

Helen Collins Sitler

Writing Like a Good Girl

In a montage of genres, Helen Collins Sitler illuminates the subtle yet powerful, often detrimental messages we send to girls that silence their public and private voices and diminish their opportunities to question and learn.

I. Initiation

“Writing was a way to capture speech, to hold onto it, keep it close. And so I wrote down bits and pieces of conversations, confessing in cheap diaries . . . expressing the intensity of my sorrow, the anguish of speech—for I was always saying the wrong thing, asking the wrong questions. . . . The fear of exposure, the fear that one’s deepest emotions and innermost thoughts will be dismissed as mere nonsense, felt by so many young girls keeping diaries, holding and hiding speech, seems to me now one of the barriers that women have always needed and still need to destroy so that we are no longer pushed into secrecy or silence.

“. . . I was never taught absolute silence, I was taught that it was important to speak but to talk a talk that was in itself a silence. . . . Questioning authority, raising issues that were not deemed appropriate subjects brought pain, punishments” (hooks 482).

II. Celebration

Parents, grandparents, siblings, and friends have gathered to share the moment. It is the closing celebration of a week-long summer program for middle school writers. Evie, an eighth grader, reads her poem aloud.

Mind’s iTrack

The day it all disappeared was the day I knew I’d be alone
 The day it all disappeared was the day I knew I’d run away
 The day it all disappeared was the day that I had that fight
 And had that small war within myself.

The day it all got confusing was the day I knew I’d fall
 The day it all got confusing was the day I knew I’d stand
 in shock
 The day it all got confusing was the day that I stabbed my
 heart
 And ran from all the pain inside.

The day it all went berserk was the day that I knew I’d
 never be okay
 The day it all went berserk was the day that I knew I’d
 follow the footsteps
 The day it all went berserk was the day that I knew I’d
 drop to the ground
 And hide my face in the shadows.

The day it all became clear was the day that I knew I’d be
 superficial
 The day it all became clear was the day that I knew I’d
 sleep in the night
 The day it all became clear was the day that I knew I’d die
 And drown in the shallow water of my soul.

I sit in the back of the room, attending as the director of the sponsoring organization for this workshop of eleven young writers—ten girls and one boy. As Evie begins to read, the anguish and the

power in her words wash over me. Yet as her voice fills the silence in the room, I see another woman in the audience flinch.

What was she expecting? I wonder. I soon find out. The fifth-grade girl she has come to hear has written several short, funny poems about famous people and a longer poem about riding a bicycle. Those words constitute a reality entirely different from Evie's.

Later that day I see the woman at the grocery store in our small town. As we stand at the deli counter, I say, "That was fun today." She flinches again.

I continue, "There was some heavy-duty stuff in what they read. It reminded me how hard it is to be in seventh grade."

She hesitates. Then she plunges in about Evie's poem, surprised that "she read that out loud. I'd take a close look at that one."

A close look at what? The poem or the child? I think, knowing that she means the child. We separate before I can find words myself to respond appropriately. Would it have mattered if she knew that one of the teachers who worked with the students in this writing workshop is a guidance counselor? Or if I had said that I worry more about the students who can't find an outlet such as poetry for expressing their anxieties and fears than I worry about those who do?

III. Truth

"We don't want teenagers to write violent poems, horrifying stories . . . ; they're ugly, in precisely the same way we [humans] are ugly" (Chabon 358).

IV. Power

Evie's words, read at the young writers' celebration, speak an uncomfortable truth. These truthful words hold power for her and reveal to her a resolution. Ironically, she chooses falseness, but still she articulates her pain and her decision about how to cope with it. Yet at least one adult who heard them would prefer she had not shared those words, offended by their ugliness.

Is this how silence begins? With a listener's flinch? A roll of the eyeballs? Is this how a young voice learns to still itself? One moment of disap-

proval layered over another and another until words are held back?

In the middle school writing workshop the previous summer, Julia, too, trusted her words to represent the darkness of human behavior. Julia contributed "No Violence," excerpted here, to the group's anthology.

No Violence

Talk back, get a slap.
Is that the best way to handle that?
Slap another and another.
Not everyone learns that from their mother,
Some learn it from others
I got made fun of, because I was fat.
What's the best way to handle that?
OK, I'm fat! OK, I'm fat!
Now, how about I give you a slap.
What should I do to handle that? . . .
Cookies and chips fly through the air,
Oh, look now I have gum smeared in my hair.
Yes, a cheerleader actually did that to me.
What's the best way to handle that?
. . . Or wait, maybe you really just don't care.
I have a bad taste in my mouth, because the
principal told me I'm not allowed to
Defend myself.
. . . Jump to conclusions,
Take matters into your own hands.
He makes me feel like I'm the bad man.
What's the best way to handle that? . . .
You have placed the ball in my lap and have forced
me to do nothing, but to
react, react, react! . . .
If I react then you see there will only be
more trauma for me.
Mom, what should I do?
. . . just keep writing this poem you see,
Its [*sic*] going to be very cathartic for me.

Julia's principal handled the problems about the bus. However, Julia and her mother describe their time meeting with administrators as an ordeal. In retrospect, Julia says, "If I write it down, I feel better."

V. Be careful! Be safe!

"The 'good girl' in me frequently wants to say to my daughters, 'Be careful! Be safe!' The 'good girl' says, 'Write a poem they want to read. Wear lipstick.

Don't talk back. Be sweet. Be pleasant. Be nice.' My internal voice says that to me, too, and I have to struggle not to hear it, not to believe it" (Bridgers 46).

VI. Reminiscence

"If you can't say something good about someone, don't say anything at all." My mother's words reverberate in my mind nearly fifty years after I first heard her speak them. Unspoken was this corollary: Don't talk about negative things. My parents, from the World War II generation of the stiff upper lip, believed in "pulling yourself up by the bootstraps" and forging forward. It was a good way to win a war. But creating a code of silence is an exceptionally bad way to come to understanding, to cope with one's psychic wars.

Several years ago, for an advanced composition class I was teaching, I drafted a scene that I recall vividly from my elementary school years.

My brother and I sit at the kitchen table with my grandmother, eating the lunch she has made for us. My mother is across the room, between the sink and the back door. My father stands at the refrigerator getting out a bottle of milk. The glass of the one-quart bottle is slippery with condensation. I imagine now that I can see red letters imprinted on it from the dairy where it was bottled. Our front door is open. Just the screen separates inside from outside. The sun shines into the kitchen. It is a day in spring or summer. My grandmother, my father's mother who lives in the apartment above our garage, says something about Aunt Anna, her sister. In an instant, it happens.

My father screams, "I don't care what Anna does!"

I have never heard my father raise his voice before. My quiet, gentle father, the man I know as the joker, hurls the milk bottle. It arcs past the L-shaped counter that extends along the table where my brother and I sit, across an open space past the stove, and crashes into the sink. Milk and glass spray everywhere. Milk trails across the floor, drips from the curtains in the window over the sink. Shards of glass fly out from the sink, spraying across countertops and onto the floor. He continues shouting.

My grandmother whimpers, "I didn't mean anything." My brother and I sit frozen at the table. My mother begins to move from her spot near the back door toward my father. The bottle has just reached the sink when he slams the refrigerator door shut so hard that it bounces open again. Eggs spill from the egg tray on the door's shelf and bleed yellow onto the floor. The plastic shelf cracks. The small plastic housing for the butter falls from the refrigerator door to the floor, its feeble springs broken by the door's impact and rebound. My grandmother is crying now. My brother and I remain at the table, still frozen.

My mother moves to my father, reaching out to him, stroking him, trying to calm him as if he were a small child. He labors to breathe. Slowly my mother ushers him into the living room. The shouting has stopped. He collapses into his favorite chair.

Mrs. Cuthbert from next door appears at the front screen door. "I heard the noise. Do you need help over here?" she asks, as diplomatically as anyone can when adults have been shouting, glass litters the kitchen, curtains drip milk, and eggs run slimily across the floor near the refrigerator.

From somewhere my mother produces smelling salts. The ammonia smell erupts sharply under my father's nose, penetrating the area near his chair, where I am now standing. My mother, Mrs. Cuthbert, and I huddle around him in the chair, staring, helpless. Quiet reasserts itself. My father slumps in his chair, breathing heavily, exhausted, sobbing. My mother cleans up the mess in the kitchen. My grandmother returns to her apartment. My brother and I retreat to our rooms.

For the rest of our years in that house, the egg shelf on the refrigerator door remains cracked and the butter door is permanently gone. At every meal we view the visible reminders of the day my father transformed into some unrecognizable thing. Our family code of silence works to remove the incident from our collective experience. It cannot be removed, of course. It retreats inward, worms into the unconscious of a little girl, internalizes itself as the kind of thing you can never talk about, the questions you can never ask. It becomes the benchmark, the symbol of what can and cannot be expressed, ever.

I offered the draft about this incident fearfully to my advanced composition students, telling them it was something I had never written about before, much less made public. Both of my parents are gone now. I will never know what pushed my father into such a rage that day, the only time I ever saw him behave with violence. Sharing that draft with students felt like a violation to me. "If you can't say something good about someone, don't say anything at all." I never finished the essay.

VII. Voice

"I consider saying that if they [middle school girls] don't speak, they run the risk of forgetting those strong voices that used to yell, *catch me if you can*, from the top of the monkey bars in third grade That they might lose their voices entirely" (Holbrook 34; italics in original).

VIII. On How to Be a Good Girl (and Lose Your Voice)

"Many famous writers have advised younger writers to try hard for truths" (Macrorie 28). Truth, along with pain, comes across clearly in Evie's and Julia's poems. They sit comfortably side by side with the fifth-grader's poem about learning to ride a bike, a different kind of truth, one more palatable perhaps, but no less honest. Even the woman who suggested I "take a close look at" Evie and her poem heard the truth and felt the strength behind Evie's words. That's what alarmed her. Her comment wasn't about the words or even about the writer. Her comment was about what should or should not be articulated, about ways of behaving. Her comment was about being a good girl.

Writing about girls in middle school, exactly the same age as Evie and Julia, Pamela Hartman defines good girls as "docile and compliant." These are qualities that girls, especially academically talented working-class girls, employ to stay "in the good graces" of teachers and peers (111). Mary Field Belenky et al. use the term to apply to middle-class and upper-middle-class girls. Such a girl "has frequently been rewarded for her quiet predictability, her competent though perhaps unimaginative work, and her obedience and conformity" (65). When they enter college, such young

women are often unprepared for the multiple choices they will need to make; they can feel isolated and unsupported (65).

In her review of literature from the 1990s about gender and literacy, Janet J. Montelaro brings to light a disturbing reality. Girls often do not feel themselves to be the liberated women that our twenty-first-century lives would presume (23–25). Multiple studies discuss adolescent girls' fragility during the middle school years. "Something dramatic happens to girls in early adolescence" (Pipher 19). Girls become less resilient, less confident in themselves and their abilities, and more self-critical (Montelaro 23–25; Orenstein xvi; Pipher 19). Research across three decades reveals an eerily consistent pattern. Carol Gilligan in the early 1980s, Belenky et al. in the late 1980s, the American Association of University Women in the early 1990s, Margaret J. Finders in the late 1990s, and Hartman in 2006 all report the same phenomenon. By adolescence, girls' "voices have gone underground—their speech is more tentative and less articulate" (Pipher 20).

Silence becomes a safety net. It is protection from a girl's displaying publicly her outsider status from the "in" group or from deviating from a teacher's expectations. Hartman, who finds silence especially salient among working-class girls, calls it "domesticating behavior" (114). When asked about the term *womanhood*, working-class girls said the term "describe[s] females who are 'hard-working' but also who show strength, including moral strength and the power to voice their opinions and direct their own lives" (104). But the good girls who envisioned this as their future could offer no route by which their current silent compliance would help them to reach their definition of what a woman is (104).

Both Hartman and Finders draw the same conclusions: Silence diminishes opportunities to learn—in school and outside it. Silence withholds questions and opinions that might bring new insights to light. Silence supports the status quo. Yet in both of their studies, girls maintain their silence as a tool for getting along in school and for maintaining good grades.

"You've been among audiences, haven't you, that made you uneasy, guarded, self-conscious?"

Audiences in which you felt judged, disdained, belittled?" (Romano 54). Adolescent girls—Evie and Julia—know those audiences well.

IX. Silence

"We're going to have to control your tongue'. . . And I think, how do you tame a wild tongue, train it to be quiet, how do you bridle and saddle it? How do you make it lie down?" (Anzaldúa 312).

X. Wild Tongues

Evie's and Julia's poems are thoughts drenched with emotion. They bubble up from challenging experiences about which both girls try to make sense. They bubble up through layers of inchoate thought, mixed messages, social repercussions. With her words "The day it all became clear was the day I knew I'd be superficial . . . and drown in the shallow water of my soul," Evie engages in bell hooks's "talk that was in itself a silence" (482). She speaks, though, on the page. Julia uses her voice in both speech and writing—"I have called out the adults on their actions, you see"—but is not heard. They are not good girls. They have wild tongues.

Finders asks a stinging question: "What messages are sent to the young women when teachers privilege 'nice, kind, and helpful' over intellectual grappling?" (123). In light of the response to Evie's poem, I extend the question beyond the classroom. What messages are sent to young women about compliance even in settings where free expression has been invited? Signals, subtle or overt, about particular ways of using words can have far-reaching effects.

Through high school, college, and graduate school, the little girl who never spoke about why her father threw a milk bottle across the kitchen became adept at using other people's words, quoting the experts, bending them toward her purposes in writing, busy losing herself within them. I became the writer hooks describes, one whose work is "in itself a silence" (482). The canon of my writing, both the public and the personal, closely mirrors the fifth-grader's poems about famous people and learning to ride a bike. It is a decades-long pattern of silence.

XI.

"Sometimes the outside voices overwhelm the voice within" (Bridgers 45).

XII. Lessons

"Do people pay attention to you? Listen to you?" I ask Evie.

"Some people. But not a lot of people. I feel judged every day. I get overlooked a lot."

"What allowed you to put 'Mind's iTrack' out there in public?"

"Mr. S. [a teacher who works with the summer writing workshop]. I've had him for two summers and eighth grade. He's easy to get along with and I don't feel judged by him."

Evie's teachers have sent her to the office as a result of her freewrites and poems. Guidance counselors, administrators, and her teachers have determined that her writing does not predict harmful actions. Her writing *is* her action. Though her public voice is often not heard, at least her private voice is honored.

About "No Violence," Julia says, "I get it out on paper. It's over with. I'm not mad at anyone in that poem now." But she hesitates to submit "No Violence" to her school's newspaper. Now in high school, she spends her days again in the company of the older girls responsible for the events in the poem. She submits fun poems and love poems, but publishing "No Violence" in her school has potential consequences. Julia's public voice is silenced.

Sheltered in the safety of trusted peers and teachers in a summer writing workshop, Evie and Julia find their public voices.

"I'd take a close look at that one." Yes. We all should. And then encourage her—all the adolescent *bers* we know—to write and to *speak* the words that represent them, their lives, their identities.

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Manuscripts should be sent to NCTE, Promising Researcher Award Competition, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1096. Attention: Felisa Mann. For additional information, please see <http://www.ncte.org/about/awards/council/research/124585.htm>.