

Ten Minute T(ea) with Reverend Barbara Talcott

Interview conducted by Kaela Dunne

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Q) What do you think about how we teach religion at St. Mark's?

A) Well, since I kind of am responsible for making it happen the way it does, obviously I am really comfortable with it. If I wasn't comfortable with it, it wouldn't be this way. Because we are an Episcopal school, it's in our bylaws to teach religion. It's specifically in our bylaws to teach Christianity—these are our bylaws that date back to like 1870, rather 1856. But I like the way we teach Christianity in the context of two other religions, so the other Abrahamic religions. You have to take Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and the thing I like about that is it really puts our kids through their paces, putting on and taking off their lenses. So you have to see through the eyes of a Jew, then see through the eyes of Christian, and see through the eyes of a Muslim. And that is a skill that is difficult to develop, but once you have had to do it three times in a semester, you get much much better at it. So I love that, and that is required of all students so I think it's teaching really important perspective taking skills. It also teaches about religion. Unfortunately, I think Americans in particular, and maybe Northeastern Americans in particular particular, don't appreciate how powerfully religion affects things like politics, economics, and all sorts of things. It's really important for kids to learn about religion, and I know they do in most European countries, in England, but for some reason public schools in America just shy away from it and I think it's a problem, in terms of educating our populace.

Q) If there was anything you could change about our religion teaching and curriculum, what would it be?

A) If there was anything I could change, let's see. I have the experience of teaching at another school where religion was embedded as part of a humanities curriculum. I would love to have more of other humanities teachers teaching religion and more of our religion teachers teaching other humanities. I don't think there's a strong line between religion and things like english, history, psychology, anthropology. There just is no firm line there. So, if it were up to me, we wouldn't have separate departments and teachers who are specializing in these things. We would have teachers crossing these disciplines all the time. That's what I would change.

Q) What is it like working as a chaplain for one religion, but teaching a wide variety of religions?

A) Well, it fulfills me. I need to do both to be happy, so it's a perfect job for me. That said, it can be very difficult to find someone for whom it's a perfect job. So, schools that have to hire a chaplain who's also gonna teach, say, world religions, can have a tough time. Because people who go to seminary are usually only educated, you know seminary is how you get to be a priest, and they are usually only educated in Christianity and maybe Judaism. But they're not educated, certainly not, in the Eastern religions much. So, if you hire somebody who's mostly a priest,

they're not necessarily going to be a good teacher. And if you hire someone who's a teacher, they're probably not going to be a priest. It's a tough job to fill. In terms of my personal faith, it's not a problem at all. I'm an Episcopal priest but I'm an interfaith chaplain. We have kids at this school of all different religions and I am their chaplain too so I need know a whole lot more than just Christianity in order to be an interfaith chaplain. And teaching helps me prepare for that.

Q) Do you think your personal religious beliefs impact your teaching of religion classes?

A) Probably. Now, but let me not be too specific about that. So, the fact that I am a religious person impacts my teaching because I value religion—I understand religion, I can see it from the inside, I know what it looks like and feels like to be a religious person. So, I'll stop there and say really anybody who is a religious person is probably going to teach religion slightly differently than someone who is not a religious person. So, it's not about my being Christian or someone else's being Jewish or someone else's being Buddhist, but someone who appreciates religion from the inside and in a personal way is definitely going to teach probably with a little more enthusiasm and closeness and less kind of arm's length.

Q) How do you think having a religion requirement and mandatory chapel enhance the St. Mark's student experience?

A) That's a lot! Let's start with chapel. St. Mark's is an elite educational institution. Our kids compete for the highest level colleges and that can be a soul-sucking endeavor, without a doubt. So, to me, having a chapel program really brings a really important balance to these kids, who would otherwise never get that kind of time to sit back, relax, take a deep breath and realize that there are so many more important things than accomplishment, along any lines in this life. One thing we do in chapel is pray when people have died, or when tough things are happening in the world, or when joyful things are happening in the world, and it just forces perspective on you twice a week—to step back and realize there's a great big world out there. There's sadness, there's happiness, and your test this morning is one thing but the great big world is another thing. So, it really forces perspective and I think chapel is really important to raising kids, especially in a boarding school. Now, when you're in a day school, maybe you can hope that these kids are getting some perspective at home, maybe they go to worship services with their parents or maybe they meditate. But, at a boarding school, we really have to provide this because these kids are not at home. They don't have access to this through their parents. So, that's chapel. The religion requirement, I think I've already talked about the importance of studying religion for understanding today's world and being an effective citizen of this country and of the world.

Barbara is Head Chaplain and teaches in the Religion Department. She is an ordained Episcopal Priest, regularly preaching and celebrating in the Dioceses of Massachusetts and New Hampshire, and singing with choirs wherever and whenever she can. She earned her B.A. in Religion from Princeton University, her MBA from Stanford Graduate School of Business, and her Masters in Theological Studies from Harvard Divinity School.

