

Ways of Being at Risk: The Case of Billy Charles Barnett

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# Ways of Being at Risk: The Case of Billy Charles Barnett

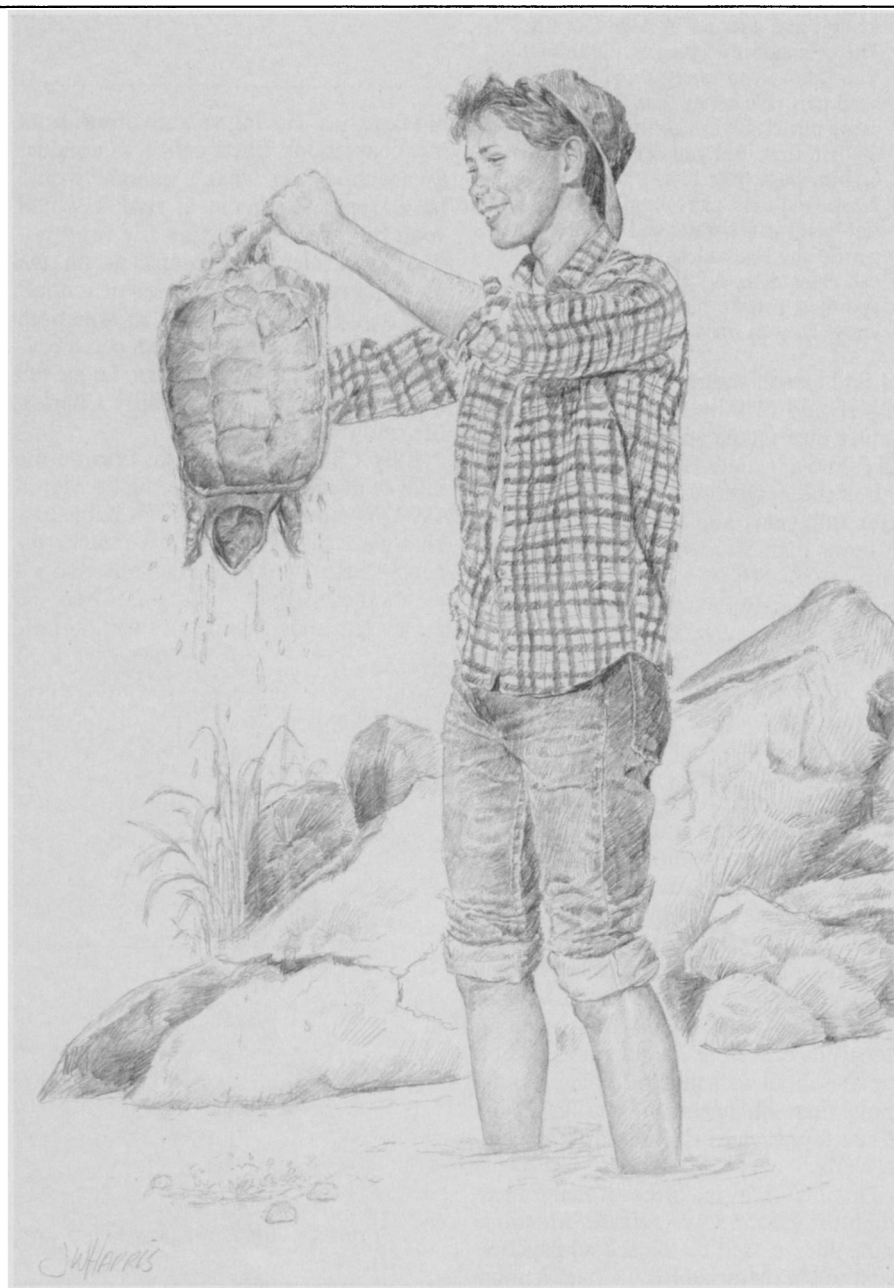
*We have lost the ability to reach out to honor the places (whether the barrio, the ghetto, the reservation, the Appalachian holler, or simply the peaks and pits of adolescence) where our students live, Mr. Barone maintains.*

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BY THOMAS BARONE

**W**E ARE THE representatives of two subcultures, meeting at McDonald's along an interstate highway in northeastern Tennessee. Sitting across from me is Billy Charles Barnett, a tall, lanky boy with dark hair, green eyes, a pug nose, and an infectious grin. He is a member of the rural "disadvantaged," a 15-year-old nominated by the vice principal as the student least likely to remain in Dusty Hollow Middle School. I am a middle-aged urban academic who, secure in a tenured university position, will *never* leave school.

I am inclined to believe the warnings of others like me — teachers and administrators at Billy Charles' school — that this teenager from the hills will be "slow" and "hard to talk to." I am, therefore, surprised to discover almost immediately a

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always loved the outdoors, but what his mother calls his "obsession" with hunting, fishing, and trapping began a couple of years ago and accounts (she insists) for his initial desire to live with his father.

That was a glorious time, according to Billy Charles. He was ecstatic to finally have for his very own a father to connect him to the past that lived within him, a male parent versed in the ways of the wilderness to guide him into his own Appalachian manhood.

Almost daily Billy Charles and his father went out in the wild, the two of them together, apprentice and teacher. Billy Charles was joyously receiving an education in the *real* basics, eagerly learning the time-honored skills of survival (as opposed to such pale school-honored imitations as how to write a check or how to fill out a job application). He was absorbing the fundamentals of the world around him. Almost daily for more than a year, rain or shine, this wilderness school was in session. Even after the master turned on his eager pupil. Even, at least for a while, after the beatings began.

The friction started early in the summer when Billy Charles' father introduced some female strangers into the household: a new wife and a 9-year-old stepdaughter. Billy Charles' version is that he was now burdened with cooking for four instead of for two. ("It's a lot more work, and all she [his stepmother] ever did was eat ice cream and watch TV.") The resentment probably runs even deeper, rooted in the slight Billy Charles must have felt as his father's attention was divided and shared with others. Whatever the cause, tensions rose, and the beatings increased in frequency and in severity, reaching a peak when his father attacked him with a horsewhip.

So a father turns viciously on a son, who, in a time of delicate adolescent need, is reluctant to leave — until the final incident of abuse when the new family decides to vacation in Florida.

While in Florida Billy Charles wrote a letter to his mother, describing his increasingly unhappy life. His father somehow managed to read the letter, and Billy Charles awoke, he says, to the pain of being pulled from the couch by his hair and slammed across the room. Not even the memory of the exciting encounter with a hammerhead shark on a previous day's deep-sea expedition could prevent a second change of custody. Not even the picture of his father's face that, as Billy

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Charles poignantly admitted to me, now makes him depressed when it appears before him unbeckoned. So, on the verge of manhood, Billy Charles went back to Mama, back to a place strewn with so many obstacles to his escape.

Billy Charles has always resisted any encroachment of the school world on his freedom outside. Rarely, for example, has he deigned to do homework. But he is frequently reminded of his sins of omission, as his mother and three sisters collaborate on school assignments in the crowded kitchen. So he retreats further inward, into a bedroom shared with two young men in their early twenties — his cousin, Carl, and Teddy, a friend of Carl's. (Only temporary boarders, says Billy Charles' stepdad, only until Carl's parents "work things out.") What does he do there all night? Billy Charles corroborated what one of his teachers told me: "I asked him and he said, 'I crawl into bed. And I die.' That's what he said, 'I just die.'"

If Billy Charles feels cramped, is he ever tempted to create some artificial space for himself through the use of drugs? His mother once caught him using an amphetamine. He was promptly hauled off to the police station, and this experience, his mother believes, was sufficiently traumatic for him to swear off any further drug use. Maybe so. But an earlier, much more stunning incident seems to have produced a deeper fear, at least of harder drugs. Several years ago, as Billy Charles tells it, a good friend, while sitting right beside him, had injected himself with an overdose. Just a couple of 9-year-olds in northern Ten-

nessee, one watching the other die — 1980s style. Recently the memory was revived when Teddy's girlfriend died in an identical manner. This, too, has depressed Billy Charles. I have wondered (but have lacked the courage to ask) about the possible relationship between these morbid memories and his own "specific suicidal ideations."

Billy Charles' imagination is his only source of escape during his self-described "imprisonment" by day. The school bus deposits him at Dusty Hollow Middle School at 8:15 every morning, and by second period — math, the period when the cage seems smallest — Billy Charles is gone. He leaves through his mind — but always on foot. "I am walking in the hills," he says, recalling the leaves and the ground and the foxes and the possums. "I love to walk." Before meeting Billy Charles, I had never known a 15-year-old without the slightest desire to drive a car. But driving is simply not of interest to him. Says Billy Charles, "I can walk to wherever I want to go."

Although Billy Charles is rarely present in spirit at school, he drifts less often out of social studies and reading classes. The social studies class is taught by Billy Charles' favorite teacher, a bright, inventive young man who attempts to inject some liveliness into classroom activities with various simulation games, films, and student-centered projects.

Billy Charles' interest in reading class may be surprising, for Billy Charles has never been an avid reader. There is an encyclopedia in his house, and there are dictionaries. But there are few books and no daily newspaper. Billy Charles has not been raised in a home in which reading is seen as a delicious way to spend idle time. Perhaps his relative success in reading class is due to the special attention that is afforded him there. Billy Charles scores fairly well on most standardized tests, but he was placed in a "special education" reading class because he had been "disruptive" in other classes and was considered more "manageable" in smaller groups. He is reportedly less abusive and obnoxious to the reading teacher.

For the most part, though, school and the world of Billy Charles do not overlap. On weekdays, he is locked in his school's embrace, but he is often dreaming of another time, another place, imagining that he is free, his own man in a future when every day is Saturday. His is a vision awash in nostalgia, adamantly culling out for celebration only the

pleasant features of the past — the thrill of the catch, the pan-fried trout, and the time spent under his father's benign tutelage — while screening out the unbearable: his father's scowl, his friend's limp body, or anything (like, say, a car or a classroom) invented since the Industrial Revolution. But the selectivity of Billy Charles' memory is understandable, and it represents, I believe, a hopeful sign. For it is only when his defenses break down and the grim ghosts of episodes past invade his psyche that Billy Charles seems most seriously at risk of abandoning more than just a formal education.

Does his vision of the future include earning a living? Billy Charles is utterly convinced that his own talents at tapping the bounty of nature will be sufficient to provide the necessities of life. As if to seal his argument, he points to his father, who works only at odd jobs (currently selling bait out of a small store) to supplement his "natural" income. Others in the area are skeptical about the possibility of living only off the land these days, pointing to stringent enforcement of the legal limitations regarding season and size of catches.

And is Billy Charles foreseeing the possibility of a future family whose hungry mouths demand more than he can provide? Odds are that Billy Charles will once again find his hours divided into time lived and time served, as the time clock replaces the clock on the classroom wall. Still, his expectations are so robustly romantic, so close to those that even members of my branch of our frontier culture were so recently forced to abandon, that I have found myself hoping along with him: maybe there is a way. What if, for example, he changed his mind about the ethics of teaching for a living? Billy Charles recently forked over \$100 for a weekend of instruction in a "trapping school." He found it rather useless (as would any advanced student in a remedial class). "But," I asked, "have you ever thought of opening a school of your own or of becoming a guide to earn your own money?"

With his infectious grin, Billy Charles answered, "Oh no, I don't believe it's right to sell just words, to sell what you know for a living."

When I pointed out to him that words are precisely what his teachers sell, his reply was another grin. But Billy Charles is young, so we may hope for future compromises of his rigorous ethical standards. Getting paid for opening up his

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treasure chest of backwoods wisdom to weekend sportsmen still seems to me both pragmatic and honorable.

Of course, Billy Charles wouldn't need any more formal schooling for such an occupation. On the contrary, if this were his goal, school might then be precisely what he already believes it to be: an unwarranted roadblock on the path to the "good life." This is an unsettling notion to those of us who work devotedly toward fulfilling the goals of universal mandatory schooling. But what are those goals? By the time such academically disinclined students as Billy Charles reach the middle grades, we think we see their future just up ahead. To paraphrase the vice principal at his school, Billy Charles will, at best, become a common laborer like his stepfather, perhaps working nights operating a forklift. And seldom, if ever, will he read a newspaper or a novel or a book of poetry.

So we abandon any lingering hopes for Billy Charles' conversion to a world of erudition and instead focus on *our* version of the basics. Teenagers unlikely ever to attend college must, we assume, be equipped with the mental skills appropriate to a working-class life: minimal competence in the basics; maybe an additional dash of content from the dominant culture (what *every* American needs to know); the basic skills of a trade, which we hope will be acquired in a high school vocational track; and, certainly, the employee's attitude, a demeanor tacitly encouraged by the organizational structure of the school and composed of a nexus of behavioral norms (such as per-

severance, promptness, diligence, and intellectual docility) needed for the industrial workplace. If the non-college-bound acquire these learnings, we the taxpayers are placed at lower risk of having to fork over welfare money, and prospective employers are placed at lower risk of having to provide remedial education for candidates for employment.

But, I ask myself again, what of students such as Billy Charles who have equipped themselves to eke out a living (maybe even legally) within the cracks of the modern global economy? Billy Charles is not illiterate (and perhaps no more aliterate than the average citizen), and he possesses much more than the minimal knowledge and skills needed for his own way of life. Could it be that Billy Charles' economic well-being is jeopardized only by our persistent attempts to inculcate values and behaviors that are, in fact, counterproductive to the successful conduct of his line of work? What use, after all, are passivity and punctuality to denizens of the forest?

Stated flatly, is Billy Charles at risk only if he stays in school? On those moments when I forget about the purposes of schooling that transcend the narrow focus on careers, my answer is yes. Then I am visited by Maria Montessori's vivid metaphor of students in rigid rows of desks as butterflies pinned to a display case. At those moments I confess to entertaining the impossible fantasy of pulling the pin and setting Billy Charles free.

How many other Billy Charles Barnetts are there — potential dropouts with the wits and wherewithal to survive financially in a world that worships the high school diploma? The conventional wisdom — the wisdom of my subculture, the legitimated wisdom — says "not many." There are other exceptions to the rule, of course, including the future stars of stage, screen, or playing field, the youthful heirs to family fortunes, or even the honest entrepreneurs-to-be. But I am incapable of imagining many stories like that of Billy Charles.

Nevertheless, I am reluctant to abandon the promises of schooling, even for such an exceptional case as Billy Charles. Indeed, his very exceptionality invites us to look beyond the narrowly pragmatic, utilitarian objectives of schooling to recollect a more substantial notion of the purposes of education. His case revives our fading dreams of a broader sort of empowerment that schools once hoped to provide for *all* American children,

regardless of their economic or social backgrounds. This included the power to use the disciplines for penetrating more deeply into one's own past and present world, the power to imagine a wide range of alternative worlds in other times and places, and the power to express these understandings by employing many forms of literacy — verbal, visual, musical, kinesthetic, and so on.

This is where the exceptionality of Billy Charles ends and his commonality begins. For these are powers of thought and expression so often denied not only to the Billy Charleses among us, but also to many academically respectable students for whom schooling is merely endured for the payoff of financial security and social standing. Them I have known much longer, those classroom drones who remain (like Billy Charles) seriously at risk of never becoming truly educated. They may pass their courses, but they are just as inevitably failed by their schools.

The institution of the school has also failed to facilitate mutual acquaintance among the people who inhabit it. I will not document the obstacles that have kept teachers and administrators from seeing Billy Charles as I have been privileged to see him. I leave it to other essays to explore the kind of restructuring that is needed before schoolpeople can pay closer attention to the life histories of other students like Billy Charles. His relatively benign experiences in a less crowded reading class and in a livelier social studies class only hint at the directions of that restructuring.

But even educators like Billy Charles' reading and social studies teachers will usually need help in acquiring the kind of knowledge that I lacked when I first met that scruffy stranger under McDonald's golden arches. Cocooned in the world of the middle-class educator, we are insulated from unfamiliar norms and ways of life. We have lost — indeed, have been systematically encouraged to lose — the ability to reach out to honor the places (whether the barrio, the ghetto, the reservation, the Appalachian holler, or simply the peaks and pits of adolescence) where our students live.

Of course, a restructuring that gives teachers the time, the resources, and the motivation to learn about the individual worlds of their students will be only a beginning. Empathy alone is not enough. It is merely a necessary condition for a second element crucial to good teach-

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ing: the development of educational activities that can broaden students' horizons. Teachers in a school with a Billy Charles Barnett will not only need to understand the importance of making turtle soup, they will also need to entice students to study other cuisines and other cultures. Math teachers will need the curricular finesse to lead students outward from field-and-stream economics to numeracy in other contexts. However, as John Dewey wisely noted long ago, one cannot effectively lead students outward without starting from the place where they currently reside.

Empowering teachers (and students) in this way may require more resources than our society is willing to provide. We

will need to reeducate teachers, to reduce their workload, and to purchase material resources to link the local community with the larger one. Thus far, we have lacked the vision and the will to commit the resources necessary to this effort. Instead, we have sometimes resorted to gimmicks to lure our children back to school. In some Florida schools, pizza is offered as an incentive to attend classes. In one Kentucky district, a snazzy car is raffled off as a door prize for students with good attendance records. But should such bribery succeed in filling classrooms with warm bodies, will this no longer be a nation at risk of losing the hearts and wasting the minds of its young people? I think not.

I venture to suggest the heresy that we would not *necessarily* be better off were the dropout rate to decrease dramatically tomorrow. We conveniently forget the role of the traditional American school in perpetuating a seriously impoverished notion of what constitutes an education. Before we could say that a lower dropout rate is good news, we would need to know whether the reasons for *not* leaving school are valid ones. Are students remaining because we have become serious about introducing meaning into the life of the classroom? Are they staying because we have equipped our teachers with the means for knowing and respecting their students' pasts even as they attempt to open up their futures? And why would we need to know whether these things are occurring? Because Billy Charles has reminded us that doing anything less is still a very risky business. [K]

