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# Pulitzer Prize-Winning Author Addresses Convocation

September 26, 2007

BLOOMINGTON, Ill., – Pulitzer Prize-winning author Tracy Kidder asked Illinois Wesleyan University students to be more inspired than he was in his youth.

"Now, I'm 61, it's too late for me," joked Kidder, addressing the IWU President's Convocation on Wednesday, Sept. 26, in a speech punctuated with humor and a message – do what you love and use it to change the world. "For most of you the question of what you're going to do with your lives has not been answered, though it is the one question you cannot stop asking yourself."

[Hear the address](#)

Kidder's speech, titled "One Way to Live a Meaningful Life," followed the subject of his novel *Mountains Beyond Mountains: The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer, A Man Who Could Cure the World*. The book was the focus of Illinois Wesleyan's 2007 Summer Reading Program, which all first-year students were assigned.

"Dr. Farmer's message, it would seem to me, is a plea that we pay attention to the world as it really is," said Kidder, who followed Farmer for several months as the world-renowned physician worked tirelessly to fight illness and establish "poverty with dignity" for people in Haiti, Moscow and Peru with clean water, livable housing and medical attention. "If we see a bag lady or a drunk sleeping in a doorway, our first reaction is to get as far away from them as we can," said Kidder. "Farmer's message is *don't do that*. Don't join what seems to be America's collective amnesia to human suffering."

Telling stories of Farmer's adventures, Kidder spoke of his eclectic upbringing, his days among the wealthy at Duke University and his struggles to create Partners In Health, a not-for-profit organization. Contending that Farmer, with his boundless energy and determination, is unique, Kidder still believes he is an inspiration to guide students not to "forget the forgotten people" of the world.

One story included Farmer volunteering at a hospital in Haiti during his college days. Trying to help a woman whose pregnant sister was dying because she could not afford to buy blood for a transfusion, the woman cried out, "*Tout moun, se moun*," or we are all human beings. "All day Farmer had felt pulled in different directions and asking himself, 'Who should I try to become?'" said Kidder. "At the young age of 22, when he heard that woman cry out, he knew it was not enough to be simply an American or simply a doctor. He knew he had to become part of all humanity."

Though he professed to have no recipe for a successful life, Kidder encouraged students to do what they love, and put it to use. "There is no skill you can acquire that can't be used in some way to improve the world," he said. "Each of you are different and each of you will have to find what you love to do."

The title of *Mountains Beyond Mountains* is inspired by the Haitian proverb, "Beyond mountains, there are mountains," meaning that as problems are solved, others present themselves. According to Kidder, Farmer believes if more people from the wealthy nations acknowledge suffering, poverty and illness around the world, we could treat them as solvable problems. "If everyone was saying these intolerable problems need to be fixed, then the world would already be largely different and basically healed," said Kidder.

Overall, it was Farmer's curiosity that led him to begin his journey, said Kidder, pulling him away from the American dream, and instead to the dream of moving mountains. It is this same curiosity Illinois Wesleyan's President Richard F. Wilson hoped for IWU students. "If there is anything we can carry away from today, it is the recognition that curiosity sometimes can lead to commitment. And those who dedicate themselves to people across the world in some small way can enrich our own lives," said Wilson.

While on campus, Kidder also took part in an informal discussion and book signing, moderated by Associate Professor of Political Science and Director of International Studies William Munro.



Tracy Kidder