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Lynda Barry Will Make You Believe In Yourself

By DAN KOIS

Dorie Cox left her little house by the Fort Lauderdale airport at 7:15 a.m. on a Wednesday morning this past summer to take a three-train journey to Miami. The Tri-Rail zipped along beside I-95 into the city; the Metrorail took her past the hospital where her best friend died; the elevated Metromover looped, conductorless, around downtown and dropped her off at Miami Dade College.

Around the same time, Vanessa Moss caught the No. 95 express bus from Golden Glades. Each trip to and from the four-day creative-writing workshop she signed up for would cost \$2.35. So the previous day, she went to the credit union and asked the teller for eight allotments of \$2.35.

Moss, a divorced postal clerk with a grown daughter, had never heard of Lynda Barry until the local NPR station mentioned her seminar "Writing the Unthinkable." She'd always thought she could be a writer — she has ideas about food and faith and romance — so she wanted to figure out, through Barry's course, whether it was something she could even consider.

Cox works at a monthly trade journal about megayachts. She has been reading Barry's cartoons since the early 1980s, often clipping and trading with her best friend from high school, Sandie Brown. Last year, Brown died of dengue fever, and Cox got a small tattoo on her left rib: a telephone, copied from Barry's comics, in remembrance of the hours the friends spent talking to each other. Now she hoped to write about that friendship.

In a drab fourth-floor classroom at Miami Dade, the two women, each in her late 40s, joined the 33 other students assembled — mostly women, mostly middle-aged and mostly creatively frustrated. At the front of the class, Barry wore an Emily Dickinson T-shirt, a red bandanna knotted atop her head. She was preparing to sing. "Singin' 's the scariest thing you can do in front of people," she told her new students. "I figure I'm already nervous" — indeed, her deep voice shook a bit — "so what the hell."

“I hope you’re nervous, too,” she added. When someone nodded, Barry broke into a grin. “Good!” she exclaimed. “I want you to be terrified.”

She closed her eyes and sang to the tune of “[Coal Miner’s Daughter](#)”: “I was born a meat cutter’s daughter/My mom was from the Philippines; she was a janitor/I ate TV dinners at night/I grew up by the TV light/While Dad drank vodka in the basement and Mom hollered.”

Barry opened her eyes and smiled. “I’m gonna work you like mules on the Erie Canal,” she said.

Here are some details about Lynda Barry that didn’t appear in her autobiographical song. She’s a cartoonist whose weekly strip, “Ernie Pook’s Comeek,” was a staple of alternative newsweeklies for almost 30 years. (Next month, the publisher Drawn & Quarterly will release “[Blabber Blabber Blabber](#),” the first in a 10-volume retrospective series of her work.) She dips Copenhagen tobacco and fights against wind farms. She e-mails stupid YouTube links to her old buddy Matt Groening, the creator of “The Simpsons.”

Barry reinvented herself as a creativity guru as the market for her comic strip dried up, publishing two boundary-blurring books on inspiration and teaching writing workshops for nonwriters. Barry’s advertising copy is clear: “THIS CLASS WORKS ESPECIALLY WELL FOR ‘NONWRITERS’ like bartenders, janitors, office workers, hairdressers, musicians and ANYONE who has given up on ‘being a writer’ but still wonders what it might be like to write.”

In most writing workshops, very little actual writing happens in class. Instead, students write at home and submit work for the class to critique. Sometimes the teacher takes an active role in leading the discussion; sometimes she offers a few trenchant thoughts on the writer’s craft.

Barry isn’t particularly interested in the writer’s craft. She’s more interested in where ideas come from — and her goal is to help people tap into what she considers to be an innate creativity.

“Kids don’t plan to play,” she told her class in the first day. “They don’t go: ‘Barbie, Ken, you ready to play? It’s gonna be a three-act.’ ” Narrative, Barry believes, is so hard-wired into human beings that creativity can come as naturally to adults as it does to children. They need only to access the deep part of the brain that controls that storytelling instinct. Barry calls that state of mind “the image world” and feels it’s as central to a person’s well-being as the immune system.

To explain, she told a story about the neuroscientist V. S. Ramachandran, who helps patients experiencing phantom-limb pain. Barry discussed one patient who felt that his missing left hand was clenched in a fist and could never shake the discomfort — could never “unclench” it.

So Ramachandran used a mirror box — a compartment into which the patient could insert his right hand and see it reflected at the end of his left arm. “And Ramachandran said, ‘Open your hands.’ And the patient saw this” — Barry opened two clenched fists in unison. “That’s what I think images do.

“I think that in the course of human life,” she continued softly, “we have events that cause” — she clenched her fist and held it up, inspecting it from all angles. “Losing your parents might cause it. Or a war. Or things going bad in a family.”

The only way to open that fist, she said, is to see your own trouble reflected in an image, as the patient saw his hand reflected in a mirror. It might be a story you write, or a book you read, or a song that means the world to you. “And then?” She opened her hand and waved.

In Barry’s class, every writing exercise is a repeated ritual. At the beginning of each one, for example, students slowly draw a spiral on a sheet of paper. While everyone did that, Barry recited a poem. It’s the same poem every time, by Rumi, and Barry recited it quickly, her head down, her fingers tented before her. “You’re in your body like a plant is solid in the ground,” she intoned, “yet you’re wind.”

“Think back to early days,” she went on. “Write on a clean sheet of paper the first 10 images that come to mind when I say, ‘Money.’ ”

After two minutes of silence, she continued. “Choose an image that has some kind of trouble attached to it,” she said. “Or if you’re feeling wild, just choose No. 2.” Then she asked a series of questions meant to spur recollection of detail: “Is it day or night in this image?” “What’s behind you?” “What’s beyond what’s behind you?”

“Now you’re going to describe this image as if it’s happening right now. If you get stuck, don’t go like this” — she made Rodin’s Thinker pose — “or look over what you wrote. Just go back to your spiral. Keep your pen moving. I’ll be back in eight minutes.”

When Barry asked for volunteers to read, Dorie Cox raised her hand. Barry ran over, crouched on the floor, bowed her head and listened while Cox read a funny remembrance of the cash-filled birthday cards her grandmother used to send. When Cox finished, Barry said:

“Good! Good! Good!” and looked for another reader. She didn’t comment on Cox’s work. No one may comment on Cox’s work.

Over the four days in Miami, every student would write 16 pieces and read aloud at least once. In one class, a student wept through a story about being told she couldn’t play with the black children in her neighborhood. “Good! Good, good, good,” Barry exclaimed. “That’s O.K, that’s normal. Another reader?”

A former stockbroker read a harrowing story about standing underneath the World Trade Center as the bodies started to fall. “Good, good, good,” Barry said, then touched another student who raised her hand earlier. “Five, four” —

“After that story?” the student squeaked.

“Do it bravely!” Barry barked. “Three, two, one.” The woman read, bravely.

Students’ work is meant to stand on its own, without criticism, revision or, in fact, revisitation. Barry insists that students not reread their writing until the entire course has concluded. “While you’re writing, you’re having this experience,” Barry explained. “But when you read it, all you can think about is, Is my baby defective?” Sometimes, she said, babies just need time to open their eyes.

At the end of Day 2, a buoyant Barry told the class: “I can’t wait for tomorrow. I like you guys so much, and not just as a friend.”

I ate lunch that day with Vanessa Moss, the postal clerk who heard about the workshop on NPR. “There’s so much creativity here!” she marveled. “It’s so good to meet people. Sometimes I think I’m the craziest person on the planet. My goal on my bucket list is to write a romantic comedy movie. I don’t want to be famous famous. I just want to do that.”

Was this the first writing class she’d ever taken? “Oh, yes,” she replied. “It’s wonderful so far. Lynda Barry is the teacher, but I’m a teacher, you’re a teacher — we all are. The student is always us also.”

Barry’s parents divorced when she was 12, the same year she dropped acid for the first time and changed the I in her first name to a Y. By the time she was 16, though, she’d quit drugs and taken a seven-night-a-week job as a janitor at a Seattle hospital. Her parents didn’t attend her high-school graduation. Her mother appears frequently in her cartoons and stories, but never in the present tense.

I asked her if she's still in touch with her parents. Usually when you ask Barry a question, she responds with wide-eyed enthusiasm, cartoonish but evidently sincere, summoning a story from the vaults. This time she closed her eyes, tilted her head back a long while and finally said, "I think I don't want to talk about that."

So we talked about her cartooning career, which began in 1977, when she slipped comic strips under the door of a friend in hopes he might run them in the Evergreen State College newspaper. Over the next decade, that friend, Matt Groening, and Barry became stars of the alternative-comics world, with his strip, "Life in Hell," and hers, "[Ernie Pook's Comeek](#)," appearing in weeklies across the country.

Barry drew cartoons for Esquire and published a series of books. She appeared half a dozen times on "[Late Night With David Letterman](#)," telling wry stories about her love life. She married a carpenter in 1986 and divorced a year later; she told Letterman she knew the marriage was doomed on her honeymoon, when her new husband took one look at the Grand Canyon and said, "I thought it would be bigger." Then he turned to her. "It's your fault for hypin' it up."

Her comics changed. Once about relationships, now they focused on childhood — a fictionalized version of her own, starring pigtailed [Marlys](#), her sister, Maybonne, and a block full of characters in extremis. She wrote two well-reviewed novels featuring young people in trouble.

After Sept. 11, 2001, Barry foundered creatively. She and her second husband, Kevin Kawula, a prairie-restoration expert, moved from Evanston, Ill., to a 15-acre farm in rural Wisconsin. Kawula, an affable bear of a man — "Everybody else loves Han Solo," she told me, "but I always wanted Chewbacca" — built Barry a free-standing, sun-filled studio overstuffed with scrap paper, art supplies and knickknacks given to her by students. (In Miami, a puppeteer named Hannah made a little Marlys marionette, complete with polka-dot underpants.)

By 2008, the consolidation of the alt-weekly world meant that "Ernie Pook's" was appearing in only four papers, and Barry was earning just \$155 a week drawing it. Stuck in a draining battle with wind developers over plans to build turbines in her town — "they're the S.U.V. of renewable energy," she said — she decided to shutter the strip months shy of its 30th anniversary.

Now she sells original art [on eBay](#) and has been buoyed by the modest success of "[What It Is](#)," her 2008 book about writing, and its follow-up in 2010, "[Picture This](#)," about art. But it's the classes, which Barry began teaching to share the techniques she learned from a drawing professor at Evergreen, that spark her enthusiasm. She conducts around 15 workshops a

year, from two-hour minisessions with college students to long multiday seminars at writers' conferences like this one.

On the afternoon after the third class, we sat in a hotel bar drinking Tsingtaos. "Now I can take this off," Barry said, untying her bandanna and dropping it in her bag. That day started out rough. "For an hour, it was hellish," Barry said. The workshop can seem haphazard but is actually carefully planned. "I run a tight ship, but I try and make it seem like I'm not doing that at all. I have stories that I know will make 'em laugh and forget. I have others that are more about: think about this. And then the ones that are really important to me, like the story about 'The Family Circus.' "

She told that story at the end of the session. "I grew up in a house that had a whole lot of trouble," she said. "As much trouble as you could imagine. In the daily paper, there were all these comic strips, and there was one that was a circle. It seemed like things were pretty good on the other side of the circle. No one's getting hit. No one's yelling."

Once, at a comics convention, she shook hands with Bil Keane's son, Jeff — Jeffy — who now inks the strip. Barry instantly burst into tears. She told the class why: "Because when he put his hand out and I touched it, I realized I had stepped through the circle. I was on the other side of the circle, the place where I wanted to be. And how I got there was I drew a picture." She smiled and held her arms out. "The reason I'm standing here in Florida in 2011 is because I drew a picture and wrote some words. The reason you all are here is because you're interested in doing the same thing. When I think about all the things that this image world has brought me. . . . I mean, I don't have health insurance, and dental work is really an issue, but the feeling that life is worth living? Being in this class gives me that in spades."

On the last day of class, a part-time social-sciences professor named Margaret Stott sat next to me. "God, you should write a story about the people at my table at lunch," she said. "WRITERS. With a capital W." She acted out their conversation. " 'What's your workshop like?' And I said, 'Well, it's accessing your creativity,' and they looked at me like, Is this a writing workshop, or not?"

Barry marched in singing [a song about underpants](#). (It was from "South Park.") She danced the hula with Hannah's marionette. Then she said there would be no break today, there's no time, there's too much writing to do.

Cox wrote about sitting with her friend Sandie in the high-school cafeteria, how they used to watch out for each other — each warning the other if her hair was askew or if her minipad was showing. She'd told Barry about Sandie and even showed her the tattoo (Barry, too, had

dengue fever, in fact almost died from it in 1994), and when she finished reading aloud, Barry patted her shoulder gently. “Good, good, good.”

Vanessa Moss read a story, rich with detail, about gossiping co-workers sorting the mail. “That’s perfect!” Barry shouted. “Perfect! I mean good, good! I had to remember I can only say *good*. Good good good good good.”

At the end of class, Barry put her hands on her hips. “Well, you little bad asses. How about that?”

Moss told me that Barry’s encouragement had convinced her she could write. At first, she “felt like a kid at kindergarten level, in a room full of high-schoolers.” But little by little, she gained confidence. Now she wants to write a book. “I don’t know whether it would be fiction or nonfiction, but that’s my goal. I feel now that I could do it. That it’s possible.”

The day after the workshop, Dorie Cox set her kitchen timer for eight minutes and wrote about the image of being in Barry’s class. “I would like to have class in Lynda Barry’s messy kitchen in the country,” she wrote. “I will have to control my own time, space and mind for my health, wealth, productivity. For my personal survival.”

“Somebody said to me one time, ‘This class is like therapy,’ ” Barry said. She shook her head. “No. Therapy is like *this*. And *this* is very old.” The seminar finished, I’d driven us to dinner at a Cuban restaurant she’d visited once before, during the Miami Book Fair. “I saw Jonathan Franzen at that fair. I hate Jonathan Franzen so much. I hate that guy.” To her, turning down Oprah Winfrey revealed a disdain for viewers who look to Winfrey for advice. “When I saw him, I felt sick.” But then, she said, she realized there’s no difference between what she viewed as Franzen’s dismissal of lowbrow readers and her dismissal of highbrow Franzen. “It’s just I’m doing it from below, and he’s doing it from above.”

Do Writers, with a capital W, look down on her students? “Absolutely. I have a real chip on my shoulder about that — the idea that some things aren’t art. It’s from growing up poor. You run into that your whole life — people of my background and education can’t participate.

“Why does it matter?” she asked. “It’s like me saying, ‘I’m beautiful.’ Compared to other women, I’m not. But who does it hurt for me to say so?”

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