

The Courage to Act

Review of *Sounds from the Heart: Learning to Listen to Girls*, by Maureen Barbieri, foreword by Myra Sadker, Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1995, 261 pages.

Maureen Barbieri taught seventh-grade English at the Laurel School, the private girls school in Ohio at which Carol Gilligan and her colleagues did the research that led to the book *Meeting at the Crossroads*. Barbieri arrived just as this research was in full swing, and it clearly influenced the way she taught, challenging her to question herself and her teaching practices. *Sounds from the Heart* is Barbieri's account of that year and, briefly, of the following year at a public, co-ed school.

Barbieri's summaries of the Laurel-Harvard research will feel familiar to NMN readers. Her descriptions of her students' behavior are interesting and perceptive (as are the girls' writing samples), but if they were all *Sounds from the Heart* had to offer I might not recommend it as highly as I do. For me, the most interesting parts of the book are when Barbieri's efforts to act on Gilligan's research conflict with what her students have been led by their previous schooling to expect. This is where I think this book adds something new to the discussion; this is where I think Barbieri has something to teach us.

Here's one example. From the start, Barbieri is aware that the Laurel girls are good at meeting others' expectations and that doing so is the key to succeeding at such a school. "They know the drill," Barbieri says. "Figure out what it takes to get an A in this class: Exactly what does this teacher want?" What *this* teacher wanted, however, was to help the girls discover their own reasons for reading and writing. You can see the conflict right away. The students and teacher were in a sense working at cross-purposes at first. Barbieri wanted the girls to try what Natalie Goldberg calls "writing practice," a form of regular freewriting in which the writer doesn't censor her thoughts or worry about the finished product. Her goal was to help the girls discover what they really thought, and it's easy to see how this goal grew out of her understanding of the dangers of "losing voice" to which the Harvard research had introduced her.

Meanwhile, however, the girls weren't sure about the value of writing practice. "Exactly what is the purpose of it?" one of them wanted to know. Here was a teacher at her own kind of crossroads. She had conceived of an assignment that she believed would help her students learn to listen to their own voices and work toward their own goals, but at the moment, *that* goal was hers, not theirs. I find this paradox quite compelling. When is it all right to say to someone else, "Trust me, this will be a good idea," and when have we not yet earned the right to ask for that trust? When would such a comment feel more like manipulation than like true understanding?

I know that in my own experience, I usually wait until I know a girl fairly well, or even very well, before I dare to get prescriptive, to say, "This is what I think you need to do now." I too have talked about writing practice (or something like it), or about writing regularly, or about the difference between drafts and finished pieces. But when I talk about these things, it's generally with girls who have already recognized that they're too concerned with pleasing others or with getting it right the first time. In other words, they see a problem and are asking about ideas for a solution. In Barbieri's situation, she perceived a

problem that the girls in a sense could not see, which made her dilemma sharper than mine. What to do in such a situation: help the girls see the problem first, so that any suggestions she made (such as the idea for writing practice) would make sense to them? Or ask them to trust her and do the assignment even without understanding its purpose, believing that in time they would come to understand?

On balance, I end up thinking that Barbieri did the right thing, within her context, because she did it with sensitivity, because the girls do seem to have come relatively quickly to using writing practice to free up their writing and their thoughts, and because Barbieri shared her own freewriting with her students, proving that she truly meant it when she said it was a valuable exercise. Still, I think this business of guessing what others need or would benefit from always needs to be handled with delicacy and tact. Particularly when we're concerned about helping girls listen to themselves and work toward their own goals, I think we need to make sure we aren't unintentionally imposing the precise opposite along the way. I'm interested in considering how to involve girls even more thoroughly in the process when these situations arise. What if, for example, Barbieri had talked even more openly with her students about her concerns and her perception that they were overly focused on what others wanted? What if she had tried to help them see the problem before proposing a solution? (Perhaps she'd argue that they couldn't have seen yet. This too seems a valid point and is part of what makes this issue so tricky.)

In another case, Barbieri's efforts to act on what she believed conflicted so strongly with the school's usual practices that she went so far as to ask for changes on the students' behalf. This is where I think the book is especially important. "I wanted them to get to know themselves better and they wanted to get an A," Barbieri explains, referring again to the challenge of trying to act, within a school setting, on what the research about adolescent girls has told us. Barbieri tells us that she wanted her classroom to be an oasis, a respite from the usual grade pressure, and that she wanted her students to discover a true love for reading and writing. I understand why this caring teacher wanted her students to love the subject for its own sake, but I also understand why the girls wanted those A's. The girls' attitudes didn't spring from nowhere, after all, and they'd learned, correctly, what were the keys to success as they understood it. It used to trouble me, as a student, that the very teachers who *gave* grades and exams then begged their students not to place so much emphasis on them. The phrase "actions speak louder than words" always seemed apt to me at such times, and I wanted to say, "If you don't want us to focus on exams and grades, help make it so that we don't have to."

That's why the highlight of *Sounds from the Heart*, for me, is the way that Barbieri backs up her words with action and gets the right *not* to grade to her students. Instead, the students use portfolio assessment, keeping track of their work and writing letters to their teacher and their parents describing what they feel they've learned. This experiment, Barbieri reports, "challenged the girls to go beyond their perceptions of anyone's expectations. They read and wrote for their own purposes and, freed from seeing their efforts reduced to a single letter grade, they pushed themselves in new directions. ... Most importantly, our classroom community took on a new texture, one of greater trust and apprenticeship, and my relationship with them flourished."

In other words, things happened when Barbieri made an external change that hadn't happened when she had merely talked about heeding one's own voice or writing for one's own purposes. At Laurel, Barbieri had a great deal of support for this no-grade experiment. When she later went to teach at a more traditional co-ed public school and wanted to try the same experiment, she had to work harder for the right to do it. After talking over the idea with her students ("We hate exams,' they admitted, though they weren't sure how portfolio assessment would work"), she went to the administration on their behalf. "Over some protests from other faculty members," she reports, "we were given the administration's blessing to go ahead with our plan."

If, as many have suggested, it takes courage for a girl to stand up for what she believes in and risk being criticized or even ostracized, so does it take courage for a teacher, and perhaps especially a female teacher, to do the same. Yet acting on what we know about the conditions under which girls (or, sometimes, any students) best learn can call for this kind of courage. Yes, it was easier for Barbieri to stand up for herself and to ask for change on her students' behalf than it will be for other teachers in less supportive or innovative situations. All the more reason for those who can do it to do it first, so that others might more easily follow. Courage means not just listening but also acting on what we hear.

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