

Be a Bard

Start Down an Ancient Path

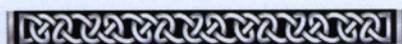
By Jane Valencia

Are you fascinated by myth, legend, folklore, stories, or poetry and verse of any kind? Do you carry within you a sense of legacy—ideals from the past or visions for the future—which you yearn to pass along to the current or future generations? Do you love the idea of mixing art forms and interests into your offerings with the harp? Are you intensely curious? Do you enjoy learning new skills, and/or gathering certain kinds of knowledge? Do you wish magic was real or know that in some way it is?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, then following a bardic path may be for you! In this article, we'll dip into the wellspring of bardic tradition. We'll look at a few aspects of bardic nature and how you might draw from your own fountain of knowledge and inspiration to grow as a bard or to infuse some "bardic nature" into your expression as a harper. Finally, we'll enjoy an interview with a 21st century bard within our own folk harp community: Barra Jacob-McDowell, also known as Barra the Bard.

Please note that your "flavor" and style as a bard or as a bard-inspired harper may vary widely from what is presented in this introductory article. The bardic path can draw from any number of traditions, and from a vast array of knowledge and/or artistic streams. Ultimately the 21st century bardic path is an expression of your unique creative nature—your gifts, experiences, and passions.

Are you intrigued by any of the notions listed above? Read on!



Jane Valencia (right) is a bardic harper and storyteller, author/illustrator, and wilderness instructor who enchants young and old alike with her tales, music, art, and "greenwood secrets" (ways to discover and adventure in nature's magic). She plays and teaches both wire- and nylon-strung harp. She has several CDs, including three with Debra Knodel as the Celtic harp duo Spookytree (formerly Knodel & Valencia). Jane's publications include a children's fantasy novel, a kids herbal comic, and numerous blog posts and articles. Find out more at her website: ForestHalls.org

What is a Bard?

Here are a few of the quotes that simmer in my own cauldron of bardic inspiration:

"The bards of old inhabited a magic reality of their own making, and they made of their lives a fairy tale. They could not be caged by possibilities, nor could they be bought. Poetic insight is more important in our lives than ever in this computerized, industrialized age. We desperately need people who are passionately alive in an enchanted reality, cohabited by the spirits, the ancestors, and the gods."
— Robin Williamson, forward to *The Bardic Source Book*, ed. John Matthews.

"We are mythic by nature. We find the subtle symbolic ground hidden in ourselves. Myth is the second nature of the world."



Nature with its rhythm, cyclical activity ... is the first."
– Michael Meade, *Entering Mythic Territory: Healing and the Bestowing Self*. Audio CDs.

One could write a dissertation about bards and bardic tradition. Here is my three paragraph "nutshell" version:

The bard—one who uses poetic words, song, and music, often with a harp or other accompanying instrument—was one who was the "rememberer of the tribe," the voice of the culture, the voice of the divine, and the voice of the land. The Celtic harp tradition goes back to bardic storytelling and the lore that surrounds the archetype of the bard in cultures that relied on aural tradition to pass along their history, genealogy, and the traditions and values of their people.

In a mythical sense, the bard wove a spell with his or her words, bearing, and music that bound the people into "one mind"—a mind that reached back through generations into history and legend, and which reached forward for generations to come. The bard rallied warriors into battle with stirring and heroic poetry and music. Bards celebrated the heroic and noble roots of the people. The legendary bard might also express magical abilities, as Taliesin did when, as the boy Gwion Bach, he shape-shifted from one animal to another in his attempt to escape the sorceress Ceridwen. Having just accidentally consumed three drops of inspiration from her cauldron, he had become transformed with magical wisdom. Later in the legend, and now as an accomplished bard, Taliesin magically reduced a court of royal bards to make only nonsense sounds ("blerum, blerum") instead of magnificent poetry to their king.

The historical Celtic bard was a court poet, crafting praise-poems and elegies in service to their chieftain or lord. The 6th century bard Aneirin, for instance, composed a series of elegies honoring the fallen warriors in his Brythonic/Old Welsh poem known as "Y Goddodin." Bardic schools, which existed from at least the 1st century C.E. (and likely far earlier) to the mid-17th century trained, poets, historians, judges, and doctors. The poetic craft was integral to transmitting these streams of knowledge and tradition. Historical Celtic bardic tradition is certainly worth exploring! I include some references at the end of this article to help send you on that trail. Barra the Bard's legacy (as you'll discover) is directly connected to this storytelling and bardic tradition.

Here in the 21st century, bards continue today to serve as voices for the community, for the land, for whatever it is they hold dear. They use storytelling, song, poetry, music, and whatever creative magic inspires them to engage their audience. Their "mixed media" approach creates an atmosphere of the possible and the wondrous that may, it is hoped, transform the listener even in a small way. That said, a bard doesn't always have to mix artistry—say, the spoken word with harp music. Understanding and intending your art to express the rich legacy of the bard can and does stand on its own.

With all the possibilities open to *being a bard*, it can be a surprisingly simple step to begin weaving bardic nature into your harp artistry.



Photo: Barra the Bard

Barra the Bard / Barra Jacob-McDowell is a storyteller, singer, harper, writer, poet, blogger, and workshop leader. Based in Pittsburgh, PA, she has performed up and down the Eastern U.S. She performs solo and with Linda McNair as half of ClarSeannachie; their motto is: "Tales with Celtic harp." Barra offers traditional tales, legends, myths and poetry from the Celtic lands of Scotland, Ireland, Wales, to all ages and in an assortment of venues. Her longest-running and favorite gig is as the official seannachie at the Ligonier Highland Games; this September will be her 25th consecutive year there. Usually telling at least an hour, often more, Barra has only ever repeated one story one time, by request there in 24 years. She learned a LOT of Scottish tales from her granny! Barra's been writing a column on Scottish folktales and folklore for Kilt & Harp since 2000. Visit her website at www.barrabard.com, and her blog, <http://adventuresinbarding.blogspot.com>. She also does Middle-earth fanfiction as "Barrabard" at www.tolkienfanfiction.com.



Photo: Barra at first paid gig in 1989

Cultivate Your Bardic Nature

These days the bardic path is many-textured. Each bard will wear his or her mantle differently, based on the legacies from which they draw, their life journeys and passions, and their own unique way of being in the world. To offer yourself as a bard is to step down the path of self-knowledge and mystery!

A bard of old, it is said, trained for 12 years (at least). To cultivate your bardic nature, consider that your whole life, plus interests and yearnings have been a kind of training ground for you. You already have your own full-to-the-brim basket of tradition and creativity from which to draw.

Let's start with a few bardic "essentials." How do they manifest in your life right now? You might want to start notebooks or files on each of these topics, and add to your lists as they occur to you (which they will, once you start looking for examples of these "bardic arts" in your life). For now, just set a timer for two minutes for each topic and write as much as you can:

1. Storytelling

Many bards (today and in the past) tell stories. Consider, too, that we humans are born storytellers. We tell stories about our day to one another, about what's going on in our lives, and situations that inspire or infuriate us. Jot down the following:

- stories you loved as a kid
- stories (or books or movies or ...) you love now
- stories you tell or wish you could tell

Consider all the parables, fables, fairy tales, religious stories, myths, legends, biographies, histories and more that have ever shone brightly in your mind and heart. Feel free to note "bundles" of any story "collection" you know. For example, if, as a child, you devoured all of Andrew Lang's Fairy Book collections, just note: "Andrew Lang's Fairy Books". If you loved going to bed reading a dictionary of Greek gods and goddesses, note that, too. It is said that bards learned hundreds of stories in their training. Likely you know a fair number already, by virtue of being human! If you don't know them by heart, you at least know of a bunch with fondness. Pay particular attention to your favorites!

2. Poetry

Have you ever had to memorize a poem? What poems or poets do you enjoy? Have you written any poems? Are there types of poems (haiku, for instance) that you'd be interested in getting to know more deeply or to write yourself? Make notes on all of the above

3. Songs and music

List songs you know or would like to know. List songs you play on the harp or wish you could.

4. Folklore, proverbs, tradition, wisdom ways and sayings

This may be hard to notate! Consider what lore (concerning the seasons, for example) or wisdom ways you personally know about and draw upon. Here are some examples:

- A saying—Ma, in Laura Ingalls Wilder's books, proclaimed that each day had its own work: "Wash on Monday, Iron on Tuesday"
- Folklore and wisdom say: Eagles with their keen vision are symbols of new vision or a high perspective.
- Another example of folk wisdom/tradition: The time of year around Halloween is related cross-culturally with honoring the ancestors.
... And so on.

5. What special knowledge do you have? Skills?

I myself am an herbalist, know "bird language", and am skilled in "coyote mentoring"—an "invisible" education style used in guiding children and adults into nature awareness. I can also play the oboe and clarinet, though I don't currently own either instrument. I can flex my hands in unusual ways. How about you? What are examples of special knowledge and skills that you have? How about quirky abilities?

6. What are you passionate about? What do you think is worth preserving for future generations? What would you like to change for the future?

I invite you to entertain the notion that to cultivate one's bardic nature is to understand what is meaningful to you, what sets you on fire. What kind of "magical reality" do you long to enjoy in the world, long to experience or to share

with others in some fashion?

Consider your lists as the beginning of your one-of-a-kind bardic source book. Even if you don't know your stories, poetry, and lore "by heart," you can certainly follow up on fixing that knowledge within you to your satisfaction or at least writing the details down on cards and referring to them as you wish or need. Your lists will also highlight your interests and even point to potential styles of performance for yourself if you choose to take on a public mantle of "bard"!

In any case, with the beginnings of your personal source book, you are on the path of discovery of just who your bardic self is though I warn you: you'll never fully know who you are as a bard!

To quickly dive into bardic expression try this:

1. Review your list of stories. Choose a very short tale or an excerpt of a story that you really do know by heart. Imagine the story as if it's happening right now in the room you are in. Envision everything as if you can hear, see, smell, touch, feel, even taste, what's going on.





Photos: Barra "With Wee Fox Harpling, 1997," at "Tellabration Concert" and with Linda McNair as "ClarSeanachie"

2. Review your list of songs and music. Find a song or tune that is thematically related to your tale. If you don't know the piece well (can't really play it, don't know all the verses) that's okay. A phrase of the song or tune will do.

3. Take a moment to feel your feet on the ground and to breathe deeply. Imagine yourself as part of a lineage of storytellers that goes back to the very beginnings. Imagine too that the mantle of a bard (whatever that might look or feel like to you!) is here before you. What might it feel like to place it on your shoulders?

4. Sing or play a phrase of music. Tell your story as if it is happening right now, in the area around you. At the end of your story, close with that same phrase of music. Take a long moment to enjoy the special silence that follows a playing or a telling.

Congratulations! You've just offered an expression of bardic artistry! Next time you might try interweaving a snippet of a favorite poem, or expanding on the world of your story in some way, or using music to underscore certain actions in your tale. You might open your story with the A part of the tune, and close with the B part, or even with the whole tune. (Thank you for this suggestion, Barra!) But what you have done right now is at the heart of being a bard: **creating magic** while rooting yourself in legacy.

Without further ado, let's switch to Part 2 of this article: an interview with Barra the Bard! I hope you enjoy her reflections on what it is to be a bard as much as I do!

Bardic Legacy: Here is Barra's story:

People often ask me "What to you, is a bard? How does a bard differ from a storyteller, or is there a difference?" Well, there's the Merriam-Webster definition:

"1a : a tribal poet-singer skilled in composing and reciting verses on heroes and their deeds

b : a composer, singer, or declaimer of epic or heroic verse

2: poet."

But that's inadequate and in fact, not quite accurate.

I was very lucky; I was born into a family in which my maternal grandmother, Abigail Jones Dangler, was (we thought) the tail end of a long line of bards, both Welsh and Scottish. Historically, a bard was part of the intelligentsia in Celtic lands, orally trained to be a genealogist, historian, newsbringer, teacher, and entertainer. Some were poets, musicians and/or teachers. As part of an oral tradition, there were no writers, unlike now; one aspect in which being a bard has evolved. The training was long and rigorous, three times seven years to reach the highest level. Obviously, modern bards don't have the same training—and frankly, I'm glad that I've never taken a final exam that included being almost submerged in a stone trough of water while having to compose a work in an assigned mode/meter/subject! Although, naturally, one understands it was partly a symbolic rebirth into that calling. My modern definition which you would see on my website, www.barrabard.com, is:

Bard (n.)—one who is a performer, tradition-bearer, historian, teacher, writer and newsbringer.

In my opinion, a bard differs from a storyteller in that they can combine other media; in my case, singing, harping, poetry, blogging, leading workshops/classes and writing fiction. When



I do a workshop on combining storytelling and music, I'm a storyteller; when I do one on combining harping and telling, I'm proud to call myself a harpteller.

I know tellers who sing or play an instrument or instruments, and harpers who tell stories, but not all of them are bards. It's partly a mindset, seeing oneself as part of that history, and caring deeply about passing it on. In a way, it's trying to create an organic whole. For example, if I'm telling a traditional tale about love, I'll marry it to a traditional tune, not a contemporary pop song. But if I'm doing a Valentine's Day program in which I include a story about a girl meeting a pen-pal WWII soldier for the first time, I'd probably use a 40's song. Giving background information about a composer is partly bardic, but not entirely. Faith Stenning (my harp teacher) painstakingly researched the background of tunes for her programs—but was so shy and ill-at-ease in imparting that information, unlike the ease with which she sang and played, that I wouldn't call her a bard; and she never considered herself in that light. In my opinion, the best bards and harptellers today are people like Patrick Ball and Robin Williamson, and there are others too, including Jane. Not all bards are storytellers or harpers; not all harpers and storytellers are bards.

My road to becoming a bard has been almost lifelong, thanks to my early training. As a very solitary child, I played word games with lonely elderly neighbors, and acted out my current favorite story with my dolls. I've been performing as a bard in some ways since I was 12, when I began being published as a poet. More officially, I date it as beginning in 1989, when I finally embraced my girlhood dream of "going around the countryside entertaining

people" (although I haven't gotten as far as an organized tour yet, one of my big goals). For my performing name, well, my name is Barra Jacob-McDowell, which people constantly get wrong on one or all three parts! My husband, John McDowell, suggested I use "Barra the Bard" and I liked its brevity and alliteration. Over the years, I think it's become a capsule description of what I do, although I find that people can still spell it wrong!

Since I knew all these terrific tales, myths and legends from Granny, I started out concentrating on telling Scottish and Welsh tales. John is Scots-Irish, and asked me to learn a few Irish stories. Since I was halfway to being a Celtic teller, I added some Cornish, Manx and Breton ones. Living in Pittsburgh, which is a city of many ethnic neighborhoods, I had joined StorySwap, now Pittsburgh's storytelling guild, and the others were an interesting mix of styles and specialties, so I began doing multicultural programs. Gradually I began adding in a few personal/family tales, historical ones (most of my family are amateur historians; professionally my brother is very specialized in his field), ghost stories, some of my own, and a very few literary adaptations because it's so hard to get author permission if it's not in the public domain.

Granny was blind for 40 years, and her decision when I was three that I was going to be her "eyes" when she came for her annual two-month visit, meant that she began giving me wonderful training for a future writer and bard, along with her teaching me to read that summer. A few years later, she initiated me into making a bed from scratch one hot summer morning. "Dae it right or dinna dae it at a'!" she said over and over and over, ruthlessly ripping back the covers after her fingers unerringly found the

tinest wrinkle or the least millimeter the bedspread was askew. By lunchtime, I could do it quickly and easily, four times in a row. As far as she was concerned, there was only one way to do it. Having moved to western PA many years ago, a succession of college roommates and friends showed me that there's at least one other way. Over time I've modified the method I use, doing this now without much thought in about five minutes as I'm sure you do, too. That also applies to being a bard! Thanks to my Granny, if I hear a tale I like, if I tell the bones of it in 24 hours (usually to John, who's very patient about this!), then I've got it. When I skim through a story I want to learn in a collection or anthology, I re-read it, make a few notes, and tell it inside of 24 hours, then it's in my repertoire, too.

I love living in a city with excellent public and university libraries, as well as using the Internet and learning stories from people in person. When I began harping and telling 26 years ago, I estimated that my repertoire was over 5,000 stories, folktales, fairytales, legends, and myths, and of course I've added to that since. Naturally, I don't tell all of those! Some I love and tell often, especially if they fit into more than one program; some I'm polishing up, or haven't found the right time to tell them yet; some I love but they aren't right for me for various reasons, and some I thought I'd like but don't after all.... And some I like but choose not to tell.

I knew from the outset that I wanted to combine telling and harping, but held myself back for a loooong time and then began inching into it very gingerly and carefully. Although I've been singing all my life, I was very timid about singing solo. The next step was playing my harp and telling—and quite honestly, I'm a much better teller than a harper, being only intermediate level. It took 20 years to get there from beginner! I'm 65 now, and I estimate I'll probably be in my 80s or 90s before I can consider myself advanced at the rate I'm going. On the other hand, nobody can accuse me of rushing!

I love doing research, I love putting together and performing programs, and I try to be contagious with my delight and love of these wonderful stories, honed for centuries by others. Traditional tales often do contain life lessons, and the best ones are many-layered. I can tell a story for years and suddenly see a new facet of it! They are the jewels I give to any who can see their true calling. I don't tell clan feud tales, because Scots at festivals, especially those who may have had a few drams, don't need to have old grudges brought to mind. The older I get and the more I embrace my own cronehood, the more I'm growing fond of wisdom tales and stories in which there are helpers at the crossroads for questors to meet. That said, I have favorites in the various genres I tell, which change over time but the story has to catch the listener's interest. I don't tell stories with stated morals, because many find that patronizing and/or a turnoff. Barra's Bardic Rule of Storytelling, #1 is: you have to love, or at least like, the story you're telling, because the audience will pick up on it if you don't, and if you don't care, why should they?

I want to entertain. I want to instruct, if it's a teaching or wisdom tale, although I seldom state that. And I certainly want others to re-tell the traditional tales, so they live on. As far as my personal/

family tales and my own created fiction and poems, I feel strongly that they should be credited to me, if I give permission for someone else to tell them under certain conditions so I maintain control.

Most people don't have an idea about what a bard is so we have to educate them. All the time! After all, most people think I'm a harpist, and I'm not—and most people, when I say I'm a storyteller, ask if I read stories in schools and/or libraries. No, I tell them, I tell stories in the traditional manner, from memory and the heart and sometimes the gut. I don't memorize the stories, unless they contain a riddle, a rhyme, or a poem. I do usually try to find and blend more than one version.

If a harper is interested in setting off down the bardic path they need to be excited by and expect change on whatever aspect of this path they choose, might take. It may not be as immersive as the way I taught myself to write, or again, it might be on some other facet. Bardic roots are in emotion as well as the intellect, and (what many humans struggle with) balance. One of my novel protagonists, in summing up his ideals, says, "Nobility, service, humility, honor, as well as kindness, generosity, courtesy, learning, and balance: these are the values I try to enact." The pursuit is ongoing and evolving, because to cease learning is to begin to die as an artist/bard/person.

You will find this journey to be fun, hard, scary, joyful, exciting, tedious, awful and awe-filled, with detours, dead ends and unexpected summits of vistas wider than you ever imagined. You will travel far, and far, and farther yet, through time and space and experience. Some things will change, including you, but the essence is eternal and unchanging. It will bring you pain and joy and other emotions to give, because you can't just hoard the knowledge; it must be shared as part of the cycle. "For seven years, a student; then seven years practicing; and seven years teaching makes a bard," was a sentence I heard many times. Can you be a bard of bed-making? My grandmother was, as well as a

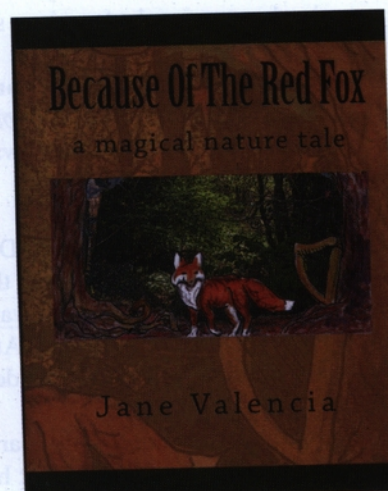
bard in harping and storytelling

and in passing to me part of the rich heritage given to her from her grandparents. I have no living children, so I pass it on to those I can. There is so much to tell that it's hard to be succinct, which is why I'm talking to Jane about collaborating on a bardic book. I also love hearing about others' journeys; so my contact information is on the next page.

Photos opposite page left and this page right:

Jane Valencia offers harp, story, and song at a local farmer's market.

Jane's children's contemporary fantasy novel is threaded with medieval tales and language, Celtic lore, songs, bad puns, magical creatures, and mythic beings. Two harps—a double-strung and a wire-strung—appear in the book as well.



Find out more about bards:

"What Is A Bard?" Adapted from *Druid Mysteries* by Philip Carr-Gomm <http://www.druidry.org/druid-way/what-druidry/what-druidism/what-bard>

For information on Irish bardic poetry and bardic schools:

"Bardic Poetry" Dónall Ó Baoill, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/plantation/bardic/index.shtml>

Bardic tales and stories:

"Aneirin and Taliesin: poets of the old north" by Phil Carradice <http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/wales/entries/179daa23-8adf-3c10-93b8-bb597ed30278>

"An American Harper In Wales" by Jane Valencia, originally published in the *Folk Harp Journal*, Issue No. 97, Fall 1997. This article chronicles Jane's return as her "bardic self." You can read the article at: <http://www.eldalamberon.com/jane.html>

Audio CDs and books by storyteller and mythologist Michael Meade. <http://mosaicvoices.org>

The Bardic Source Book: Inspirational Legacy and Teachings of the Ancient Celts, ed. John Matthews. This book is readily available via the internet.

About storytelling

The National Storytelling Network, <http://www.storynet.org/>, has a wealth of information and an international community offering discussions about events, tips, ethics, historical origins of some tales, suggestions about thematic stories, and more. WARNING: Storytellers are wordy!

The Library of Congress has a Folk-Life Center that is a vast resource in itself at <http://www.loc.gov/folklife/>. It is possible, as Barra has done twice, to become a researcher there.

Some governments are designating some of their tradition-carriers as national treasures. One of Barra's heroes, the Scottish Traveler, Duncan Williamson, was so honored before his death a few years ago, for his contributions in passing on the cultural traditions, way of life, stories and songs of an ethnic group that existed from the 1600s until the mid-20th century. It could be said that Pete Seeger was a bard in a uniquely American sense.

Want to become a bard? Check out:

The Bardic Handbook: The Complete Manual for the Twenty-first Century Bard by Kevan Manwaring is a yearlong self-study bardic training program.

The Order of Bards, Ovates, and Druids <http://www.druidry.org> offers a distance learning course that introduces concepts and practices of the druidic path by way of nurturing your creative expression via the role of a bard. At the end of the first level of study, the Bardic Grade, you are indeed a bard!

... and definitely connect with Barra the Bard at: <http://www.barrabard.com> or Jane Valencia, at: <http://www.foresthalls.org>

Stella Benson (1947 - 2014)



Estella (Stella) Benson passed away on July 27, 2014 in Bellingham, Washington. Stella is survived by her husband, Randall, two sisters, five children and ten grandchildren. Donations can be made in Stella's memory to Peacehealth St. Joseph's Medical Center in Bellingham Washington Stella Benson Harp Therapy Fund.

Stella was the Founder and Director of the International Healing Musician's Program, former executive director for the Music for Healing and Transition Program, and past Chair of the National Standards Board for Therapeutic Musician, Beginning her healing music journey in 1992, Ms. Benson has provided healing music services to many patients, their families and loved ones.

A pioneer in promoting healing music, her healing music recordings, educational books, and her international on-line program have proven to be invaluable to musicians, patients, and healthcare providers internationally.