

**Dispatch from the Pandemic #7:  
Of Books and Basketball  
by Barbara Lyghtel Rohrer**

JUNE 19, 2020 — Nora, a good friend, a novelist who has successfully published four novels by a major publishing house, recently asked me to review her latest manuscript. I have served as one of her early readers before, but this was a major work of hers, certainly the most significant novel she has written to date. It is one that she had wanted to write for decades and finally thought she had the skills to do so. She also had finally mustered the courage to tackle some of its thorny social issues.

She actually asked both me and a friend, Dave, another accomplished novelist, to read the book before sending it to an agent for consideration. We both said yes, though I thought at the time, what could I possibly bring to the table beyond basic copy editing? While pointing out missing words, misspellings and punctuation errors is a needed function in an editing process, I would downplay its significance in a manuscript review. Still I took to the task seriously. I read the manuscript once just to get a handle on the plot and characters, consuming it quickly in a few days. Then I begin the more painstaking work of reading the story a second time with much greater care. I paid attention to what the characters did and asked, did that rang true to who they were. I questioned both motivations and actions. I wrote my questions and comments in the margins. I underlined sentences and phrases that either were beautifully constructed or rang particularly true. And, of course, I corrected typos.

Dave came back with his comments first. They were broad and dealt with overarching themes of the book. His feedback was excellent. My feedback was more along the lines of, would a mother of two small children simply plan a day outing on a Saturday without touching base with her husband? Would not the husband question the sudden appearance on the coffee table of a large papier mâché foot? My contributions seemed small in light of Dave's analysis.

Later, Nora called me. She had gone through all my comments and questions and was acting on each one. *Really?*

While I am confident in my writing and editing skills, I also know my limitations. Just as other professions have specialties within their practices, so does the field of writing—a dermatologist is not equipped to do heart surgery; an attorney specializing in family law is not going to defend a corporation against a lawsuit involving complicated financial shenanigans. And I know I do not know how to write a novel. Indeed, I stand in awe of those who do. How do authors put all those pieces together into a satisfying whole? It is beyond me.

“You may not know how to write a novel,” said Nora, “but you know how to read a novel. You did exactly what I needed you to do. Your questions and comments just bumped my manuscript up three or four levels.”

*Oh.*

I almost don't know how to take such affirmation of my abilities. But here was Nora telling me, reminding me, that no matter what, I had something to offer. Taken more broadly, we all have something of value to offer. It just may not be in the form we wish it were or in a form we even recognize. That's because sometimes we are so fixated on what others do, we fail to see what we can do.

In "The Ramshackle Garden of Affection," a selected correspondence between Ross Gay and his former graduate student Noah Davis, both lovers of the game of basketball, Gay writes, "Everyone knows that the team that does the most talking usually wins ... The team that chatters more lets each other know where they are on the court. They know how to find one another. They know how to ask for help... A quiet team refuses ... to say, *I'm open. I'm here if you need me.* A quiet team refuses to need and be needed. What is basketball if not the practice of being needed and needy?"<sup>1</sup>

And in the bigger context, what is life if not the practice of being needed and needy? At times, we develop a way of being in the world that is built around being exclusively one or the other. Some of those individuals who are so caught up in the falsehood of being their own man or woman that they will never take advice or direction from another, let alone any kind of help or assistance. They call it being independent or, worse, self-made, which would be laughable if it were not so tragically untrue. Not one of us is self-made. We all have had help somewhere along the way—otherwise we would not be alive—and we all use resources left by the goodness and wisdom of others, whether it is driving down roads we did not build, going to schools and libraries we did not establish, working for organizations or worshipping at churches we did not found.

Then there are those whose constant state of being is to always look to others to do what they need to do themselves. Yes, there is systemic injustice inherent within the structures of our society. I am not talking about that. I am talking about those with privilege enough to make something of their lives and be of service to others, but who—for whatever reason—are not quite able to pull that off. You see that in the shambles of their lives.

Most of us bounce back and forth between periods of being one or the other—at times allowing ourselves to be the needed one to those times of being the needy one. And that on the surface seems to be healthy. But diving a bit deeper, I suggest that we learn to be both simultaneously, continually chattering as if playing a game of basketball. *I'm here if you need me. Throw me the ball* rolls into *I have the ball. I can make the shot* rolls right back into *I'm here if you need me.* The beauty of this back and forth is that each player has something to offer and something to receive. No one is superior. No one is inferior. We all are just helping and being helped along the way. And in that, we build our relationships. We build our communities. We build our lives.

I could have said to my friend when asked to review her latest novel, I can't help you. I don't know how to write a novel. But she recognized that she needed help, and her asking for my help was a gift to me. Her need allowed me to uncover how I could serve her in a way that truly was a gift to her. Each of us was able to fill a need and to have a need that both served and affirmed.

While I felt I had nothing to offer Nora to help her in refining her novel, she knew better. She asked me for feedback not based on my expertise in novel writing, but based on my experience as a reader, a skill I did not even know was a skill to possess.

Our best relationships are those that flow easily from being in need to being able to fill a need, to offering help to being able to accept help—much as in a good game of basketball. Let's play.

<sup>1</sup>Ross Gay, "The Ramshackle Garden of Affection," *The Sun*. June 2020, 45.

