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Sister of 9/11 victim finds hope in health care work with teens

Sr. Camille D'Arienzo | Jun. 11, 2013 Conversations with Sr. Camille

Sr. Camille: I find your email address, colleen@peacefultomorrows.org, intriguing. Please describe the peaceful tomorrows you envision.

Colleen Kelly: I envision peaceful tomorrows to be when we all use the power within us to live by that universal maxim, "Do unto others as you would have done unto you." It applies to people, communities and nations. And it's that easy (and that hard)!

What drew you to help found September 11th Families for Peaceful Tomorrows[1]?

Part of my conviction is personality-based. I was blessed to be born with a predilection toward nonviolence. I do think a lot, however, about how difficult nonviolent response can be. That said, returning violence with violence never made sense to me, and it didn't feel right. Why would I want another family to hurt the way my family was hurt?

How was your family hurt?

My brother, Bill, was 30 years old when he died on 9/11 at the World Trade Center. He did not work there. He was at a breakfast conference at Windows on the World. It's intensely painful to think about how he died, and I spent many years trying to understand his last moments. Now I have to try hard to remember his voice or his mannerisms. It's not that I forget Bill. He was a wonderful man, special to me and our family in ways that everyone who died that day was special to their loved ones. The difference is that Bill's essence has replaced his physical presence. Some moments his spirit is overwhelming and I laugh at how Bill chooses to make himself known. Other moments require laser attentiveness.

How deep is your commitment to nonviolence?

I'm not ready to die for the conviction of nonviolence, and that bothers me. Clearly, there are those who are willing to die ... for their country, their faith, their convictions. I can and should learn from them. I'm very committed to the notion of the rule of law and the potential for a system of justice that complements our human shortcomings.

Are there individuals who've inspired you to pursue this goal?

Dan Berrigan; The Parents Circle - Families Forum, a group of Israeli and Palestinian families who have lost loved ones and who work together to advocate nonviolence; the family of Maryknoll Sr. Ita Ford, particularly her brother, Bill, and niece, Miriam. They have taught me about the long arc of justice. And Michael Lapsley, an Anglican priest who lost both his arms to a letter bomb sent to him because of his work against apartheid**.** Michael embodies nonviolence. The nonviolence exemplified by Jesus grounds my faith.

Where did you grow up?

Yardley, Pa. It was an ideal childhood.

Who and what nurtured your Catholic faith?

My parents. Our church was our family's social life growing up. We were friends with many priests and religious. I even cooked at the convent while in high school. The Jesuits taught me how to think critically about my faith. Here in the Bronx, it was a group of friends. We called ourselves the "liturgy group" and would meet every two to three weeks for liturgy, a meal and a lot of laughs. The good works that sprung from those friendships and gatherings continues today.

What was your family like?

My family is the best! Ask anyone. I'm fortunate to have parents who are the surrogate mom and dad to many relatives and friends, and sisters who are each special and loving in their own way. My brother was a beautiful guy, and is deeply missed. My family always has my back, even Bill, who still makes his presence known. My family is unconditional love in action.

What schools did you attend?

St. Ignatius grade school; Bishop Conwell High School; University of Scranton (are you picking up on the Jesuit theme?), then Pace University and Columbia University for nursing. Currently, I am finishing a degree in internal relations at City College in New York.

Why did you become a nurse practitioner?

I realized in college I wasn't smart enough to become a doctor without dedicating my entire day and night to studying. Becoming a nurse practitioner suits me better -- much more emphasis on wellness and the whole person, not just the symptom or physical manifestation of disease.

What have you had to offer children -- your own as well as those you care for in your professional capacity?

The world, quite literally. (Yankee Stadium, the Botanical Gardens and the Bronx Zoo aren't bad, either!) We also happen to have the world's best pizza.

What do the children have to offer you?

My own children and I share an uninhibited relationship. I'm at my best and worst with them. No one knows me better than they do. They offer me a daily gift of humility. Every parent wants his or her children to be happy, and when they're happy, I'm happy.

And your patients?

I work in adolescent health care, and my patients teach me about being real. Teens can sense a mile away if you're fake or disingenuous. I love their energy, their openness, their malleability. Adolescents face a daunting world here in the United States. They're surrounded by sex, money, isolating electronics, and a constant barrage of messages telling them who they should be and how they should look. My patients come from some of the toughest neighborhoods in the country. Yet there are many doing all the right things against enormous odds. I've noticed over the years that any adult taking a special interest in a troubled teen can make a world of difference

in their life. And vice versa.

How do you pray?

I pray a lot when walking, often unintentionally. I'll find myself reciting a Hail Mary while walking down the street. I often pray as a conversation, asking God for some relief or guidance. I've tried sitting in the manner of contemplatives and have realized that I can "sit" with a cup of tea, curled up on a couch, and talk to God just fine. I also love prayer with the Benedictine brothers at Weston Priory in Vermont. They taught me that sometimes there is nothing to do except pray, and that praying is doing.

My most recent discovery was about prayer and thoughtfulness, to really think about what I was praying for, to wrestle with whether or not I was praying for the "right thing." I understand now I can pray for something that I have the ability to affect, but it involves a personal discomfort, a sacrifice. God's pretty busy, so what can I do to help the world?

Do you have a favorite Scripture passage?

No. Isn't that awful?

Do you have a favorite Bible story or prayer?

I find myself again and again returning to the story of the prodigal son. There's so much there; human desire, self-centeredness, forgiveness, jealousy, redemption. Runs the gamut of the best and worst in all of us. Rembrandt captured the beauty of this parable in his famous painting "The Return of the Prodigal Son [2]." (Have you seen the father's anguish, the barefoot son?) Henri Nouwen encapsulates the same beauty with words in his book of the same title [3].

Does it make in difference in your life?

Absolutely! I believe in conversion.

Are you married?

I am single and divorced. For me, the annulment process proved incredibly healing -- having to sit and write thoughtful answers to questions that chronicled my marriage and its ultimate failure.

No that you're 50, how would you describe your life?

I am so very happy. And so very grateful. I'm at the "What's next?" stage and excited.

What is your image of God?

I believe I see the face of God every single day. When I was a child, I was taught to fear God. I now believe God is unimaginable love, and heaven is here on Earth when we truly love and care about others. Then, I grew up. Life became complicated, and God and I became intimate.

What about your faith is most meaningful to you?

The suffering. Often, it's hard to find any meaning in suffering, and that's when my faith is most challenged. I have seen glimpses of how suffering can make me and others more compassionate human beings, but it also has the power to lead to despair.

Does your faith affect your perspective on suffering?

Yes. Suffering has the potential to help us connect more fully and intensely with other human beings. I believe this is why Jesus suffered, why we all suffer in some way. Some suffering is human-made, and as followers of Christ, I was taught we are called to action to address this specific suffering, each using our unique gifts. What I don't understand is the wide variations in suffering not caused by humans.

What does Christianity ask of you?

Love one another. I believe it was more of a demand.

What do you want from Catholicism?

John F. Kennedy put it more aptly. What does my Catholicism ask of me? What can I be for my Catholic faith? My church? You and me and millions around the world -- we *are* our Catholicism.

What in contemporary Catholicism distresses you?

Many things. Its sense of exceptionalism. As a nurse practitioner, I'm a mandated reporter whenever I suspect child abuse. I report to the state registry. Why would adults in the church have different rules?

Any Catholic dogma that doesn't place love as its foremost guiding principle.

The deep lack of understanding within the church leaders of human sexuality, both its beauty and frailty.

Is there anything you would change?

I would try to do a better job of honoring the sacrifices made by religious around the world doing righteous work. I would allow married and female priests. They exist already.

What causes you sorrow?

Apathy. The intense disparity in people's lives. Suffering, front and center.

What gives you hope?

Two things. First, that there are so many courageous, smart and caring people working to uphold the dignity of others. And second, truth be told, some of my adolescent patients who have unbelievably awful lives. That fact that they can get up every day and make it to school astounds me and gives me hope in the resiliency of the human spirit.

Is there any spiritual practice you admire in another faith?

Where to begin? The Buddhist's ability to let go. Some of the Jewish rituals concerning mourning and other nodal events I find very comforting. The Native Americans' respect for nature. The Muslim call to prayer five times a day -- what reverence!

Sooner or later, each person undergoes or overcomes some life-shaking experience. Have you had one that helped form you?

Honestly, there are two: the loss of my brother on 9/11 and the loss of my marriage in 2004. Each taught me lessons about suffering, humility and grace. Each also allowed for expressions of compassion in ways I never

imagined.

Is there something you wish I had asked?

Yes, about Guantanamo. It's easy to forget because there is no prison or trial in midtown Manhattan -- it's 90 miles offshore of Florida instead. Purposefully.

Several detainees were tortured. Jesus was tortured.

Five detainees face the death penalty. Jesus was penalized by death.

The Gospels promote truth and justice. The current system does not.

Those injured and affected by 9/11 certainly are justified in their anger, as Jesus was in the temple. But it is our response to travesty that defines who we are, and I believe the American legal response to the crimes of 9/11 can be so much better. Americans have a legal system that has worked well for the past 237 years. We should put our faith in the rule of law and stop letting fear be the force that drives the trials at Guantanamo.

How do you relax?

I feel like this is an online dating question! Reading, hiking, sitting in an Irish pub, listening to Irish music and talking with friends. Did I mention beer?

Do you have a favorite movie?

I love "It's A Wonderful Life."

Author?

Paul Farmer, David Cole, Samantha Power

Food?

Never met a potato I didn't like.

Thank you so much, Colleen, for sharing this part of your life's story with us.

[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 audiobook, renamed *Forgiveness: Stories of Redemption*, is available [4] from Now You Know Media.]

Editor's note: We can send you an email alert every time Sr. Camille's column, "Conversations with Sr. Camille," is posted. Go to this page and follow directions: **Email alert sign-up** [5].

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