

**Multifaith Celebration of Spiritual Life at Stanford
University Public Worship
Sunday, September 29, 2013
Reflection by Amy Harris '14**

Around the time I entered high school, my mother began to encourage me to write a personal mission statement. She told me that a mission statement is a declaration of who you are and the kind of person you are striving to become. She stressed the importance of not just thinking about this statement, but of writing it down, of creating something tangible to refer back to as a reminder of who I am and what I stand for. In this way, my mother considered a mission statement to be a tool to re-center myself should I lose sight of what is truly important in life.

Although I have always embraced the idea of having a personal mission statement, I never felt compelled to transform the vague ideas floating around in my head into a written piece that I could later revisit. I always figured I know who I was. It wasn't until the fall of my junior year at Stanford, that I came to truly grasp the value of writing out my mission.

Last fall, while studying abroad in El Salvador, I attended a silent retreat. During the retreat, in addition to spending time in silence, my peers and I also took part in spiritual direction and guided meditations. For each meditation, the retreat facilitator would share a personal story then ask us to meditate and later reflect upon a question that arose from that story. For our final meditation, we were asked to contemplate the question of whether we would choose to live our life in fear, or in love. Later that evening, as I was looking over the words that I had scrawled in my retreat journal, I discovered that my reflection to the final meditation question was essentially my personal mission statement.

This particular question prompted me to write my mission because it made me realize just how much I had been living my life in fear. It made me reflect on how I had let my fears and insecurities affect my experience in the classroom and in my spiritual life, particularly during my freshman year at Stanford.

When I arrived at Stanford freshman year, I was in awe of the academic brilliance of everyone around me. I was thrilled to be in such an intellectually-stimulating environment, but considered myself to be academically inferior in comparison to my peers and questioned whether or not I belonged at Stanford. These feelings of inferiority rendered me positively petrified to speak in class for fear of saying something that was incorrect. I was so terrified of looking incompetent that I even refrained from asking questions for fear that I would ask a question about something that was obvious to everyone else.

These same fears and insecurities that crept up in the classroom, about not knowing enough, or not having the right answers, were also present in my faith life at Stanford.

Upon arriving at Stanford, I had just entered the Catholic Church through the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) program and was eager to expand my knowledge about the Catholic tradition. Reflecting upon my past few years at Stanford, I can tell you that my involvement with the Catholic Community at Stanford has greatly influenced both my spirituality and the direction of my studies. From Catholic Community retreats and service trips, to my ministry roles at Mass and on the Catholic Leadership Team, I have been blessed with many opportunities to connect to people, places, and experiences that have constantly expanded the lens with which I view my faith.

Knowing how much my experience as a Catholic has influenced my life, it may be surprising for you to know that I have grappled with strong insecurities about my spirituality at Stanford.

Coming to Stanford as a newly-confirmed Catholic, I was simultaneously eager to learn all I could about my faith, but anxious about other people finding out that I was not raised Catholic, or for that matter, with any denomination. I tended to discredit my own experience by thinking that, because I had not been raised Catholic, my perspective on Catholicism was somehow inauthentic. I often didn't mention the fact that I had only become Catholic a few months before. Like my life in the classroom, the prospect of being asked a question that I didn't know the answer to, or not knowing the "right" answer to a question, at times inhibited me from asking questions about and from discussing my faith with both my Catholic and non-Catholic peers.

One of the greatest lessons that I've learned about my intellectual and spiritual life, just one of the many lessons that writing my mission statement helped me discern, is not to live in fear about not having the right answers, but rather to live in love of asking questions and furthering my understanding of myself, my peers, and the world.

The academic year has just begun, and many of you have just started your journey at Stanford. I hope that you will approach your life on The Farm with an open mind and an open heart so that you can soak up the rich diversity of thought, personal background, and perspective that our university has to offer. I hope that you will not be concerned by not having the right answers, but rather discover that the questions that you ask and the experiences you have here at Stanford help you further discern who you are, what you believe, and who your life's mission is calling you to be.