

Chapter 4

Faith, Hope, and Strength: Achieving the Impossible

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ABSTRACT

The author relates their life story with regard to some of the obstacles and problems they had to overcome in order to become a full professor of mathematics at a medium-sized regional university and president of a large prestigious international professional organization. The author relates their dealings with classism, poverty, gender bias, as well as overcoming self-doubt and physical obstacles. The author's goal in this chapter is to inform others in education of how they potentially may marginalize some students without realizing it. Additionally, the author wishes to champion and encourage others (students and professionals alike) who may be facing similar or even more daunting circumstances. This chapter and the author salute all who struggle to realize their potential in the face of what may too often seem to be insurmountable difficulties. The author congratulates the reader on making it to where they are and wishes the reader continued success!

INTRODUCTION

I have encountered and overcome many trials in my life. It has not been easy, but through faith, hope, and strength I have endured many challenges and overcome these obstacles before me. I have been blessed, and I have been fortunate, because I was able to take advantage of opportunities when they arose. I had faith in myself and hope that I would rise above my circumstances. Somehow, I found the inner strength to surmount the roadblocks in my life. I hope that the educators who read this personal account chapter will be enlightened and also motivated to provide guidance to those students from backgrounds like mine who struggle to realize their potential.

I am a white female of Irish, Scottish, Polish, and Russian decent. I was born in Waterloo, Iowa in the mid 1950's, the fourth of six children. Both of my parents had eighth grade educations, and my grandparents significantly less than that; my maternal grandmother had a fifth-grade education, and my maternal great grandmother only had a third-grade education. My father was a first generation American;

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both of his parents were born in Europe. My grandfather was a shoemaker by trade, and my grandmother died when my dad very young. Either because they did not have the opportunity for an education beyond eighth grade or because they wanted better lives for their children than what they had, education was highly valued by my parents in our home as I was growing up.

In the basement of our home, we had a modest library of books including an unabridged dictionary and a full set of encyclopedias as well as an assortment of other books addressing multiple topics. My parents were successful in ensuring that all six of us children graduated from high school. They felt that this was the best they could provide for all of us, and any further education was up to each of us as individuals and at our own expense.

When I was growing up, I did not really know I was poor until, later on in life, I met college peers with whom I could compare my situation. I always had enough food to eat and enough clothes to wear including shoes, coats, and dresses. My father worked in the foundry at John Deer®. My mother stayed at home as a lot of mothers did in the late 1950's and in the 1960's. She baked, cooked, and cleaned and sewed most of the clothes for her six children. She had a large garden in the summer and canned lots of the produce for our use over the winter. We got by. I knew classmates at school who had a lot more and I knew some who had a lot less. I thought I was middle class, and I did not realize differently until I began to my first semester of college. Freire (2005) said:

We act in it [the world] on the basis of bits of knowledge that, having been learned throughout our socialization, have become automatic habits. And because we act like this, our minds do not function epistemologically. Our curiosity is not "aroused" to search for the reasons that things are as they are. (p. 139)

It is difficult to explain how you cannot know what seems obvious to everyone else. As Freire notes, circumstance just seemed to be normal to me; I had no reason to question my economic status. I knew I was not rich, but I also knew I was richer than some people. Logically, this seemed to make me, in my young mind, middle class – in the middle between rich and poor. I did not realize I was in the middle of not so poor and really poor. My exposure to certain types of etiquette was limited, and I was locked into the “*Use it up, wear it out or do without*” mentality prevalent in my neighborhood, mostly coming from our parents who grew up during the Great Depression.

MAIN FOCUS OF THE CHAPTER: MY STORY

Growing Up Fast: Homeless at Twenty

One of the first times I had a hint (but, again, did not catch on to the notion that it was because of my social standing instead of my abilities), was when I was in the first grade. Our whole class had been practicing the story *Three Billy Goat's Gruff* to prepare for a school play. Janet (not her real name) and I had tried out for the main part of the narrator, and we were both very good. However, I was able to read the entire script without error, and Janet made a few mistakes. In my mind I had clearly won, but Janet was chosen over me. I was very disappointed, and at that time I did not understand why I had not been chosen.

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