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Sr. Maggie: "Secular" Counseling

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Mina Magalhães

Sr. Maggie: “Secular” Counseling

Abstract: This paper includes part of an interview with Sr. Maggie, who has worked as a therapist for over thirty years, and how she has made a separation of faith and work lives to help others, created in part through her ease with change.

Sr. Maggie Elliott began work as a counselor in 1984 following her realization that her passion lay in helping not just the students she taught, but also their families. She has worked in several different centers, including ones where she was asked to take responsibilities beyond her level of experience, such as directing when she had only just received her master’s degree. Yet through her different jobs, she has been able to learn what she would like in a workplace. The center where she is a therapist now is her favorite, for she is in an environment that is friendly and supportive, where she can go to work every day, work hard, and know that no one is talking behind her back or “criticizing” her. She has always loved working with individuals, and while she has worked with families, her favorite clients are couples and junior high girls. With girls at that age, she had just felt that she “connects” with them, and if they are willing to really work to help themselves, she can also assist them in gaining more confidence. When she first started counseling she had to make the decision of if she wanted her clients to know that she was a sister, and she decided not to have it openly known. She did not want to make their lives harder by adding anxiety or embarrassment by letting them know that she was a sister. If it came up, or she decided to, she was not opposed to letting them know, but felt it was more comfortable for them not to. Sr. Maggie truly feels that she is living “in a dream,” a path that God led her to, though she has faced some difficulties as she gets older. In the last year she found that she is not ready to stop her work, but that she might be open to “cutting back,” as it is mentally tiring. But

with the support of a large family who lives in the area, and friends and her community, Sr. Maggie will continue in her work of helping others. Sr. Maggie puts a line between her work and faith selves, not for herself, but to make others more comfortable. Sr. Maggie's decision shows that it is possible to be both a woman religious and work with others together, but when necessary, that she can also have them on different sides of her life, and can help others even more effectively. Instead of trying to influence others with her own beliefs, she works with them on an equal level without concern for who is closer to God.

In part because of Sr. Maggie's belief that while her spiritual and work lives were connected, they could be put to better use separately, she never found it a difficult adjustment to transition from wearing traditional habits to leaving them behind in favor of adopting secular clothes. This put her on equal footing with lay people, for instead of trying to maintain boundaries of religious and lay, which can create a hierarchy of power by deciding who is holier, she believed they were all equal. Her ease with wearing skirts and dresses instead of donning a habit was related to her age and the fact that she was less established in her ways as sister, having only worn the habit a short period of time, but also because she could accept change for the good it made possible. Shortly after the transition from habits, the mother superior at her first community, who was less comfortable with the change, told her "if you're going to wear [secular clothes], act like a lady and cross your legs," for wearing knee length skirts as the fashion was then left her legs visible in a way that habits had not. Instead of agreeing with this admonition, Sr. Maggie thought silently that she could be a lady even if she did not cross her legs. Her father expressed similar concerns for maintaining behaviors so as to be viewed a certain way, and felt that if she did not wear a habit even in places like grocery stores, she would not receive the proper "respect." As would continue in her life, Sr. Maggie did not want to create a divide

between herself and others because of her faith, and told her father that she should be respected whether in a habit or a dress, and that it should make no difference.

Works Cited

“Sr. Maggie Elliott.” Personal interview. 31 December 2017.