

Fordham Footsteps: Mark Rego, FCRH '81, Interview Transcript

Matt Burns:

Hey listeners, welcome to Fordham Footsteps, the podcast that features Fordham alumni and discusses their path from their time as a student to their current career.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

Some will have a direct correlation to their majors and others will describe how they took some unexpected turns.

Matt Burns:

Either way, expected insider's guide to certain industries and some great stories from our esteemed alumni. I'm Matt Burns, associate director for young alumni and student engagement.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

And I'm Sarah Hunt Munoz, senior director for strategic initiatives. And with us today is Dr. Mark Rego, Fordham College at Rose Hill class of 1981. Dr. Rego, thanks for joining us today.

Mark Rego:

Thank you. Thanks for having me.

Matt Burns:

It looks like you were a biology major, is that correct?

Mark Rego:

At the end, I was, I had about seven different majors in the course of my four years.

Matt Burns:

So, when did you ultimately decide on biology, and what'd you think you were going to do with it?

Mark Rego:

Well, it was a compromise, by the time graduation came around, I had a standing appointment with a dean each semester where I would change my major and we didn't quite know what to do because I had never really stuck with a single major. So, the dean said I had enough science to have a biology major, but I had the distribution requirements for liberal arts, so he ended up giving me a BA in biology.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

What did you want to do with that degree in biology? Did you have aspirations to go into that field?

Mark Rego:

I had a lot of thoughts as an undergraduate. I had no direct aspirations about one particular field. I liked science, I was very good at it, but I liked the liberal arts more. I wasn't as good at that. So, I had some general principles, I would say, more than a goal. And I actually came up with a threefold plan. And the plan was, number one, I wanted something that I could employ myself if I wanted, I could have my own gig if I wanted to.

Mark Rego:

Second, I wanted something that had somewhat of a service component. Didn't need to be direct service, scientist would count. And lastly, something I did not think I would need but did, I wanted something that I would study even if I didn't have to work, and I ended up in that situation.

Mark Rego:

So, by the time I graduated, I had applied to medical school, but I applied late because having changed my major so often, by the time the MCATs rolled around in junior year, I had not taken all the courses that you need to take the MCATs, so I applied to medical school without them, and only four schools accepted your application without MCATs. And I got introduced to all four right away, and they all said, you do not have your MCATs, kind of in a tough spot.

Mark Rego:

So, I did get a waitlisted at one, at New York Medical College, and then I took the MCATs senior year and after college I just took a job, I was a bank teller just to do something, and I was not a good bank teller. And then one day my parents called and said, we have a letter here for you from New York Medical College, should we open it? And I got into medical school. So, off I went.

Matt Burns:

So, what prompted you to choose psychiatry as your focus?

Mark Rego:

The factor number three. I actually had applied to internal medicine and I was more of the idea of doctoring to somebody and I liked being their doctor that attracted me. And I actually I had applied to the Primary Care Medicine Program at Misericordia and that's what I got into. But by that time I had told the dean that I was pulling out of the match, the match is the thing in medical school where you apply for a residency position. And I took a position in what's called just a straight medical internship at Valhalla at Westchester County Medical Center. And from there, I was going to apply to psychiatry, because psychiatry also fit the doctoring mold that I wanted. But I imagined, if I couldn't work, would I study hypertension and diabetes? And I knew the answer was no, I wouldn't, but would I study psychiatric things? And the answer was yes, I would, turns out I have, so that was the right choice.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

And what are some of those psychiatric things that struck your fancy that you explored in-depth?

Mark Rego:

Oh, the list is endless. Like with many things, when things in nature go wrong, that's where you'll have your window into how things work. My interest is primarily in mental illness per se, although I trained in

therapy and did therapy for the first decade or so of my practice that has to do with a lot of other life problems that are not mental illness per se, but I am more interested in when somebody becomes mentally ill, which does not mean severely ill, could also be mildly ill, anxiety disorder, mild depression.

Mark Rego:

So, those are the things that interest me because, unlike other things, when something breaks, or let's say when you have a heart attack, just a piece of your heart just stops working, that piece of muscle that died. But in your brain, when you're mentally ill, it's not that something dies, it's that some normal system goes awry.

Mark Rego:

You can see the awryness, but it's telling you about the normal system, it's telling you about how we work when we're not having an illness. And I found that when I was studying and reading journals, as I did a lot, especially in the early years of practice, I would always look at the bibliographies for things that I liked, and I found that I was constantly coming across certain terms that I didn't understand, like phenomenology or hermeneutics from philosophy, so I had peaked in a lot of places like neuroscience and different aspects of psychiatry, psychoanalysis, et cetera.

Mark Rego:

And I wasn't finding another door, another way to look at things that might tell me more about mental disorders, but philosophy looked like it would. And fortuitously, there was only one other psychiatrist in the town, Milford, Connecticut, where I practiced, and it turns out that before becoming a psychiatrist, he had gone to graduate school for philosophy and was very active in what is called philosophy and psychiatry movement, where both disciplines try to talk to each other, to inform each other.

Mark Rego:

Aside from being a friend and working with me together for many years, he tutored me. I started reading at about '95, from then on just kept telling me, read this book, read this, read that, and explain to me what I didn't understand and really helped me get a start. So, it became another tool I could use to try to understand mental illness.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

So, you must have taken philosophy courses as a student at Fordham, were you then revisiting some of those same philosophers later in life? And did you hearken back to your days as an undergrad?

Mark Rego:

I took a few courses. I wished I could have taken more, but took three courses with Father Dolan and it was great. It was just super interesting, quite challenging. And I would go to his office and I recommend, by the way, if students are listening, go to everybody's office, it's free education that you're not going to get elsewhere, ask anything you want. So, I would do that with Father Dolan, and Father Dolan gave me a start and love for philosophy.

Matt Burns:

So, I want to ask about you starting your own private practice. It's one of the big three you mentioned there, right? You said you wanted to really have your own gig, I think is what you said there, when did you make that leap to start your own private practice?

Mark Rego:

The minute I finished my residency, I had a lot of offers to stay. Yale as a gigantic research program, but I really didn't have any research aspirations. I saw research as a distraction. You were just starting your career and you had to focus down into something so narrow, an inch wide and a mile deep to start working on, and I didn't want to do that.

Mark Rego:

It was clear that it would take many years to become a good psychiatrist. You simply had to see a lot of people, a lot of sick people, and that's what I wanted to do. So, I started planning even before I graduated, contacted this other fellow, Jim Phillips, the philosopher psychiatrist, and he welcomed me to Milford. So, that was my plan.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

And when did you go to Peru? I read that you founded a mental health clinic there. How did that come about?

Mark Rego:

We, myself and other psychiatrists had aspirations to work abroad, but it's very difficult because of the language barrier. My Spanish was very good, much better than his. I had a lot of Spanish at Fordham, and then during medical school, I was the translator on many occasions in Lincoln Hospital, in the South Bronx. And that's when I really learned how to speak Spanish. That was my immersion experience.

Mark Rego:

So, there's a magazine that was just pharmaceutical ads, not a real magazine called Physician Traveling or something, so it was travel ads for doctors. And Jim, the other guy saw it, and it was an ad from this Peruvian American psychiatric association from Peruvian ex-pats who were doctors here, who had left during troubled times asking for psychiatrists to come to one of their medical clinics, that they do once a year in this case, a town in the Andes called Ayacucho. And Ayacucho was important because it was the seed of the civil war, and there were about 60,000 people killed there during the civil war in the 80s and 90s.

Mark Rego:

So, interestingly, the ad was only paid for in California and somehow Jim got it. So, of course, the nuns in Peru said, well, that was no mistake, that was providence. So Jim couldn't go, so I went and met a lot of people and the need was very great. I spoke to an ER doc in Ayacucho and asked him what happens when somebody who's mentally ill comes in, and he said, "We medicate them and we throw them on the street, that's what we do."

Mark Rego:

I had a list of contacts and this was going nowhere fast. My last contact was this nun I'd heard about, Sister Ann, who was starting a clinic. And sometimes she was in the mountains, sometimes she was in

Ayacucho. So, I went to this convent and she was there, and she had a clinic that was a two-hour walk, straight up a hill. She had just a few drugs and things. And what she would do is this group would drive around at night and pick up people who were obviously mentally ill, drive them to her, they'd feed them, clean them up, and she would give them a shot of a long-acting antipsychotic.

Mark Rego:

And then after a while, for a couple of months, they started coming back on their own because they could feel it wearing off. The voices would come back. So, they came back on their own for the shots and she was getting more busy than she could manage.

Mark Rego:

She had a couple of volunteer nurses, not enough medicine. So, we said, let's work together. I bought her furniture, because Peruvian Society already had contacts with some NGOs to get medicine, so I started making relationships with them to get mental health psychiatrist medicines. And we eventually moved the clinic back to Ayacucho and it just blossomed.

Mark Rego:

And then we had nurses and social workers. There were a couple of doctors from Lima who would volunteer a couple of times a month for the medication clinic and be available by phone as would I, but then we would come every six months, do a few clinics, but also more talk and plan, build things up better.

Mark Rego:

While we were here, I would try to get drugs and we'd both try to raise money, which was really our failure, we could not raise money to sustain the clinic. Sister Ann's order was really sustaining it, paying most of our bills. And in the end, we had to hand the clinic off to another group, a group of Christian brothers from the Netherlands who had a different philosophy than we did.

Mark Rego:

Our philosophy was everybody could come, no one had to pay if they couldn't pay. The long story short, we did build it, it still exists. It is not as open to the core as it was, but at least it's there, there was nothing before, and now there is a standing, functioning, mental health clinic for the lower half of the country and the Andes.

Matt Burns:

It really just speaks to the variety and the depths of some of the experience that you've had. I know you've talked about how a lot of that experience has culminated into your book, and so congratulations on it. It's called Frontal Fatigue, and it looks at the interconnectedness of mental illness, technology in the modern world. Do you mind now telling us a bit about where this book come from, how long it took you to write, what that process was like, and how you feel now that it's sitting on bookshelves?

Mark Rego:

The story of the book is I had an inkling for a long time that there was just something wrong with modern life. There was in some way, that it was fundamentally not good for us. Obviously, I talk about this in the book, you have less disease, and less violence, and we don't work as much and know our lives

compared to your great grandparents, my grandparents, are dramatically improved, and yet study after study shows that with each birth cohort, after a least world war II, people are less happy, less contented, and the cases of depression, anxiety, more mentally ill, and the cases of severe mental illness like schizophrenia, people are not born mentally ill, but they become mentally ill earlier in life and have worse courses of illness.

Mark Rego:

So, something's going on. I have been involved in this group, it's called AAPP, the Association for Psychiatry and Philosophy, and they had annual meetings. So, the theme of the meeting in 2004 was technology and psychiatry. And that sounds like an odd pairing, however, technology has a long relationship with philosophy.

Mark Rego:

Basically, the idea is, is technology helping us or we using it as tool, or does technology order our lives in ways that we wouldn't otherwise do? Take social media as an obvious example, it has taken over the lives of many young people. It's clearly not merely a tool, it's changing people's lives in some ways good, in some ways clearly not good.

Mark Rego:

So, it's been an issue in philosophy, so it's not so strange to have a meeting about technology and psychiatry. But I saw it as an opportunity to talk about modern life and just use technology as the center bridge to modern life. But as I did the research more and more, it seemed to me that it was not just a bridge, but more that our culture could be explained or described as a technological culture.

Mark Rego:

If you would describe other cultures as matriarchal, or hunter-gathering, or mostly traditional, in one sense or another, we've lost most of that. We're not traditional in any sense anymore. We've lost religion, family. There are no more extended families living together. People's ties to religion are gone. People move all over the place. So, a lot of things that bound us together have changed.

Mark Rego:

And I describe in the book that I think we are a technological society in that most problems are treated as if they were technological problems. You google them, you find the information. I talk about three different steps that take over everything we do. One step is complexity, which just talks about the number of moving parts involved in anything. One step is abstraction. You can't just look at something, like I could look at this glass, I know what it does. I look at Zoom, I have no idea what it does, and I have a sense in my mind, but I must abstract what it does.

Mark Rego:

And last, is you have to reconstruct it, you have to get updates all the time, it's constantly updating. So, those components are how we approach everything, whether it's something technological like Zoom, or how do we raise our kids? How do I think of who I am as a man, as a professional, as an American, as a father, as a husband? What's my identity? How do I stay healthy?

Mark Rego:

All of these questions that our grandparents would never ask themselves and every generation before them would never ask themselves, but now, there are things we all have to think about and decide on our own. So, it became more apparent to me that we've become such a technological society that the way we approach technology has become the way we approach everything.

Mark Rego:

Then we get into the brain aspects of this, which involves the prefrontal cortex, the large part of your brain in the front, which I would argue is what makes us human and has a bunch of amazing abilities like to abstract things, and to help us multitask, and everything from paying attention to you right now and not being easily distracted to having empathy.

Mark Rego:

But the reason it's important is those tasks fall squarely on the prefrontal cortex, and we almost live in our prefrontal courtesies. And it turns out that from a mental health point of view, that's not a good thing. And there's a great deal of research now about the prefrontal cortex and mental illness. And there's some research in animals, of course, that shows that you could stress the prefrontal cortex and make mental illness simply appear.

Mark Rego:

If you stress the prefrontal cortex, it doesn't function well, and if there is any vulnerability that you carry medically or because of your experience, and you are overly stressed and you stress your prefrontal cortex, that vulnerability is going to come out. So, there seemed to be a bridge between the structure of how we all live and the ability to more easily develop mental illness.

Matt Burns:

You prescribe any solutions to it, or are we still just at that stage we're evaluating the problem?

Mark Rego:

I do. My book is not prescriptive in nature, but I do talk about some things. One is to get to know the prefrontal cortex, I'll call it the PFC, to know when you are stressed. So, things like having trouble concentrating, having trouble reading, not being able to think of words. So, knowing some signs of PFC stress, knowing how you stress it yourself is important.

Mark Rego:

There's two ways of approaching it. One is how to get away from it. And of course, all the things people talk about meditation and yoga, those are all fine. But I talk about a couple of really basic things like use your hands, find something, whether it's a craft, cooking, repairing, weighing an instrument, find something where you're using your hands, and you will find that you almost instantly get out of your PFC. Nature. And natural beauty or even artificial beauty are also ways of pulling us out. Indulging your senses, and I mentioned, this is not a get out of jail free card for hedonists. Look at things, listen to things, taste things, touch things.

Mark Rego:

The second thing is the opposite. Yes, meditate in the way that in the say 1950s and '60s, people had to, for the first time in history, exercise and watch their weight. No one had to before that because they walked everywhere, they took the stairs. Now that is a fundamental part of life.

Mark Rego:

I will add that exercising and watching your mind is also now a part of life that we can no longer ignore to be a healthy person. And to live fully is no longer going to be healthy, to not have a built-in part of your life that disciplines your mind some way, that calms it, focuses it, disciplines it, monitors it.

Matt Burns:

That sounds like great universally applicable advice. And the book, just again for everyone's reference is called Frontal Fatigue, and Mark you, you can get anywhere books are sold. I take it online, certainly.

Mark Rego:

Get it anywhere online, books are sold. You can ask a bookstore to buy some if they want.

Matt Burns:

You did mention some great advice there. I think that is applicable for any student. Any particular advice you would offer current students who want to follow in your footsteps, whether they're biology majors or any other major you might have had?

Mark Rego:

Two things come to mind. One is I'm sure there are students who are in the position I was in. I was the first generation in my family to go to college and in my community, so, no one really knew about college, and that's one of the reasons I was so unguided. So, the thing you would hear from adults was take courses in something you're going to do. If you're going to be in business, take business courses. Why take philosophy or history? You're not going to be a teacher. Doesn't make any sense.

Mark Rego:

That's perfectly practical advice, but it's not really how the world works anymore. So, for people who are first-generation college students, I would urge them to get advice from deans or from professors. And in today's society, if you are broadly educated, if you have a good scientific vocabulary, and if you are a good reader, you could read and write, I think that's your a ticket anywhere. There is a lot to be said for simply being well educated. And you don't need to take courses in what you're going to do in order to be ready for the world. That would be one thing.

Mark Rego:

The other is the way the world is today, I think being just a liberal arts person or just a science person, I think that's not a good idea. Maybe you can't be well versed in both, but you should have some scientific knowledge and you should certainly be some degree well-read. Reading is our superpower as humans, so I would advise students to really try to have a toe in both ponds.

Mark Rego:

And as I said, go to office hours, it's a free thing, it's much better than class. Think of a question, make up a question, just go and talk to the professor. Also, as practical part of that, if you want a

recommendation later and they know you, it just adds so much to talk to the professor about what's going on in the class.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

Really good advice and really easy to do. So, students get out there, meet your professors, knock on those doors, get that advice because you never know where you could end up with it. Thank you so much, Dr. Rego, this was really interesting. What an interesting trajectory from your Fordham experience to now. You've dabbled in so many different things. You really are the epitome of a liberal arts education, and we really appreciate your time today.

Mark Rego:

Thank you very much. It was really a pleasure.

Matt Burns:

Well, that's another addition of Fordham Footsteps.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

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Matt Burns:

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