



## Cultivating Hardiness Zones for Adolescent Girls

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In the last paragraph of The Bluest Eye, Toni Morrison's poignant novel about racism and poverty, the narrator, nine year-old Claudia, reflects on the ineffective magic she and her sister Freida practiced one hot summer's day, believing as they did so fervently, that "if we planted the seeds, and said the right words over them, they would blossom, and everything would be all right" (p. 9). Pecola's baby, conceived in such pain and sorrow, would live; she and Freida would, in effect, "change the course of events and alter a human life" (p. 149). But when the marigolds, those most common and hardy of flowers, symbolic of suffering and despair, do not bloom and Pecola's baby dies, Claudia comes finally and rightly to blame not herself, but the unyielding earth.

I talk about how I did not plant the seeds too deeply, how it was the fault of the earth, the land, our town. I even think now that the land of the entire country was hostile to marigolds that year. This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live. (p. 160)

I teach the Bluest Eye and each year I ask myself and my students, and now you, this question: What if we were to know what Claudia knows in her nine-year-old wisdom: that to alter a human life we need not one caring adult or mentor, not individual resolve, not courage or pull-yourself-up-by-your-boot-straps will power, but the right soil--the proper ph, the correct nutrients, sunlight and rain, the right hardiness zone?

If you garden you have a sense of what I mean by a hardiness zone. In your mind you might picture the page from any gardening manual. You know the one—10 different bands of color running horizontally across the country, warning you to take care what you



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plant where. Relational hardiness zones tell us that girls need different things to grow well in urban areas than they do in rural or suburban areas, that poor girls need different nutrients than girls who are economically well-off, that white girls in Van Buren or Calais need different soil than white girls in Waterville or immigrant girls in Portland. Hardiness zones remind us that there is no monolithic girl, not even a monolithic white girl.

The idea of hardiness zones requires us to move away from the purely psychological—away from a focus solely on self-esteem or depression or eating disorders—those symptoms of individual stress and distress—and to widen our lens—to consider the social and political landscape in which a girl comes of age.

More specifically, in health psychology, the concept of “hardiness” (Ouellette [Kobasa], 1979, 1982, 1993, in prep.) describes the stance of an individual girl in relation to a stressful context and points to developmental experiences girls may need to resist the long-term harm of institutionalized sexism, racism and classism. Consisting of three key components, control, commitment, and challenge, hardiness describes how persons make sense of and respond to stresses in their lives. Hardiness control refers to a girl’s capacity to make choices in stressful circumstances, her ability to understand her stresses within a larger context, and to have a repertoire of positive coping skills. Hardiness commitment describes her individual’s belief system, sense of purpose, connection to others and recognition that there are resources for her to draw on. Hardiness challenge is a relationship to change in which she feels challenged and mobilized rather than defeated. People who exhibit hardiness challenge “are catalysts in their environment and are well practiced at responding to the unexpected” (Ouellette [Kobasa] 1979, p. 4). Such girls know where to go for support, and they are flexible and persistent.

If we widen our lens in this way to include the cultural and social contexts in which girls live and what they need to thrive, different issues and concerns come into focus. Let me illustrate with an example.

In each of three years of a study of poor and working class urban adolescent girls, Anita speaks with clarity and passion about her hopes for the future and her connections in the present. In eighth, ninth and tenth grade, Anita says she wants to be a lawyer and that “kids, kids, kids,” as she explains in eighth grade, are the only thing that might get in her



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way. In ninth grade she determines that “I ain’t going to let nothing get in the way. The only thing that could probably happen is a baby.” In the tenth grade, she wants to be a lawyer “because we need some Black lawyers up there” and she is taking an elective for students interested in law. A powerful critique of race and class motivates her to “want to achieve in life.” She observes that “there’s a lot of people that I know that don’t want a Black kid to be somebody.” This same year, her response to the interviewer’s question about what might get in her way is less forceful: “If I ever got pregnant.” Anita also tells her interviewer that she has been sexually active without using contraceptives.

Perhaps Anita’s sense that a baby “could probably happen” to her comes from being the daughter of a woman who had children in her teens. Her mother, she explains in another part of her interview, “is part of me and I’m a part of my mother.” Passionately, Anita explains how she and her mother “have trust in each other and we rely on each other” which comes from her mother’s tendency to be “very open” with Anita, even open about “about sex and boys and stuff.” “We are not that different,” Anita says, “and we do the same because I follow behind her footsteps and sometimes she will follow behind mine.” Anita is proud of her connection with her mother and the mutuality within their relationship. A baby does happen to Anita; she follows in her mother’s footsteps. She’s pregnant by the fall of eleventh grade, when she drops out of school.

We can talk about what happened to Anita in a lot of different ways, most of them point to her or her mother as the source of the problem—we can say she had low self-esteem, that she was depressed, she had poor social skills and so she was easily taken advantage of, that she was the result of bad mothering. In so doing, though, we risk pathologizing and stigmatizing Anita, her mother, or her culture—and we ignore who Anita is and what she has said about her life and relationships. So I don’t want to go there. Instead I want to argue that poor girls, including girls who become pregnant like Anita, do not make stupid choices, they make the best of tough situations in which they are faced with few real options for psychological growth and long-term well-being. By exploring the critical importance of relationships within girls’ lives, we shift the focus from girls’ alleged failures to the relational and environmental contexts that too often cannot fully support

them in ways that have been considered to be health promoting. When we do so, we find ourselves asking different questions.

For example, what does it mean for Anita that her capacity to carry out her dreams may depend on a certain disconnection from her mother and the community through which she has come to know her self? And, indeed, perhaps a disconnection from mothering itself. Girls' psychological strength derives from their connections with significant others. Anita's decision to have a baby places her in closer connection with her mother as it moves her away from the dreams for a better life that she, and her mother, shared.

Anita's story—a story not unlike that of many poor adolescent girls in Maine-- is at the heart of a dilemma facing those of us who want to foster girls' strengths—their hardiness-- as they deal with the stresses of adolescence: How can we encourage girls to take positive risks that lead to increased options for economic viability and well-being when taking those risks runs the danger of disconnection from the people they love? If "strength" for adolescent girls implies the capacity to stay mentally and physically whole while being able to achieve, or maintain, middle-class (or better) economic status, then the question of how girls negotiate their relationships with those closest to them, and what girls need from these adults as well as the from their communities and the institutions in their lives, becomes particularly urgent.

This is no simple or straightforward negotiation. Connection to adults and community is essential to girls' mental health and well-being. Those connections are often strained when girls embark on life paths different from the adults they love and who, ironically and poignantly, often themselves encourage these disconnections through their hopes for better lives for them. This lays the groundwork for a psychological mine field: On the one hand, "success" in middle-class terms too often means a betrayal of cultural and familial connections and the terror of isolation while, on the other hand, not achieving such success can mean betraying one's own and one's parents' or community's hopes, economic marginalization and limited notions of identity and social position.

While adolescence is considered to be a time of broadening horizons and efficacy, the sphere upon which girls most often exert power and control is on or with their bodies. Research on girls' experiences of sexuality reveal how fraught girls' psychosexual



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development really is: sexuality is typically experienced as a physical, psychological or social danger (Thompson, 1995; Tolman, 1992). Rates of sexual abuse increase remarkably for girls between the ages of ten and fourteen (Russell, 1984); research documents the fact that the youngest teen mothers are made pregnant by men who are, on average, ten years their senior (Males, 1993). The realization that their bodies are a site of temptation and conquest provides many girls with a profound sense of anxiety for their own safety and some girls with an illusory sense of power that too often backfires. Girls' real powerlessness in their lives and worlds is implied by the constrained sphere of action — their bodies— upon which they typically act. No wonder that girls have higher rates of depression: persons who are depressed are more realistic than those who are not (e.g., Petersen & Craighead, 1986).

Girls' struggles are rooted in systemic problems, such as poverty, racism and sexism, that require collective, rather than individual, response. Research suggests that women (and of course men) teachers, counselors, and youth workers need to take a holistic approach to their work with girls. Such an approach should address the individual girl within the social context of her life, her relationships, the systems she encounters and the society in which she lives. To do this women must possess knowledge of girls' lived experiences of racism, sexism, and classism.

But even this knowledge is insufficient. Every woman's life has been shaped and is continually influenced by these interlocking contexts. Power and privilege (and their absence) can cause divisions among women by distorting their perceptions of themselves and each other and blinding them to the systemic obstacles they each face. Without the opportunity and capacity to examine our own histories of bias, women – with the best of intentions – may mistakenly enact the role of *cheerleader*: enthusiastically encouraging girls to be confident, courageous and bold, but leading them into hostile territory without preparing them well for the consequences they may face (Ward, 2001).

What connection means for girls is far more complicated than providing her with a mentor. In understanding the struggles and strengths of girls within the communities and contexts in which they live, our notions of health and the units of analysis need to change. Hardiness does just that. It's a concept of health and stress resistance that locates the



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struggle between the girl and her world, not simply within the individual girl, and that holds the adults in girls' environments accountable for providing girls with experiences and opportunities for them to understand, engage with and potentially transform what limits and harms them — so that they can develop strategies of what Janie Ward calls "resistance for liberation" (Robinson & Ward, 1991, Ward, 2000).

The stress and distress that so many girls experience can be understood as a loss of control in many arenas of their lives, a struggle to create an identity and belief system to which they can wholeheartedly commit, and a sense of isolation within the challenges that face them. Hardiness begins to define areas of knowledge, skills and support that an individual can develop to resist and transform stresses. Through this perspective, the relational and educational contexts, both in schools and other community organizations, in which girls find themselves can be assessed in terms of their capacity to facilitate hardiness or to be "hardiness zones." Girls need experiences in which they exert control over more than their bodies, sexuality or appearance; where they can connect to their own worth, to a positive belief system and to others who will commit to them, and where they can experience support and encouragement to learn and persist in the face of struggles.

What would it mean for the significant adults in girls' lives to provide them with a relational hardiness zone -- a context in which girls experience greater control, commitment and challenge? What can we learn about hardiness zones from relationships that girls experience as positive?

Girls' relationships with their mothers are a critical arena for the development of hardiness. Relationships between mothers and daughters present powerful opportunities to develop hardiness zones in those contexts in which self-development and cultural identity often become divided. How can these relationships better support girls? Terri Apter (1990) notes that mothers' culturally-driven expectations of adolescent separation is the lens through which they interpret conflict and questions from their daughters. For the girls, she found, struggles in relationship were about fighting for a new way of relating, not a moving away. Apter found that girls wanted to be engaged in vibrant, searching and challenging relationships — relationships in which they could experience control and commitment — but



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that mothers, too often, withdrew, teaching their daughters to back down in the face of challenges or conflict (see Debold, Wilson & Malave, 1993).

Women teachers also hold a possibility of providing relational hardiness zones for girls but it is a possibility that is complicated by the women's own complex relationships to the systems of power that they represent as teachers. Entrusted with the nurturance and education of girls, women teachers are often "engaged in a kind of socio-cultural balancing" (Hartman-Halbertal, 1996) of themselves, their students and their communities -- struggling with the conflicts and contradictions among their roles and identities as women, as mentors and socializers, and as transmitters of patriarchal culture. Listening to a group of White working-class girls here in central Maine, I heard girls refer to this balancing in their descriptions of their women teachers. In spite of their intense anger at their teachers' ambivalences, what the girls seemed to want, what they longed for and seemed unable to attain, was a genuine closeness and the unequivocal support of their teachers. They spoke fondly of those rare occasions when they felt "closer" to a teacher, when "it feels more like she's a person," when a teacher shows "she really cares about us," or when teachers "know how I'm feeling" (Brown, 1998).

Connections between girls and women teachers are complicated and difficult, particularly across class and cultural lines, where women cannot fully read, understand, or identify with the girls in their charge. Such relationships, Lisa Delpit (1995) explains, demand "a very special kind of listening, listening that requires not only open eyes and ears, but also hearts and minds," a willingness to "put our beliefs on hold...to cease to exist as ourselves for a moment." It is, she insists, "the only way to learn what it might feel like to be someone else and the only way to start a dialogue" (p. 46-47). Through such a relational stance girls perceive connection and the commitment of adults in ways that allow girls to hold their hearts and minds together.

Girls' relationships are as complicated as they are important. In schools and in programs, relationships with peers and with adult women become the sites where girls practice and hone their understanding of the social world. Such connections have the potential to provide girls with an environment where they are both heard and free to speak, where they can experience their own voices as substantive, worthy of being taken and



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responded to seriously. Listening and, through listening, meaningful participation in school and community life (rather than conformity and obedience), is a means by which adults can create hardiness zones for girls.

Tantalizing evidence suggests that the meaningful involvement of young people in school and community programming has a very positive impact on their engagement with school and their health (see O'Connor, 1997). Linda Powell's (1994) creation of Family Group within an urban high school provided young people with a place to bring their questions about power and authority as well as their desire for connection with each other and their teachers. One result was an extraordinary improvement in retention rates. In a recent study of 25 school sites nationwide, girls who volunteered in their communities and who did not have sex education were less likely to become pregnant, be suspended or fail school courses than girls who took a regular curriculum and had no community experience (Allen et al., 1997). Speaking of girls' "hunger for an us," and their hope, fears and excitement to "create their own homeplaces," (another way to think of hardiness zones) Michelle Fine and her colleagues (1996) refer to the need for "schools and communities that engage young women... in social critique and in activist experiences of social transformation" (p. 30).

In many families, especially those of color, young women form strong relationships with what Patricia Hill Collins (1991) has called "Othermothers" -- the women who are integral to the strength of caring communities by taking a real and persistent interest in the children of the community. These "othermothers" have relationships with the girls' mothers that serve as bridges across generations and perspectives. They are perceived as "being there" for the girls in ways mothers are not allowed; they are perceived as seeing the girls as "special"; and they are respected and trusted by the mothers. "Othermothers" do not parachute in as mentors but are part of the physical or social community; they are people who nourish a girl's hope through acts of love, courage, and commitment to making the community and the world a better place for girls. In my own research I hear of the many women in White working class girls' daily lives who provide safe spaces for their feelings and thoughts, their questions and social critique--aunts, older sisters, family friends, cousins (Brown, 1998). These women know them, love them, and teach them. It's



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important that join these women and honor the power of such relationships in our attempts to create relational hardiness zones.

When young girls seek out relationships with othermothers they form genuine connections that can make a real difference in their lives. Such relationships in which girls' questions and women's ambivalences are brought to the surface, provide the scaffolding for public critique and political resistance. So many girls are hungry for such relationships and sites of possibility. These meaningful relationships, echoed in the girls she listened to, cause Amy Sullivan (1996) to question the traditional role of mentor, a "helping model . . . which often assumes deficiencies in the adolescent," and locates knowledge and power in the adult, and to offer, instead, the role of "muse" and the possibility of "evocative relationships " (p. 227). Such relationships, Sullivan explains, are "distinguished by girls' ability to speak freely; by women's ability to listen to, understand, and validate girls' feelings and experience; and by women's willingness to share their own experience as well" (p. 246).

Girls' relationships with the "muses" in their lives suggest the importance of women who will listen with "open hearts and minds"; who will allow the experiences of girls who are different from them to "edge themselves into our consciousness" (Delpit, 1995, pp. 46-47). Such relationships make room for girls' strong feelings and opinions, out of which come their social critique and a useful examination of the expectations, rules and norms of the culture of power. Without this examination-- which depends both on the immediacy and intensity of girls' feelings and an adult's willingness to remain in their presence and to be, in Adrienne Rich's (1979) terms, "a witness in their defense" -- girls are less likely to speak out or publicly respond to injustice or hurtful behavior in ways that are effective and constructive. In turn, they are likely to be less hardy.

The caring that girls want and find meaningful from adults is a caring that gives girls the opportunity for self-development through such effective cultural critique. Learning to read the culture critically provides girls with greater hardiness control by giving them a way to understand their context and to see their options, greater hardiness commitment by providing girls with a sense of shared purpose and connection with others, and greater



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hardiness challenge by demonstrating the positive benefit and importance of shared struggle.

Girls need safe spaces, home places, in schools, neighborhoods, within kinship networks, as well as within families, "where one can weave whole cloth from the fragments of social critique and sweet dreams" (Pastor, McCormick, & Fine, 1996, p. 15). The hardiness zones I'm describing are not precious spaces in which girls bond through suffering but spaces where their personal experiences can be understood through systemic analysis and where they can develop skills through being involved in making change within their communities. As Suzanne Ouellette, who first developed the idea of hardiness zones, has said, "If depression is linked to stressful life events, then you need to go in and change the situation in which those events are happening" (quoted in Debold, 1995, p. 22). Girls need to be involved in that intervention process, and adults need to take responsibility for creating those spaces and possibilities for change.

Most adolescent girls do not fit media representations and stereotypes (Leadbeater & Way, 1996). Most girls move through adolescence without succumbing to depression, becoming a teen mother or a suicide statistic. Yet, this is not an occasion for us to pat ourselves on the back. By and large, as girls angrily tell us, we have left them to their own devices to negotiate the divide between their dreams and their commitments to others. In so doing, we force girls, particularly poor girls, to enact betrayal: will they choose their own achievement or their connection with their cultural community and family?

For girls not to face, or internalize, a divide between potential achievement and familial or cultural connection, they need to have adults who provide them with the space and the skills to construct the problem differently, to see different options. They need to have opportunities to develop a sense of purpose and to experience effective action that takes very seriously what they have experienced within systems of power and unequal resources. Girls cannot act alone to move beyond their bodies as their only realm of power into a larger arena of possibility. They need adults, and the institutions that adults create and are part of, to join them.



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In her collection of essays, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, Alice Walker (1983) describes the fruits of her mother's passionate commitment. I'm asking you, now as you listen, to think about yours and to consider our collective work today:

My mother adorned with flowers whatever shabby house we were forced to live in. And not just your typical straggly country stand of zinnia's, either, She planted ambitious gardens, with over fifty different varieties of plants that bloom profusely from early March until late November...Whatever she planted grew as if by magic and her fame as a grower of flowers spread over three counties. Because of her creativity with her flowers, even my memories of poverty are seen through a screen of blooms—sunflower, petunias, roses, dahlias, forsythia, sprea, delphiniums, verbena...whatever rocky soil she landed on, she turned into a garden. A garden so brilliant with colors, so original in its design, so magnificent with life and creativity, that to this day people drive by our house in Georgia—perfect strangers and imperfect strangers—and ask to stand or walk among my mothers' art.

I notice that it is only when my mother is working in her flowers that she is radiant...she is involved in work her soul must have....Her face, as she prepares the Art that is her gift, is a legacy of respect she leaves to me, for all that illuminates and cherishes life. She has handed down respect for the possibilities—and the will to grasp them. (pp.241-242)

The soil in Georgia or say, Oregon or Texas or Florida, is good for certain kinds of flowers. Here in Maine we have a short growing season--my manual tells me there are four hardiness zones in Maine alone--our soil is rocky, our land rugged, and as a result we have had to become amazingly creative in sharing gardening secrets and developing hardy plants. We have met challenges and we are here today because we have more work to do. Like our mothers before us we are the tenders of flowers. Creating relational hardiness zones in our communities and state is about preparing a garden for all variety of girls so they can "bloom profusely." Our work, as Carol Gilligan (1998) says, is about "the perennial flowering of truth" (xii). It will take community efforts, on-going conversations and planning,



othermothers and muses, but it is our gift, a legacy of respect we leave, it is work our souls must have.

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