

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Faith Sullivan, Ada Comstock Scholar, Class of 2002

Interviewed by
Tanya Pearson, Class of 2015

May 23, 2015

Abstract

Faith Sullivan begins her interview discussing how she left nursing school at 19 to get married and start a family and how she eventually found her way to community college when her youngest child was in high school. Sullivan describes how the opportunity to attend Smith came about and how she was able to balance home, career and academic life as a non-traditional student. She attributes her courage and confidence to her Smith education, characteristics that enabled her to finish graduate school despite the death of her son, Tony. Sullivan discusses her time at Harvard Divinity and her current career in psychotherapy.

Restrictions

None

Format

Interview recorded using Canon Vixia HF.

Videographer

Video recorded by Sarah Wentworth.

Transcript

Transcribed by Shomriel Sherman, Audio Transcription Center.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

Bibliography: Sullivan, Faith. Interview by Tanya Pearson. Video recording, May 23, 2015. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Faith Sullivan, interview by Tanya Pearson, transcript of video recording, May 23, 2015, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

Transcript

Bibliography: Sullivan, Faith. Interview by Tanya Pearson. Transcript of video recording, May 23, 2015. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Sullivan, Faith, interview by Tanya Pearson, transcript of video recording, May 23, 2015, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

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Sophia Smith Collection
Smith College
Northampton, MA

Transcript of interview conducted May 23, 2015, with:

FAITH SULLIVAN
Northampton, MA

by: TANYA PEARSON

WENTWORTH Oh yeah?

PEARSON: It looks fine?

WENTWORTH What's that?

PEARSON: It looks fine?

WENTWORTH It looks great. Looks great, sounds great.

SULLIVAN: OK.

WENTWORTH So you're ready to go.

PEARSON: OK. This is Tanya Pearson, and I'm conducting an interview with Faith Sullivan, Ada Comstock scholar, class of 2002, on May 23rd, 2015, for the Smith College Alumni Oral History Project. Thank you very much for being here (unclear).

SULLIVAN: I'm so happy to be here.

PEARSON: So, let's start from the very beginning. Ada stories are a little different than traditionally-aged (laughs) student stories. But when did you decide to return to school, and can you describe the process?

SULLIVAN: Yes. I left nursing school when I was 19. And got married and proceeded to have four children. And always thought I'd get back to school. I thought I would finish nursing. As it turned out, I did not finish nursing school. And when my youngest was — let's see. I think he was probably about 16 or 17 — I started the process of going back to school. And I went first to a community college, and a professor there said why didn't I look into applying at Smith? And I thought, Wow! Really? And so I did. And — you know, for me it was really a love of learning that brought me here. I just love learning about anything. And I wanted to

fulfill that dream, you know, to just have that as part of my life experience.

So I applied and got accepted and was just totally amazed that I was here. I kept pinching myself every day as I would walk around campus, saying, “Wow! This is so beautiful.” Even the campus, the beauty of the campus, was one of the most thrilling things here. Because walking between class and class, I just felt embraced by the energy. There was an energy of excitement, an energy of support. Just really embraced by all of the women who’ve gone before me, walking around on the same campus. So that — it just filled my heart, and I knew that I was in the right place. And so, I ended up majoring in religion. And — because I’ve always had a passion about studying religion. I love to compare the similarities of all the major religious traditions. And so I met some wonderful professors. I don’t know how far you want me to go with my discussion here.

PEARSON: Oh, it’s OK. No, no, you can keep going.

SULLIVAN: OK. Wonderful professors. It was just absolutely — just fantastic. Just so enriching, my journey here, studying all the different world religions. And while I’m non-denominational, I was encouraged, by talking with my professors, to — after Smith, to pursue a master of divinity degree. Which I did. And I followed the counseling route, at Harvard there, at their divinity program. And now I have a psychotherapy practice right here in Northampton. So it’s really been a success story for me, and I’m really doing what I love, so much. So — so that’s part of my story. And I have more to discuss, but I would like to hear your questions too.

PEARSON: OK, yeah. Did — well, just as far as your life on campus — did you live on campus or off campus? Were you involved in the Smith community at all?

SULLIVAN: Well, I was involved, yes, but I lived off campus, because I live locally. And so I did commute in every day. But, you know, I would have lunch here. And the Adas at the time would meet. We met down in — I think it’s called the Gamut.

PEARSON: Oh, I don’t know the Gamut.

SULLIVAN: By the theater room — the theater building, Mendenhall? We met in there. I think — I don’t — at some appointed time during the day, and — a certain day a week or so. And people got together and just shared stories, and so on. So yeah, I was involved in that sense.

PEARSON: OK.

SULLIVAN: Yes. And I loved it.

PEARSON: And did you take advantage of any, like, academic opportunities, like Praxis or internships or —

SULLIVAN: I did not do Praxis because I was still working part-time in the area. And so I continued doing that. And then, coming here, I came — I finished in three years, so I guess you would call me — it was a part-time study, apparently. But I don't know if they call it full-time or not. But — it must have been full-time. But it wasn't like what a lot of the traditional students have on their plate. I know there was one semester I took four courses, and that was actually my best semester. (laughs)

PEARSON: Oh, was it?

SULLIVAN: In terms of my academics, yeah. So — right.

PEARSON: Did you make it a point to attend a women's college?

SULLIVAN: It wasn't my original thought. But I just loved it when — I was talking to professors at Holyoke Community College, where I had started taking courses. I went there prior to Smith, and had sort of dabbled away at getting my associate's degree over the years, while I was raising my children. And — and, when it was suggested that I ought to apply — I had a pretty good GPA at Holyoke Community — I thought, Well, why not? It's time now. So — and I really love the fact that it — that it is a women's college. Because I felt really supported. I came in as an older student, and I felt so supported in being able to express myself. I must say that when I first came to Smith, like so many Adas, like so many traditional students even, we do ha— I think we have this in common — where we feel like, you know, we can't really articulate our passion. We can't articulate and really participate in a class where we're called upon to express succinctly our views about whatever the topic was. And so I was very sort of shy about that, and felt like I just wasn't going to be up to par when I first started at Smith as an Ada in '97. And Smith actually taught me how to do that. And I — you know, I just walked through those fears and learned how to articulate from my heart. Talk about what my passion is. And really it just increased the courage that I knew was always there, but just wasn't able to put into — put into the work, really.

So — yes. So when I was 19 I wasn't ready to go out into the world and face whatever there was out there. And so I kind of needed to be home with my children. That was a wonderful part of my life. And raise them. And then come back later on in life. I came back after I left a marriage, and — which is a story of a lot of Adas, I know. (laughter) And — so I just felt like it — a certain kind of freedom that I could do the things that I had always wanted to do. I mean, raising children was certainly one of them. But once that job was finished, to a large degree — once they became adults — I was able to then come back myself. And just explore this whole passion for learning.

And so I just want to emphasize that Smith really helped me develop courage. Courage to walk through fears and walk into the world and face whatever was there. And so a few months after I left Smith, I was actually in a master's program. Had just started. And one of my sons, who was 31 years old at the time, died by suicide. And that was a huge, huge blow, of course, to me, to the rest of my family. And so, what I — what I want to say and emphasize is that I managed to stick in — stick with my program — with the help of wonderful professors who gave me a little extra time to finish things that particular year. And the cour— I just have to say that the courage that was just nurtured here at Smith, for me, really helped me get through that. And one of the things that happens, you know, when we lose anybody, but particularly a child through suicide, we're told that even though we don't want to believe it, there will be a gift. There will be a gift in it. And I've learned that there's a gift in all of our experiences in life. And the gift for me, I feel my son — Tony was his name — gave me two gifts. Courage and compassion. So I do have tremendous compassion for others. And I do work in the psychotherapy world now. I do counsel people who've lost loved ones to suicide. And so, the courage, however, be— really began here at Smith, where I learned — you know, we have writer's block, or we have, you know, we're so afraid to speak up in class — I learned I could just forge ahead and do it, and walk through those fears. So when my worst fear was realized, I got through it. And I'm able to help others now.

And I just want to say that the courage that started here at Smith helped me tremendously after I left Smith, in my life. And I've learned now that I can walk through any fear and know that I'll be OK on the other side. So that's a huge part of the story that I wanted to share today about how Smith's academics, the professors, really shaped me, even at an older age in life, to be able to deal with something so terrible. And to realize the gifts that I have received. And to take those gifts into the world and help others. Yeah.

PEARSON: That's an amazing story. Are there any professors or people in the administration that you can think of who, you know, like, personally made an impact?

SULLIVAN: Yes.

PEARSON: I'm just wondering myself—

SULLIVAN: Yes.

PEARSON: —if there are some common —

SULLIVAN: Well, my advisor, the wonderful Lois Dubin, really was just amazing. Fantastic. So helpful to me. You know, encouraging me to go on and do more.

WENTWORTH: I'm sorry. Can you just — I'm going to put the mic back on you. It just fell off.

PEARSON: Oh, it fell off?

WENTWORTH: So sorry about that. But we — we have a backup source, so what — everything you said will be captured. I just want to make sure that—

SULLIVAN: Sorry. How did that happen?

WENTWORTH: No, no, that's fine. Here.

PEARSON: I didn't even see that happen.

WENTWORTH: Yeah, no, I'm sorry about that.

SULLIVAN: I must have moved my arm or something.

WENTWORTH: But that was incredibly — your last (unclear) was powerful, and it was all captured. So you don't have to worry.

SULLIVAN: OK. Yeah.

PEARSON: So your advisor — I'm so sorry about that.

SULLIVAN: So just tell me when to start again. (laughs)

WENTWORTH: We're all set.

SULLIVAN: OK. So the professors that really impacted me, as I said, were Lois Dubin, my advisor. She encouraged me throughout my process, really helped me find my voice. Which a lot of women in my age bracket had lost, you know, early on in life, for one reason or another. So I definitely found my voice here. Learned that I could express myself. And I really knew that I could do that without fear, by the time I left Smith. Joel Kaminsky, who taught—

PEARSON: Oh, I know the name, but (unclear).

SULLIVAN: —he taught Old Testament. And he was just a really wonderful influence in my life. Talking about, you know, you really can do something with a religion degree. That it does open up the — all of the options that you could imagine after leaving Smith. And my Buddhist professor was also a really wonderful man. And I'm sorry I can't remember his name right now, but —

PEARSON: (laughs) That's OK.

SULLIVAN: (laughs) So he helped me learn that my story was powerful. I had a very important spiritual experience when I was a young woman, and never spoke about it, really, till I got to Smith. And he affirmed it. He affirmed it for me as, Yes, this is real. And other people have these experiences too. And so it really helped me to then be able to articulate it, and speak to others about it. Which I think has been helpful for others to hear. And so — so all of those experiences with these wonderful religion professors — and I know now that's why I came here, even though at the beginning I had never met them. But because of my contact with them, they helped to shape my life — to affirm, you know, what I had been through, and then to affirm my going forward. And it was one of these professors who suggested, “You might want to pursue a master of divinity.” Which I didn't even know — had never heard anything about. And I never thought I would be going on to graduate school after leaving Smith. But yes, I did. And it was another wonderful, enriching experience. And I—

PEARSON: You said you went to Harvard?

SULLIVAN: I went to Harvard Divinity. And my—

PEARSON: Did you live there or did you —

SULLIVAN: I lived on campus for three days a week, and I would come — in a graduate dorm — and I would come home on — for the rest of the week. I lived locally around Northampton, yeah. And so — so yes, that experience really prepared me for work in the world, finally. You know. And so my job as a psychotherapist is really — I guess where this whole path led me, although I didn't know exactly what my career would look like when I first started at Smith.

PEARSON: I do want to (laughs) leave time for the closing question.

SULLIVAN: Oh yes.

PEARSON: But I have kind of a strange Ada-specific question that I'd like to ask.

SULLIVAN: Certainly. Yes.

PEARSON: Because I hear this from people all the time, and I actually felt this myself, when I started. It's called “imposter syndrome.” (laughs)

SULLIVAN: OK.

PEARSON: And I guess —

SULLIVAN: Oh yeah.

PEARSON: We've all talked about it together. But did you ever, when you first started, have a feeling like somebody made a mistake, and you weren't supposed to be here, or — I felt like — I feel like it comes — I felt that way, like, the first month, where I was so excited, but then I was sitting in the classes and I — I just got very intimidated.

SULLIVAN: Yes.

PEARSON: I felt like — did you ever feel —

SULLIVAN: I felt that — I felt that way too. In fact, I'll share this with you. I was going to major in English. Because when I started at Smith, believe it or not, I thought I could not string two or three words together and sound intelligent. I felt like I needed to go back and learn grammar and, you know, really just some remedial stuff. And actually I didn't do that, after speaking with my advisor, Lois Dubin. And kind of expressing, from my heart, what I thought I wanted to do in the world. And she's the one that said, "Well, you know, you might really want to think about majoring in religion." And so actually it was a relief when she said that, because actually that was my passion. I loved studying all the world religions and comparing them. And for me it was so exciting to find the similarities, when you get down through the dogma, to the mystical tradition, of all the religious traditions. I found that they were saying the same thing, and that really excited me.

And so — yes. I felt like an imposter at first. I felt I could not write. And I remember going to the writing center for help. And it gradually dissipated. I was afraid to speak up in class. And I just did, you know? I forced myself through the fear. And with Lois Dubin's help. Because she's the one that said to me, "I want to teach you how to speak succinctly about a given topic." And I'll never forget that. Because that's what I learned to do here. And — as well as writing. I mean, I knew I could write very well by the time I finished here at Smith. It gave me so much confidence and competence — sense of competence — that that's what I took over into my MDiv program at Harvard. And all of that is what helped me get through the loss of my son.

Yeah. It really — I mean, without that, I think I would've probably isolated myself and not been out in the world doing anything, for quite a long time. I would've just been wrapped up in grief. But everything that I received here — like I said, the sense of competence, confidence, the knowledge that I could just walk through that fear of how do I start writing this paper on this blank page, you know? And how do I speak up in class? Should I speak up? And I learned that yes, yes, do all these things. So — and now I speak about my son's death to help others. To help — help others who've lost someone. And I think that it helps them. It really does. So — yeah.

PEARSON: Yeah. We really don't have any time left. But what advice would you have for people who are just starting at Smith? Well — and I guess we can — because we're both Adas —

SULLIVAN: Yes.

PEARSON: — you know, speak to Adas. And Adas who are just graduating.

SULLIVAN: What I want to say is take the classes that you love. If you have a passion in something, go for those kinds of classes. Because while I had a passion for studying religion and finding the similarities, at first, as I said, I was going to study English because I thought I should. So I think if you can leave “should” out of the equation and follow your passion, you're going to end up in the right courses with the right professors, and you'll be able to realize your dream. And then afterwards I would say still listen to your heart and follow that, even though it doesn't make sense to the larger society who questions why we're even back in college in the first place. (laughter) So, you know, you have to learn to speak to that and say, “Well, I'm here because I need to be.” Or, “I'm doing such-and-such because that's what I need to follow right now.” And if you follow that, it — I find — it leads you to the right place. Yeah.

PEARSON: Thank you very much, Faith.

SULLIVAN: You're so welcome. I'm so glad to help.

PEARSON: Thanks.

SULLIVAN: Yeah.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Shomriel Sherman, June 2015.