

Joan Bates Forsberg

Bridge to Understanding/*Puente al Entendimiento*

Most of our spiritual life is the long, slow growth variety, illumined, quickened, redirected on occasion by sudden gifts of insight . . . by experiences which blast us out of our established routine . . . or by persons sent across our path by God to get our attention.¹

1. Getting to Know You/Aprendiendo a conocerte

Name/Nombre: Joan Bates Forsberg

Career/Carrera: Campus Ministry/Ministerio Universitario

A.B. Recipient/A.B. honor: 1975

Color of Hair/Color de pelo: Brown/Café

Color of Eyes/Color de ojos: Blue/Azul

Brothers or Sisters/Hermanos o Hermanas:
An older sister/Una hermana mayor

Favorite School Subject/Clase favorita:
English in high school;
philosophy in college/ Inglés en la secundaria, Filosofía en el colegio

Hobbies/Pasa tiempo: Piano, violin, alto saxophone, singing/Piano, violín, alto saxo fono, canto

My friends and I liked/A mis amigas y a mi nos gustaba
Orchestra, band, choirs/
Orquesta, banda, y el canto



¹ Personal Paper. "A 'brief' spiritual history - for one 48 years of age!" Joan's chapter draws upon this and other unpublished personal material as well as her interview.

I looked up to/Yo admiro a: Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Anne
Morrow Lindburgh, Martin
Luther King, Jr.

2. Group Ministry, Wider City Parish, New Haven

Dear Sisters . . . There once was a time - back before abortion became a national issue - when the use of birth control was outlawed in this country. That's right - just plain contraception, even for married couples, was illegal.²

Connecticut was among the strictest states. In 1952, Joan Bates, a student at Yale Divinity School, was in the middle of it all. She was about to be married, but the Pill was not yet legal. So she crossed the state line to obtain a diaphragm at a New York Planned Parenthood office.

Joan and Bob Forsberg were part of an interdenominational, interracial urban ministry. Their store-front church on Oak Street was at the heart of a crowded, low-income area. Members of the Group Ministry lived in small apartments in the neighborhood. The Forsbergs lived on the first floor of the 100-year-old tenement building – Joan's "honeymoon home" meant sharing it with the local rats and the occasional wanderer. No central heating, no hot water, no toilets in the apartments.

Over time, word of the availability of family planning spread. Little did she know she would be making regular trips to Port Chester in a parish van filled with young mothers and children from the neighborhood. Their border-running trips continued until Planned Parenthood opened a clinic in New Haven that challenged the Comstock law and pursued the case through the Supreme Court.

Joan was in the middle of that, too, at the New Haven level of the 1965 "Griswold vs. Connecticut Supreme Court" case that struck down the Connecticut anti-birth control law.³ A main argument, "the right to privacy," became the foundation of the legal argument for the

² Joan Forsberg in "Letters to My Sisters About Reproductive Choice," edited by Faith Johnson and Marilyn Breitling, 2003.

³[Http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/conlaw/griswold.html](http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/conlaw/griswold.html);
[Http://www.nfprha.org/latest/griswoldbackground.asp](http://www.nfprha.org/latest/griswoldbackground.asp)

right to abortion, a subject that, she said, "never came up in all of our struggles with the birth control law."

Now-retired Minnesotan physician, Dr. Miriam McCreary, remembers pre-Roe v. Wade,⁴ "how desperate women were, and I just wanted to be available to give them a safe abortion... to treat them the way I'd want to be treated myself."⁵

"My memory of those years," Joan said, "is of listening, listening, listening, encouraging, helping people to sober up, and otherwise trying to be supportive to a steady stream of people who found their way to our home."⁶

"I, like others serving the Wider City Parish, reached out in the other traditional forms of ministry We also all took part in neighborhood rat clean-up campaigns, helped defend members against landlords, fed and sheltered homeless men and women, tried to build a sense of community."⁷

It was, however, a mutual ministry. "Our extended family taught me many things about suffering and courage and vast despair that I needed to learn. Growing up in suburbia, I could not have learned about the pressures of poverty and about hoping only in God."

In group meetings, the marches and rallies, and in church talking with people, there was a sense of being caught up in the biblical vision of justice, she said. "Something larger than all of us was happening. You could not doubt the Spirit of God moving in that."

"I learned humility from being white in the Black Ghetto during the Civil Rights Years -- and an immense sense of gratitude that one was allowed to be part of that movement. In the midst of the local grass roots organizations was energy, hope and a sense that God was moving. "

⁴ Roe v. Wade.

http://supct.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/historics/USSC_CR_04100113_ZS.html

⁵ Fred De Sam Lazaro. "A State with One Abortion Clinic." The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer. PBS. March 3, 2006.

⁶ Joan in interview with author. Pilgrim Place, Claremont, CA, Feb. 22, 2006.

⁷ Joan as quoted in L.M. Russell's talk at Joan's retirement party from Yale Divinity School, February, 1993.

By now, Joan, the only white person in that neighborhood, was singing in the Dixwell Avenue United Church of Christ choir. Church membership there "taught me about forgiveness, acceptance, and oneness in Christ at a level I had not experienced before. It was not a side road exactly but a different route."

The pictures remain clear:

- The bus ride to Montgomery with Dixwell Church choir
- Taking part in the march
- Sitting on the curbside in Montgomery
- Listening to Martin Luther King preach
- Being part of the singing on that bus.
- Agony of walking into the racism of South Carolina."

3. Life As a Youth

Snapshots. Comfortable, upbeat, middle-class; solid, loving, church-active family. Have to go to Sunday-school. Have to go to church. When I grow up if I ever go to church, it will only be to sing in choir – the only good part.

Confirmation Class.

Joan: I don't want to join church. Means nothing to me.

Mother: If you feel that way, then church probably does not want you either at this point.

Youth Conferences. Thank God for High School Youth Conferences -- lots of singing and music! Church isn't all that bad. There is something to this God business. Suddenly things I had heard about in church and Sunday school are becoming REAL.

College. End of first year. Junior counselor at Youth Conference. Closing night camp-fire traditional challenge: Consider "full time Christian service." I heard in that mystical experience God's personal call to ministry. Something in me said a loud, clear, absolute YES. The sense of certainty and of joy has never faded. Thanks be to God for the Spirit-given nerve to say YES!

I have a place in the world. I know I matter. God seems loving, available. God seems of good will and not out to get me, not watching for me to make a mistake. I am called. I feel wanted.

Three Seminary Years at Yale. Struggling again. Once a theologically happy liberal who liked God and was sure God liked me. Never occurred to me to question if I was accepted or acceptable. Seminary was "a time of radical, tumultuous growth and deepening."

As Joan grappled with being good enough, she met a radical second-year student living in voluntary poverty in the slums. Bob Forsberg "convinced me to marry him, which meant trying to overcome being middle-class." New puzzling emerged:

Could I ever work hard enough and give up enough to be acceptable as a Christian?

Could I ever be as committed as my husband to this form of ministry?

4. Fifteen-years Ministry While Raising Children

"I *did* know intuitively that, overwhelmed as I was with child-raising, I was in fact about Godly business with them, listening them into being. This awesome, holy business was more chaotic and spontaneous than anybody ever told me God's work would be. I had not seen any books that dealt with motherhood and housekeeping as sacramental ministry."

Joan Bates Forsberg graduated from Yale Divinity School in 1953. The next year she was ordained. It was "a high spiritual experience," as were the births of their first child later that year and two other babies within six years.

She practiced the juggling art of marriage, children, and career that women today call multitasking. "The demands and opportunities of ordained ministry and of parenthood presented me with a delight and despair that I had never anticipated."

When women have been socialized to take care of everyone else's needs first, what does it mean to love oneself? In marriage? In one's ministry?

To whom can I talk who will understand?

How can I be an adequate mother (translate Perfect Mom) and also fulfill my ordination vows?

The soul questions continued:

How can we be "last of all and servant to all" without being used?

How can I be always loving and patient when I am exhausted?

"Somehow I was sure that if only I were faithful enough, I should be able to manage it all - serenely." Later, she made sense out of the clutter. "At one level, I had a model in my mother, who had gotten an education, done a professional thing in teaching school, and was independent. What I saw, instead, was the one who deferred to authority and to the needs of the family."

Upon marrying, her mother had to leave the school system in deference to her husband, the school superintendent. She went home, had two children and became a mom.

Joan said, "I also followed the model of young women of my mother's age. My husband was passionate about his decision. I did not know how to do the strong, stand-up-for-yourself kind of things and still be married. 'Assertiveness' and 'mutuality' in marriage did not seem to go together. No model for how you did that well emerged until later when I read Anne Morrow Lindberg's *Gift from the Sea*."

5. Step Two: Finding Voice

"When I first said I just wanted to type and answer the phone, Parker Rossman chuckled his okay. Then he said, 'We need to do a session on the inner city. I need your help to take people around the inner city. You could do that.'

"Well, yes, I could. So I did that session. 'Well, now, we need a session on drugs and the whole issue of that.' I knew about a drug rehab center near our parish. 'So, okay, we'll take the group there. Now we need a session on women and the ministry.' I loved it all."

After seventeen years, the Forsbergs were still living with their three children in that neighborhood. Money was tight for people in the group ministry. Besides, she needed to be doing something else, something that honored her true calling.

Parker Rossman, director of the Ecumenical Center for Continuing Education for Clergy at Yale, asked her to work part time for him. Five decades later, he recalled, "We persuaded Joan to give leadership to an experimental conference on women in the church.

We were astonished when about 60 Roman Catholic sisters showed up."⁸

"I actually really backed into feminism," Joan said. "I didn't need to be bothered with it. RIGHT! Once I read *The Feminine Mystique*⁹ and visited a consciousness-raising meeting - "just to know what's going on" - it finally got to me."

"Feminism transforms from the inside out. It transforms the way you experience the world and understand yourself in the world. That also is what the Gospel is supposed to do. Both are about having the scales fall from our eyes so that we can see the world truthfully and respond authentically."¹⁰

At the Ecumenical Center, Joan's confidence, self-assurance and reputation grew. "I ended up being the program director for four years. I helped plan and direct theologically oriented conferences for clergy and laity. I invited divinity school faculty to lecture. I counseled. We did one of the earliest conferences on women in ministry."

6. Yale Divinity School Dean

"Out of the blue, I was invited to go to the Divinity School. Twenty-eight women students needed a faculty woman with whom they could talk "when things are really bad and we need an advocate.' Dean Colin Williams said, 'You're right.'"

In 1971, Joan became Advocate for Women and Registrar. Her work description:

- Carry out the registrar's administrative duties
- Counsel -- personal, vocational, spiritual
- Teach course in Women and Ministry
- Participate in school's liturgical life
- Direct program for women.

Soon promoted to Assistant Dean and then to Associate Dean for

⁸Rossman, Parker. "Joan Bates Forsberg" Email to author. March 01, 2006 11:15 AM.

⁹ Betty Friedan. *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1997, 1991, 1974, 1963).

¹⁰ Joan Forsberg in transcript of "On a Spiritual Journey – The Traffic and the Terrain." Talk at Yale in the mid-1980s.

Student Life, she continued to advocate for women. By now, she and Sister Margaret Farley and, soon, Professor Letty Russell were *the* three faculty women. "In the early 1970s the Holy Spirit blew the door open. All these women started to come through seminary doors. No turning back."

The Spirit also opened the door to Joan's spiritual journey. A changing theology, a new place of ministry, awareness of the women's movement, and "resingling" -- all caused and reflected major shifts in her being.

She had listened to young mothers in poverty and to ministers and seekers sorting out career direction. Now she listened to herself. Her listening ministry took the form of campus ministry.

Letty Russell said, Joan, well into part-time retirement, was still listening with "her wonderful 'listening ear.' She has a gift of being present to people in ways that make all of us feel that she is there for us no matter how brief the exchange."¹¹

Joan's ministry as a dean was listening and pastoral. "I feel as though I am finally in the just-right ministry for me. I am growing into glad openness and more self-acceptance. I experience being refreshed in spirit even in the midst of people and pressures. I am learning to trust the word that is given to me."¹²

In 1975, when she received the first Antoinette Brown Award, she knew that "the Synod was lifting up the ministry of all ordained U.C.C. women who were plugging away in the parish ministry receiving little recognition. I felt a wistfulness that they were not there with us mixed in with all the joy."

7. The Decision of Ordination

"My ministry has been and is - a bridge - a ministry to facilitate. I hope it builds communication and understanding towards the wholeness of the human family."¹³

Ordination is an important milestone, but "one continues to grow, hopefully, in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God"

¹¹ L. M. Russell. "Joan Bates Forsberg." Retirement Celebration Talk. February, 1993.

¹² From Letty Russell's 1980s' course, "Women in Ministry."

¹³ Missioner.

throughout ministry, learning and deepening from the many professional and personal experiences and changes one encounters.

In the 1980s, second-career men and women began to come to seminary thinking they wanted ordination. Some had met the Holy in a mystical experience, in a 12-step program or in another kind of adult crisis. Finding no church that spoke to that kind of encounter with the Holy, "they thought the way you honor that is, of course, to enter seminary and become a minister."

In 1954, these were the expected pre-ordination questions of the day:

You are married, why would you want to be ordained?

What are you going to do if you have children?

Why should we take you [a woman] seriously?

Joan listened to the true questions of women finding voice in that time of huge social transition. "It was a different era. When I describe to college students today what it was like to be a woman becoming newly conscious in the 1960s and 1970s, these wonderful, bright, young women just look at me.

"Is it so different? Now is more frantic. The electronic age has engulfed everybody with input. The young women talk blithely about how multi-tasking is so wonderful. They think there is no strain. There is a strain -- on the human psyche."

8. Ordination Issues¹⁴

What is the faithful response to the call of God for all concerned and what specifically is that for myself?

What would ordination mean for me?

¹⁴ M. Farley and J. Forsberg. "Issues in the Ordination of Women" at Yale Divinity School. 10/6/1977.

Will my ordination or being ordained and serving in that way somehow enhance the life of the people of God among whom I work, or will it be divisive?

Will "the Rev." cut me off from the people of God, or is there a nourishing and healthful way to be ordained and be present with the people?

Can I change the system by getting into it or by staying outside it?

Will I be taken seriously without the credential of a PhD or a Rev?

With sounds of young children punctuating their dialogue in a 1977 Yale Divinity School Conversation, Joan Forsberg and Margaret Farley had discussed ordination. For Joan, the equation had appeared "simple and clear." Call to campus ministry equals seminary plus ordination. She delighted in having returned to her goal of twenty-five years earlier, before the inner city ministry detour.

She urged the seminarians to refuse others' expectations. "Explore your own questions with your own soul and with fear and trembling and with the resolution that you will keep working at the faithfulness of that after the decision is made. Return each question to the first:

What is the faithful response to the call of God for all concerned and what specifically is that for me?"

9. Survivor

"I need feedback from people I trust, women I care about that care about women and care about me.

Am I legitimate, authentic, or play-acting?

How am I to know?

There is nothing to test that against. I haven't known any other women in a job like mine."¹⁵

The struggle for professional and spiritual survival was great, the loneliness intense. Some women used the energy from their anger

¹⁵ As quoted in the 1980s' Women in Ministry course transcript.

and outrage to fuel their courage. The struggle spent energy yet was part of the ministry, the pioneering. It affected family and marriage.

For many, it took a toll on spirit and body. Without today's women clergy mentors, Joan and others were their own spiritual mentors.

Then, professional doors, if not closed all the time, would swing open only a little and then might slam in her face. Far fewer churches than now were ready for women, but women were ready. When those two realities collided, new questions emerged:

What do you do to keep yourself together in the face of this lack of readiness?

If you have been working in a job and they ease you out for a man, what do you do with that?

What do you do with your self esteem? How do you survive?

How do you find the structures within the church that help women survive professionally? How do you create them?

Many women perceive many new forms of ministry that need to be done in the world. What do you do with that?

How do you keep your strength together?

It was a unique toll of fatigue, inner pressure to prove yourself, how women were perceived by other women and by men, being superwoman and modeling for other women. It would compel many clergy women who risked going against norms to choose new ways of thinking and to question anew:

How will I remember that my ministry is a personal call and a personal response to God's working in my Spirit?

10. The Gift of Ill Health

"There is no already set clear will of God that I am supposed to latch onto. Rather, God and I are into this together. It is up to me to

become fully adult, responding to the nudges of the Spirit and moving out on faith."¹⁶

This chapter in Joan's process of evolving ministry brought her to a wall. "It became clear to me in the hospital days that be-ing is more important than do-ing." In 1972, the first of two heart attacks in the middle of everything returned her to reflective questioning. Her health crash revealed that "I had lost some of my being in all the doing. It caused me to reorder the priorities of my life and to reexamine myself and my way of being."

At age 79 in the year 2007, Joan Bates Forsberg's ministry of presence continues to offer from her soul more for us to ponder within ours:

In the 1970's, like many women in my generation who woke up late, I began newly to live into a sense of my own authority. I realized that out there on the desert there was no path, no clear-cut guideline.... I sensed God was nearby while I was stumbling around looking for the path. It was up to me to decide where I was going. I think I was growing up.

11. What About You?

"I feel as though I am finally in the just-right ministry for me. I am growing into glad openness and more self-acceptance."

What do you think she meant?

Tell about a "just-right" happening for you.

How did you know it was right for you?

Joan described what it was like to be a woman becoming newly conscious in the 1960s and 1970s, "These wonderful, bright, young women in 2006 just looked at me -- no recognition about what I am talking about."

What is your "becoming" like as one of the bright young women of the 2000s?

Joan Forsberg recognized that who God means for us to be can take time. She encourages us to explore the big questions "with your own

¹⁶ From "The Traffic and the Terrain."

soul and with fear and trembling and with the resolution that you will keep working at the faithfulness of that after the decision is made."

Have you begun to ask honest questions about your life work?

Write a true question about your future, a career or decision.

Have you begun to respond to this question that only you with God's loving, listening presence can answer for yourself?

How have you marked an important decision?

13. Church Family Project

Gather a small group of clergy women or other professional/working women representing various generations from your church or association to discuss these questions (for starters) as a panel. Ask them to read beforehand "Bridge to Understanding." Ask one woman to lead the sharing. Invite all women from your church and your youth group to attend.

Do younger women now gain a sense of their being sooner?

Does really coming to know yourself require time and experience?

When do they learn to trust 'the word that is given to me'?

14. Still Curious?

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<<http://www.nfprha.org/latest/griswoldbackground.asp>>.

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"UCC Statement on Reproductive Choice"

"General Synod Resolutions"

"Roe v. Wade"

"Human Sexuality"

Dallas (Dee) A. Brauninger. *Antoinette Brown Women: Finding Voice*, April 2007