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THE DREAM OF THE PRIEST

I STILL DREAM SOMETIMES THAT I can fly. Flying is really easy—you surmount the tops of houses and sail over them, looking down at the roof tiles and chimneys as they pass beneath you. Maybe you approach a grove of trees, a bit cowed by their great height. Then you remember that you can fly, and your troubles are over: you float above them all. Funny, I never dream of landing—only of the ascent. I always awaken from these dreams a little surprised to be earthbound.

Let's see: a ballerina. An archeologist. A lawyer. A college professor. A singer. An actor. I thought I might be a lot of things. Priest was not on the radar screen for girls when I was young, so when I raised it as a possibility I was told that girls couldn't be priests, and I accepted that as the fact it was. I know many women priests who yearned to be ordained long before it was possible, but I was not one of them. There were plenty of other things to be.

I crowded some of these ambitions together at the same time—a career combining ballet and archeology made perfect sense to me for at least a year. I remember a friend in my dance class who wanted to be both a dancer and a nun. Why

not, we told each other? The world was so full of interesting things to be, and our energy was boundless—we could not recall ever having been tired. Time seemed endless to us. In short, nothing stood in the way of our doing anything we wanted to do. This we knew. We were eleven or twelve, I think. Not enough of our lives had passed yet to sober us. Young girls think they can do anything.

Even after that golden I'll-have-one-of-everything phase is over, another invincible season follows, one in which it seems that a person can do anything she sets her mind to. That limits aren't real; they are merely a failure of nerve. I wish everybody could feel that way forever, but nobody does. Life is just not like that.

Eventually, you settle on something, in a more informed choice. Maybe you meet someone who already does that to which you aspire. Probably you seek out such people, make it your business to meet as many of them as you can, gravitating toward everything about this profession on which you are in the process of setting your heart.

Perhaps there are special clothes and equipment—a uniform, a lab coat. A stethoscope, perhaps. For us, a clerical collar and liturgical vestments. There are special stores that sell only clerical furnishings, and a quiet but rather intense rivalry exists among these establishments in their competition for the largest share of what has always been a very small market.

A flat package arrives at the door. You know what it is—you've been expecting it, with an eagerness that would embarrass you if you thought anybody else knew about it. It is

your new black clerical shirt, your first. With it, three round white collars and a set of collar studs—soon, you will have to order more studs, but you don't know that yet. You don't know how easy they are to lose.

You wait until you are alone to try it on—you don't really want anyone else to know that your appearance matters to you. You are a bit surprised yourself, actually; surely it was the work itself to which you were called, not the clothes. Occasionally, you have heaped inner scorn upon people you thought were too attracted to the haberdashery of your calling; now you appear to be one of them. And yet you study yourself in the mirror, once you've plumbed the intricacies of fastening the collar onto the shirt, an operation that was second nature to gentlemen of the Victorian era and will very soon be second nature to you. Something like a cleric looks back at you, somebody dressed in a way people don't dress any more, and never did, really: although well-dressed men of the nineteenth century did wear detachable collars, the round "dog collar" is not ancient, nor is it a survival of street wear from an earlier age, as so many liturgical vestments are. It dates only from the 1840s, and only clerics have ever worn it. Before 1840, the clergy dressed like everyone else. So did doctors, until even later, and nurses as well.

You don't know yet how often you will wear yours. You haven't learned yet that if you forget to pack your collar on a trip, you can make one out of stiff paper folded lengthwise, or from plastic you have cut in a strip from a white jug of laundry detergent. You don't know yet that you can fabricate a collar

stud from a paper clip, if one of yours drops irretrievably down a grate, or that you can use a cufflink.

There is some other stuff you don't know yet.

My friend Kevin grew up Irish Catholic. He loved everything about church—the Latin, the incense, the music, the statues, the bread and the wine. Of course he was an altar boy. He was scrupulous in all his observances—a daily Mass and the daily confession that went with it, the keeping of every fast day. He loved all the priests in his parish, and was always available to serve them at the altar. It was apparent to him from before he made his First Holy Communion that he was born to be a priest, too, and everything in his life for as long as he could remember had been in preparation for that. His mother was proud—her son, a priest!

At seventeen, he was sent to minor seminary with the blessing of his entire Brooklyn neighborhood. Of course he loved it. He strove to excel in holiness, really to be the devout Catholic he knew God wanted him to be. He fasted more than other students, stayed in chapel longer after the liturgies had ended. Every day was a test, a chance to be better than he had been the day before.

Such devotion. I am guessing that he might have been a bit holier-than-thou with the other seminarians. Kevin was very young then, and young people aren't always as sensitive to the feelings of others as they might be.

The seminary years continued, and his devotion only increased, if that were possible. Certainly his professors' job was to encourage their students' piety, but even they grew concerned about Kevin's extreme version of it. It was too

much! They forbade his extra fasts, his long chapel vigils. He needed to eat and sleep. The tussle between their concern and his devotion was an ongoing war. In time, Kevin lost. He was asked not to return.

He would never be a priest.

Kevin's dream was destroyed. The church to which he had dedicated his life had rejected his offering of himself. To say that he was devastated would be like saying that the Grand Canyon is big.

A long period of desolation followed. He found a secular career. He turned away from the church—it didn't help that these were the years in which the innovations of Vatican II were implemented, and Kevin couldn't stand any of them. The dignity and beauty he had loved all his life was swept away in a vernacular swirl of guitar music. It was clear that there was no church for him anymore.

Cutting this cord did open him to some things he had never considered. Love was one—he met the man who would become his life partner, and they began a relationship that would last more than fifty years. He lived a New York life, like millions of his fellow citizens—Sunday morning brunch with the *New York Times*. Years passed.

One day, Kevin was walking along West 46th Street on his way back to his office from lunch. He heard the music of an organ and looked in the direction from which it came, the open door of a church. He had passed that church a thousand times, but today the door was open. He climbed the steps and peered in: the priest was censing the altar, flanked by the deacon and subdeacon, who each lifted the hem of his

beautiful brocade cope out of his way as he moved from one end of the altar to the other. Kevin could smell the incense from the door. He turned aside from his journey and walked in. The holy water stoup beside the entrance was full—he wet his fingers and crossed himself, for the first time in years. A statue of the Blessed Mother greeted him from behind her bank of votive candles in a station halfway down the nave.

The Mass was in English, yes, but it was Elizabethan English. It was not precisely the church of his childhood, but it was close enough. There was not a guitar in sight. Kevin was home.

The priest caught sight of him after the Mass and greeted him kindly. They talked for a few minutes that day, and Kevin hurried back to his office. But he began to attend Mass daily. He joined the parish. He did whatever he could to help out. No task was too big or too small. His partner was welcomed by the priest and everyone else when he visited. Kevin's Irish Catholic mother was dead by now, so she was spared the knowledge that her son was becoming an Episcopalian. This was a good thing, for it probably would have killed her.

The priest suggested that Kevin attend a Cursillo retreat—the first one ever in Episcopal New York. He became a leader in that worldwide spiritual renewal community, founded and led by laypeople. This involved leadership at retreat weekends, where Kevin frequently was called upon to tell his story.

We heard this story often, over the years. Fifteen talks are given on a Cursillo weekend, and over the dozens of retreats in which he assisted, Kevin gave most of them, some more than once. This story of his vocation almost always

made an appearance. Kevin revived his habit from seminary of staying in chapel (sometimes all night) to pray for people on the weekends, now an offering instead of scrupulosity. He was a mentor to many in the Cursillo movement in New York, as well as in his parish. From waiting on tables to presiding, he did it all gladly. He was a devoted and supportive friend to many priests and many laypeople, Episcopal and Roman Catholic alike. To tell this story, I reached out to friends from those days. We shared memories of Kevin, who has been dead for some time now. Writing about him here has made me miss him, and has filled me with gratitude for having known him.

Though they broke his heart, the faculty at the seminary were right about Kevin's vocation: he would have been the wrong kind of priest, he used to say, if he had realized his dream early in life as he and everyone else had expected he would. He would have regarded ordination as the reward for his rigid adherence to doing things the one and only right way. It would have confirmed him in the belief that perfection was not only possible, it was obligatory. Imposing it upon himself, he would have imposed it on others. He would have become harsh and judgmental. He would have been too dutiful to explore his own sexuality because of his vow of celibacy, and it would have ridden him painfully throughout his ministry.

But, you know—that's not the only alternative scenario to what happened in real life. Kevin and I both could have been wrong about the kind of priest he would have been. Yes, he would have started out demanding perfection from himself and everyone else. But he wouldn't have gotten it—and maybe he would have changed his approach. He wouldn't

have been the first young priest who needed to calm down a little. I look back on my own early years now, and see an arrogance that embarrasses me just thinking about it. Because I was academically strong, I was overconfident, certain that I knew what was right. I didn't fully appreciate the fact that there are *fashions* in ministry, that practices and approaches come in and out of vogue, so I accepted the truisms of the time as both universal and eternal truths, when none of them were either of those.

So Kevin never did become a priest. But he showed us all what a lay leader could be. Could we say, then, that this outcome was “meant to be”? That it was part of God's plan for Kevin? The older I get, the less confident I am in my ability to identify God's plan, and the less attracted I am to the idea that God maps out plans for us, the way a general draws up a battle plan. Rather, it seems to me that God offers possibilities at every turn, opportunities to help a new thing happen in the world. A cherished goal becomes suddenly and permanently out of reach—and life doesn't end. Now something else can happen. Maybe Kevin would have been a good priest. Maybe he wouldn't have. But neither of those possibilities were inevitable: they were *possible*. Lately I've been thinking that *possible* is one of my favorite words.

Whom did you tell first, when the possibility of your vocation first became clear to you? Do you remember when it was? For some people, it is a stunning moment of call they remember for the rest of their lives: the moment, the day, where they were, what they were doing. For most, though, it is a process. We come to it inch by inch, not all at once. It

becomes possible, not certain. Whom did you tell? Someone who loved you? Maybe. But maybe not. Sometimes we don't go to family first with something that's going to change our lives—they want our lives to stay the same. Family often can't see us as something other than what we already are. Sometimes family is the last to know.

More often than not, the one to whom you entrust the news of your vocation is the one who inspired you to it in the first place, if that person is still around. Or someone else who now does that work. I think most of us have a string of such people, not just one; we gravitate toward those who inhabit already the fellowship we long to join. We meet as many of them as we can.

The people you admire weren't always the experienced elders they are now. They all were once as you are now—they were new. They didn't always know all they know now—they had to learn it, as everyone must. They remember what it was like not to know. Perhaps one of them sees something familiar in you. *I was like that*, he or she may remember, and there is a growing warmth to your interactions. When the time does come for you to tell someone what has been growing in your heart, this is the person you seek out. *Do I have what it takes? Can you imagine me in this role? What should I do first?*

Notice that I didn't say anything about *Is God calling me to do this?*

I cannot know what God is or is not doing. None of us can. I especially can't know this when what I am discerning involves my own passionate desire—human beings easily confuse our own desires with God's will. We also anthropomorphize God

scandalously; we think God is just like us, only omnipotent—sort of like Superman. That God likes and desires things in the same way we do. We use language about God like the people in the Bible used, thinking that in doing so we are being faithful to the Scriptures, when what we are really doing is confining God to the thought processes of a particular time and place. We do not allow God to do new things, when the very essence of God is *to create*. God is the creator, not the replicator.

So I can't know if God is calling you to be a priest. Or to be a teacher or a waiter or a nurse or an engineer. All I can judge is whether or not you have the qualities I know to be useful in a calling, if it's one about which I am well-informed. Scornful of those less knowledgeable than you are? Probably not a teacher. Faint at the sight of blood? Something other than nursing, maybe. We can expect God to use what is already present to form us, and we can expect that God's call will probably not be a violation of who we are. It will be *in line* with who we are. The best indicator of a vocation may be that the people who know you aren't surprised when you tell them about it—they've already seen it in you.

And what they have seen is not just aptitude. Vocation is never only potential—it is actual. It is recognizable before it appears in full. Insofar as has been possible, you've already been exercising your vocation, even before you begin your formal training for it.

But, although your vocation won't be in violation of who you are, it could be in violation of who you *think* you are. We don't see ourselves as clearly as we imagine we do. I

remember a young man who swore he would never become a priest. Anything but that. His father was one, and worked at night a lot. He would never do that to *his* family. Naturally, he went on to become a priest, and naturally, he found ways to be the father he wanted to be.

Sometimes the world sees the initial outline of your vocation before you do. Other times the part of the world you need to see it fails to do so. Sometimes this doesn't matter—you can just go forward anyway, on your own. But usually, it matters a great deal. In the church, for instance, there are gatekeepers, and they must agree with you that a vocation exists. In the church as Episcopalians have inherited it, discernment is a threefold action of the Holy Spirit: upon me, upon my community, and upon my bishop. It is not something we do as individuals—we do it together. Somehow, we must all agree that we are seeing the same thing in me, or we do not proceed.

And there are *trends* in the church's attitude toward vocation, trends that come and go. When I was studying, most of my classmates were young, as I was. Early in my priesthood, though, it began to seem to many in authority that younger aspirants needed to get some real world experience before beginning, and more than a few excellent ones were turned down solely on the basis of not being old enough, never to return to the process. I have lived to see this come full circle—right now, very young people are the prize in diocesan discernment processes, and it is the middle-aged who must explain themselves. When I was beginning, parish ministry was the gold standard, and anyone who aspired to

anything else, such as chaplaincy in a hospital or a school—and made the mistake of saying so—could live to regret it. At the moment, there is somewhat more flexibility in this regard. Tomorrow, who knows? Although one might consider it crass to say so, the inexorable law of supply and demand is as active in the ordination process as it is elsewhere, necessitating flexibility at the front end when priests are in short supply. When there are too many for the positions available, the church is choosier. It can fail to see some gems because they don't fit the mold.

Though this looks to people involved in the discernment process like a thoroughly regrettable contraction in possibilities, it is important to remember that there is no such thing as contraction of possibility in the reality of God. God doesn't contract; God expands. The creation is ongoing and the universe is getting bigger; the individual deaths we mourn—the deaths of stars, of galaxies, to say nothing of our own little deaths—are compost for a larger growth. As in the universe, so in the church: that there aren't as many positions now like the one I had after seminary—as curate under the supervision of an experienced rector—does not mean there is no need for priests to gather the people of God, only that we will do it in a different way. It is at just such times that the imagination of God makes something new.

Back when the ordination of women was news, not many parishes were willing to take a chance on hiring one. All of us remember hearing a regretful “My people aren't ready for a woman” and wondering silently just what the sign of the people's readiness would be. We were suspicious of the

expressed regret; we heard it as “I am not ready, but am not willing to admit it—so I will blame it on my congregation.” Looking back now, from the perspective of someone who has had to balance conflicting viewpoints on controversial issues in a parish many times, this was a bit harsh—there was more truth in what they said than I was prepared to admit. Almost any rector who hired a woman was certain to face opposition from some of his parishioners, and would have to navigate his way through it. *Parish ministry is hard enough; do I really want to invite a conflict that might destroy the fragile balance I’ve worked so hard to maintain?* The parish rebellions they imagined before the fact were more severe in the imagining than they turned out to be in real life, but then we never do know what something is going to be like until we try it. Trying it took guts. Still, it was hard on us to watch our male classmates find full-time positions in prosperous churches with relative ease, while we struggled to locate places that might let us work for free.

What this meant was that women were in a position to understand from personal experience something of what it had been like for African American and other minority clergy for two centuries. The same went for openly gay clergy, who were just beginning to claim their truth out loud in those days. There were just places none of us could go, for reasons that had nothing to do with our fitness to serve.

After an appropriate moment or two of outrage and hurt, though, a person in that position still must find a place in which to exercise the vocation to which we are called. *Okay, you must find a way to say to yourself, so we know what I can’t do right now. Let’s see what I can do.* Some women strung together

two or three part-time positions. Some worked at secular jobs and served parishes as non-stipendiary clergy on the weekends. Some created parish positions that had not existed before, and the men in charge of those parishes helped them do it. Most of these men were very aware of the economic injustice of all this, and troubled by the ethical dilemma confronting them: which is worse, allowing a woman to work here for little or no money, or not allowing her to work at all? But most of us wanted to work, no matter what we were paid. We hoped and trusted that the scales would balance better in the future. And balance they did, after a fashion, with about the same tilt the general culture displays: more and more women found full-time positions in parishes as time went by, but once they passed the moment when diocesan minimum salaries apply, women enjoyed roughly the same seventy cents on the dollar ratio to men's salaries prevalent in the secular world. It may be a little better now, but not much.

Nope, it isn't fair. Still, the result has been that some very gifted women serve in places that wouldn't have been able to afford them if they had been men. Seeing all this has led me unwillingly to an observation I still believe: there are some positive benefits to limited opportunity. It forces us into places we would not have chosen on our own. Once there, we discover gifts in parishes in which we never would have imagined ourselves. This doesn't mean that we shouldn't keep trying to even the playing field. It only means that NO is never the last word in ministry. There will always be a dependable supply of clergy wanting to serve rich parishes. Not everyone

can serve in a poor one—it is hard work, and your resources are few. Those of us who can, probably should.

Not getting what we want isn't the worst thing that can happen to us. No. The worst thing would be to let it keep us from using what we have.

Sally had loved theology since before she was old enough to know what it was. Puzzling about where things came from, about both the immensity and the tiny-ness of the natural world, sitting on the rock she has thought of as hers since her childhood on the coast of Maine and watching the sea change with the tides—these were both deep delights and spiritual quests for a curious little girl. She was also rather more abundantly churched than many people, dutifully attending the Congregational church of her parents early on Sunday mornings and then going with her grandfather to the Episcopal church after that. The more sensual beauty of the liturgy there—even in that plainer liturgical era—struck a chord in her, and its effect on her grandfather intrigued and attracted her. The way his face changed as the service unfolded, she said—he became so full of peace.

Fast forward: a life in the arts, a family, busy decades as an active Episcopalian—then the breast cancer nobody ever expects visited her. A chaplain's ministry to her in the hospital saved her spiritual life and maybe her sanity, she thought, and she realized that she wanted to be able to bring that to other people. It seemed of one fabric with everything else she had known of God throughout her life—the wonder of nature, the deep peace of prayer, the beauty of liturgy.

Maybe it was her age—Sally was not a twenty-something.

Probably her clarity about a vocation to hospital chaplaincy worked against her. “Maybe I’m just not good at communicating who I am to people,” she says now. I wasn’t there, so I don’t know. However it was, she was not invited to continue exploring an ordained vocation.

She completed a seminary degree anyway—nobody could stop her from learning. She completed several units of clinical pastoral education, the training required of hospital chaplains. She accepted a position as pastoral care assistant to the rector in her parish, one she held for seven years. Then she became a hospice chaplain at a residential facility for older adults. She taught seminars in end-of-life issues to medical students at Yale. She became a spiritual director to seminary students, both at Princeton and at Yale.

“So then, you got to do all the things you wanted to do,” I said, “even though you never were ordained?”

Sally paused. “I did. But it was harder. You see, when you have the recognition ordination confers, people *assume* you’re a good pastor.”

“Even if you’re really *not* very good at it.”

“Exactly. But if you’re not ordained, you have to prove it up front, every time.”

“Yeah. We assume that ordained people are pastors, and that laypeople *aren’t*.”

“Exactly.”

That’s the truth. All credentials are shorthand. Each certifies a certain level of mastery—there are things every lawyer must know, things every accountant must be able to

do, and the initials “JD” or “CPA” after one’s name signal to the world that such mastery is present.

Credentials signify professional consensus: *Not only do I think I’m qualified, the people already recognized in my chosen profession do, too. I undertook a course of study and completed it. I sat for an examination and passed it.*

There is nothing wrong with requiring credentials. Any profession has every reason to maintain rigorous standards for its members; its failure to do so would injure everybody in it and cast rightful aspersions on the profession itself. To the extent that the care of souls is a profession, it is right that we cannot simply appoint ourselves to it.

But there is an inevitable lack of precision to the credentialing process in many professions. Maybe in most of them. Strive though we may to be “objective,” many factors combine to inform our judgments of one another. A candidate looks or sounds like your mother, went to a school that was your school’s rival, believes something other than you believe about something that matters greatly to you. You yourself are not feeling well today, or you are deeply worried about something completely unrelated to the candidate before you. I will set these things aside, you say, and you think you have. But the heart has many layers, and not all of them are known to us.

Also, judgments are local. Attitudes toward controversial topics vary from place to place. A lesbian candidate in the Episcopal Diocese of New York need not conceal that important fact about herself from the committee that examines her. There are still many dioceses in which that

is far from being the case. When I was taking the General Ordination exam, which is required of all candidates for the priesthood and is administered anonymously, women students were advised to write in such a way that our gender was not apparent—our readers would come from all over the country, and the ordination of women was unwelcome news in many places. Gay men from that era recall being advised to refer to their same-sex partners by the opposite gender’s pronoun. It seemed an odd way to begin a life in which they would vow to follow Someone who was “the way, the truth, and the life.” But I knew more than one person whose ordination didn’t happen because they couldn’t bring themselves to lie.

So there is nothing inevitable about being called, to ordained ministry or to anything else. Imagining that being called to ministry means you’re certain to be ordained is like imagining that being a good Christian means you’ll never get cancer. Many factors can contradict your sense of call, however certain it may seem to you. The thread of Providence is not discernible from the beginning, only from the end. All we are equipped to see are gifts, talents, and a natural tilt toward exercising them.

Your life’s calling does not need to be ordained beforehand in order to be your life’s calling. Indeed, in the reality of God, there can *be* no “beforehand” or “afterward.” Everything is “now” in the reality of God. The linearity of the human experience of time is ours alone—if God is the ground of all existence, then God has the capacity to hold all things at once, rather than stringing them out along a line, as we must do in order to experience them. I have written rather extensively

elsewhere about time and history as God sees it, and so have many others. When we separate God from our experience of God, we actually reduce the divine nature: God becomes simply a better player on the same field in which we play, the captain of our team, larger and stronger than we are, but a player, as we are players. It is when we understand ourselves to be part of God's incarnation—to be what Paul calls "in Christ"—that the trajectory of our own intention and that of the universe click into alignment. In that alignment is the energy that can birth new things.

We think God makes choices the way we make choices—*I will do this, so I will not do that*. God seems either/or to us because we experience ourselves as either/or. But even we are more complex than that, in every avenue of our lives. The love of your life isn't the only person you could possibly have married—he is just the one you *did* marry. The building of your life together continued to marry the two of you, day by day. Likewise, the children you bore or fathered were not fulfilled in purpose simply by being born to you: a decision to father or mother them you made daily for years created your parenthood as you went along. Adoptive families demonstrate this: adoptive parents are certainly parents, and birth parents may elect not to be. A family can be created without the usual beginning—the conception of a child together. The reverse is also true—the usual beginning does not always produce a family.

Sally's vocation as a chaplain was like this. Denied the usual beginning to a ministry of chaplaincy, she reached it by an alternate route. If credentials like ordination are

shorthand, Sally's vocation was written longhand. Doing it that way was harder, but since it was the only one available to her, she accepted it. In almost every way, she lived her calling. *Almost every way*: what was missing was the ease of entry into it, based on evidence that a community supported her. Ordination gives us that, but Sally had to secure it afresh each time, with the only evidence of a good job well done provided in the facilities' performance evaluations, which were internal documents. The other evidence, provided by the patients and families and staff with whom she worked in one setting, was also not readily available to any new one. This is true, later on, for the ordained as well, of course—your collar may get you in the door, but it won't keep you there if the competence and faithfulness it promises are nowhere to be found. The beginning is not the end. There are people for whom the day of their ordination represents the high point of their ministry. Certainly, that was a memorable day—let's hope, though, that it was not your high point. If I were to ask someone to tell me about his priesthood after he'd served for forty years and what he told me about was the first day of it, I would try my best to hide my horror. But I would probably fail.

Naïve though it may be, the ideal which attracts us to priesthood is a powerful lure, potent enough to keep us on the long road toward it, in spite of the obstacles we encounter. Paradoxically, we must be prepared to begin surrendering the ideal as soon as we are ordained. The ideal of your vocation was formed primarily through observation, but your actual vocation is created through experience. We make it by living

it. There is no way to know in advance just what it will be like, and there is only one way to find out.

Finding out will be disruptive. Not everyone fights it as hard as my friend Vicki did. Her understanding of her call is different from mine—it comes from a God unmistakably outside herself:

I was already a concert organist, teaching associate in organ and music theory, and organist and choir director. My goal was a tenure track position, as well as concertizing and encouraging composers to write new compositions for the organ.

Call for me meant a total change of profession, going back to school and starting all over. I fought it as hard as I could. My father, uncles, grandfathers, and great-grandfather were all pastors in the Missouri Synod Lutheran Church, a denomination that still does not accept the ordination of women, so this was not something I considered as a young girl.

I began working at an Episcopal Church as their organist and choir director when my Jewish husband's father was diagnosed with a brain tumor. That year of struggling with life and death issues in a vibrant community of faith was transformative, and the "coincidences" that kept happening provided solace and love in such a deep way that they could not be easily

discarded as “chance.” A very specific mystical experience had me wondering if God was calling me to ordained ministry. I began sessions with a spiritual director, but was able to rationalize that I already had a doctorate in music and that my music career used all of my gifts and talents. The first anniversary of that experience, however, was a terrible day because I knew that I was supposed to change my life and I hadn’t.

I was angry with God for changing the rules, for the sexism and sexual harassment I had endured in academia, and for my own deep-seated fear of stepping into a brand new patriarchal system about which I knew nothing. The answer I heard from God was that it wouldn’t be easy but that Christ would always be with me. I went through a few more months of crying and agony until I finally gave in.

The experience of fighting a call is not an experience I know; mine was gentler than Victoria’s, and it did not involve as much disruption. But many prophets of ancient Israel knew it well; the most famous among them argued strenuously with God at the moment of their calling. Here is Moses:

But Moses said to the LORD, “O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of tongue.” Then the LORD said to him, “Who

gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the LORD? Now go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak.” But he said, “O my Lord, please send someone else.”

Exodus 4:10–13

And here is Isaiah:

And I said: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the king, the LORD of hosts!” Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.” Then I heard the voice of the LORD saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me!”

Isaiah 6:5–8

Jeremiah:

Now the word of the LORD came to me saying, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.” Then I said, “Ah, Lord GOD! Truly, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.” But the LORD said to me, “Do not say, ‘I

am only a boy'; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you.

Jeremiah 1:4–7

Jonah:

Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, “Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.” But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD.

Jonah 1:1–3

As painful as coming to terms with the beginning of Victoria’s call to priesthood was, it was not her last uncomfortable era. The rigor of the work itself has remained a challenge. “It has been the hardest journey I could ever even imagine. It has involved working on my own spiritual discernment and struggling with the voices within me that would run away from God. I have had to find a more authentic and truthful humility, and deal with my fear of a living God. I have had to learn to pray for my enemies, and even to love them. I have had to put my ego aside again and again in order to hear that ‘still small voice.’ This has meant going places I didn’t want to go, and doing things I don’t necessarily want to do.”

Here, precisely, is a sign of being called—the burden of ministry is hard to bear but, over and over, you are able to

bear it. At the very moment when you realize that you have nothing to give, something within you is found. “But it is always in that most vulnerable and tender place,” she says, “that I feel the presence and love of God most profoundly.”

A sign of call like that cannot be found in the sunny meadows of easy success. Easy success only convinces us that we’re great priests. A priceless sign such as this only surfaces when we come up empty.

Besides this unexpected strength in the hard times, more clear-cut rewards continue to hold Victoria.

There is nothing quite like knowing that you have just been used by God—that the words that came out of your mouth spoke to someone in such a deep way that they felt Christ’s love for them and that that experience has changed their lives in some way. I have loved blessing and marrying couples, and am especially moved by working with same-sex couples and having the opportunity to apologize to them and their family and friends for the past sins of the church in shaming them and trying to take away from them their direct connection to God’s love. I love baptizing babies, children and adults, preparing young people and adults for confirmation, reception, and reaffirmation. I love comforting people with prayer during times of trial. . . . And I love really knowing, despite all of the horrific things that happen in the world, God’s “got the whole world in his hands.”

When the biblical writers write of reluctant prophets, they show us impressive Cecil B. DeMille–style moments of triumph. They don't show us this part: the joy of knowing that you have answered the call and done your best, and that the energy of God's love has flowed quietly but unmistakably through you to touch those you serve. I am in exactly the right place and doing exactly what I was created to do, you say wonderingly to yourself.

Forty years later, you're still saying the same thing.

AARON

Holiness on the head,
Light and perfections on the breast,
Harmonious bells below, raising the dead
To lead them unto life and rest:
Thus are true Aarons drest.

Profaneness in my head,
Defects and darkness in my breast,
A noise of passions ringing me for dead
Unto a place where is no rest:
Poor priest thus am I drest,

Only another head
I have, another heart and breast,
another music, making live, not dead,
without whom I could have no rest:
In him I am well drest.

Christ is my only head,
My alone-only heart and breast,
My only music, striking me ev'n dead;
That to the old man I may rest,
And be in him new-drest.

So, holy in my head,
Perfect and light in my dear breast,
My doctrine tun'd by Christ, (who is not dead,
But lives in me while I do rest),
Come people; Aaron's drest.

George Herbert, 1633

George Herbert was an English priest. In this poem, he contrasts his own unworthiness with the high calling of his ministry, represented through references to the vestments Aaron wore, which are described in great detail in scripture—you can read about his splendid apparel in the twenty-eighth chapter of Exodus. Aaron is a type of priesthood in both Judaism and Christianity; a fact most modern people don't know but which would not have been lost on anyone in Herbert's day. Herbert served the tiny church of St. Andrew in Bemerton. As modest as it was, his sense of his own unworthiness to serve it save by the power of God's presence was potent. He spent the night before he was to take it up stretched out on its stone floor in prayer over his unworthiness.