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Nurturing One's Faith

Julie Shapiro

A Jewish feminist finds that Seattle University nurtures her faith and profession.

I never applied to teach at Seattle University Law School. At the time I began teaching it would not have occurred to me to apply to a Jesuit Catholic law school. After all, I'm Jewish, a lesbian, a feminist, and a woman. Each of these aspects of my identity seemed to me to be at odds with what I thought I knew about Jesuit Catholic schools.

And so I began my teaching career at the University of Puget Sound, a nominally Methodist but practically secular institution. Imagine my chagrin when, one day, we all arrived at work to discover that the University of Puget Sound had sold its law school to Seattle University. While we on the faculty were not actually sold (we were free to leave if we chose to do so), if we wished to continue our teaching careers uninterrupted, it would be at Seattle University. And so it was for me.

Looking back, it seems to me that this story speaks volumes about my own ignorance and prejudice. For while there are definitely issues for a Jewish lesbian feminist working at a Jesuit Catholic institution, on the whole my experience has been extremely positive. And no aspect of that experience has surprised me more or benefited me more than the evolution of my own Jewish identity.

As I began to meet my new colleagues at Seattle University, one of the first things to strike me was the passionate and explicit commitment to social justice. I shared this commitment but at UPS that was not particularly important. At Seattle University, this commitment was valued and validated. I was surprised to learn that, for many, the commitment was rooted in a Jesuit Catholic tradition that I knew nothing about. For the first time in my experience as an academic, I found myself a part of a greater community with a shared core of values.

Further, at Seattle University I found myself in daily contact with many people who drew on their religious faith as a source of strength in the pursuit of those ideals of social justice. This was new to me.

Before I began to teach I had practiced law in Philadelphia, and there too I had worked within a community of people passionately committed to justice. But the sources of our shared commitment were never much explored.

At Seattle University the connection between faith and justice was, of course, the subject of much discussion. I found myself drawn into the conversations around this topic. I admired those who drew on their religious faith as a source of strength and support in the struggle for justice. More than that, I envied them. I wanted to somehow give that kind of strength to my children, but I couldn't see how I could do that when I myself had no such faith. I said as much in a conversation with Phil Burroughs, S.J., then rector at Seattle University. His response surprised me. With absolute certainty he observed that I had my own brand of faith and my own faith tradition to draw upon. Perhaps it was his certainty, but for whatever reason, I suddenly realized he was right.

This was a revelatory discovery. Though I had been raised to be Jewish, I had a secular Jewish upbringing. Faith was not part of the picture. No one had ever suggested to me that I had faith before. Neither had I understood that identifying, nurturing and deepening my faith were possible.

I had already joined a synagogue in order to provide for a religious education for my children. At the time I did so, I didn't think I would become a part of the community, beyond the weekly trips to and from Sunday school, and I didn't think it would mean that much in my life. But spurred on by what I saw at Seattle University and by Phil's observation, I looked for and found far more for myself than I could have ever guessed I would.

I sat in on adult education classes and found my own commitment to justice could be grounded in and informed by Jewish teaching. I developed my own community at the synagogue, a community rooted in

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Jewish tradition and teaching. I joined with other families raising children to create a community of shared rituals and holidays. I have been to Torah study, when I can fit it into my schedule. I even go to services from time to time. What's more, when I do go, I find them rich and meaningful.

Through it all I have found the members of the Seattle University community have been enormously supportive, encouraging and respectful. I've often had the sense that the fact that I have worked to find the meaning of my own faith in my own life has meant a great deal to people here. My deepening appreciation of Judaism is valued and thereby encouraged.

I hope to learn more, to do more and to understand more about my faith in the future. I can see now that this is an ongoing enterprise, one that takes a lifetime. Perhaps I would have come to the place in any event, but it seems to me that being at Seattle University had a great deal to do with setting me on this path. For that I am grateful.

It is still surprising to me that of the multiple identities that I thought would be problematic at Seattle University, the one I expected to matter most -- being of a different faith -- matters least. Having faith, albeit a different faith, is readily understandable to people here and reinforces rather than strains the sense of community. Others in the community, from the President on down, can relate to my experience and identity in this regard. After all, in the great divide of having faith/not having faith we are on the same side of the line. This is not as true for my other identities -- the lesbian, the feminist, the woman. It is there that the work remains to be done.

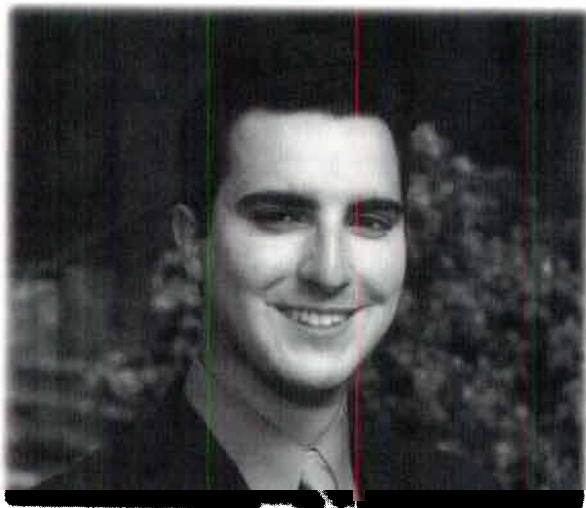


Photo Courtesy of Loyola College of Maryland

Michael Formichelli has had a long-time passion for competitive debate. The fact that Loyola College in Maryland had no debate team didn't deter him in his decision to attend the College; he saw it as a challenge. Arriving on campus as a freshman, he quickly enlisted the Dean's help and formed a debate club that same year and soon was competing in the prestigious American Parliamentary Debate Association. He served as president of the club throughout his four years at Loyola.

Not surprising for a young man who likes to debate, Michael chose political science as his major, finding that course of study appealing because it talked about power and persuasion. Then, for one of his classes, he read Plato's dialogue *The Gorgias*, and became fascinated with Platonic philosophical perspectives on both life and politics. He decided to major in philosophy as well.

Throughout his work at Loyola, Michael sought to connect his intellectual interests across disciplines, and not just political science and philosophy. For example, studying the works of Eric Voegelin, he examined the ontological basis for his political thought by referencing his understanding of Christianity, consulting often with a theology professor about early Church history in the process. He received a departmental award for his work. It was one of many awards he would receive during his distinguished academic career at Loyola. A member of Phi Beta Kappa, he graduated *summa cum laude* and received medals from the political science and philosophy departments.

Michael received one of the inaugural Jack Kent Cooke Foundation scholarships for graduate studies in 2002, and will study philosophy at Boston College, where he hopes to earn a doctorate