

## Showing Up as My Whole Self: Finding a Way to Marry My Public Health Career with My Religious Identity

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*Editors' Note: The PHRS Bulletin regularly features accounts and reflections from early career professionals in public health about their discovery, training, knowledge, work, and reflections upon spiritual and religious factors in public health.*

I grew up in a very homogeneous environment: the mostly White suburbs of Cincinnati, Ohio where all the kids went to either the public school or one of the dozens of Catholic parish schools, scattered about the city and beyond. I went the way of many of my childhood peers: Catholic same-sex high school, then Catholic university, and all within a farther, yet similar, radius of living in Midwest cities along the way. It would be fair to say that I was the fish, and I never really noticed the water I swam in.

One of the experiences that changed all of that was attending Boston University School of Public Health for my MPH, my first time attending a school that did not have a Catholic affiliation and living in a city in a quite different part of the country. Boston and graduate school wooed me from the beginning: I had never lived so close to the coast and Boston seemed to have limitless brilliant people simply going about their lives and doing groundbreaking things in their respective fields. The water was entirely different, and the tank was much, much bigger.

As I went through my degree and eventually my public health career, I felt a subtle yet tangible piece of me missing: my identity as a Catholic; an identity I had nurtured since childhood, and had eventually led me as an undergrad at Saint Louis University to study theology. While the East Coast setting stretched my brain in so many ways, I

found myself shutting off my theology brain in order to better fit into a field that sometimes made religion – and, as I felt most personally, Catholicism – the butt of jokes around a meeting table. Religion was seemingly viewed as little more than the opponent in a battle for reproductive access and rights.



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When I was about to resign myself to the fact that I would never come to the field as my whole self, a public health practitioner and a lifelong Catholic, a few instances of hope found me. The first was when a professor of mine, who taught a course on reproductive advocacy, asked if I could summarize the Catholic viewpoint on abortion so the students could understand it or at least, in my mind, dispel some myths.

I was struck that anyone would even ask to understand it, and I readily agreed, though asked that it be distributed without a by line. It was the hardest piece I wrote during graduate school, not because it was even for a grade but because it meant the most to me personally. Not long after the professor assigned it for class, the teaching assistant, a friend of mine, came to me and said a paraphrase of the following, “I know you wrote the reading we assigned in class. While I don’t agree with you [on abortion], I learned a lot, and I understand where you’re coming from.”

The second opportunity came when our Dean asked if I could be a discussant of a talk about Spirituality and Health, a live-streamed, recorded, and school-wide event. Again, I poured myself

into my presentation, weaving between my academic brain and my deeply held beliefs. To be in front of the room and speak openly about my Catholic faith to my public health colleagues, not only signaled to me progress in this often fraught intersection but also it simply felt different. I was my whole self that day; the fish, I realized, could swim anywhere.

Today, I bring my whole self to my work in the field of Maternal and Child Health. While I still experience much of the same things that make me cringe quietly among a group of colleagues, I've also pushed myself to find other religious colleagues in my field and to speak openly about religious identity being an often overlooked, yet essential, part of building trust in communities and working towards diversity and inclusion. My goal is to eventually launch a brand where I can combine my public health knowledge on pregnancy with a formation series for expectant Catholic families so that people can find an environment that views childbearing as not simply a clinical experience, but a deeply spiritual one as well.

“There aren't many of us, but we're there,” I often say when I find another public health colleague, young in her career, who feels she can share her religious identity with me. The fish swims in a school, and I hope I can help others to realize that.

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