

# PSYCHOLOGY

## Experiencing Ignatian Core Values in Health Psychology: Utilizing “Inspiration” and “Aspiration”

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### Overview of the Sub-field

Over the past 30 years, *Health Psychology* has become a major subfield of psychology. *Health Psychology* is one of 56 divisions of the American Psychological Association, psychology’s major professional organization. The specialty is defined in the following way: *Health Psychology seeks to advance contributions of psychology to the understanding of health and illness through basic and clinical research, education, and service activities and encourages the integration of biomedical information about health and illness with current psychological knowledge.*

### Departmental Mission Statement

In keeping with the Jesuit, Catholic, liberal arts tradition, the Department of Psychology educates students in the science of behavior and mental processes with sensitivity toward the diversity of all people so students may use psychological knowledge and insight to address human concerns.

### Ignatian Mission and Identity Objectives

As part of the annual assessment of college life by XU’s Office of Strategic Information Resources, Xavier students (and students at other participating Jesuit universities) are asked the following questions during their freshman and senior year in order to obtain students’ understanding and experience of Xavier’s core values arising from its Jesuit identity: *To what extent has your experience at this institution contributed to your development of each of the following?*

1. Understanding the mission of your institution.
2. Devoting effort to help others in need.
3. Leading by example.
4. Increasing your awareness of the relationship between global and ethical issues.
5. Actively working to further social justice
6. Defining your own values and beliefs.
7. Demonstrating respect for other’s differences.
8. Actively working toward a more inclusive community.
9. Ability to look critically at society and its institutions.
10. Making ethical decisions in professional situations.
11. Making ethical decisions in personal situations.
12. Understanding what it means to be men and women for others.
13. Making connections between your intellectual and spiritual life.

(The response scale is: Very much =4, Quite a bit= 3, Some=2, Very little=1)

### Teaching Component

As part of the Ethic, Religion and Society's annual lecture series, Paul Farmer, Ph.D., M.D., presented his work, *HIV/AIDS Crisis: Research and Advocacy (Community-based Treatment for HIV/AIDS)* at Xavier University on April 23, 2007. In preparation, and as part of the course unit on "International Health", students read, *Mountains Beyond Mountains: The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer - A Man Who Would Cure the World* (Tracy Kidder, 2003), engaged in multiple small group discussions, and reflected upon and responded, in writing, to the following question:

***As you consider your life and work in the future, what aspirations and goals has Dr. Farmer's experience inspired in you?***

The goals of this teaching component were to:

- Facilitate students' understanding and experience of the University's core values in a personally meaningful way.
- Enhance self-reflection, awareness and insight (a skill critical to professional psychologists and a significant component of Ignatian spirituality and Jesuit education [see *Heroic Leadership* by Chris Lowney, 2003 or chapter 4 in *Jesuit Saturdays* by William Byron, SJ, 2000]).

### **Quotes from Student Responses**

... As I entered into college, I found myself continuing this passion [medicine] through volunteering in children's hospitals and eventually working in the research section of Cincinnati Children's Medical Center. Also, in college I found a way to a new passion of service. Through Alternative Breaks, it opened up a whole new world of opportunities to serve people. My eyes were opened to issues of homelessness and poverty in cities of the United States, and then this was expanded to issues in Ukraine and Jamaica. I found myself wondering about other social justice issues, those of children's issue, healthcare inequality, disabilities, women's issues, etc. Once I was exposed to one issue, I wanted to find a way to deal with each issue.

Senior psychology major, chemistry minor

I have always wanted to be a writer but knew that most people could not make a living on a writer's salary so I abandoned the idea for a different major once I came to college. I also essentially gave up writing because I adopted an "all or nothing" feeling towards it, believing that if I was not going to spend all of my energy on it, I should not spend any on it. However, seeing how Farmer seems to successfully balance his job and his passion rekindled the idea that perhaps I could be a writer – in whatever free time I can find. Psychology may be my job but writing is definitely my passion so I pulled out the novel that I started a year ago and wrote twenty more pages on it over the last break. I am still unsure whether I will ever have the nerve to get it published but at least I can still continue writing for the joy of writing.

Senior psychology and finance major

Farmer's experience showed me that you must use the talents that God gave you.... My talents of empathy and insight are the reasons I chose psychology.

Junior psychology major, philosophy minor

Farmer's story has taught me so many things, first of all reinforcing my desire to go into the helping field. My goal is to study social work and become a therapist. I want to help people by letting them know that someone is there for them and will listen to their problems. Just as Farmer corrected my misconceptions about poverty and disease, I too want to help with other's misconceptions. I want to be a mediator for others, allowing them to educate one another through their miscommunications. I feel things such as miscommunication will only lead to ruin, so someone needs to act and help them.

Junior psychology major

My understanding is that we are all born into certain lives that we don't always have control over, but I also believe that we were born into certain lives for a reason. Am I better than a Haitian born into poverty? Am I lesser than a European born into royalty? Perhaps the question shouldn't be who is better or more deserving of certain rights and amenities, but instead we need to ask what is that all human beings should be entitled to. As is mentioned in *MBM*, all human beings should be entitled to proper living conditions: clean water, food, shelter, clean air, and proper health care. If we are blessed enough to be given these things at birth, shouldn't we work to ensure that others also are provided with these essentials?

Senior psych. major, gender & diversity studies minor

I know that I have a few gifts. I am compassionate, I am analytical, I am empathetic, and I am outgoing. I know I have a few weaknesses. I am lethargic, I am pessimistic (in viewing myself), I am doubtful of myself. I also have a few traits that I am not sure are helpful or hurtful. I am easy going, I am fun, I am highly based on the here-and-now, and I am sarcastic. I know that I have everything necessary to be a successful person; I just do not know what it is that I am going to be successful at. .... I know that I can be a source of guidance for people. Coaching has allowed me to be that lifeline or that safety net for some people.

Junior psychology major

As a student at Xavier, I have had the privilege to receive an education concerning the many branches of structural violence and its victims and, consequently, have chosen to remember the images of the poor instead of living in the ignorance that my actions do not directly affect those who are suffering.

Senior psych. major, natural sci. and Spanish minor

It has always been difficult for me to express my emotions, as I was taught to keep them inside like the rest of my family. Farmer has made me rethink the manner in which I express my emotions, which is often not at all. In the future, I would like to be able to open up more to people, especially to those that are important in my life.

Senior psych. major, gender & diversity studies minor

[Recently] I was juggling my schoolwork and helping my mother take care of her father who was very ill. I spent much of the last month helping my mother because family has always been something that has meant a lot to me. I decided that my grandfather needed my undivided attention because he was so critically ill. I spent almost everyday helping my mother take care of him because I felt like it was something that I needed to do. Almost everyday my grandfather and I would talk about sports and then he wanted to know if I had decided yet where I was going to go to law school. My grandfather was so proud because he already

had one lawyer in the family and he was on his way to having another one. He knew that I was happiest when I was helping others. We got the call that no one ever wants to get, my grandfather had passed away. As I continue on with my life, I look back to the conversations I had with my grandfather in the last month of his life. I will never forget his words about the fact that I would be a great lawyer because I had more ambition than anyone he knew at the age of twenty-two. Between the words of my grandfather and Farmer, I have been inspired to help people in the only way I know how, to be there for them in a time of need.

Senior political science major, psychology minor

I put my family before everything else in my life. I was raised to believe that your family is the only support system you will have for the entirety of your life....I hope that when I get married, my wife will be a major part of everything that I do; including every decision that needs to be made regarding our family. I also want to be a major part of the raising of my children. I cannot imagine leaving my children in their beginning years when they are learning everything about the world. This is the time when they learn to trust and value people and I hope to be there for this important stage in their lives.

Junior psychology major

I, like most people, am guilty of making assumptions about people, just because he or she is different.....just because someone acts differently than I would act in the same situation, does not mean that we are unlike each other in every aspect.

Junior psychology major

...I can see myself as a person who chooses a career focused upon passion, vocation, and selflessness. Farmer's life has helped inspire me to realize where true happiness in life lies. His works have made me realize that I should follow my passions, I should find a career that I enjoy, and that I should make the world a better place.

Junior psychology major, English minor

The absolute most important lesson I learned from Farmer's story is that the only thing that can hold me back is inaction.

Senior psychology major

## **Student Feedback**

*I'll remember how the International Health unit challenged me to evaluate my priorities/goals in my future career and service to others.*

*The reflection paper was a great way to incorporate my thoughts about the book with my life.*

*It is important to take the time to look at how things affect your own life. It was really great to write the paper.*

*I liked the paper because it is good to be asked, "What about you?" in some courses.*

*I enjoyed writing the paper because it really made me think about what I'd like to do with my life.*

*The reflection paper was a good follow-up to reading the book. It allowed expression of opinions, reactions, and considerations. It was a nice open-ended subject.*

*The reflection paper was good because it gives us the chance to respond to the book and evaluate our own goals, etc.*

*Farmer was just one person that affected so many people. I learned that if you have a drive to do something - then it can be done.*

*I liked the paper because it helps individuals reflect and learn about themselves.*

*The paper helped tie up our thoughts about the book in regards to our own lives. It made me think critically about the book and Paul Farmer's life while also looking at my life in the past and future.*

*The book combined with Farmer's presentation and my personal reflections – was really an inspirational/educational aspect of this course.*