

HALLELUJAH, ANYHOW!

A Memoir

Barbara C. Harris

With Kelly Brown Douglas



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CHAPTER ONE

A Cloud of Witnesses

It was a Saturday morning in Boston. I was in the front row of the balcony, the perfect seat for seeing all that was about to unfold on the floor of the auditorium beneath me. As Barbara came into view in the midst of this mighty procession of Episcopal authority, what struck me was the simultaneous smallness and command of the woman who was the center of attention that day. She walked down the aisle with a bearing of poised self-possession as she swayed to the rhythms of the music. When she approached the front of the auditorium to take her seat in the first row, I wondered what was going through her mind. I wondered about whom she was thinking. Who, I wondered, was walking down that aisle with her—who was in the cloud of witnesses, past and present, who bought her to that moment and were still keeping watch over her? In this chapter Barbara tells the stories of those great witnesses in her life. It is a story primarily of strong women that begins and ends with her mother.

This cloud of witnesses gave to Barbara a profound knowledge of how to thrive with dignity in a world that would despise her for her race and her gender. This was not a knowledge cultivated in a classroom and handed down in a dispassionate professorial voice. Rather, this was the “everyday taken for granted knowledge born from the experiences and hardships of living.”¹ It was therefore knowledge handed

1. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge 2000), 36.

down in such a manner to reflect the fierce determination of black women trying to make do and do better for themselves and their children in, as Audre Lorde describes, “the mouth of a racist, sexist suicidal dragon. . . .”²

It was this cloud of witnesses that carried Barbara into Hynes Auditorium that Saturday morning, with one in particular leading the way: her mother Beatrice P. Harris.

Over the years that I have known Barbara, there is probably no woman that I have heard her reference or speak about more than her mother. Her mother, who died in 1993 at age ninety-one, clearly remains a major influence in Barbara’s life—not simply because of the values and knowledge she imparted, or the fact that she raised Barbara and her siblings in the church, but because she was a strong, determined woman who would not be “pushed around” (like mother, like daughter). While I never met Barbara’s mother in person, Barbara’s memory of her brings her to life, letting you know how truly Barbara is her mother’s daughter. It is no wonder she was on Barbara’s mind as she walked down the aisle toward her consecration. She feared the unsolicited “taken for granted wisdom” her mother might be moved to share that day. This chapter tells the story of her mother and the other cloud of witnesses that brought Barbara to that day.

The Women behind the Woman

“Yeah, and my mother always wanted the best for my siblings and me.”

As the service opened I was almost dazzled by the spectacle, the eight thousand five hundred people gathered in the auditorium of Hynes Convention Center in Boston, the rows of bishops, sixty-two of them, the hundreds of clergy from all over the

2. Audre Lorde, “Man Child,” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Toronto: Crossing Press Feminist Series, 2007), 74.5

world, men and women. It seemed as if it was an endless line. And then there were the many friends and family from Philadelphia and beyond who gathered to share this moment with me. There was glorious music, brass fanfares, choirs from churches large and small, young people and old. I sat, as is custom, in the midst of the congregation of the people who had elected me bishop suffragan of Massachusetts. At the right moment, and in response to their call expressed through the presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church, Edmund Lee Browning, I would rise and accept responsibility and authority for all in whose midst I now sat.

As I sat there that day at the Hynes Auditorium amidst the panoply not only of a great ecclesiastical occasion but also the pressure and confusion of a major media event, I was also dreading what was to come. I knew that Bishop Browning, as the presiding bishop and chief consecrator that day, intended to allow those who objected to my ordination to voice their opposition in the midst of the service. The Book of Common Prayer provides such an opportunity, much as in a marriage ceremony. So in the least, I was nervous sitting there. But I began to worry even more about something other than the possible objections that would surely be voiced: the woman sitting across from me.

My mother was perched on her chair regarding one of the objectors with a piercing stare. Mom was not a woman who agreed particularly with St. Paul's admonition that we should "suffer fools gladly," and she was then of an age when she figured she could do and say anything she wanted. I knew that if she started to tap her foot and narrow her lips we could expect a strong response to what was going on. I could picture her approaching the man at the microphone and asking in front of that huge crowd with all those cameras trained on her, "Now just what is your problem?"

My mother was an only girl; she had four brothers and she was spoiled too. Mom had a sense of entitlement and a firm sense of herself always. From time to time she did domestic

work, but she did it elegantly, which is how she did everything, even when she took in washing and ironing to pay for my piano and voice lessons. She used to sip on a little bourbon while she ironed because she said the steam got in her throat.

Sparing details, I will only say that I reached a point in my adult life when I refused to sit next to my mother at family obsequies because her wry side-of-the-mouth comments reduced me to tears of laughter while she sat straight-faced and seemingly absorbed in or focused on the rituals of the deceased. Which reminds me of my father's mother's burial.

Our cortege was held up in the cemetery while another family completed an interment. My mother got out of the car and suddenly seemed to collapse against the door of the limousine in which we were riding. We had to climb out the other side of the car to determine the nature of her distress and with tears (of laughter) in her eyes she pointed to the ground. There in the snow in the cemetery lay an obviously used condom. Mom said, "I guess the spirits have sex out here."

Douglas: *Is there any story, any event, any interaction that most reflects you and your mother's relationship and her influence on you and who you are?*

Harris: *My mother was a trained musician, and I loved music, and my mother sacrificed so that I could have music lessons: piano and voice. And (long pause) well, there was a period when she was church organist and I was in the choir as she was organist and choir director, but, as a teenager, or pre-teen and teenager, my mother took in laundry, washing and ironing, to pay for my music lessons—so that it didn't come out of the household budget, this was an extra responsibility that she took on so that I could have this, I won't call it a luxury, so that I could have this opportunity and this privilege. And, I was deeply grateful for that because I knew that that was hard for her to do. She didn't earn a lot of money doing it but enough to cover the costs of my weekly piano lessons and my lessons as part of a vocal group.*

(Long pause). So, from early on, I had my mother's support for good things in life. Yeah, and my mother always wanted the best for my siblings and me.

Douglas: *Was there a time when you truly defied your mother's wishes for you, even knowing that she wanted the best for you?*

Harris: *Yes, my wedding day when we pulled up to the church and my mother said "Are you sure you want to do this?" and I said, "What do you mean?" and she said, "Because we can pull around the corner and go on back home and it'll all be over."*

Douglas: *Your mother didn't want you to get married?*

Harris: *Not really.*

Douglas: *Why didn't you listen to her?*

Harris: *Because I didn't think my mother, I was thirty years old, and I didn't think my mother needed to judge my choice of a marriage partner. I suppose she wanted what she thought was the best for me in a marriage partner and, um, this person was not "it" in her opinion. I had to practically bribe her to get her to come to the wedding. I resented her being so vocal in her objection.*

Douglas: *And did that make you become even more headstrong about wanting to do it?*

Harris: *Not in the sense of trying to win a battle over her, but I thought I knew what I was doing and I was just determined that I was going to do, in this instance, what I wanted to do.*

Douglas: *And, what about your ordination? What did your mother think about that?*

Harris: *My mother was not very supportive of the ordination of women and particularly of mine, but I guess . . . I don't know what her objections were because she had had no real experience of ordained women. But I think her reaction to my seeking ordination was that not just a general objection or reluctance to*

accept ordination of women but that she probably felt that I was not a worthy candidate.

Douglas: *And why's that?*

Harris: *I guess she just never saw her daughter as a likely person to be ordained. Her model for ordained ministry came way, way out of the past with a rigid, stern, but loving priest—under whom she and we had all grown up. So, I was nowhere near her image or her model of ordained ministry. And I guess knowing all my flaws and shortcomings, she could not imagine the church approving her flawed daughter in the ranks of its ordained clergy. I guess it was kind of, “Well if you knew what I knew about her, you wouldn’t want her either.”*

In the end, my mother came around to my ordination, at least partially evidenced by the fact of the numbers of her friends who showed up for my ordination as a deacon. In fact, by the time I was ordained priest she was actually one of my strongest supporters. When someone wondered aloud if more people had attended my ordination or that of another woman my mother interrupted in classic motherly fashion saying: “It doesn’t make any difference. Barbara had four bishops at her ordination!”

Womanist Roots

“I don’t need anybody to fight for me. I can fight for myself and I’m not a little boy.”

As I listened to Barbara talk about her mother all I could think of was Alice Walker’s definition of “womanist.”³ In this four-part definition, Walker tells us that a womanist is outrageous, audacious, courageous and prone to willful behavior. Barbara’s womanist character has been evident throughout her journey, and there was little doubt where it came from. However, the “womanist” DNA ran deep in Barbara. To search Barbara’s

3. Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose*, reprint ed. (New York: Mariner Books, 2003).

womanist DNA is to discover other women in her life who were just as outrageous, audacious, courageous and willful. These were women that I had never heard Barbara speak of, but a mutual friend of ours, the Rev. Nan Peete, told me that there were amazing women in Barbara's life; I should be sure to ask her about them. And so I did.

Douglas: *Now clearly, you get that, what then they called feistiness, from your mother. Were all the women of your family so feisty or what we might call today "womanish?"*

Harris: *I think some of my feistiness comes from my great-grandmother. She had been a slave on the Brauner plantation in Maryland. We called her Mom Sem, Sem was the short version of her married name, Sembly. She used to tell the wonderful story about her encounter on the plantation with General Grant. He came onto the plantation one day and asked her for a drink of water. So she pumped a dipper for him. He rinsed it out, threw it aside, and asked her to pump another. She said, "You didn't need to rinse that out. It was clean." He replied, "People around her have been trying to poison people like us. I've been South fighting for little boys like you." My great-grandmother wore her hair close-cropped, even more so than I do mine, so she said to Grant, "I don't need anybody to fight for me. I can fight for myself and I'm not a little boy." I think she was about twelve years old.*

Douglas: *Now she told you that story or was it handed down?*

Harris: *I don't know how, whether she told me directly, I think she told me that directly but she was feisty because immediately following Emancipation, she changed her name from Adelaide Eliza Brauner to Ida Brauner. She had a twin sister who was sold South and while I do not know the details of it, miraculously, they were reunited in Washington, DC, after Emancipation. I wish I knew the details of the story, but I don't. I only know that they were reunited. She lived in DC until the family moved to Philadelphia.*

Douglas: *Are there any other stories, or recollections that you have, that she told you about her days as a slave?*

Harris: *No, that's all I know about her days as a slave, but I do know what kind of personality she was. If she liked you, there was nothing she wouldn't do for you. And if she did not like you, there was nothing she would do for you. She approved of my sister and took my sister into her room, closed the door, and taught my sister to sew. The door was shut in my face and she told me, "Thee is not fit for human company," and I was not allowed into the room. I remember lying on my stomach in the hall pushing buttons under door and saying, "Postman! Special Delivery!" One day when I was doing that, my grandmother, her oldest daughter, came tiptoeing up the stairs and the next thing I knew there a wire coat hanger across my backside. That was the last time I played Postman.*

Douglas: *There was a time in the black community that grandmothers and especially great-grandmothers were treated as respected matriarchs. Was this the way it was for Mom Sem?*

Harris: *My great-grandmother was very regal. I can remember her taking me to the store with her and she would walk very erect down the street and I could not, at age seven or eight, understand why she was carrying a huge black umbrella in the middle of a sunny August day. I didn't realize then she was shading herself from the sun. I was just embarrassed because I thought it looked so ridiculous to be walking the street in a bright August sunshine with a huge black man's umbrella over her head. But, as we passed the corner saloon, the men all standing outside all removed their hats and nodded and said, "Good afternoon, Ms. Sembley." So, she had a lot of respect in the neighborhood.*

Douglas: *So, you clearly spent a lot of time with your great-grandmother.*

Harris: *She lived with us until I was eight years old; she died in 1938. When my great-grandmother died I remember that I was*

playing around the corner with a cousin and my sister—who was five years older than me and who died in 2006, three days before her eighty-first birthday—came running and said, “You kids come on home. Mom Sem just died.” Of course, death didn’t have any meaning for me and in those days children didn’t go to funerals. The undertaker came and carried her body out in a wicker basket, but it still didn’t register. She was gone, that’s all; we never saw her again.

Douglas: *So what do you think she would have thought of your ordination to the priesthood and your subsequent consecration as bishop?*

Harris: *I don’t think she could have even conceived of it.*

A word about my grandmother, Mom Sem’s daughter Mary Matile Sembley Price. I once shared this in a homily. I learned much from my grandmother for whom the daily round was sweeping floors and dusting and cleaning other people’s houses. When most had finished an eight-hour day, she went on to yet another job of cleaning up behind dirty adolescent boys at a private day school—emptying wastebaskets, mopping floors, and readying the untidy headmaster’s office for the next day. I joined her on Friday afternoons for “grand rounds” of washing blackboards and dusting fifty-four captain’s chairs in the study hall—legs and all—for which she shared with me from her meager wages the grand sum of fifty cents per week. And God knows I hated every minute and every penny of it. She walked home in the dark every night and I alongside her on Friday evenings, singing hymns or breathing out little one-line prayers such as “Lord, if I just can make it to my Father’s house,” or “Jesus, God from glory, come down here.” Sometimes it was “I thank you, Jesus and I thank you, Lord.” I shared this on the day the church commemorates the life of George Herbert, priest, poet, and writer of prose. It also is my grandmother’s birth date. Some of Herbert’s poems have been set to music and have found their way into the hymns of the church.

My grandmother's prayers hardly match his poetry or prose, but they were no less sincere. One of his poems found in our 1982 hymnal sums up for me my grandmother's life and I asked the small group to which I was speaking to sing it for all the little Mattie Prices of this world whose humble lives were lived to God's praise and God's glory. The hymn goes like this: "Teach me my God and King, in all things thee to see, and what I do in anything, to do it as for thee."

A Sister/Friend

"I'm your older sister. I'm allowed to hit you."

Douglas: *Tell me more about your sister. Was she as feisty as you or the other women in your family?*

Harris: *My sister, Joey, as I said, was five years older than me. She was more docile. My sister was very quiet and not very ambitious, but a little bossy. She hit me once and I hit her back. She said to me, "How dare you!" and I said, "You hit me." She came back, "I'm your older sister. I'm allowed to hit you." For a long time my sister convinced me that I was adopted and had been left on the doorstep. She said mom and daddy felt sorry for me because I had such awful hair so they took me in. One day I got up the courage to ask my mother if I'd been adopted. She said, "Where'd you ever get that notion," and I said "Joey told me." That was the first time I saw my nice, nice sister get a whipping. It was sheer delight.*

My sister was an unusual person. She never sought anything for herself but gave herself over to nurturing the whole family. She was always content to bask in any success I enjoyed. She was my strongest supporter and a wonderful friend. She said once, "My sister did not have to be elected by the Diocese of Massachusetts for me to know she's the greatest person on earth." How's that for fierce support?

The Other Side

“Oh, Grandma!”

Douglas: *All of those about whom you speak are on your maternal side; what about your paternal side of the family?*

Harris: *My father’s family, which emanated in Richmond, Virginia, was constituted much the same as my mother’s. Daddy also was one of four brothers with one sister. Because we lived with my maternal grandparents, I saw more of them than my father’s mother and other members of that branch of the family. There was a slavery history on my father’s side of the family as well. His grandmother, Rosa Funn, was a house slave, a seamstress. Before leaving for a trip to Europe, her owners told her that if she was a “good girl” she could get married on their return. Her wedding ring, a delicate band set with three pearls, became my mother’s engagement ring. My mother allowed my sister to “dress up” with it from time to time and eventually it was passed to me because pearls are my birthstone.*

Douglas: *What were the women like on your father’s side of the family? What kind of relationship did you have with them?*

Harris: *Not a very strong one.*

Douglas: *Say more.*

Harris: *My grandmother Harris was a very fair-skinned woman, whom most people, including myself had I not known her, would have assumed was white. In fact, one afternoon I was coming from a piano lesson and I got on the streetcar and sat down next to my father’s mother and I did not speak to her because I didn’t look at her, I just thought I was sitting next to some white woman that I didn’t know. She let me ride four blocks and she said, “Good afternoon, miss.” Scared me to death. And I turned and said, “Oh, Grandma!” You can believe I studied the faces of petite white women with a lot more care after that.*

Douglas: *You’re kidding!*

Harris: *And she was on her way to my house to meet with my maternal grandmother about some organization to which they both belonged. And I was scared to death about what she was going to say.*

One undeniable aspect of slavery is reflected in skin complexion. The fact that slave women had children with slave masters showed up in many fair-skinned African Americans of former generations. And so it was with members of my father's family. One of my father's early jobs was acquired because his employer mistook him for a white person. It was when Daddy refused to buy tickets for a Polish dance and gave his reason, "I'm not Polish, I'm colored," that he lost the job in matter of hours.

Gentle Men

"If nothin's what you ask for, nothin's what you get."

While the women in Barbara's life perhaps had the most influence in shaping her personality, and perhaps were God's hands in making her "fit" to take the hits that would come with being the first woman bishop in the Anglican Communion, the men in her life were no less influential. For to know Barbara—even in all of her womanish feistiness—is to know a gentle spirit and soul that cares deeply for the most vulnerable in our world, one who is as kind in spirit as she is fierce in words. When one hears about the men in Barbara's life, one quickly recognizes where this gentle spirit comes from. It is fitting then that Barbara would be the one to overturn the gendered expectations of a bishop in the Anglican Communion, as in fact those expectations were overturned within her own family. The women in her family were not the demure females that women were expected to be and the men were not the domineering figures that a patriarchal model of gender roles demanded of them.

My grandfather was a delight. He ran a crab house which was really a front for a gambling joint. He served deviled crabs and

hard-shell crabs, but the real action was in the back room. He had a shiny sign up which said, “Jesus Never Fails,” which must have been a great consolation to the gamblers. Grandpop taught us to tap dance, to do the Buck n’ Wing and the Charleston. He fiddled around on the piano, playing songs with strange names like “Big Bertha,” and “Thompson Street.” I doubt whether the words would be appropriate if printed here. He called us his “gandsies” and invented great games the whole family could join in playing.

He did teach me some valuable lessons. For example, he always said you should ask for more than you want. Once I asked him for a penny and that was all I got. “Grandpop, is that all you’re going to give me?” I asked, and he responded, “If you wanted a nickel, you should have asked for a dime. If nothin’s what you ask for, nothin’s what you get.”

Douglas: *One person you don’t talk much about is your father. Tell me about him.*

Harris: *My father was a quiet, loving person but left all the disciplinary aspects of our growing up to my mother—except that if he was in disapproval of something, he would let you know, but the actual meting out of any discipline was kind of left to my mother. I remember announcing something that I wanted to do at age nineteen. He said he didn’t think I should do it. I grandly announced that “I’m as much woman now as I’ll ever be.” He looked at me sadly and said, “If you’re as much woman now as you’ll ever be, then shame on you.”*

My father was a very quiet, unassuming person who deeply loved us but did not have a very forceful role in the household and I suspect a part of that was because he was living under his mother-in-law and father-in-law’s roof and so he was not the master of his own household. While I didn’t understand it then, in retrospect, I suspect that had a lot to do with his quiet, unassuming attitude and behavior.

My father also taught me to play poker and I learned the hard way. At my insistent urging he agreed to explain the rudiments

of the game, told me to put my money on the table and dealt me a hand. He took twenty dollars from me in a matter of minutes and smiling put it in his pocket. “Okay Daddy,” I said, “you can give me my twenty back now.” He replied, “You would not get it back in a real game, so let this be a lesson to you.” He never did return my twenty bucks, nor did I ever play much poker.

Douglas: *When did he pass away? How old were you?*

Harris: *My father died after a series of heart attacks and strokes. He would have a slight stroke and then bounce back: I think there were eleven of them. He died when I was 29, my brother was eighteen and I remember my brother saying, “I’ve lost the best friend that I ever had.” And that left my brother in a household with four women so he promptly enlisted in the air force, which was probably the smartest thing he could do.*

By the time of my father’s death, we had a new rector at our parish church. Our rector emeritus did what today we strongly urge clergy retired from a parish not to do. He acceded to my mother’s request that he conduct and preach the funeral—a huge mistake on my mother’s part. Dear old Father Thomas saw the huge crowd, got excited and preached not one, but two sermons that went on so long we barely had time to get to the cemetery on a Saturday afternoon before the grave diggers left.

Douglas: *And what was the impact of his death on you?*

Harris: *(Long Pause) I was saddened by my father’s death, but I did not feel that a very powerful influence on my life had been lost. And, um, the next year, I got married. While I was a little sorry that my father wasn’t there to see me married, I did not have deep regret about that.*

Douglas: *Is there any particular reason that you didn’t have deep regret about that? Was that because he wasn’t a powerful influence in your life or was it because you didn’t want him to know who you married?*

Harris: *I'm not sure he would have approved of the person I married, my mother certainly didn't, and I think he might have joined her in her sentiment but not perhaps as vocally as she expressed her objections.*

Douglas: *Tell me about your brother.*

Harris: *My brother is 11 years younger than I am, and as my brother came along later and as the first boy child in the entire family, he was pampered and spoiled, so that he didn't have to struggle for anything.*

Douglas: *Ok, so you were . . .*

Harris: *I was part of the spoiling, pampering process . . .*

Douglas: *Yeah, so you were sort of raising him, you grew up not so much as siblings . . .*

Harris: *My sister and I were truly big sisters and we contributed to this process of pampering this first male child in the family. We all doted on my brother. He turned out to be all right despite the fact that he was spoiled. He was a nice kid who developed into a fine man. Even though he is in his early seventies I still think of him as my little brother (as did Joey until her death), and in 2001 Joey and I took a twenty-six hour train ride to celebrate his milestone sixtieth birthday with him in Florida.*

My brother was born in 1941, the first boy in the family. I think for my father he was the first baby boy in the whole world. I remember my father bought an expensive crib for him but wasn't able to keep up the payments on it, so the salesman came to the house to pick it up. Can you imagine someone coming to repossess a crib? My grandmother was sitting on the front porch crocheting. The man said, "Mr. Harris didn't keep up the payments and I'm here to take it back." Muz, as we called my grandmother, said, "It's upstairs in the back bedroom. You go right on up and get it but when you do don't plan on coming past me with it. You just go right on out the

back window.” Like the rich young ruler in the Bible, he turned and went sadly away.

And then there were the endless cousins, Roman Catholics on one side and Baptists on the other. There were Catholics, male and female, whose saint’s name was Mary. Mary Catherine, Mary Priscilla, Mary Harriet, Mary Philip, Mary Francis and Mary Mary, who was known as “Big Mary.” The Baptists were equally interestingly named. Four sisters, Lizzie, Lisa, Lola and “Lunky,” were pretty dramatic and could turn a family death and funeral into a rather raucous and sometimes amusing affair.

I had a favorite cousin who was a good cook. Stockton would come some days and fix pancakes, which was a treat. One day I managed to eat nine. Mother usually sat at the table with me, she didn’t let me eat alone. One day she was busy upstairs and I slipped out and went down the street to the Sheltons, who had eight children. I sent one of the girls, my friend Reba, to my house to eat my lunch while I ate bologna sandwiches and drank lemonade with the Sheltons. When my mother came down and saw Reba eating my lunch she was furious. I, on the other hand, was in seventh heaven because we never had bologna in our house. Besides, anything my mother didn’t like was not good for you and she did not like bologna. Hallelujah anyhow!