

Geraldine O'Mahony

On July 17th 2015 I achieved a milestone I had often thought impossible when I successfully defended my doctoral dissertation and was awarded my Ph.D. in Development Studies from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. During my doctoral program, there was no shortage of times where I doubted myself and my ability to finish, but this was nothing new in and of itself. I am the first member of my family to pursue an advanced degree, the first to graduate college, to first to go to college, the first to finish high school. At every stage in that journey I have doubted myself and my abilities, but I have also pushed on—sometimes slowly, sometimes simply standing still and not going anywhere, and sometimes stepping back altogether and taking a break and doing something entirely different for a while. But it was enough not to give up.

As a child I read Arthur Conan Doyle and wanted to be just like Sherlock Holmes and go to Cambridge University. I thought it both fantastical and some sort of magical doorway to a new world. I had a cartoon poster on my bedroom door depicting the various colleges at Cambridge from the age of seven, not really having any sense of what any of it meant. In secondary school I told teachers of my intention to apply to Cambridge to read Theology and Religious Studies for Honours, and was met with a wry smile—encouraged to apply for university and to break the family mold, but also politely told that no one from my school, from my town, of our type, had ever applied, never mind been accepted. I had one teacher, Tony, who encouraged me in my dream nonetheless, because though he admitted he thought it hopeless, he figured that the effort would be educational and the inevitable rejection bracing. But to everyone's surprise, I was accepted. And at Newnham College, Cambridge University, I went on to become academic affairs officer and college president, determined to prove that I belonged just as much as everyone else. In truth, I struggled in ways that my classmates did not seem to—my own self-doubt, my fear of failure and of appearing “unworthy” meant I did not ask for help when I should have, and so struggled uphill on my own when others took the support of the outstretched hands offered them.

After Cambridge I moved to London to work with the intent of saving money before returning to Cambridge for further study. But quickly one year became several, as London is far too fun a city for anyone in their twenties to be worrying about saving money! But eventually I returned to school, taking a detour and matriculating at Edinburgh University to study for a Masters in Divinity, again with Honours. Edinburgh offered me a new city, a new university and a totally new approach to a subject I loved. And it turned out to be a wonderful challenge. While at Edinburgh some of the same old insecurities returned and once again I doubted my ability to finish my courses, write my dissertation, or finish my Masters as a whole. It was also while at Edinburgh that I was diagnosed with two learning disabilities, further adding fuel to fears that I was just not cut out for college life and that any previous successes had somehow been a fluke—that I was an imposter. But finish I did and yet again it was a struggle. While at Edinburgh I received a scholarship to study at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire for a Summer, where I met the woman who is now my wife and an Assistant Professor in the History Department here at CWU. Yet another reason to be thankful for Edinburgh!

One course at Edinburgh developed into a new area of interest for me: Islamic Studies, and this led me to McGill University in Montreal and a Masters in Islamic Studies. This masters program involved learning Arabic, a particular challenge with a learning disability that makes memorization difficult. But for the first time I reached out and asked the right people for help,

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and the office for students with disabilities was able to work with me to get me different testing arrangements, written materials converted from written to oral form, and printouts with black words on lilac paper, all to make it slightly easier for me to get my work done. And they did this all the while convincing me that this wasn't a special accommodation, but that this was about leveling the playing field and giving me the basics I needed to succeed. Midway through my time at McGill I spent the summer studying intensive Arabic at the Lebanese American University in Beirut, Lebanon, and got to enjoy limitless falafel and knafeh.

After completing my Masters at McGill I moved on to the Doctoral program at Wisconsin where I encountered a whole new set of challenges and difficulties, self-doubts and fears. After the first year I earned another Masters, this time in Political Science. I minored in Middle Eastern Studies, thanks to all that intensive Arabic. And I also earned a graduate certificate in African Studies along the way. I encountered some people who also doubted me and my ability to overcome my background and my disabilities, who told me to quit and do something else. But I also found those who believed that such things don't matter and instead showed me that my ideas and the originality of my arguments and approaches were what mattered and what should, along with my effort and intent, determine my success or failure. I learned to listen to those voices more than the doubters. After all, as the philosopher Taylor Swift would say, "haters gonna hate hate hate hate hate." In order to be the people we want to be, the people we are capable of being, we all have to be able to shake off those doubts and fears and push on.

Reading this little narrative it would be easy to think I went from one school to another with little time in between, when the truth was very different. Before and in between my time at various universities I trained as an auxiliary nurse and volunteered in Medjugorje, Bosnia during the Bosnia civil war, and I am left with a distinct memory of working a few hours away from Srebrenica as that town was being torn apart by genocide. In London I worked in Adoption and Fostering Services, mostly in administrative positions but also in residential social work positions, such as in young offenders institutes. I have worked for museums, NGOs, development groups, and governments in countries in the Middle East. I have also taught HIV and AIDS awareness in schools, hospitals, clinics, offices, and anywhere else I could throughout countries too numerous to mention in Eastern and Southern Africa, while also nursing in refugee camps and orphanages. I have had the opportunity to see some of the most amazing places you could imagine—from Palmyra in Syria to Victoria Falls in Zimbabwe, but also some of the most heart-wrenching pain and suffering people have to endure due to the accident of geography of where they were born and when. I come from a rather poor family, and so the opportunities I have had to travel always involved working abroad and the willingness to sleep in some rather weird places, go wherever I or my skills were most needed, and be able to "go with the flow."

All this combined meant that by the time I came to start my Ph.D. program I was one of the older students in my cohort, but I quickly realized it didn't matter, as I had one of the more interesting and diverse backgrounds, which helped in a whole host of other ways. At each point of my studies I have enjoyed taking advantages of opportunities available to me, and more often than not creating those opportunities for myself when they didn't actually exist.