

Everyday Hero

By Jana Aloo

When I was asked to talk about an everyday hero, the first person that came to mind was Dr. Paul Farmer, a physician and anthropologist from Boston, who has been working in rural Haiti for almost 20 years. I've heard Dr Farmer speak on the radio and recently saw him interviewed during the coverage of the earthquake and finally checked out from the library a book written about him called *Mountains Beyond Mountains—The Quest of Paul Farmer, the man who would cure the world*. He is an icon in the public health world because he embodies the best of public health ethics and goals—working with community, dedication to social justice and prevention and he keeps it simple. When the book begins, Dr. Farmer is a 35-year-old Harvard graduate. He lives in a church rectory in a low income area of Boston four months of the year while working at a hospital and Harvard, and spends the remainder of the year without pay in Haiti. As the book states, he chose to give up a comfortable life commuting to the suburbs to pursue a passion to help those who have the least and need the most. There are endless stories in the book and on the Internet that tell about the ways he has touched and saved people's lives in the US and Haiti. Although he is one of my heroes, and a celebrated hero to many others, I am actually drawn to tell you about someone else named Noah Tamba.

Like Paul Farmer, Noah Tamba was about 35 years old almost 20 years ago when I was assigned through the Peace Corps to work with him in a rural village in Senegal, West Africa. He was a government-trained nurse who was responsible for the health and lives of over fifty-thousand rural villagers in a desert-like area in the north of the country. Like all government employees, he had little control over where he would work and even less control about change. He was from the tropical southern area of Senegal, a Christian, and was assigned to a northern sandy village only a few miles from the pilgrimage center of Islam. He even spoke a different language. As you can imagine, this was not his first choice. Having a Peace Corp volunteer following him around for two years was probably also not his choice. But we made things work between us. Like I said, Noah was responsible for fifty-thousand villagers spread out over many sandy miles. He worked all hours of the day, every day. Government nurses were only allowed to take a vacation if they had someone to cover for them—and of course there was no one trained and able to cover. People would line up every single day often so sick from malaria that they had to be carried and just lay waiting for him. He delivered all the babies, witnessed and recorded all the deaths, and took responsibility to care for very sick people with little medicine or resources. In Senegal, one in four children dies before their fifth birthday and I knew young healthy women who died in childbirth. It was shocking and tragic and he took responsibility for their care and provided kindness and compassion. He once told me that he chose the wrong profession. He said he'd wished he'd become a teacher or pharmacist. It was all just too much.

While I always admired Noah, I kept a distance because I saw parts of his character that I didn't like. For example, when we would go to even more remote villages than ours to do vaccinations of children, he would wear reading glasses that he didn't need and speak French to me instead of the local language, which what we always spoke to each other in order, to distant himself and seem more foreign

(European) and distinguished to the local people. I also saw him cut corners that could have serious consequences. At times he overreacted with an abruptness and or anger when asked for help. He had flirtations with many women in our village, some married, and kept the clinic's family planning supplies for himself. I think these were his ways of pushing back against the role of hero that he was given when he decide to become a nurse. After a year working together, he shared with me some thoughts of disappointments and frustration.

For example, once a month, both of us, separately, would make the nine-hour trip to the capital to pick up our monthly salary of \$200. I would spend a couple days enjoying a hot shower and electricity, coffee with friends and maybe a night dancing and then deposit over half of the money in the bank, buy my village family a return gift of watermelon or mangos and head back to the village. Noah explained to me that during his few days in the capital, he would be faced with so many family problems that most of his money and patience were spent. There are three choices in public transportation—a 7-seat station wagon, a 14-seat van, or a 20-seat gutted van with wooden benches on three sides and, when filled to capacity, a wooden bench down the middle. It was called an Alhamdulillah, which means praise be to God. I assume this is because most everyone prayed for a safe arrival. Noah would choose the Alhamdulillah because he couldn't afford the additional dollar for a faster more comfortable ride.

Yes, to me, Noah Tamba is a hero, a reluctant and an imperfect one. A hero doing heroic things he didn't choose to do in a place he didn't choose. Unlike Dr. Paul Farmer, who made his own choices and continues to shape his destiny while contributing to the livelihood others, Noah has been assigned "to cure the world" everyday without recognition, an NPR interview, or a book written about him. I would guess that no one on this side of the Atlantic Ocean has ever heard of Noah Tamba. I don't know what he is doing now but my best guess is he is doing similar work in a similar village. Is he like Dr. Farmer, bringing health and hope to the sick and hopeless out of a life calling or commitment to social justice and humanity? Or is he simply surviving and carrying the burden he was given. I can't know for sure but I think probably a little of both. Everyday heroes like Noah don't always choose or even want their calling, but they do it. They do the work, they travel the distance and they make a difference.