

'America' associate editor sees hope for fractured church

Sr. Camille D'Arienzo | Mar. 20, 2012 Conversations with Sr. Camille

Kerry Weber has accumulated more experience and more miles in her 29 years than many of us do in a lifetime.

She grew up in western Massachusetts, where she attended Catholic elementary and high schools. She graduated from Providence College in Rhode Island in 2004, having spent her junior year abroad at Oxford University. In 2009, she earned her Master of Science degree from the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism.



Along her way, Weber's learned and taught many things, some of which

she included in her book, *Keeping the Faith: Prayers for College Students* [1]. She currently serves as an associate editor at *America* magazine. What follows describes what brought her to this position.

Sr. Camille: Kerry, how did your journey begin?

Weber: I grew up in Massachusetts, and am the oldest of three children. I'm blessed to be able to say that my sister and brother are two of my closest friends. My father is from Wisconsin and my mother is from Massachusetts. They've been married for more than 30 years, and their relationship has been such a wonderful example to me. They're incredibly supportive.

What values do you share with them?

Well, luckily, we all share the same somewhat ridiculous sense of humor, which allows us to enjoy a number of so-bad-they're-good movies and entertain ourselves with ridiculous jokes during long car rides. We all really value our time spent together. My brother used to quote Michael Bluth, a character on the sitcom "Arrested Development," and say, "Family first." Thankfully we're not quite as crazy as the Bluths, but I think we do have that "family first" attitude. We also share a desire to serve others, and that is rooted in our Catholic faith. It's nice to be able to talk to my family about both the joys of being Catholic and the frustrations. It's really helpful just to have that shared context, even when we disagree.

While you speak of the fun you had on long car rides, you had a different kind of relationship with your car after you left home, didn't you?

Ha, well, for a few months after grad school I worked at a temporary reporting job in Greenwich, Conn., where I was paid \$10 an hour. Living in the famously wealthy town of Greenwich on \$10 an hour is (surprise!) pretty

tough, and because I knew I wasn't staying there in the long-term, getting an apartment in town wasn't affordable or practical. So I ended up staying with four separate friends, in Stamford, New Rochelle and the Bronx, over the course of about three months.

During that time, I relied largely on what I began calling my car-loset -- a combination car and closet -- to store the majority of my clothes and the majority of my belongings for the summer. My dad cut a metal rod that just fit between the handles on the ceiling in the backseat of my red '93 Camry, where I could hang up items if I needed to.

As part of that reporting job, I took photos of local houses for the paper's real estate section. And it always struck me as sort of surreal to be photographing the interiors of literal mansions -- marble everywhere, home theaters -- and then to go back to my car, which was really the only space I had that was my own at the time. But that summer taught me the true meaning of hospitality, and I'm forever grateful to the friends who helped me out without question.

Now that I have my own place in New York, I pretty much have an open-door policy. It's basically: Do you want to stay with me? Come on over. Do you have a cousin's brother's sister-in-law who needs a place to crash? Here are my keys. I don't pretend to know what it's like to be truly homeless, but I do know what it's like to just need a place to call home for a little while.

What first led you away from your parents' home?

Well, after college, I moved to Arizona for a year and then to Connecticut for three. Before coming to New York, I was working in Connecticut at *Catholic Digest*. I loved my co-workers there, but it was hard being a young person in such a small town. When I was accepted at the Columbia Journalism School, I thought it would be a great chance to build my skill set and to find a larger community. I've loved living in New York since the moment I got here. And I sound like a tourist when I say it, but I love the energy and the people here. The number of inspiring things happening in this city on any given night is amazing.

What experiences did you have along the way that gave direction to your choices?

One of my most influential experiences was working as a full-time volunteer through the Mercy Volunteer Corps, which, as you know, is run by the Sisters of Mercy. I served for one year as a special education teacher on the Navajo reservation in northeast Arizona. I didn't see myself becoming a teacher in the long term, but I knew I wanted to ground myself in the values of simple living, service, spirituality and community, so that I could try to keep those values with me in whatever career path I ended up on. When I moved there, I'd never been west of Wisconsin, so the Southwestern landscape was a shock at first. But I loved learning about the Navajo culture and traditions, and all of my co-workers and students were so welcoming. I felt at home.

Who most influenced your belief system?

My parents have been the most influential people in my life. Their ability and willingness to serve others and to love others has taught me so much. The charism of the Sisters of Mercy and the sisters themselves have also been influential. I'm working toward becoming a Mercy Associate in Queens. It's good to have a small community of people with whom I can pray and discuss faith, and who are also drawn to this idea of mercy.

Do you have a favorite Scripture passage?

I think it would have to be "Do not be afraid" from Luke, chapter 12.

Does that passage play a part in the way you live out your life?

I think that it is especially relevant in the context of the verse, "Are not five sparrows sold for two small coins? Yet not one of them has escaped the notice of God." It can be easy to think that I must deal with my worries on my own. But this passage reminds me that I'm not alone.

What is your image of God?

When I was teaching in Arizona, one of the students in my class wasn't feeling well. She was nonverbal, so she couldn't really tell us how she was feeling and she got sick all over herself. I took her to help her get cleaned up, and I was feeling both a bit grossed out and a bit self-congratulatory for taking this on. She was quite small, so when I knelt down I was at about eye level with her. She put her hand on my shoulder to steady herself and just looked at me knowing that I would help her and with this look that sort of just said, *OK, go ahead, and do what you're supposed to do*. And I just knew right away that what I was doing did not make me special. It was just exactly the sort of attention and care for others that I needed to be showing, in some way, every day. I have never felt so clearly that I was looking into the face of Christ as when I saw her looking at me that day. That's how I picture God, someone who says, *OK, let's go. Do what you've been called to do* -- and that is to love and to serve.

What about your faith is most meaningful to you?

I love that my faith touches on every aspect of my life. I love that there is nothing that I can't apply it to. I love being part of this rich history and tradition of people who have done so much good and have served so well. Of course, the church has a number of problems, and they are major ones, and they're not to be overlooked. But I can't bear to throw away all the good the church offers because of them. I have to believe that the church, at its best, has something to offer everyone.

Do you bring your faith to the workplace?

My faith and my work are pretty closely intertwined, since I work for a Catholic publication, and being up-to-date on the issues facing the church is part of my job. I love working for *America*, because I'm surrounded by genuinely intelligent and interesting people who take their faith seriously, but who are always willing to laugh and to learn together.

How do you pray?

Well, I go to Mass each week. And I try every morning to start my day by repeating a saying by Dag Hammarskjöld, which goes, "For all that has been: Thanks. For all that will be: Yes." It's a good reminder to be grateful, and to me it sort of echoes the annunciation, that idea of saying yes to things that are scary and unknown, and trusting that everything will be OK eventually. At night, I try to pray with "Give us this Day," the daily missal, and I sometimes use the 3-minute retreat app from Loyola Press on my iPhone. Of course there are times when I just have a conversation with God, talk about my day, try to figure out what I could have done better, which is usually a lot.

What do you want from Catholicism?

I want a church that will challenge me and accept me. I want a church that is welcoming and open and forgiving. A church willing to admit its wrongs and make amends. I want a church that continues to grow, both in its ideas and in the number of people involved. I feel like the church has been or done all of these things in different ways and at different times in my life, but the key is to try to get the church to be all these things at once, for all people, today.

What in contemporary Catholicism encourages or distresses you?

I'm discouraged by the sense that the church sometimes feels irrevocably fractured, that Catholics feel like they have to pick "sides," between liberal and conservative. It saddens me that there are even "sides" to pick from. On the other hand, in a way, it's this very diversity and vastness of Catholicism that encourages me: that so many people from such diverse backgrounds and with a range of opinions can call themselves Catholic and can truly be Catholic, and that ultimately we're united by the incarnation and the resurrection. And if Christ can overcome death, surely our own sometimes petty divisions can't be insurmountable.

Is there anything you would change?

Of course. Some I have control over, right now, and some I don't. I try to focus on the things I have control over. I think of that old story about G.K. Chesterton being asked to write an essay answering the question, "What is wrong with the world?" He wrote: "I am." So I try to start there, with myself. To paraphrase Gandhi, I try to be the change I wish to see in the church.

What gives you hope?

I volunteer as a sponsor for RCIA, and talking with people who are choosing to join the church these days helps me to see it through their eyes, which is refreshing and challenging. Also: Cherry Garcia ice cream, riding the elevated subway at sunset and Bruce Springsteen.

Are you inspired by any saint?

I love St. Anthony of Padua. I was first impressed by his finding skills in kindergarten (and still am), but I've since come to appreciate the stories of his oratory skills and his faith, too, which is why I chose Anthony as my confirmation name. I have a terrible sense of direction, so having a devotion to the patron saint of lost things is useful. But I also like to think of him interceding in times when I feel spiritually lost, too.

Joseph Campbell advised us to follow our bliss. What is your bliss? Where do you hope to be celebrating life 10 years from now?

I find bliss in going on a run, drinking hot cups of tea, reading good books, taking road trips and just spending time with my family and friends. In 10 years, if I still have those things, I'll be happy no matter where I am.

[Mercy Sr. Camille D'Arienzo, broadcaster and author, has written a soon-to-be-published book titled *Stories of Forgiveness*.]

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Links:

[1] <http://www.amazon.com/Keeping-Faith-Prayers-College-Students/dp/1585957380>

[2] <http://ncronline.org/email-alert-signup>