

## A Hall of Mountains

By Mike Lanzerotti

Many indispensable qualities are required from an individual in order to be a citizen of a community. In the book *Mountains Beyond Mountains* by Tracy Kidder, Dr. Paul Farmer asks, "What does it mean to be an American?" This is a very good question that will help us understand what the duties are of a citizen in the U. S. In order to become an American citizen, one must be born on U. S. soil. However, there is an alternate route to citizenship called immigration. Among these immigrants, State Senator George Washington Plunkitt shares many of the same indispensable qualities of Dr. Paul Farmer. While Farmer's ideas are idealistic and impractical, Plunkitt comes up with a functional and realistic method of service to one's community.

Being born in the U.S, Farmer grew up being a U. S. citizen. The fact that he was born in this country voids any personal preference he may have had on where he would have liked to grow up. In fact he grew up in a poor American family, living in mobile homes without many of the luxuries that many other children would have had living in a stationary home. With his second-rate upbringing, Farmer was able to live the American Dream. He had fought against all the odds, and using his intellect as his means to the top. Farmer attended both Duke and Harvard University, receiving his M.D. and Ph.D. in anthropology at the same time at Harvard. From his background, Farmer was able to experience many different aspects of being an American in different social classes.

While in medical school, Farmer found his "life's calling" to cure infectious diseases in places where medicine was nearly nonexistent. Dr. Farmer has personally traveled to treat

communities all over the world since he has started his “quest” in Boston. He has traveled to many countries including Haiti, Russia, Peru, Latvia, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan. It is at this point in his life that Farmer no longer considers himself a citizen of the U.S, but a citizen-of the world. In a way he denounces the U. S. for not acting in a similar manner by aiding these third-world Countries. In the book, he talks about how the U. S. government rid Haiti of its dictator, but not its ruin from the old government. According to Dr. Paul Farmer, it is our duty as humans and citizens of the world to help as many of the unfortunate in the world as possible with our resources.

Another look at citizenship comes from George Washington Plunkett, a well-known New York State Senator from the Fifteenth Assembly District of New York. As part of the Tammany Hall political machine, Plunkitt was a very powerful man for his time. In the book *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall*, Plunkitt explains in his talks what it is like to be an influential governing figure in his community.

Like Farmer, Plunkitt also rose up from “rags to riches.” When he realized how the political system worked, Plunkitt went to his cousin and asked, “Tommy, I’m going to be a politician and I want to get a followin’; can I count on you?” He said, ‘Sure, George.’ That’s how I started in business. I got a marketable commodity—one vote” (9). So, Plunkitt decided to serve his superiors instead of the underprivileged like Farmer. He started with that one vote and gathered a following of sixty or so friends to create the George Washington Plunkitt Association. When the district Democratic leader found out about Plunkitt and his association, he and offered him a position. Plunkitt turned him down and used his organization to move himself up to the position of a “statesman.”

Plunkitt's idea of serving his community was a little bit different than Dr. Paul Farmer's. As he explained in his speech about honest graft and dishonest graft, Plunkitt tells his interview about how he could serve the constituents of his community while maintaining a healthy - business in real estate. Plunkitt describe how he seemed to have a knack for picking out land that would be bought by the government. For example, Plunkitt bought a swamp next to and area that was going to be a future park and it turned out that the administration couldn't finish the project without acquiring Plunkitt's swamp. Although his dealings were not exactly fair to everyone else, he created a small fortune while serving the public. It turned out that Plunkitt was responsible for transforming central park from a dirty slum into a famous public recreational area.

Another example of Plunkitt serving the community is how he and his campaign team were always out helping in public emergencies. When there was a fire they showed up right along side the firemen, not to tell people about their campaign, but to help them find a place to stay. He may even help them with lost positions, whatever it took to get them back on their feet. They did this for almost every emergency that he could come to, because each victim would become life long Plunkitt ticket. Everything that Plunkitt did to help serve his district brought him something in return.

Another interesting way of looking at Dr. Paul Farmer's and George Washington Plunkitt's views on citizenship is by investigating their own political views. Farmer seems to want a utopia of healthcare for everyone in the world. He gives practically free service to everyone in the category of less fortunate in many different countries. In theory, Farmer wants everyone in the middle class and above to aid the poor for nothing in return. What is interesting to note is how similar Farmer's ideas are to socialism. He believes that no one should be on top

nor, especially, on the bottom. It is this idea of equality for all citizens that socialism is based. One problem with that idea is that Farmer's plan is not economically sound. Most socialist countries become ruined from monetary corruption. Fortunately for Farmer, he had the financial support of Tom White. Unfortunately for Farmer, everyone doesn't have a millionaire such as Tom White to back them up on their endeavors.

However, Plunkitt has a remedy for that problem. Being a democrat, his ideas relate to democracy and free enterprise. Plunkitt worked hard to win the support of the people, but he also made sure that he got a "little something" in return. Although it is illegal now, honest graft seemed to suit both Tammany Hall and its citizens very well. The only people who complained about Plunkitt's endeavors were outsiders, reporters, and his opponents.

Although they both have very different proposals of what it means to be a citizen, Plunkitt and Farmer have one thing in common: service. Each person provides for the community of which they consider themselves a citizen. While Dr. Paul Farmer displays great stamina in providing healthcare for the Haitians and other poor communities around the world, it seems somewhat unrealistic to expect everyone to follow his lead. On the other hand, George Washington Plunkitt seems to have an idea that would encourage more people to give back to their communities.

#### Works Cited

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