

The Clarion Call to a Sacred Ordination
The Rev. Dr. Barbara Fisher
"DreamerBaf"



*The Whisperer breathed into my spirit and,
inhaling life,
I cried out against the Journey to be made...*
DreamerBaf

Wild Goose Festival
TenX9 Storytelling
Friday, July 8, 2016 @ 4:00pm
Hot Springs, North Carolina

Cherry Tree Theology

Rough tree bark snags my seven-year-old bare legs....

Sap glues fingers to branches dancing skyward....

Tiny teeth clench a gnawed yellow pencil —

Waistband holds tight the yellow writing pad....

My bare feet search out climbing notches....

Up-up-up — sticky hands reaching for Eternity....

Clef of the tree found -

The grunt of success sighing forth....

Hidden once again within....

My sacred Writing Nook....

Head tilting in gleeful anticipation —

Pencil listening for the whispering Voice of God....

I have only to close my eyes to bring to life the sights, sounds and smells of the spiritual enfolding of the seven-year-old me — an enfolding forever engraved in that poem found in my seventh-grade poetry journal, A poem shimmering in the restlessness by which the next fifty-three years of my journey have been defined, A restlessness given a seven-year-old's sing-song voice in the mantra, "I'll never get married until I am 108 'cause I have too many places to go, too many things to do, and just too many people to meet!" Since my earliest recollections, I have felt a deep and abiding call on my life by that "Whispering Voice" whom I understood to be 'God.' I was taught, however, to believe that there was a damning juxtaposition between the "code of the Church" by which I sought to live my life - and the "behaviors" that have given definition to the "I am that I am" of my personhood. Little did I realize, from my perch high in that cherry tree, the prophetic words called forth from the depth of my tangled child-like faith.

Hearing that Whispering Voice of God goes hand-in-hand with my entire spiritual journey, just as baptism and church membership are still connected in the church of my childhood. On Easter, 1959, at the ripe old age of seven, I am able to convince the elders I understand what it means to be "saved," How I remember as I am baptized, announcing, "When I grow up, I am going to be a pastor just like Reverend Pavy!"

Spring, 1967:

A rite of passage at that church is for 8th graders to spend a weekend at the church's Bible College. For me, however, dashed dreams and a broken heart are my rite of passage! "Excuse me, God — You do know that I am a woman — and they do not ordain women? But, the elders say, "I'll make a wonderful pastor's wife, "For the first time in my entire life, the Whispering Voice of God falls silent. Feeling lost and disillusioned, I walk away from the only church I've ever known.

Easter morning, 1972:

For five years I play a game of "hide and seek" with the Whispering Voice. Then, this morning, family obligations "force" me to attend a "conservative" church so I can witness my once-atheist brother be Peter. "Peter" looks into my eyes as he denies Christ for the third time, and God's call washes over me anew as all those talks with God in that cherry tree well up. This time it makes no difference that I am female because this church ordains women! I teach Sunday school, go to camp as a youth counselor, sing in the choir — and yes, even get married just to be in the church's submissive order by having a husband — all in the hope of being ordained.

August 2, 1974:

Standing in the courtroom I am bathed in shame, my shattered spirit wonders how I have been engaged, married, and painfully divorced in less than eight months! Even more painful are the Church's shunning and an accusation that the marriage failed because I am a *lesbian*. Which, by the way, is news to me! So, for the next six years I shun anything to do with religion - including the Whisperer. A called denied, dashed dreams of a twice-broken heart, and a valiant attempt to ignore the Whispering Voice of God follow me — fueling a cacophony of unworthiness and self-doubt. Until one day, in a moment of weakness, the Whisperer penetrates the innermost depth of my being. Once again my heart is moved...love wins — deliverance loses — as the lesbian phoenix rises from the flames.

September, 1983:

As the sacredly created "me," I am now living fully into loving and being loved. The call to ordination by the Whisperer sings within, and I allow myself to embrace it - in spite of being both female and a closeted lesbian! With an attitude of "don't ask — don't tell", I enroll in seminary. I enter as a member of denomination "X," do the majority of my studies as a "Y," and graduate as a "Z" — all the turmoil of attempting to hide in the closet. But, when I am "outed" by someone at the seminary, my dream of ordination is dashed forever. Negotiating to be allowed to graduate, I receive a degree of Master of Art: Specialization Christian Education instead of my coveted Master of Divinity. Deep within my spirit a cry issues forth, "Well, God, guess they never will ordain 'my kind'!" And the Whispering Voice births within my spirit a sorrow for the Church's lack of vision.

Easter, 2000:

Now living in a committed lesbian partnership, I know that sound is the Whisperer tap-dancing in heaven as we slip into a church for the first time in eight years! Taking a seat in the last row, we are startled to see what we have heard is true! There in front of us are two men holding hands! Across from us are two women with their arms linked around each other's waist! After extensive interviews, filing required paperwork, and passing background checks, I am once again drawn into believing that this time will be different: I shall be fully ordained as a minister in the charter group by The Fellowship Of Reconciling Pentecostals, International. Bowing to an ordination on the "fringes," it is with a fervent prayer that the Whisperer would be pacified by a ragged truce of surrender. It isn't the church of my heart, but I no longer have to hide in the closet! Awed by the sacredness of being female, lesbian, and ordained, I fail to perceive what is happening in my partner's ministry. Within a year, she abdicates her position — taking with her a number of church members destroying our civil union and my ordained ministry. The Whispering Voice and I both weep for the pain of those lost in the fallout - and I enter into a wilderness journey — far from faith, community, or desire for hearth or home!

August, 2005:

It is three years later that I sorely stub my toe on a book — sending it flying across the floor of the bookstore: Phyllis Tickle's "The Shaping of a Life: A Spiritual Landscape." Two weeks later, an email written just to sort through inner turmoil - which I never intended to send - somehow ends up in Phyllis's inbox! The content of that email leads Phyllis Tickle to become my spiritual sage, supreme butt-kicker, and, in 2012, a reader for my Doctor of Ministry thesis. Through Phyllis's love and guidance, I find the courage to continue the journey towards embracing my sacred call to ordained ministry...and the Whisperer chuckles, "Who will go forth — and whom can we send?"

July 29, 2014:

Listening to the women priests talking and laughing, God's presence wraps around us like a homemade quilt. Carter Heyward, Alison Cheek, Nancy Wittig, Betty Powell, Merrill Bittner....I still can't believe that I have been given the privilege of being the host for the dignitaries of the 40th Anniversary Celebration of the Ordination of Women to the Episcopal Priesthood. Suddenly I realize, while the Philadelphia Eleven were being "irregularly ordained" on that day forty years ago, I was being served my divorce summons— and losing any hope of ordination! Over the tender weekend, the gentle nudging of the women priests, "Tell us your story...We know there is one," touches deeply, Sitting on the steps as others sleep, looking up at the starry sky, the Whisperer's breath blows across the forty-years of my wilderness journey of denial and broken dreams....rocking me gently as a mother does her healing child.

March 15, 2015:

"Could you hold that thought for one minute? I'll be right back!" Returning with my spouse, Sandy, "Okay, Bishop —would you mind repeating what you just said?" The Bishop grins at Sandy, "I just said to Barbara Anne that I have approved her for the discernment process for the priesthood."

July 9, 2016

I am now a Postulant for Holy Orders for the Priesthood in the church of my heart. In three weeks, I will begin a year of Anglican Studies at Virginia Theological Seminary, I now walk in the fullness to which I was called at the moment God dreamed me into being. And to the Whisperer, I whisper, "Here am I, God, please....send me!"

Note: I graduated from Virginia Theological Seminary on May 18, 2017. I was ordained a transitional deacon on June 24, 2017, and was ordained into the Sacred Order of the Priesthood in the Episcopal Church on December 16, 2017.