dedicated to Shirley Lindenbaum and Arthur Kleinman].

**Rylko-Bauer:** OK! Oh, so that was kind of a formative moment.

**Farmer:** It was! Yeah. It was. And then when Atwood Gaines came to Duke that year for a job talk. If I'm not mistaken, he joined Duke in 1980. And he used Arthur Kleinman's new book, *Patients and Healers in the Context of Culture*, which was still in proofs, if memory serves me right.

**Rylko-Bauer:** Oh, really [chuckle].

**Farmer:** In my written version, there's a proper tribute to him. I was able, even as a junior with only one year to go, to switch majors to anthropology because of him.

**Rylko-Bauer:** From biochem?

**Farmer:** Yeah, from biochem. Well you know, I loved it, I had a great teacher at Duke. But I don't imagine that I wouldn't have ended up somehow engaged in anthropology, because the match was so perfect, it seemed to me, that I think I would have come to it anyway. I was just lucky it was as an undergraduate. And Kleinman's work, he makes an appeal at the end of his first book ... I remember he said he hoped to send its echoes resounding down the halls of medical schools. So he was really speaking to physicians and student physicians. And it worked with me.

**Rylko-Bauer:** I think that was one of the really unique things about him, because he was one of the first people who crossed over. I mean, it's medical anthropology, and yet you have to do more than just write about other cultures to reach people in our medical system.

**Farmer:** You know, you can look back at the history of the discipline and find forebears, as he has, and as I tried to do a little bit last night by talking about W. H. R. Rivers. It's a tradition that starts in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the physician-anthropologist, but some argued later that [those physicians] were amateur ethnographers. Um, better an amateur ethnographer than an amateur physician, though.

**Rylko-Bauer:** Yeah, exactly [both laughing]. Well, you know, you mention Arthur Kleinman and you mention Shirley Lindenbaum. But what other anthropologists that you met or worked with or whose work you read, influenced [not only] your worldview, but also this integration of medicine and anthropology with praxis? Because I think that's a real hallmark of what you do. And I think it's really unique. You term it pragmatic solidarity, that's really what you're talking about. Am I right?

**Farmer:** You are right. I admired activists early on in this process. I mean, I'm not able to parse as entirely different some of the activists I met or wanted to emulate in other fields. Such as, for example, in writing about migrant farm workers in North Carolina, particularly Haitian migrant farm workers, as an undergraduate, I met these amazing nuns.

**Rylko-Bauer:** I remember you talking about that.

**Farmer:** They were inspired by liberation theology, this was in Eastern North Carolina. They'd been working with United Farm Workers, probably in California, first.

**Rylko-Bauer:** Is that your first introduction to liberation theology in practice?

**Farmer:** It was. Sticking with the notion of practice. So that was outside anthropology. And you know, anybody who is aiming to be a physician or a nurse or a social worker, is involved in praxis, so, it was never an option. Arthur Kleinman wouldn't mind me saying that he initially looked with some doubt on my commitment to anthropology. I wouldn't have repeated it, if he hadn't said it very openly. He had his doubts and he later would say, 'I was wrong about that. It was always the way you were going to shape your life.' And I knew that by the time I entered medical school, if not before.

This was a time too, on American campuses, when the wars in Central America were on the plate of activists along with the fight against Apartheid. I very much admired the principled stances of people, even if they couldn't do much from a college campus ... these were other students, faculty. I had some terrific faculty. One of my classics professors wrote these humble letters for Amnesty International to prisoners of conscience.

**Rylko-Bauer:** Really.

**Farmer:** Yeah. Peter Burian is his name. So, I got to meet at Duke a lot of progressive activists and [that] got me to Haiti, too, indirectly. Another thing I do want to underline, is that Marxist anthropology or political economy-focused social science was also very important to me.

**Rylko-Bauer:** Still is.

**Farmer:** Still is, yeah. Because it seemed to take an honest and critical look at the ways in which poverty and other forms of social inequality shaped lives so profoundly. And I knew that was true. I had seen that growing up. And as years went by, after time in Haiti, it seemed even more true. Anyway, by the time I got to Haiti, the idea of being a dispassionate neutral observer was dead to me. And for me. I had no interest, very little interest in that ahead of time, before going there. But none within my first



months. By then I knew that not only would I like to be partisan on behalf of sick people, but on behalf of poor people, and that would involve pragmatic solidarity. You know, I joke with my friends who are surgeons. [They're] like, 'Well we'd like to be helpful but there's no operating rooms.' OK, so you want me to build the operating room? 'Yes!' So you want me to put in the electricity? 'Yes!' And that's pragmatic solidarity, you know. What is it that you need to lessen human suffering? And you know, I had been tutored by the Haitians. They were my real teachers on activism, and my most important teachers. So that was a big part of my undergraduate experience.

Then, meeting Jim Kim; it's the kinds of things we talked about in graduate school ... Jim sometimes called it political commitments, which is just another, and fine way, of putting it, but it was really a moral engagement.

**Rylko-Bauer:** Well, you could have political commitment but not be pragmatic about it.

**Farmer:** That's right. That's right. And that's what I wanted to avoid. And then, reading [Gustavo] Gutiérrez and others, in Haiti, and understanding ... I mean, it's such a straightforward sounding notion, the preferential option for the poor, but when you spend time on it, you know, it can be really quite revelatory.

**Rylko-Bauer:** Well, revolutionary.

**Farmer:** Revolutionary, radical commitment. So [those were] some other teachers. It's been noted before that liberation theology is a branch of theology that has been most informed by anthropology.

**Rylko-Bauer:** Yes.

**Farmer:** So there was already a great link there. My introductory anthro teacher, who is a Marxist anthropologist, the books he chose for us to read, I actually read them.

**Rylko-Bauer:** Were there books that, I mean other than Shirley Lindenbaum's *Kuru Sorcery* ...

**Farmer:** That was actually in medical anthropology.

**Rylko-Bauer:** Can you think of a couple of books that really had an impact on you? Because I know that I can, from graduate school.

**Farmer:** Sure. This is undergraduate still.

**Rylko-Bauer:** That's true.

**Farmer:** I can give you a couple. I mean like *Tally's Corner*, by Elliot Liebow, which was really not anthropology, but it was ethnographically inspired sociology ... Or you know, Richard Fox's own book, *Lions of the Punjab*. In other words, these were materialist readings of the social world. And I thought it was very healthy to understand how material conditions, whether in Punjab or on a street corner in the urban United States, how those shaped people's ways of reading the world. And then there was a lot of ... You know, one of my great friends at Duke was Weston La Barre, who was firmly in the psychoanalytic camp, as was his friend, Georges Devereux, who was a character. And I learned a great deal from them, but never had that real connection, intellectually or personally, that I did with some of the more political economy-inspired anthropologists. We read [Max]Weber, which I really didn't pay much attention to until I went to grad school. But you know, in those first years, there were terrific things that stuck with me. And still do. I still refer students to some of these works.

**Rylko-Bauer:** One of the advantages for me of having to think a little bit before we did this interview, was that I thought about the Paul Farmer that I know. And you certainly influenced me. I mean, I already had a political economy perspective of sorts, but it really grew in our collaborations. But I think of you as more than just ... You're not a Marxist anthropologist. I see you as eclectic and I know that we've talked about the dangers of ideologies.

**Farmer:** Yeah.

**Rylko-Bauer:** And so, maybe you could talk a little bit about the other arenas of scholarship, philosophy, and knowledge that informed that political economy, which is kind of at the core, but it's more than that.

**Farmer:** Oh much more. And you know, in fact ...

**Rylko-Bauer:** And liberation theology is one of those

**Farmer:** Yeah

**Rylko-Bauer:** But there's a lot out there on that. *Pathologies of Power* has a chapter on it [Note: See also *In the Company of the Poor*]. But I think that it's nice for us to get a little better sense of the other things that seemed to have [had] an influence on you.

**Farmer:** Absolutely. I mean, interpretive anthropology. Again, this is a function, I think, less of ... certainly not of ideology, which I think it's ok for us to mistrust. But of also the time that you go into the field. So, I loved reading Clifford Geertz. You know, it was beautifully written. It was, as advertised, thick description. What's not to like? I loved reading [Karl] Marx [who] is a great writer, right? But that didn't mean that it was the end all in understanding commodity fetishism, or whatever it may be called. Last night, I called this mash-up anthropology. So, psychological anthropology—well I got a lot of that through Woody [Atwood] Gaines, Weston LaBarre. Political economy and anthropology, you know, I got a lot of that through reading.

**Rylko-Bauer:** Well, Erika Bourguignon was ...

**Farmer:** Oh yeah, another example, once I got to Haiti in that first year. Sidney Mintz and Erika Bourguignon are in many ways—there's two people with very different traditions in anthropology, right? Erika and Sidney Mintz. But their work was so beautifully complementary when you're reading them in the field, which, I read even in that year. I say 'in the field' because that's what anthropologists taught me to say, but in Haiti, is all I mean.

And don't forget going to France ... I went to France from Duke in probably May of my junior year all the way until December. And you know, that's when I started reading [Pierre] Bourdieu, whom I later befriended. And, as I said last night, I came to revere him. A wonderful scholar, very eclectic, not caught up in any ideological model, open to any kind of discussion or study of human suffering. And really interested in activism. He was an activist. And not many great French intellectuals were. So I got interested in him as an undergraduate and stayed interested, and still am.

**Rylko-Bauer:** And what, in particular, of his work inspired you? Or that you found really powerful as a tool?

**Farmer:** Well, this was what I was going to say about [Claude] Lévi-Strauss and others, if you're willing to put in the work of reading them carefully, you end up loving them anyway, you know what I mean? You put time into reading someone, you're not

easily going to discard his or her views, even if you are classed as somehow in a different school of thought. And I think that's true in social theory in general. It's a lot to read a 500 page book, you know. It's a lot to pay attention in a seminar on marriage conventions that Lévi-Strauss gave. So if you're going to put in the work you're going to end up taking something from them, a debt. And I had a very deep one to Bourdieu, and a solid one to Lévi-Strauss, whose work, when I look back, reminded me a lot of cognitive anthropology, which was very overly structured, in my view now. But then, it's just, you pay attention to people.

For Bourdieu, here's what I think. . . you know, he was more compelling at that point in my life than anybody else I'd read. And that is [because] he was really struggling, and he really struggled to understand how historical experience and everyday social life get in the body. Right? So the idea of embodiment, that term is sometimes associated with [Maurice] Merleau-Ponty, but for me it was really Bourdieu.

**Rylko-Bauer:** And actually, in medical anthropology it's associated with Margaret Lock and Nancy Scheper-Hughes.

**Farmer:** Right.

**Rylko-Bauer:** But there's antecedents to that.

**Farmer:** And of course, Nancy Scheper-Hughes, you know, became a big influence and a friend. I really love the way she thinks and works and writes. She's a terrific writer. I read her book, I'm trying to remember when ...

**Rylko-Bauer:** Her Ireland book, *Saints* ...

**Farmer:** *Saints, Scholars, and Schizophrenics*. In a way, bringing all of these people together, they were scholars who were struggling with the ways in which adverse experience, misfortune, pain, suffering, got into our bodies and lives, and then ...

**Rylko-Bauer:** Made visible ...

**Farmer:** Made visible, but also made visible through connected families, their social suffering in their families and circles. And of course, Arthur [Kleinman] has picked that up and run with it for decades.

**Rylko-Bauer:** I'm glad you used the word struggle, because I think that we often times look at end products like wonderful books, and forget that there can be a lot of blood, sweat, and tears in getting to that point of understanding.

**Farmer:** Well, I mean, take your book about your mother. You know it wasn't easy, not just with her but for you to force yourself to do it. ... the struggle to really do it in less than a decade. That's quite apart from the struggle with the emotional impact of the interviews. It is a struggle. I can't imagine anyone who's going to ... I'm writing a book about Ebola now.

**Rylko-Bauer:** Oh, ok.

**Farmer:** It's about all these same issues. The idea of writing about something so painful, difficult, lethal, and not struggling seems to me absurd. I mean, I don't know what Durkheim thought when he was writing about suicide in broad sociological terms. Maybe you struggle less when there's more distance, but if it's experience-near then you're going to struggle. And I would be a little suspicious if someone didn't struggle in writing ethnography.

**Rylko-Bauer:** Well, your mention that you're working on another book now is a nice segue to something I also wanted to ask. You put lots of time, energy, heart, and soul into your work as a physician and advocate. I mean, it consumes your life sometimes, especially in moments of crisis. And yet, despite the fact that you're busy, you still end up feeling compelled to translate your lived experience into some concrete form. And I wanted you to talk a little bit about what compels you to do that and also what you find helpful in writing.

**Farmer:** Well, I know some people who, when they speak about complexity, you're just convinced that they are able to do that on the fly. My friend, whom you've met a couple times, Haun Saussy, I mean, just listening to him talk about a subject with which he is not familiar makes me believe that he is one of those people. And I could go on. But for me, it is definitely not that way. And I look at the errors that so many of my colleagues make, scientific errors like the one I made about racial disparities and intelligence testing. And I think, I don't want to do that. Let me just give an example. The conflation of cultural difference and structural violence, right? Back to the example that was on my mind last night. People ask a lot, why did Ebola spread in those three countries and no others. Pretty true, right?

**Rylko-Bauer:** Right.

**Farmer:** And the most tempting thing for people to believe, the people asking that question ... they already often have a belief ...

**Rylko-Bauer:** They're looking for reinforcement?

**Farmer:** They're looking for reinforcement and they believe that it's something cultural. Not something structural and not something determined by history, political economy that stretches way back in time and across a very broad region, meaning the world. So, you know, I hear some of these misstatements and I think ...

**Rylko-Bauer:** Still today?

**Farmer:** Oh yeah, I mean, most of them are misstatements. Claims of causality about epidemic disease are usually rife with mistakes. I saw it a lot in the early years of the AIDS epidemic.

**Rylko-Bauer:** Sure. And you've written about that.

**Farmer:** The point I wanted to make is that only because I've written about it, can I say it with any kind of confidence. My confidence or grand proclamations [chuckle] about these matters comes out of working out with my hand. We used to write with things called pens or pencils, it's a metaphor ...

**Rylko-Bauer:** I remember you once telling me that you think through writing.

**Farmer:** Yeah, I think with my hand. Maybe some people we know, it comes right out of their ... you know, like Athena, is she the one that came out of Zeus' head fully formed? Or did I get that wrong? Is that Minerva? [laugh] I never studied ... Anyway, that's not it for me. For me it's hard won, it comes out of really thinking something through, trying to read literature critically. Making notes, taking my own fieldnotes or experience and really pushing that into some coherent analysis. And it happens in the process of writing different iterations. So there, that's why I do it.

**Rylko-Bauer:** And I know that you do many iterations.

**Farmer:** I do, you know. And not out of some belief that I'm ever going to get it right stylistically, but more out of the belief that there's no way people can know this without fighting for that knowledge. I mean, it would be infused knowledge, right? As if you believe it came into your head as a message from elsewhere, fully formed. I

don't believe that. I believe we fight for our analysis and our knowledge, in everyday life, as well. And for me, that indispensably involves writing. You know, I was writing about Ebola fifteen years ago or more.

**Rylko-Bauer:** I didn't know that...

**Farmer:** Well, the cover of *Infections and Inequalities* [which depicts an Ebola burial site in Kikwit, DRC]. So, you know, you get engaged in a topic and by the time this big epidemic hit, I was already writing again, that first month of ... I wanted to figure it out, to go fight. [I wanted] the pragmatic solidarity to be correct, to be effective, to be pragmatic, for the praxis to be praxis rather than just practice.

**Rylko-Bauer:** That's an important distinction.

**Farmer:** For me it was about writing. And writing never is an end onto itself for me, although I certainly would not wish those who are able to write as an end, as something that is ... I'm glad people feel that way, novelists, or ethnographers, you know. But for me it's not that way. It's really to get better at the pragmatic solidarity.

**Rylko-Bauer:** I'm going to shift a little bit. Today, right now, do you think of yourself as an applied anthropologist.

**Farmer:** Of course. I mean, I have to say [that] I do think there's a little bit too much umbrage taken by the applied anthropologists, you know. They're still fighting a battle between theoretical and applied. That was never a significant struggle for me. I was always going to be an applied anthropologist, from the get go. So, it's kind of like when someone says, well, are you a Marxist anthropologist? I feel like saying, yes, just to dispense with the discussion. Not really to say that I want to fit under some ideological label. It's just ... so of course I'm an applied anthropologist. No doctor, who's an anthropologist, should be anything other than an applied anthropologist. And I never had any interest in anthropology that wasn't related to pragmatic application. That said, I have a lot of debts to people who really haven't done that. My graduate school and undergraduate school professors, Nur Yalman, Sally Falk Moore ... prior to being an anthropologist, she was a lawyer. She was the youngest lawyer at the Nuremberg Trials.

**Rylko-Bauer:** Seriously?

**Farmer:** Seriously, you should read about that. In fact, you should interview her, she's emeritus now. Her way of doing anthropology when she was my professor would not be classed as applied anthropology.

**Rylko-Bauer:** But that experience had to have ...

**Farmer:** Shaped her. Indeed, she's best known for her legal anthropology. Her book on customary law in Kilimanjaro, which is the one I read; it may have been called *Social Facts and Fabrications*, or some other groovy title. And then there was Arthur [Kleinman], of course, who regardless of what other label he or others may choose to apply to him, is a physician-anthropologist who is practicing medicine and teaching medical students, and thus applying.

**Rylko-Bauer:** Although, he wouldn't, I think, classify himself that ...

**Farmer:** But I'm saying, that is sometimes a hang-up that I never labored under. I have other hang-ups, but not that one. I think it's passé. It should be done.

**Rylko-Bauer:** Well, it should be done. And what's been interesting at these meetings, is to get affirmation that in Canada that's really not an issue. Those boundaries aren't there. I've heard Canadian anthropologists, when I've gone to a couple of sessions, say that everybody does some applied work, whether they're teaching applied or not. And so they see it as this false divide in the United States in certain areas.

**Farmer:** Yeah. Well, even then, I would say that Canada-United States is a false divide. I mean, I don't identify with a nation state, right? Of course, I grew up in the United States and trained in the United States. But I also studied in France, and spent much of my professional life in Haiti. I do think that that's one of my critiques of the notion, the fetishized notion of applied anthropology. Stop already with the fussing about whether or not we need applied. I'm saying, 'I'm in.' I've always been in. Since the time I was an undergrad.

My first project as an anthropologist, a paper in that first course, was to go to the emergency room at Duke and I was a participant observer. I'd just learned the word, you know. And who was I observing with? Residents, nurses, people who had no hang ups about whether or not they were doing something applied, otherwise they wouldn't be in those rooms, right? And, you know, I just never ... I guess what I'm saying, when I saw this elevated in a seminar room, I thought 'seminar room warriors,



stop.' I would sometimes even tune it out. Same at the meetings. We should all be applied anthropologists. What's the point?

**Rylko-Bauer:** Well, you know, I have one mentor and that's John van Willigen. And he always talks about 'anthropology put to use' in one form or another. That's kind of his core definition of what you would call applied.

**Farmer:** That's a beautiful term. Yeah. On my gravestone you can put: Paul Farmer—Was Of Use. I'll be happy. [both laughing]

**Rylko-Bauer:** Ok!

**Farmer:** I mean it! You know, who wouldn't want to?

**Rylko-Bauer:** Who wouldn't want to, right. I think, we have just a few minutes left, so, I want to conclude at least this first part, because we're going to ...

**Farmer:** I hope!

**Rylko-Bauer:** This has been so wonderful, it really has.

**Farmer:** For me too, I don't get a chance to talk about anthropology very much, because I'm in between places like ...you know, Brigham Women's Hospital and Haiti.

**Rylko-Bauer:** No, we'll do this again and I'll make the effort.

**Farmer:** Thank you.

**Rylko-Bauer:** Since you gave the Malinowski Lecture yesterday, I want to conclude with a final question that goes back to one thing you talked about, which was cultural competence and cultural humility. And I want you to expand on both of those terms, how you were using them and whether they are in opposition to each other, in tension with each other. And not just how you used them in the talk, but also how you use them ... because clearly this has some relevance in what you've been doing recently, which is why it appeared in the talk, I'm sure.

**Farmer:** I hope I didn't sound too glib about it. I mean, the short version is worth spelling out. The notion of cultural competence has arisen in a corporate context. For example, the idea that in order to be commercially viable, you have to understand

your customer. And it's marketing research. Kind of like what I wrote about for you many years ago, about the novel *Les Choses* [*The Things*], by Georges Perec, you know. The marketers. Remember they were social scientist wannabes in that novel, right? So, using knowledge of a culture or language for instrumental ends. We talked a little bit about this yesterday just in a private discussion. Using this, you know, for nefarious ends. I'm not talking about making money, although that can also be nefarious. But talking about military endeavors and endeavors to prop up illegitimate power. So, I think it's ok to have a hermeneutic of suspicion about the idea of cultural competence.

Just sticking with a moral framework, it's a lot safer to be seeking cultural humility. That is to say, 'well, you know what, I don't know about this, I don't know this language, but I know that I don't know the language and that matters. I don't know what these people are thinking, how they're framing a question or understanding an event. But I know that I don't know, and someone else will.' So that's the cultural humility framework. And the cultural competence framework is, 'here's a series of key arenas of knowledge that you have to master to be competent.' Like, a urologist to be a competent urologic surgeon, or an internist to practice medicine in 2017, right? And I just don't think culture is like that—you're competent or you're incompetent. And if I had to choose, I would just say, 'ok, I'm incompetent.' Which I did say last night. You know, I said I was incompetent, culturally incompetent regarding Sierra Leone. But that doesn't mean I can't figure out what people are thinking. Now that's the crude version. When I think within anthropology, if there's ever a discipline that fans that illusion that it's possible to be fully competent through study, it's ours.

**Rylko-Bauer:** So you're talking about two levels of this concept. Two applications.

**Farmer:** I am. You know I'm going to add a third that I do not think is in this high stakes world of promoting some product or really illegitimate goal around power, [such as] the use of anthropological information in war. But [in] a much more mundane area, where I think again maybe this zeal to show that applied anthropology is important may mislead us, and that's in medicine. You know, across American medical schools and teaching hospitals, there is this idea that students and residents and nurses need to have cultural competence. And then they end up learning these really silly kind of ... what do African Americans think about this, or what do Chinese people think about ...

**Rylko-Bauer:** As if they're all one homogeneous entity.

**Farmer:** I mean, that's a cartoon, right? It's bowdlerizing the way it's used. But it is a ... I've seen it, you know

**Rylko-Bauer:** So, it comes out of a recognition that you've got cultural diversity and that ...

**Farmer:** And that we need to understand other people. It comes out of a good place. But ...

**Rylko-Bauer:** Yeah, right. But it's been applied wrong?

**Farmer:** It's been applied wrong. And part of the way it's been applied badly may be related to our zeal to show that applied anthropology's important. Now, I looked around that room last night, a room that was packed. And the people ...

**Rylko-Bauer:** It was standing room only!

**Farmer:** No, no, no. People I know there, all of us who consider ourselves applied anthropologists, do not do this. They're not guilty of what I'm describing. It tends not to be professional anthropologists, right?

But the good ideas, that we need to understand cultural diversity, cultural constructs in general, how social construction works, how we need to value other people's ideas when we seek to understand. All these things are good, right? But then, how does it become bowdlerized or even fetishized as something, you know, a checklist. And that's ... if we, the applied anthropologists, including medical anthropologists, are guilty of trying to show how important we are, then we should stop doing that. You know, we don't have to do that.

There's no question that epistemologically we're right, in the sense of the world as socially constructed. Even biomedicine is a social construct. Certainly understanding illness, but also disease. So, ok, we won those arguments. Let's not cheapen that argument by saying, 'oh, and here's the things that you need to become competent in this arena.' Because that is true of surgical practice, that is true of flying an airplane, that is true of car mechanics or building a bridge that won't collapse.

It's not true of culture. It's not true of solidarity. It's not true of compassion. These are, in many ways, ineffable or at least difficult to trace constructs, that we should be ... You know, we should say, 'sorry, you're not going to be competent in this, I'm not going to be competent.' Know that you're not competent. And then you can say, 'OK,

I know I don't know this, so let me find someone who does.' I didn't mean it to be a cheap attack on a very good idea, right?

**Rylko-Bauer:** Right.

**Farmer:** But rather to say ... after all, I am saying it at a professional meeting of anthropologists. So, it's not like I'm going into the Dean of Students office at Harvard Medical School and assailing this notion. I'm talking to my peers who are the source of these ideas in anthropology.

**Rylko-Bauer:** Well, I think on that note we'll stop for right now.

**Farmer:** Just for now.

**Rylko-Bauer:** Just for now, because I know that you have something else.

**Farmer:** I can't wait until the next installment.

**Rylko-Bauer:** Me too. And I want to really thank you.

**Farmer:** Thank you for being there last night, helping me with this tough and inspiring material.

**Rylko-Bauer:** Well, you did a wonderful job. You deserve that award and you honored it by giving a wonderful lecture.

**Farmer:** Thank you very much.

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