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Summer at New York monastery changed life of Emmy-winning filmmaker

Sr. Camille D'Arienzo | Nov. 13, 2012 Conversations with Sr. Camille

The business card Matthew Kells, 40, uses for his media company, Spooky Truth Productions [1], identifies him as "Caretaker." A few minutes spent with him reveal that his caretaking embrace primarily protects and delights in his wife, Catherine, and his two young daughters, Fiona, 5, and Mary Rose, 2.

Lessons from his own childhood motivate him to provide them with the peace and joy lacking in his own.

***Sr. Camille*: What was your childhood like?**

Kells: I was born and raised on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, which is one of the more affluent parts of New York City. My dad was a superintendent in a Park Avenue building, so it was a very blue-collar upbringing in a very white-collar neighborhood. My parents married young, and they fought a lot. As a result, by the time I was 15, I weighed 375 pounds and was socially terrified. I did anything I could to escape myself: theater, public speaking, some filmmaking, and I watched a lot of TV.

Did you have role models?

When I was a kid -- and I didn't really put this together until you asked me -- my grandmothers were both huge role models. My mom's mom, Mema, was the kindest person I ever met. She was a small, quiet woman, but she was an absolute lion. She went to church every day, and there was something angelic about her. She didn't push her faith, she just glowed with tranquility -- really the closest thing I've ever experienced to angelic.

My dad's mom, Nana, was in many ways the opposite. She was boisterous, fun-loving and was crazy about playing games. I think a lot of my playful side comes from her.

Where did you get your education?

My 12 years of Catholic schooling were followed by four years at Brooklyn College. I graduated magna cum laude in my major, television and radio. Being at Brooklyn College after 12 years of Catholic schools was very good for me. I think I spent my entire freshman year blushing. It opened my eyes to how many different kinds of people really lived in New York; it also prepared me well for a career in television. My classes were fun, but the skills I cultivated navigating the red tape that comes getting the credits needed to graduate from a large city institution were actually the skills that got me my first job in television.

Did you pursue the career you intended while a student?

No. I'd been drawn to advertising, and when I was a senior at Brooklyn College, I applied for a prestigious internship with the Television Academy of Arts and Sciences (the Emmy people). They had 20 spots to fill in different areas of broadcasting, and they did a national search to fill those 20 spots. By coincidence, Sr. Camille was a teacher of mine at Brooklyn College and became my mentor with the application process. A month after

applying, I was informed that I was one of three finalists for the Advertising and Promotions internship I so desperately wanted. Since the internship was Los Angeles-based, I cleared my schedule for the summer. A few weeks later, I received an unsigned letter saying I did not get the position. The next morning, I ran into Camille, who knew immediately that I had been disappointed and invited me up to her office to talk about it.

She surprised me by suggesting I consider a summer experience very different from the one I wanted. She handed me a pamphlet about a monastery in upstate New York that was running a summer program. It invited Catholic men ages 21 to 35 to spend five weeks at the monastery, living in community with the monks. I had never visited a monastery before, nor was I really practicing Catholicism actively, but maybe for the first time in my adult life, I leaped. I said yes. I had spent four years going to college full-time and getting my Bachelor of Arts, and during that time was working 11 p.m. to 7 a.m. every Thursday, Friday and Saturday. I was bitterly disappointed, and having just cleared my schedule, I truly had nothing better to do. So instead of trying to rebuild what was in place, I said yes and spent the summer at Mount Saviour Monastery [2].

It was the best summer of my life. The monks were beautiful people in the real sense of the word: giving, fragile, faithful, flawed but not discouraged, as they lived in community, seeking God. I arrived there a young man wanting very much to break into advertising, I returned focused on finding a way to work in media while staying true to the values I saw lived up at Mount Saviour.

Did you find any way to show your appreciation to the monks of Mount Saviour?

Twelve years after my initial visit, I completed a documentary I did on the community, "The Everyday: Benedictine Life at Mount Saviour Monastery [3]," which won an Emmy. It documented the life and values that had so impacted me as young man -- values I still aspire to today as a husband, a son and a father to two beautiful girls. We produced it for very little money, and I got a lot of my friends to donate their time and talents. As a result, four of them won Emmy Awards for their work in camera and sound.

What do you consider your professional strengths?

My professional strengths are my ability to motivate people, my sense of humor, my strong sense of organization and my kindness.

Do you bring your faith to the workplace?

Unfortunately, in some work environments, kindness is mistaken for weakness, so bringing my faith to some workplaces is a huge challenge and one I struggle with constantly. The short answer, of course, is that if you are in a place where those parts of you can't shine, then you are in the wrong place. The long answer is that these two things are often at odds, and I am not even close to figuring out what the right balance is in my life.

Please say something about the Christmas project you recently completed.

This summer, I was lucky enough to work on a Christmas special that will air Christmas Eve on CBS. It takes a look at how Reading, Pa., the poorest small city in America according to the 2010 census, celebrates Christmas. The special, produced by Odyssey Network, features music and scripture from Reading residents but also explores how the tenets of Christmas (faith, hope, generosity, love) play out in a place where many people have nothing at all. In a lot of ways, it was the best job I ever had. I had three of the four friends who helped me on "The Everyday" working on this. I had the privilege of interviewing more than 50 residents of Reading, who spoke from the heart about the joys and sufferings poverty has brought to their city and to their lives.

How did you meet Catherine?

Rachel, a mutual friend of ours, set Catherine and me up on a blind date. While she's a good friend, both Catherine and I would later agree that neither of us was looking forward to the date because Rachel is a bit of a nut. As a matter of fact, after Rachel gave me Catherine's number, I threw it out because I did not trust Rachel's gut when it came to love. A month later, she asked me what happened with Catherine. When I confessed that I'd never called her, Rachel screamed at me and would not relent until I agreed to call Catherine. I did so that evening. Cat and I met for a drink a few days later, and I knew immediately that she was special. Within three months, I knew we would be together forever. We were married in October 2004 at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City. Getting married there was her idea. I thought it was a bit grand, but when she told me that her parents were married there, it seemed to make a lot of sense.

How have your daughters affected your life?

Maybe it's because I didn't have my first of two daughters until I was 34, but I was woefully unprepared for how children would change my life. Everyone (correctly) tells you about the joy children bring to your life, but nobody ever tells you that your life is going to be turned upside-down and that all of your time will be spent caring for other people. I miss my wife terribly because I don't really get to experience her the way I used to. She's an amazing mother and there is great joy in seeing her in that role, but I also miss her friendship because we do not spend much time together as friends, doing the things friends do. We spend time as parents, doing the things parents do. And we spend time as the custodians of our house and lives, doing the things custodians do. Now that the kids are older, a little of that time is thankfully returning, but that aspect of parenthood is very tough.

What is your favorite scripture passage? Does it make in difference in your life?

St. Phillip is quoted as often asking his congregation, "When shall we begin to do good?" This has stayed with me because for me, it's a real call to action and gets to the heart of a lot of what I struggle with as a Catholic. I think St. Philip is asking, "What are you waiting for? Are you waiting to be smarter, or richer or wiser, or perhaps have more time on your hands? What is the delay? The time is now!"

I've always been a procrastinator. Throw a job and two kids into the mix and I can easily find a dozen excuses not to do anything that I don't absolutely have to do. I think what St. Philip is challenging us to do is to not simply get going, but to address whatever is holding you back and conquer it.

What is your image of God?

Truthfully, I don't know. I have kept a journal for more than 20 years, and I always imagine that when I write in it that I am corresponding with God, so I guess I view God like a friend or a brother.

Did you have a favorite parish and why?

Our parish is the Oratory Church of St. Boniface in downtown Brooklyn. We moved out of the neighborhood but still commute most Sundays. The people are warm, the priests are insightful and there is a strong sense of community.

How do you relax?

I play small-stakes poker -- I feel it takes me to another place. It really feeds both sides of me: I like the quiet, thoughtful nature of the game combined with the excitement and risk that comes from gambling.

What does Christianity expect of you?

We talk a lot in our house (with two girls under the age of 6) about the golden rule. If you spent every day of your life loving God and treating others the way you want to be treated, I think you've really got it covered.

How do you pray?

I pray silently and in short, concentrated bursts. A priest told me a long time ago that God already knows what you are praying for, so the prayer does not have to be formal, nor does it need to even be coherent. So I stopped praying for things essentially, though I still do pray for people. But even then, I am not praying for Mrs. Smith to feel better, I am almost presenting these people to God by thinking of them warmly and letting God do the rest.

What do you want from Catholicism for your daughters?

I want my daughters to believe in something more than what is in front of them. I want them to know they are always loved and that popular culture, school, friends, peer pressure, etc., are not the most powerful forces in their lives, even it feels like it so much of the time.

What in contemporary Catholicism distresses you? Is there anything you would change?

I think women should be able to fully participate in the faith, including the priesthood. Most of my spiritual icons are women, and I have never really liked or fully understood the exclusion.

What causes you sorrow?

Big things. My mom suffered from dementia right before she died, and the way she was affected during the last few years of her life is something I just can't shake. In a lot of ways, her death has brought the rest of the family closer together in ways I could not have imagined. That said, my last memories of her cause me some amount of anguish every day.

In addition, I'm saddened by little things: rudeness, littering, the way people line up for a bus. New York is my home, but living here is as stressful as it is incredible.

What causes you joy?

I make breakfast for the family every day. For our family, for the time being, it is the meal that brings us all together, especially on the weekdays. Our kitchen is really where we spend most of our time as a family. Early on Saturday morning, the smell of bacon, Fiona cracking eggs and Mary Rose whisking them into pancake batter (and making a terrible mess), our dog Stetson's overgrown nails clicking on the linoleum as he circles for bits and crumbs, blues/rock/doo-wop pouring out of the radio (courtesy of WGBO/Bob Porter), Catherine flipping pancakes -- nothing better.

What gives you hope?

My girls. As I get older, I feel I'm so often caught up in the everyday stresses I carry around. It is a revelation to see two happy, unrestrained, truly free girls every single day. I aspire to be more like them, I really do.

Do you have a favorite TV program?

I tend to lean toward silly and stay far away from reality shows. "30 Rock," "The Simpsons," "Bob's Burgers." I

also try to watch documentary and nonfiction things at home. "Planet Earth" was astounding! I'd like to state for the record that I have never seen "Downton Abbey."

Do you have a favorite author?

I love to read, but I don't much anymore except for bedtime, so I guess I'd have to say Dr. Seuss (*Cat in the Hat*), Roald Dahl (*Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*) and Norman Bridwell (*Clifford the Big Red Dog*).

Thanks, Matthew. You've just taught your professor a few things.

[Mercy Sr. Camille D'Arienzo, broadcaster and author, narrates *Stories of Forgiveness*, a book about people whose experiences have caused them to consider the possibilities of extending or accepting forgiveness. The audio book is available through the book's website, storiesofforgiveness.com [4].]

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