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Mathematician says love of teaching, social justice runs in the family

by Sr. Camille D'Arienzo

Conversations with Sr. Camille

***Camille:* Jim, in the interest of full disclosure, I confess that your father, the late beloved Edward Stasheff, was my mentor at the University of Michigan. As he guided me through my master's and doctoral degrees, he noted with pride that you, his firstborn son, held two doctorates. He would proudly add that your dissertations were beyond his comprehension. What was that all about?**



Jim: The two doctorates were from Princeton and Oxford. I started

at Princeton, then won a Marshall Scholarship to Oxford. I had started my thesis at Princeton and wanted to earn that degree, but the Marshall wouldn't pay my way home without earning an Oxford degree. So it's really one long thesis, with Princeton part I and Oxford part II, though the latter was submitted first so I could quote part I. Dad sometimes quipped that he did understand half of my theses title: "ON THE homotopy associativity OF H-spaces."

What was it like to grow up in a family with an internationally recognized television producer/director/teacher?

It meant watching TV with a technically critical eye from its earliest days, sometimes taking notes for a suitable postmortem. Then occasional appearances on a history show on WNYE, playing Edward Jenner as a boy, and then appearances on a TV high school quiz show. On the other hand, at Michigan, I never took any of the courses he taught.

How did you perceive your mother as encouraging and tempering your gregarious father?

She was very supportive of him but very much a woman in her own right. For example, he would call home at short notice and ask if he could bring someone to dinner, knowing she would manage to throw something together to eat or stretch what she had started. Her leadership in the PTA and then the Mount Vernon Public Library was an inspiration, but even more, her full partnership with Dad in looking out for "waifs and strays": at first, high school students, then college and graduate students, some of whom even boarded with them.

Your parents were legendary for welcoming students who'd fallen on hard times and couldn't afford the cost of living on campus. I remember well that, in lieu of rent, they were expected to walk the dog, shovel snow in winter and mow the lawn in spring and summer. I know some helped with the dishes as well. More than a dozen had this opportunity over the years. Jim, from whom did you draw your faith?

Initially from Mom, since Dad became a Catholic only in my teen years; in fact, I'm officially his godfather! But also very much from her father, an Irish-American of very strong faith.

Your love of teaching?

From both; even when Mom wasn't employed as full-time teacher, she still gave speech lessons at home.

Your commitment to justice issues?

I think it's in the genes! Dad's father was very much the radical Russian Jewish immigrant who felt strongly about social justice and Mom's grandfather (or maybe great-grandfather?) had to leave Ireland for "poaching Redcoats out of season," though I think it was mostly by the pen, not the sword.

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Even after your father converted to Catholicism, the family retained great respect for his tradition. I remember your reciting the kaddish at your dad's remembrance service.

I was limited to giving the English translation while my niece, Isobel, recited it in Hebrew. We had been brought up long before Vatican II to be aware and proud of my father's Jewish heritage. He took the family to a friend's Passover seder at least once and later celebrated them himself at the Michigan Newman Center.

Please speak about your teaching career.

As a research mathematician, my classroom teaching career was very standard, from calculus to advanced

graduate courses and thesis supervision. In the classroom, I don't think I came close to Dad's expertise. As a thesis supervisor, mentor and now journal editor, I'm (in)famous for my red pen, having watched Dad mark up drafts his students presented -- as I bet you experienced.

Would you say something about your involvement in justice concerns?

The furthest back I remember being active was in the days of the House Un-American Activities Committee when it came to Michigan and I joined the protests. At Newman at UNC Chapel Hill, there was a group I joined that met to discuss liberation theology. One of the members was from El Salvador, a personal friend of Oscar Romero. His testimony struck me deeply. Also, there is a group of Jesuit mathematicians, the Clavius Group, which I (and my wife, Ann, and our children) joined early on. One of the group, Carlos Vasco, was from Colombia and a "man the barricades" activist.

In Raleigh, N.C., where I lived, the central prison and death row is near downtown. I became active in the vigils when an execution was scheduled. They made a lasting impression on me. I no longer can participate in person, but give what moral and bumper-sticker support I can.

How do you pray?

Mostly inside my head and through spiritual reading, very occasionally in movement. I once did some modern dance. Now each day I have the three-minute retreat from Loyola.

Do you have a favorite Scripture passage?

That changes from time to time; what comes to mind now is To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

What does Christianity demand of you?

The above, especially in being conscious of the least among us.

How does it enrich your life?

It keeps me from being too self-centered.

How would you assess contemporary Catholicism? What is best in it? What would strengthen it?

Contemporary Catholicism is in flux. I can only hope that the spirit of Vatican II will bear much more fruit. Being in the Philadelphia archdiocese, there are daily reminders of the transgressions of the hierarchy. Strength can come and hopefully eventually will come from the Voice of the Faithful: We are church.

Do you have heroes?

Within the faith: Oscar Romero, Dorothy Day, Cardinal John Henry Newman, St. Francis, but also many outside, especially Nelson Mandela.

Now in retirement, at 76, what do you consider your greatest accomplishments?

My son, Steven, and daughter, Kim, who have both combined the academic/teaching genes from my side and the human compassion of my wife, Ann, who was for many years a nurse.

Academically, I feel my greatest accomplishments are mentoring young mathematicians and caring for some "waifs and strays," though not as intimately as my parents did.

How and where did you meet your wife?

When I arrived at Princeton as a grad student, Ann was a nurse in the university infirmary, but we met folk dancing. As a dancing partner, Ann stood out for the very alive way she carried herself. We discovered our common Slavic heritage (Dad's father is from Ukraine and Ann's parents are from Slovakia). Thanks to some painters in the math building who added "To je Pravda!" (It is true!) to the Wet Paint sign, I learned of a Slovak (Greek Catholic) parish nearby, which we attended occasionally, as well as the Aquinas Center at the university.

How did becoming grandparents affect your life and Ann's?



Kim married Frank, and we acquired two step-granddaughters.

Steve and his wife, Colleen, gave us our grandson, Paul, on Jan. 1, 2011. Even though they are here from Iowa only twice a year, we are grateful to have Skype every week or two -- it's the light of our life to watch him grow.

Someone advised us to think globally and act locally. Does that appeal to you and, if so, how?

Yes, it's the only way we can have an effect.

What saddens you?

The multiple crises of our time: political polarization in our country and polarization in our church, like the attack on the LCWR.

What gives you joy, hope?

Joy in the next generations, hope from those who keep trying to better the world.

How do you relax?

Reading of all sorts, watching TV, working in the yard, mentoring students.

Where and with whom do you worship?

Formally, in my local parish.

Is there anything you wish I had asked?

Perhaps about my respect for mathematics. I once gave a talk at the Newman Center at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, titled, "Gifts of the Spirit: Faith and Mathematics." Somehow, for me, they are not totally separate.

Jim, I'm afraid I end up in your father's place. That last answer lost me! Mathematics would not cause me to lose my faith, only my mind.

This was fun.

I agree. Thank you.

[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.]

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