Dr. Paul Farmer Address  
at Suffolk University Undergraduate Commencement - May 23, 2010

Thank you very much. Levity is good in these large crowds. I had this, as the president was introducing me and someone came to interrupt him, I had this image of that, that he was told that no, these things are really not true about him. A correction. [Laughter] Actually I knew what was going on because I had spoken to one of the singers of the National Anthem prior to coming out here. And I just want to say what was evident, I believe, to those singing but perhaps not to all of you, is that these two flags, the ones draped around the shoulders of the singers and one that we saluted together today are the two oldest flags in this hemisphere. Haiti and the United States have an intertwined history that I will comment on briefly in my remarks, but it was a great privilege to hear the anthem sung so beautifully by those voices. … [Speaks in Haitian Creole][Applause]

Now I'm going to deliver my entire speech in Haitian Creole. [Laughter] And ask you to remain standing. [Laughter] It's an honor to be here with all of you. And I want to start by thanking all the parents here present. Your parents, as you know, and families have made important sacrifices to see you through. And since we're right between Mother's Day and Father's Day, I'd like to ask that we give a round of Applause to parents and those who have acted as parents to all of us. [Applause]

But my remarks today are really not for the parents, nor for the faculty, nor the administration, but for you, the graduates, the Class of 2010. You'll be relieved to know that my remarks will be brief, if not as brief as Abraham Lincoln's most famous speech, which, and I looked this up, weighed in at 273 words. By the time photographers were taking pictures of him he had already left the stage, the Gettysburg Address.

And I'm going to think a little bit about greatness, as I'm sure you are today. They say that Abraham Lincoln was a great man, and no one would dispute that. Who would argue with the claim that Nelson Mandela, who is still walking among us, is a great man? Each of us probably has our own list of great men, one that would include those as varied as Oscar Romero; to Haitians, Jean-Jacques Dessalines; FDR; Louis Pasteur; Martin Luther King. And that's just the list of men. The list of great women is surely far longer. [Applause] From Joan of Arc to Rosa Parks to your own Linda Dorcena Forry, we all have a debt, not only to our mothers, but also to those giants who have accepted fighting, at times, an undercurrent of old-school sexism, roles as leaders and models of who and what we can be as humans sharing a troubled but promising planet, the only planet we've got, Battle Star Galactica fantasies notwithstanding.

But there is something about lists of the great that can intimidate all of us if we fail to understand something important. That each of these great leaders just mentioned has something in common with all of us. They were or are flawed. Their greatness was
disputed during their times. They were calumnied and pilloried, and in many cases murdered and martyred. Thus our heroes, the people we really admire, mortal, with feet of clay and hearts that betray at times their better natures.

Back to Honest Abe, who led this country through its terrible internal conflict … over great matters and who was inspired, by one count, over 15,000 books. A few weeks ago, while stranded in London by the freak eruption of an Icelandic volcano, and I'd like to see how you translate Icelandic volcano into sign language. [Laughter] How would you like to pronounce the name of that in any language? I don't understand how they manage that language there. [Laughter] Well, stuck there, you know, I have to say it occurred to me after the last 18 months, how could, what are the statistical chances of being marooned by hurricanes, then an earthquake and then volcano? I mean, I must have done something deeply wrong. [Laughter]

Anyway, I got stranded. I had left Haiti and went to Oxford to give a talk and I got stranded there. And so I was bored. And I was looking for books to read. And I found one about Lincoln. I was called Abraham Lincoln Vampire Hunter. [Laughter] What is it about your generation and vampires? [Laughter] Someone has got to explain, well, my daughter's been explaining it to me, but I really don't get it. Anyway. The author, Seth Grahame-Smith, is perhaps best known for literary mash up, which I'm sure you've all read, called Pride and Prejudice and Zombies. [Laughter] Finally someone who has made Jane Austen entertaining. [Laughter] I read that also. And then stuck by that volcano, and also another book called Sense and Sensibility and Sea Monsters. I'm serious. I'm not making this up. Anyway, in Vampire Hunter, a young Abe Lincoln is only an amateur in his battle against murderous vampires until he is equipped with the tools of the trade. That's what I'm going to talk about, the tools of the trade.

In this fantastical story, Lincoln befriends a benevolent vampire who trains him in wrestling and axe handling. And who tells him where the evil vampires live. Now if we were … let's just say at Tulane, I would have to be careful because the evil vampires all live in the South. But anyway, that's another story. Now on his own, young Lincoln could achieve little even as he witnessed so much suffering and death at the hands of a powerful enemy, but with well-honed skills, the necessary equipment and knowledgeable partners, he could take on even the strongest and fastest of the undead. At this point the president of Suffolk is thinking, why did we ask Dr. Farmer to give the graduation speech? [Laughter]

But now I'm going to go on to a more serious story about the importance of skills. Actually there's a reporter from the Boston Globe here and he just asked me, are you going to talk about Haiti? And I said I was. But I was going to try to do it in a way that would engage the graduates. So I want to tell you another story about the importance of skills, tools and partners, this time a real story.

Cut to central Haiti circa 1985. I was at the time shuttling between Harvard Medical School, where I was a second-year student, and central Haiti, where I was working
with a small group of Haitian friends to introduce basic health care and educational services to a group of people displaced by a hydroelectric dam. I was then full of optimism, in part because I was a young American who had never known abject poverty and did not yet fully understand the ways in which large-scale social forces constrict possibility.

Just as I had never seen abject poverty, what one Haitian mother described to me as the everyday struggle for food and wood and water, neither had I ever seen tetanus. Now I'm an infectious disease doctor, so I'm going to tell you, although you probably all know this already. I'm sure it's part of the everyday curriculum. And you know that tetanus is a disease caused by Clostridium tetani. Right? You do know that. And you know that it's an anaerobe, right? And that, yes, you know, the woman in the sunglasses is nodding, there you go. I don't believe you, by the way. You're making this up totally. [Laughter] An effective vaccine was developed for tetanus in 1924. Now growing up I'd heard of lockjaw, a classic symptom of tetanus which causes painful muscle spasms and worse. But cases in the United States were rare since vaccination is compulsory for public school attendance. But that's not the story of the whole world. Even today estimates of the total number of cases of tetanus exceed 700,000 per year, worldwide.

Now I didn't know this number in 1983 and 1984 when I was fortunate enough to be involved in vaccination campaigns in rural Haiti, where if we'd done our job properly I would not have seen any cases of tetanus at all, since the vaccine is effective and costs pennies. If we'd done our job right, I would not be able to tell you about Joseanne. By 1985, and I was at the time 25, your age, a little older, we had built a small and already overcrowded clinic in Cange, which is not the site of a very large hospital. Back then I was working mostly with a group of community health workers, trudging through the countryside doing a health census and meeting with village councils willing to help us expand our prevention programs. In one village I had become friendly with a young schoolteacher who could always be relied upon to help with a census or a meeting. I was there in that village of Cange, not his village but where I was living and working, when he and a group of young men carried a teenage girl into our crowded clinic on a makeshift stretcher. She was racked with spasms which all of us, including the villagers, recognized instantly as tetanus. And, you know, I think it's worth, since almost none of you have seen this disease, it's just worth saying it is a horrible thing to see. Someone who has spasms so severe that they can fracture the vertebral bodies, fracture the backbone.

Now we didn't know exactly what to do. That is, we knew to look for a wound and clean it, because tetanus comes in through the outside world. It's a soil organism. And we knew to ease these spasms with muscle relaxants. We knew which antibiotics would help, and we had them on hand. But we also knew that the proper care of a patient with severe tetanus requires advanced care, mechanical ventilation that you'd have in an ICU, sometimes for weeks. In the best of all worlds, of course, you never see this disease, as my medical colleagues know, but when you do, the best thing to do is intubate someone and put them on a breathing machine and paralyze
them, sometimes even for weeks. And that's what would be done at the Brigham, where I work here in Boston. But we didn't have mechanical ventilation in 1985 where we were, and we didn't know where in the capital city, Port au Prince, to look for it. There was in the village where I was working, Cange, there was visiting just at that time an American internist, part of a visiting medical team, and together we began therapy in a quiet and dark room that we dubbed, anxiously, the ICU. We sent someone to Port au Prince to look into possibilities for transfer and although after, this is now I'd been in Haiti a couple of years and was doubtful about the possibility of such a transfer since it so often led to nothing other than a false sense of security. That is, you feel that you've transferred the patient to another institution, but when you follow up, nothing has been done. And Joseanne began to respond to our therapy. She started having fewer spasms, and the way these spasms are triggered is, why you put them in a dark and quiet room is, because any kind of stimulus can cause these horrible and sometimes lethal spasms. Within a couple of days she was able to say a few words without triggering another wave of these spasms, and I began to think that our little ICU, even without a ventilator, might save her life. And it was a great feeling. One of the greatest feelings that a doctor can know.

The search for assistance in Port au Prince turned up nothing, because the general hospital there was wracked by its own spasms of disorder, as it is today, and the private hospital there had mechanical ventilation only for the operating rooms. A few nights later, in the wee hours, two or three in the morning, someone came looking for me, and they were yelling, Joseanne [Creole word], Joseanne is dead. I sprang up from my bed, back at the age when I actually could do such a thing, and I ran to her room, asking for others to look for the real doctors. But as I examined Joseanne, she was still breathing, raggedly, and then I started to ask a series of very troubling questions. Had we over-sedated her? Were her diaphragmatic and intercostal muscles affected by the disease? And there's another complication of this disease called autonomic dysfunction, which again I know my friend in the sunglasses over there, you know all about auto-, yeah, sure. I read your thesis on it for graduation today. But I started asking these difficult questions. Had we failed her in the little-picture sense, that is, her own, by giving her the wrong treatment, just as we had clearly failed her in the big-picture sense, which was preventing the disease through vaccination. And I felt just the opposite of the joy that I had, or satisfaction that I had felt before. I felt terrible. We all did. And I remember this feeling very well, an epiphany of dread and one which would become familiar to me as the years tick by.

But Joseanne did not die. She recovered. Our interventions saved her life. She later married and had a family, and as far as I know is doing just fine a quarter of a century later. A happy ending, and there are many of those in medicine, especially, I would say, in global health, because there there is so much need and too little attention, and when you bring the need together with proper attention, you have spectacular results all the time. That's the kind of felicity that I would wish all of you graduates, to do something that you find, something that you find compelling and satisfying and which can give you a sense of satisfaction over the years. What this left me with, then a 25-year old medical student, was a deep respect for the potential power of life-
saving if distal medical interventions. Now let me explain what I mean by distal. In other words, our interventions for Joseanne came pretty late in the game. A proximal intervention for me would be making sure that everyone in that region of Haiti or, again, on the planet, gets vaccinated for tetanus. But a distal intervention was a very important one, too, and I'm going to, of course now, talk about the earthquake because that's where a lot of distal interventions, late in the game, after people are already injured or dying, that's where a lot of lives were saved in Haiti.

I made a private pact with myself at about that time, that year, 1985, that I would spend my life trying to bring decent medicine, at the very least, to people living in poverty. Now that includes building better medical infrastructure and also building human capacity to prevent disease or bad outcomes whenever possible. Now a quarter of a century later I am lucky enough to work with thousands of Haitian colleagues scattered from the Dominican border to the coast in a city named San Marc and to help to build or improve a dozen hospitals in rural Haiti. It is this group, along with millions of patients, that has drawn upon your support during these last four months to ensure that they have the tools, skills, and partners to respond to the greatest natural disaster of our times. Here we are in Boston, but you can surely tell by now that so much of my mind and heart remains in Haiti, as I said earlier, our oldest neighbor, whose people are facing hurricane season with a new set of anxieties. Well over a million people were displaced after January twelfth, when an earthquake killed more than a quarter of a million people, maimed thousands physically and millions emotionally, and leveled much of the city of Port au Prince and many other towns and cities. Today not a single federal building is left standing in the capital.

Now for the inspiring news. More than half of all American households contributed to relief efforts in one way or another. That is, to me, an astounding reminder of the goodwill that we can muster for one another. A donors' conference on March thirty-first led to billions of dollars of commitment to help rebuild Haiti. This University and the city of Boston and also the Haitian diaspora played an enormous and welcome role, focusing on the most pragmatic forms of solidarity imaginable. People have worked day in and day out to provide food and water and shelter and yet, here we are, four months later, facing each rain with dread and fearing the worst as storms begin to whirl towards us.

What would it take from you and from all of us to provide a bit more and better pragmatic solidarity to our oldest neighbors? The answer to that rhetorical question in my view is a bit of heroism and common courage from each of us. We need these qualities linked to humility to rebuild cities and towns and make them safe. I actually just received less than an hour ago a photograph from Haiti from an IDP, internally displaced persons camp. This camp is in Port-au-Prince and has … more than 45,000 homeless people in it. And my colleagues, my Haitian colleagues from Partners in Health, have been working there since this camp formed in the day or two following the earthquake. But the photograph was actually … some guys from the US Army who were playing basketball with people in the camp. And the US Army, which as some of you know has significant logistic capacity, had come in with gravel and
improved the sanitation and services available in this camp. And it was really moving to see, again, just an hour ago, photographs of this pickup basketball game.

So this pragmatic solidarity, in my view, can come from anyone. It can come from all of us. We also need to recognize and develop and support the genius of the Haitian people who have led the way, I will argue today, in the past, and who can and must lead now in this difficult moment. You are not surprised that I use this pulpit to ask for even more solidarity with our neighbors and also gratitude for what Haiti has done for the world. It's been observed by many that all modern human rights movements, and there are many, trace their origins to the fight to end the slave trade and slavery itself.

And it was in Haiti that the most decisive blow against slavery was dealt when in 1791 a slave revolt culminated in the defeat of Napoleon's vast army. For those who doubt the grand aspirations of the victorious former slaves to establish an independent republic free from slavery, we have only to consult the historical record. The discovery after the earthquake just a couple of months ago of the only surviving copy of Haiti's 1804 Declaration of Independence in the British National Archives, leaves no doubt. Haiti's leaders sought to base the first independent nation in Latin America on the fight against slavery and used rights languages unstintingly. But the price paid by the Haitians was steep. Dessalines, the father of Haitian independence in many ways was killed in a power struggle within a couple of years of the stirring words in the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution. And his former masters orchestrated an embargo, the first of many, against this troubled young nation. In 1825, the French demanded that Haiti pay France 150 million germinal francs, not only for the loss of plantations, but for the loss of their slaves. Never before or since has a poor but victorious nation indemnified the rich and defeated in this manner. And for over a century, well into the 1950s, the Haitians paid this debt.

Many adverse events and processes ensued, coups, invasions, military occupations, dictatorships, epidemics. But the nagging sense that Haiti had paid dearly for living up to the goals of liberty, fraternity and equality for all lives on. Almost all the Haitians I know believe it to this day. How much money went from the former slave colony to one of the richest countries in the world is debated, as was the significance of this transfer to the deepening poverty in modern Haiti. But some recent exercises seeking to value interest these transfers estimated the extortion at $20 billion. Divide that figure by 9 million Haitians and we see that if it were returned today, each Haitian would be owed well over $2,000.

Now what does all this bitter history have to do with the bright futures now before you? The Suffolk University One Campaign, anybody in that? You're in it, come on. Which brought together students and faculty from across Suffolk's three schools to raise funds and organize events featuring Haitian artists to help focus attention on Haiti in the wake of the January twelfth earthquake. It's heartening to see a campus work in unison to alleviate human suffering, to ensure that the efforts of all add up to more than the sum of the goodwill of each. This is exactly the collaborative spirit
that is demanded of the international community in working with Haiti, a country that
even before the earthquake was home to more nongovernmental organizations per
capita than any other in the Western hemisphere and perhaps any other in the world.

Recognizing with deep insight shared by precious few that Haiti’s future can only be
secured by Haitians, Suffolk University One has directed its funds towards Haitian-
led, Haitian-staffed organizations with a long history of working with the poor. We
are humbled that Partners in Health was among the recipients, and I should add here,
Partners in Health in Haiti is called Zanmi Lastane, and it employs 5,000 people,
almost all of them Haitian.

But back to you guys. It is a dreadful graduation speech cliché to observe that yours
in a generation that will change the future. When has this not been true? But
remember that there was a time when commencement exercises took place with
ringing denunciation of slavery or unjust wars or failure to respond effectively and
rapidly to human suffering. And there must have been listening to some of those
speeches the very people also in their early twenties who would themselves fight the
slave trade or resist unjust wars or devote themselves to the alleviation of human
suffering.

No doubt many such addresses were heard on this campus, a progressive institution
that preceded many long established universities when, shortly following its founding
in 1906, it welcomed African Americans, Asians, Native Americans and women into
the student body. The future of Haiti is central to this challenge to change the future.
Haiti is not only our oldest neighbor and one to which
we have an enormous debt.
And it's not only a microcosm of all that can go wrong. It is also an example of an
inspiring if beleaguered place where much can be said [by two?]. And lessons
learned in Haiti over the next few years will, I firmly believe, help to save our planet,
another clichéd claim from speeches such as these.

The eternal appeal
of President Lincoln, the real one, not the vampire hunter, to the
better angels of our nature is what I would like to invoke in my closing words to you,
dear Class of 2010. I know that many commencement speakers will wax
grandiloquent about heroes and saints, but I have not focused today on the deeds of
great women or men. I seek instead to remind you that in times of doubt, when fear
of failure creeps into your lives, we can and do encounter everyday heroes who rise to
challenges unforeseen. And I am reminding myself, too, because who could be
involved in endeavors like ours to bring healthcare to the poor and the displaced and
not feel fear of failure? Your generation is charged with finding ways of advancing
our most cherished social goals. I can tell you for sure that when, in 1982 I graduated
from college, we were not thinking of global warming, pandemic disease or the need
to rethink how we power our businesses, homes, universities and hospitals. We paid
too little attention to growing financial barriers to higher education, which today, as
President Sargent points out, are more prohibitive than at any time since the
Depression. We had few resources like the Suffolk's pioneering Center for Women's
Health and Human Rights, academic homes for faculty and students who strive to
shed light on the links between the experiences of the individual women and the large-scale social forces that conspire to deny them quality medical care. We were certainly not thinking about how to build back better, as President Clinton has asked us to do, in seeking to help our Haitian neighbors to rebuild their country. Yours is truly the first global generation. And it is for that reason that members of your student body and faculty have come together to show your pragmatic solidarity with Haiti. You know that we will not move human history forward without thinking globally, whether you go into business, law, education, healthcare, computer science or any of the 70 academic majors at this global and growing university.

The better angels of your nature remind you, I know, that you will move forward as individuals and as families and as professionals by remembering that we are all part of a single, sometimes troubled world. This is not so much a call to service, although I've made those before and will so again. It is a call to participate freely and fully in reshaping and improving this world and recalling too your relative privilege on a planet in which far too few people enjoy the fruits of higher education, modern medicine and series of human rights that include not only political freedoms, but freedom from want.

In other words, you leave Suffolk facing truly complex problems, but they are insoluble. They require, as Lincoln the Vampire Hunter discovered, not just passion, but tools, skills and partners. Your generation has this and more. So remember regardless of what celebrations occur tonight, we are counting on you, the Class of 2010. Thank you. Thank you so much for allowing me to be part of this celebration. And good luck. [Applause]