

## Who am I? A Teacher <sup>1</sup>

by

Julie Sullivan

Who am I? I am a teacher. As a young child, I did not play doctor or house. I played school and coaxed my younger brother into being my pupil. I love teaching. I relish breaking things down into smaller pieces and showing how the pieces fit together. Perhaps, from a visual perspective, this is why I enjoy jigsaw puzzles. Education has been a central part of my entire life. After starting kindergarten at age five, I went straight through school (other than summer jobs and a few months of full-time internships) to finish my Ph.D. and accept my first job as a university professor at age twenty-six. When I started teaching at the university level, I sometimes felt as though I had left my body and was watching someone else in front of the class.

Education is hope. It is the lever that unlocks our potential and helps us understand the other and helps us understand on another, play a constructive role in society, and contribute to the common good. I learned the importance of educational opportunities at an early age. When I was in seventh grade, my math teacher gave me the textbook and told me to work on my own. When I finished the book by midyear, she said, “You don’t need to learn any more math. Instead of coming to math class the rest of the year, I would like for you to assist the remedial reading teacher during this class period.” It shocked me to discover that there were children my age still struggling to read, and I spent the rest of the year enjoying reading to and with them. That summer the reading teacher asked me to assist him in teaching Head Start. Again, I became acutely aware of the inequities in our educational opportunities when I handed a young boy a banana, and he handed it back because he had never seen a banana and did not know what to do with it.

Despite my intense passion for education and teaching, I didn’t always know I wanted to be an educator. I graduated after eleventh grade from high school in a small town in Florida. There was no college-prep program, and I had run out of classes to take. I entered the University of Florida as a first-generation college student, and while I had never earned a grade below an A, I had no idea how to select a major.

I started in pre-med because I thought this was a major for someone who earned good grades, and I had had a lot of positive experiences with physicians, having grown up as a child with severe asthma and allergies. I quickly learned, however, that I was not good with my hands (sewing a button on was a challenge for me), and manual dexterity is essential for physicians. When I asked my father for advice, he said, “I don’t care what you major in, as long as you can support yourself when you finish.” So, after a wide-ranging exploration of other majors, I selected accounting. I had always been good at math, had a logical mind, and knew that there would be a job in the end.

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<sup>1</sup> Julie Sullivan, “Who am I? A Teacher,” in *Rising: Learning from Women’s Leadership in Catholic Ministries*, by Carolyn Y. Woo (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2022) 185-191.

During my junior year I interned in the audit and tax departments at Ernst & Young (then Ernst & Whinney). I discovered I enjoyed tax research and planning work (it was like a puzzle) and did not have the same affinity for audit work. During my senior year I received several job offers, requiring me to start in audit. I was told that I could not begin in tax without a master's degree in tax. So, I stayed at the University of Florida and pursued my master's. (So much for Dad's advice. He turned out to be very supportive, however.)

During my master's program I worked as a teaching assistant for a professor of large lecture sections of introductory accounting. I had returned to my roots as a teacher and loved it. I quickly decided to continue once again in school (my poor father!) and pursued a Ph.D. at the University of Florida.

My educational and career choices have always been heavily determined by external forces, which I firmly believe are guided by the hand of God. I have actively applied for multiple jobs only twice in my life, once with accounting firms at the end of my bachelor's degree when God led me back to teaching, and once when I finished my Ph.D. and applied for my first university teaching position. After that, through the grace of God, jobs have found me at the right time, primarily at times when I was ready to learn and grow in a new way.

After teaching at the University of Oklahoma for four years, I was invited to teach at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill for a year as a visiting professor. I loved Chapel Hill and knew I wanted to raise my children and develop as a scholar there. I began praying every morning as I walked the long distance from my assigned parking lot to my office, and by the middle of the year, I was invited to remain as a permanent faculty member. I enjoyed fifteen more years there, matured as a teacher and scholar, and discovered and honed my administrative leadership skills. Nevertheless, I was surprised when asked to take on my first full-time administrative role as senior associate dean of the business school. When I asked, "Why me?" the answer was interesting. I was told that my name had come up most frequently when the faculty were asked whom they would most trust to evaluate them. While I found this flattering, I also knew it would be a big responsibility to fulfill this trust. I was in that role for five years. I grew most from my opportunities to work with a visionary leader, foster global partnerships, and learn from my colleagues across all the disciplines in the business school, as well as from our myriad external supporters.

In 2003, I joined my husband at the University of California, San Diego and assisted in creating a new business school there. While it was extremely rewarding to create something from scratch, it quickly became evident that I needed to find my own career path in San Diego. One evening I was invited by a very active Catholic woman and friend in the community to a dinner party for some female leaders. I was seated next to the president of the University of San Diego (USD), a school about which I knew little. At the end of the evening she said to me, "You know, my provost position is open." I later learned that she meant to say, "business school dean position." However, God works in mysterious ways. I didn't know what a provost did. I discreetly contacted the search consultant for this position, and after lengthy conversations, we agreed that this would be a good fit for me.

I converted to Catholicism as an adult. Although my mother had attended parochial schools for a few years as a child, I had not. My job as provost at USD was my first experience with Catholic education, and I fell in love with it immediately. With my puzzle fetish, I felt like the missing piece had been added. Reason without faith missed a huge part of how I had always lived my life. I also was very attracted to the opportunity to infuse the educational mission with the principles of Catholic social teaching, particularly the respect for the God-given dignity of every human person and the concept of solidarity or recognition that we are all interdependent and bound by bonds of reciprocity. I connected these principles to the Ashoka changemaking movement that was occurring at the time and thereby found a larger community of universities and colleagues all working to advance the common good.

During my eighth year at USD I was contacted repeatedly by a search consultant and chair of the committee searching for a new president for the University of St. Thomas in Minnesota. In the beginning it was quite easy for me to rebuff these invitations to explore this position. I did not want to leave San Diego for multiple reasons: my husband's career, our new home, and the impending birth of our oldest grandson. However, I knew the trajectory of my learning and growing in my job at USD had slowed, and I had always advised others that this is when you know it is time to change jobs. But Minnesota? Remember, I was a Florida girl living in southern California, with little to no knowledge of the University of St. Thomas or the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul. Of course, God always has had a much better imagination than I do.

After doggedly persistent requests, I finally agreed to meet with the search committee with the agreement that it was simply to share my experiences at USD. Of course, it quickly turned into an interview, and the more I got to know the St. Thomas trustees, faculty, and staff on the committee, the more impressed I was with the university and their commitment to it, as well as with the Twin Cities community.

During one conversation with the search committee I repeatedly asked whether this Catholic university, founded in 1885 as an all-male institution, became co-educational in 1977, had only fourteen previous presidents, all of whom were priests, was ready for a lay person as president. "If the community is not ready for a lay person, I said, "this will not work for the new president or the university." I repeatedly asked for reassurance that the community was ready to accept a lay leader. Finally, a member of the search committee, a woman of similar stature, intellect, age, and accomplishment as the late U.S. Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, pounded her small fist on the table and said, "You haven't even asked about being the first woman president." I jokingly (but erroneously) replied, "I figure if they get over the fact that I am not a priest, they will get over the fact that I am not a man." I did not fully appreciate the importance of her question.

However, soon after assuming the role, I quickly learned how important this was to the community. Administrators, faculty, staff, students, and friends were ready, and they went out of their way to tell me how pleased they were that the university had chosen a woman president. Female students and employees pointed out the importance of being a role model and

demonstrating that this position was attainable for women. Male employees and alumni also spoke of how proud they were that their university was open to selecting a female leader.

In closing, my life has been guided by the grace of God. I recall being impressed many decades ago by St. Augustine's advice that we should pray like it all depends on God and work like it all depends on us. Thus, my career goal has been to learn and grow continuously, primarily through constantly seeking opportunities to learn from as many different people and experiences as possible. My work is to get myself ready always and ask God to find the communities and organizations that are ready for me. I have been so fulfilled by my current role because I know it is where God intends for me to be.

So, where along the way did I go from being a teacher to becoming a leader? I didn't. I am and have always been both. The skills and goals are fundamentally the same – to inspire people and organizations to do more than they think they can and to assist and support them as they do so.