



Photo by Kate Philbrick

Barbara Babkirk:

Religion, Feminism and Meaningful Work

Part of “Making Change Happen: Women Creating a Better Maine”

Written by Janice Rogers

Barbara Babkirk began her feminist journey with the Ursuline Sisters at Mount Merici Academy, a parochial school for girls in Waterville, Maine. While attending the school from kindergarten through high school, she found two Roman Catholic nuns who took her under their wing. “They showered me with love and kindness, and expected only wonderful things of me,” she says, “and they helped me to see that there was more to life than what was in front of me.” What’s more, periodically throughout Babkirk’s life, religion and spirituality would open her eyes to the empowerment of women.

Babkirk earned her bachelor’s degree in French at the University of Maine at Orono, then moved to

Boston after graduation. Raised as a Catholic, she then discovered the feminist spiritual movement, which brought to light for her an entirely different paradigm about deity, authority and women’s roles in the church and elsewhere. The movement opened her eyes and heart to the inequity women face and the consequences they experience as a result—from domestic violence to lower wages. As a result of these experiences, Babkirk felt called to volunteer for Caring Unlimited, which assists victims of domestic violence, and where she eventually served as board president.

In Boston, Babkirk worked for the YMCA, running an internship program for college students who needed more help than she

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could provide given the extent of her training. So she decided to pursue a master's in counseling at the University of New Hampshire, where she met a woman who would become her friend and mentor. Marcia McCann had just completed her doctorate in women's career development, and she encouraged Babkirk to focus her counseling on work and vocation. When McCann fell ill with leukemia, Babkirk was hired to replace her mentor as UNH's assistant

director of career planning and placement. In 1977, Babkirk returned to Maine, taking a similar position at Bowdoin College.

About 10 years later, she had the opportunity to live in France for nine months with her daughter and husband. The time away, coupled with visits to

sacred sites dedicated to the Goddess, the Divine Mother, prompted Babkirk to realize that she was empowered to shape her own future and work in a way that fit her best. In 1988, Babkirk left Bowdoin and started her own career counseling practice, Heart at Work (www.barbarababkirk.com). Babkirk counsels both men and women, but she says the genders have very different issues when it comes to making choices about work. In particular, women feel more conflicted about maintaining work-life balance. "Men just don't have the same angst," she says. "Women are tormented by their choices; whether they're at home with their kids or at work, they feel criticized for their decision."

Babkirk says women typically are the "holders of the story" of the family – the calendar, the shopping, the everyday needs. "It's a lot of work – and it can

make women very tired – but they just take for granted that they need to do it." Babkirk helps female clients see how much value they bring to their families, to the workplace and to the external world – and she validates the choices they've made.

Babkirk began volunteering for the Maine Women's Fund after she returned to Maine; she started on the Development Committee and served as board president from 2002 - 2004. Now she leads Women Standing Together, which focuses on economic development and support for female entrepreneurs. According to Babkirk, the Fund provides "a wonderful way to help women succeed in the world."

Today, much of Babkirk's focus at Heart At Work is on counseling people in the second half of life, facing challenges such as career transitions, finding meaning through work and defining and planning for life in retirement. Babkirk feels fortunate to help people find ways to contribute that are satisfying and have meaning to them. "If you can align your values with your work, you can put your best self forward and find peace in your heart," Babkirk says. "And if one individual has peace, it can't help but have a positive ripple effect on others."



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