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How to Climb a Mountain

"If you start up a hill like a young person, you will finish old; if you start up a hill like an old person, you will finish young." So say the Malagasy people who inhabit the island of Madagascar, where I spent twenty-seven months as a community health worker with the Peace Corps. The truth of this proverb is one of the first lessons I learned in my time there. During my ten weeks of training I lived with a host family in a small highland village where rice paddies, farms, and houses are constructed in terraces up the mountainous slopes. As luck would have it, my family lived at the very top of a hill, almost two miles from the village center where my training sessions were held. The walk down the hill was never an issue, but journey home was always a challenge. The shortest route was a steep path that cut directly up the mountain. It was often tempting to rush up that path in an attempt to finish the trek quickly, but this always resulted in me reaching the top panting, choking for air. When I walked more slowly, pausing occasionally to catch my breath, it was a much less strenuous climb. It gave me an opportunity to survey my surroundings and enjoy the view, and I still had energy at the top of the hill for the rest of my walk home.

During 2013, I often found myself feeling incredibly frustrated over the injustices in our world. In the midst of the activities surrounding the 50th Anniversary March on Washington,

I wondered how it is possible that we are still facing the same issues today that so many marched for 50 years ago. My initial reaction was to feel discouraged that the fight has not yet been won, and that even another 50 years will probably not see an end to the many inequalities people face today. Yet as I look ahead to 2014, I choose to remember that walk up the mountain and let the proverb serve as a mantra for my ongoing work as a justice advocate. Rather than let myself get discouraged, I choose to feel inspired.

While it might feel easier to rally around an issue and hope our leaders will respond to our demands for change with broad, sweeping legislation, we know that this rarely happens. Instead, we enact small changes that build upon one another until we finally reach our goal. We must never forget that end goal, but we can focus on the smaller victories that help get us there. We can remind ourselves to pause and enjoy working alongside those who share our passion for justice. We can look back at the progress we've already made, allowing ourselves to see that there is a reason to keep moving forward. We can take small, feasible steps, knowing they will get us to the top of the hill with a lot more energy remaining for the next challenge.

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