

Salute to the Girl Scouts

By BARBARA T. ROESSNER

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I'm still prying the s'mores from the bottom of my sneakers, and I'm not sure I'll ever rid my hair, my clothes and my nostrils of the smell of campfire smoke. But there's one remnant of my weekend in the woods that I don't want to give up, ever.

It's an image. Of sunlight. Of water. Of pine needles on the ground and grasses around the knees and mountains in the air, all of it cast in the gauzy luminescence of June.

And amid the glow there are girls. Girls, girls and more girls. A score of them, age 9. Singing, working, embracing, arguing, making up, sneaking an illicit swim in their cotton underwear. Exuberant. Expansive. Triumphant. Limitless.

It's an image whose value need extend no further than its momentary beauty. But it is also a vision of female pubescence that despite all the real-world realities of gender bias and barriers gives me hope---not only for the moment, but for the future.

I'm no Girl Scout, but thank God my daughter is. Thank goodness she is reveling in the company of other girls and women in a way I never did, not at her age anyway. I've never been a joiner, never been able to take a pledge without secretly crossing my fingers, never been able to wear a uniform or a sash or a badge without chafing at the constraint. My daughter, praise the serendipity of genetics, is at ease in a troop.

And so she begged me, pleaded with me, nagged me until I had no choice but to scare up a ragged sleeping bag and head for the hills in a caravan of Scouts. (Except for a brief stint in the early '70s, when I swore off meat, let my armpit hair grow and spent a lot of time sleeping in tents, I'm no camper, either. I'll take a Marriott any day.)

Only out of a profound sense of motherly duty, and abiding working-mother guilt, was I prepared to whittle. What I discovered, though, is that the whittling (which, as it turns out, I totally dig), the badges, the sashes, the pledges, pins and salutes aren't the half of it. What the Girl Scouts are really about is girls, in the company of other girls, experiencing their individual and collective possibility. They're racially, ethnically and economically diverse, and largely urban-based. They chop wood, climb ropes and share each other's strength. The Girl Scouts are, in a word, hip.

One of the chaperones on our overnight was a young professional woman---a lawyer with no husband, no kids and a consuming passion for assisting young girls in tapping their infinite potential, a kind of emergency medical technician committed to reviving Ophelia. "Girl Scouts taught me I could do anything," she told me. "They're why I went to law school."

The others of us were moms with varying degrees of non-family responsibilities who simply crave time with our offspring. And we, too, were dazzled---not only by our own daughters' worth, but by the group chorus. A couple of us got tears in our eyes when the girls sang "Over the Rainbow" around the campfire. Why, then, O why can't I? But you can!

There are many routes to a weekend in the woods with a score of girls, and any one of them is worth traveling. But the Girl Scouts now stand out in my mind as a beacon of feminism that was there well before I had any notion of women's rights, or their limitations. It burned for me (though I never noticed), for my sisters and for my mother, who, somewhere in the chaos of raising six kids, managed to lead at least a dozen different troops.

One of my sister's kids recently came across her sash in their attic. Now she keeps it in her

bedside table, treasuring the heavy dark green cloth, the fine embroidery of the badges. It's Proustian, she says. "It's my Madeleine." We're thinking she should wear that old sash to her next business meeting or client soiree, just in case she starts feeling intimidated by all those suits around the table. Or perhaps she should wear it around the house, out to dinner with her husband, jogging, rollerblading, shopping---wherever and whenever she needs a reminder of sunlit girls without limits.

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