

BASTARD FELON SHAMAN

BY J. PAUL BARRETT

January 1, 1996: I performed a wedding last evening. It was my second, the groom's first, and the bride's third. We all seemed to know what we were doing and all went well.

It's extraordinary how good this event makes me feel; every time it crosses my mind I'm inclined to smile — not just at the pleasant images of the wedding ceremony, but also at the thought of how I'd come to be involved — I, an ex-commercial ocean fisherman and newspaperman turned writer, publisher, editor, bookmaker, barely able in my own assessment to merit these somewhat thin titles. Moreover, I, of all unlikely persons — one of Oregon's drug war casualties, forever stigmatized "Felon" and disarmed within the state for having cultivated a small number of relatively innocuous (actually much more beneficial than harmful, according to many experts) but at the time politically incorrect plants for personal use in the early '90s, during "Operation Green Merchant." (which prompted my neighbor to call me "that nice felon next door").

And here I was performing a marriage ceremony! Ha! and calling myself an "agnostic shaman" and signing the Marriage Certificate with the words "Minister/Shaman" after my name, fully authorized by the State of Oregon to perform marriages, or to "solemnize" them, as it is termed by law.

When my mother died in the mid-'70s I received as my legacy a trunk, the contents of which had obviously been ransacked of anything of value, but which nevertheless contained a small cache of personal effects — baby pictures, a few documents, etc. One of the documents was my parents' Marriage Certificate, which was dated more than two months after my birth.

Ha! I thought, I'm a bastard! I loved it.

I called my wife in. "Look, I'm a bastard," I exclaimed gleefully.

"I knew that," she said, deadpan, and returned to what she had been doing.

Now, when I put these three things together, especially in chronological order, I have to laugh: Bastard Felon Shaman. That's me!

Now that you know how the first titles came to me, here's how and why I acquired the all important third:

Tricia and I, after living together more than a year, came to the conclusion in 1972 that, since it seemed quite obvious to us both that we would probably be together for some time, and since there were certain advantages — both economic (income tax) and social (her parents) — to being officially married (our true commitment to one another requiring no license by any government).

Getting the papers at City Hall was no problem, but finding someone to officiate at the wedding ceremony proved difficult. Neither of us was or had ever been affiliated with any church, nor were her parents; but since weddings seem to be traditionally solemnized by some sort of clergyman, we figured we needed one for a few minutes. We picked a name at random from the telephone book and called the first Minister.

"Are you both baptized?" It began like that.

"We don't need or want to be baptized," I told him. "We just want someone to perform a wedding ceremony."

"Well, we don't normally marry people unless they're members of our congregation," he said. "Why don't you attend our services this Sunday? We'd be happy..."

"No thanks," I said.

I looked up another name — a Methodist this time: I'd heard they were liberal — and dialed another number. The fellow sounded friendly, so we visited him at his home. His wife met us at the door and escorted us to the man's bedroom. He was in a wheelchair and hooked up to a dialysis machine. He looked near death to us. We chatted awhile, listening with some sympathy to part of the long story of his extensive medical difficulties. He didn't lay a bunch of dogma on us and said he would perform the wedding ceremony, but he couldn't leave his house and the machine so we would have to be married there.

We thanked him, said we would think about it, and left.

We hadn't realized it would be so difficult to find someone to marry us.

We dialed a few more numbers. Everyone we spoke with seemed to have an agenda. We were supposed to belong, and we didn't.

I looked for a Buddhist monastery. None. Not what Tricia's folks had in mind anyway.



I just wanted some hippie shaman to perform a wedding ceremony in a beautiful meadow, surrounded by a few close friends, wildflowers and butterflies. A flute playing somewhere nearby. I wanted to pass the pipe and the beer & wine around to our guests.

But we had decided to please the parents. So we had to find a minister.

"Babe," I said to Tricia. "I can't find a goddamned #*!@* minister to marry us. I'm sorry." She laughed.

I dialed a few more numbers. I offered money right off. The next Minister apparently needed the \$25, so we agreed to meet him at his church to discuss the details. The Minister turned out to be a Pentecostal, charismatic, Jesus-loving, just short of snake-handling Bible banger who lectured us at length on the importance of believing in his particular knuckle-dragging brand of religion, and me in particular on the misogynistic teachings of St. Paul. It was a two-yard load of utter dogmashit in a one-yard truck, but we endured it so the guy would marry us.

He eventually said the words, but only after preaching a long and completely unwanted sermon about accepting Jesus as our Personal Savior. Hell, I was already accepting a permanent partner.

The Minister had the misfortune of inheriting severe widow's peaks, sharply angular facial features, thin, pursed lips and the general appearance of a gargoyle. The Minister's sinister aspect was made even more demonic in several of the wedding photos by the addition of bright crimson eyes from the flash.

"Look," I said to Tricia. "It's Satan. We were married by the Devil!"

We've been married nearly 25 years, and we seem to be working on another quarter-century. Apparently it matters little who performs the wedding ceremony. The success of this union certainly has nothing to do with the prenuptial counseling session, which left both of us disgusted.

It seemed a shame that two people who wanted to get married would have such difficulty finding someone to perform a simple ceremony with having to endure a religious sales pitch.

However, the deed having been officially and 'spiritually' accomplished I gave hardly a thought to the subject of weddings again for more than two decades — until the Spring of 1991.

I was listening to the radio in my office. A man named Kirby Hensley was being interviewed. I'd heard the name many years before. In the '60s Hensley formed the Universal Life Church, incorporating under California and federal laws as a non-profit religious organization — exempt from taxes.

The Rev. Hensley would ordain anyone anywhere in return for a small 'donation' to the Church. In other words, he sold ministerial credentials: Doctor of Divinity diplomas, Ph.D.'s in Religion, Certificates of Sainthood, just above any title one could think of. These personalized documents made great gifts and Hensley apparently sold tons of them — but a few folks actually tried to avoid taxes by filing as exempt religious sects and the IRS eventually came down on them with both jack boots. (Draft resisters tried to avoid the Vietnam War the same way.)

The Rev. Hensley continued to send out diplomas and was still doing it well into his 80s. He spoke with a twinkle in his eye but with just enough of an edge of seriousness and irrefutable logic to make perfect sense, at least to me. People can be spiritual without being religious, he said. Why were agnostics denied equal favor for refusing on moral grounds to profess to know something they could not possibly know? I liked him. He made sense. He had an excellent sense of humor.

I decided to write to him and send him a copy of my first book of sea stories (*Of Dolphins & Dead Sailors*). In my letter I said I thought the book might be worth at least a Ph.D., and that it could be considered to be my doctoral dissertation.

A week later I had a diploma from the Universal Life Church: 'Doctor of Philosophy in Religion'. My scarecrow diploma, I call it, after Dorothy's talented but uncredentialed and diffident straw pal in *The Wizard of Oz*.

I have it on my wall, and I always explain to visitors how I came by it. It looks great there, and I often smile whenever my glance happens on it — especially now that inside the frame there is a Clatsop County Registration Seal, Book 794 Page 987, recorded Sept. 23, 1992 at 14:45 and given Number 927645. In my shaman file is the receipt for \$5, bearing the words "Authorization to solemnize," signed by County Clerk Lori D. Davidson.

I walked out of the county courthouse thinking, "I can marry people."

So I did. On October 15, 1992 I performed my first wedding. The bride, of Native American heritage, was beautiful. Her sister consecrated the ground in the Tribal fashion. There was music, laughter, great food.

The three of us had gone over just how the ceremony would be conducted, what words would be said. It was completely customized. It was exactly what they wanted.

It was a wonderful experience for me. I decided I would marry anyone who asked me — and that, as a point of honor, spirituality and principle, I would never charge for this small service.

A few months after the wedding, the friend who had set it up dropped by my home.

"I'm dying of cancer," he told me. "Will you say a few words at my funeral?"

Of course I said yes.

A few months after that I officiated at another wedding and funeral, and (since it was within my authority) also ordained a few new ULC ministers and performed a couple of baptisms, all non-secular yet spiritually oriented.

And that's how I became an agnostic shaman and why I will gladly perform non-religious but spiritual ceremonies for anyone, regardless of race, faith or sexual orientation.

J. Paul Barrett lives, writes and publishes in Astoria. His latest book, *I'll Be Home In Half An Hour* (published by his own Gaff Press) is currently on sale.

I'LL BE HOME
IN HALF-AN-HOUR



John Paul Barrett

author of SEA STORIES

AM I NOT MY BROTHER'S KEEPER?

(FOR ALL THOSE WHO DISMANTLED TROJAN)

In terms of their own self importance
can we not see
that the trade off for blindness
becomes what we inherit in ourselves

greed bound in the genetics of exposure
procreating generations malformed
transferring ideology into biology
on the cutting floor of evolution

and in all the king's procession
walks an emperor without any clothes
to which a child points a finger
at an arrogance too great to ask

am I not my brother's keeper?

~LLOYD K. MARBET



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