

FM REVIEW COMMENTS 2013 16

COMMENTS TO EDITOR: This is a beautifully written essay that raises deep philosophical questions about the nature of medical helping, particularly in the context of developing countries. The author reflects on how such helping often overlooks the strengths and resilience of the recipients, and suggests the importance of "helping" others with from a position of humility and awareness. Reviewer 1 makes an important point about her metaphor of "looking up" by noting that power and privilege provide the luxury to engage in this stepping back from the daily struggle. Reviewer 2, while needlessly pedantic about the author's writing style, offers excellent insight regarding the slightly muddled nature of the central metaphors themselves. I encourage the author to address both of these concerns, as well as more minor issues.

COMMENTS TO AUTHOR: This is an eloquently expressed reflection about what it means to "help" in the context of global health. Your insights into the importance of recognizing the strengths and resilience of those receiving such help are essential qualifications to the attitude which often accompanies medical missions. Your writing is confident and often lyrical. (By the way, I disagree with Reviewer 2 about your stylistic choices. "Eschew" is a perfectly acceptable English word. As for "amidst," Webster says "Both forms are in frequent use; you can use whichever sounds better to you").

Both reviewers, however, raise important questions for you to consider in your revision. Reviewer 1 asks you to note how possession of power and privilege give the luxury to be able to "look up," which is otherwise not always available to people engaged in the daily struggle for survival.

Reviewer 2 challenges the clarity of your central metaphors of "hanging off the side of a mountain" and "looking up." On the stylistic level, "hanging off" does imply hanging off a cliff; and is a rather confusing image when fused with the actual experience of ascending a mountain path. Perhaps you mean "clinging to the side" in the sense that a mountain path is often carved (perilously) into the side of a mountain.

Similarly, "looking up" seems less accurate to your purpose than "looking around," although I agree the latter is less poetical. However you revise or explain this metaphor, what seems to me important is that you convey the value of taking in ALL aspects of of the "view," both the suffering and struggles of the people AND their resilience and capabilities.

This speaks to a related problem with the metaphor of looking up, or stepping back to consider the big picture. Reviewer 2 alludes to this when she questions whether you are suggesting that we somehow "overlook" the details that medicine tends to focus on in order to grasp the big picture. Clearly, this is not what you're saying, but again the metaphor of "looking up" may easily be confused with looking past or overlooking. Please make clear that this is not the case. Rather, at least in my read, you are saying that the vision of the physician must include EVERYTHING, both the poor dentition AND the sure-footedness.

Reviewer 2 struggled with the anecdote about the children, and I did as well, but for a slightly different reason. I didn't think the example was "trite" or "belabored," but I found the sentences about their being children "from anywhere," "just like any other" problematic. In the lines 29-41, I think you elide these children's unique differences. Also, there is something troubling about seeing them as "most beautiful" when you are seeing them at a distance, overlooking their gritty details. See if you can nuance this aspect a bit.

I also agree with Reviewer 2 that the concluding story of the resident with the camera could benefit from some editing (perhaps too much narrative detail for a minor character) and focusing (sorry :-)). Somehow, in an essay in which you are so present, it seems strange to end on someone we've never met. I think it detracts from the emotional impact. Consider how you might join in this last, significant moment - perhaps even "Together, we stood on the mountain, looking up (or around, or however you decide to deal with this metaphor)."

Please understand that all these comments show an active engagement from all readers with your essay. It is only because it is so good that we want to make it even better.