

There is arguably no more challenging, unsettling life stage than that of the budding adolescent girl growing up in our culture in modern times. They are inundated with messages of how their self-worth and place in the pecking order is based on their bodies and how their bodies compare not just to their peers but to the top supermodels on earth. They are inundated with messages about how what they wear can make or break their even gaining consideration to the next level of social acceptance. Whether they are “in” or “out” is often determined by other girls, usually without them knowing anything was wrong. They are much crueler to one another than most boys will ever be to them.

The worst is when we learn how cruel they can be to themselves.

There is also a myth which they are taught at a young age – a myth which dominates their psyche as they awaken to their budding sexuality. It is perhaps best called the “Cinderella Myth”. It is the story that someday their prince will come, that someday a man will come and find in them their true beauty which was held captive by their competitors (always other girls or women!) or which they never knew they possessed. Then it is his love, his kiss, which will awaken them and set them free... which will complete them. How many times has the story been told? How often is this plot line played out in movies, books, shows? How often is it reinforced in school, at home and yes EVEN IN CAMP with the comments they make to one another on what looks good and what doesn't (why does it matter?), from their counselors who spend an hour primping in the mirror every night off! It all sends and reinforces the message! Thus they fight amongst themselves, lie to one another, say hurtful things to one another as they scramble to be at the top of the pack - the right pack, the “popular crowd” - to be attractive to the right boys and to attract to them their Prince Charming.

Being so dependent upon external validation and so vulnerable to peer attacks, leads most of them to be massively insecure. We joke about their inability to go to the bathroom alone – to go anywhere alone! They can't make decisions without first taking into account the opinions of others and the social consequences which might come upon them. By 13 most of them have begun to create and fortify a secret world from their parents, knowing their parents would never understand nor approve of some of the choices they make to fit in and stay with the pack – especially regarding how “far” they'll go sexually with boys. Recent movies like “13” (a true story written by one of the films stars) reveals the startling truth of how sexually active they are. I've had people wince at the thought of their campers engaging in this, tell me I'm crazy and there's no way, only to come to me after their summer and tell me how true it turned out to be.

Of the many recent books written about the “mean girl” phenomena, few offer resolution to this pattern of behaviors. Many suggest support groups for adult women who survived the horrors of their adolescent girlhood and are still haunted by the insecurity. Therapy Groups for girls with eating disorders are popping up everywhere. Camps regularly receive notes from the psychologists who are working with them at younger and younger ages. So much of this takes such a defeatist, reactive approach! IT DOESN'T HAVE TO BE THIS WAY!

Over the past year and half I've put tremendous attention in the direction of proactively leading girls in the direction of a totally different way of approaching their lives, with success that is anywhere from subtle to stunning. The key to it is first and foremost defining what that new way of living would be, essentially recreating reality for them to be one where they wake up each morning and feel good and filled with an abundant sense of possibilities. Then we teach them the skills, the mindset, the awareness they'll need to make the choices to make this new reality, become their reality. I begin each of my retreats with these girls with: "Imagine what it would be like if you knew in all certainty that you could trust fully and completely every girl sitting with you today – for as long as you live. That you knew in all certainty that they would never do or say anything to hurt you intentionally. That if they ever had a problem with you they would come to you directly and resolve it. That they would never spread rumors about you and in fact would make an effort to squash any rumors they hear about you before it became gossip. That they would stick up for you. That they would always be honest with you. That they would never make comments about how fat your butt looks in those pants or say anything which pushes buttons where you are insecure! That they would encourage you and support you to be yourself, to take risks and accept you unconditionally for any ways this meant you needed to be different. That you would never again have the experience of walking in a room and having everyone get quiet because they had been talking about you –and if it did happen you could trust they only got quiet because they were planning a surprise party for you!... What would that be like?"

Typically I am met with a stunned silence. Some think I'm crazy and they tell me so (after all they are 13!). Some don't know how to respond. Some have questions about "How..." All listen, intently. All fully get that I mean what I say when I say it is possible. I've watched too many girls make this transformation through this work for anyone to convince me otherwise. What I am aiming towards is to create for them reference experiences. Ones which once they've had them, they now know what's possible and thus can no longer say "it can't be done". Then they can begin to choose to do what it takes to make their lives be this way, all the time, even – especially – at home.

This requires acting with great intention and offering your campers a whole different kind of learning than they get in traditional culture. It takes role models who live it and demonstrate it consistently. It takes a willingness to put the time in to teach them how to communicate, positively and cleanly with one another. It takes the willingness to put the time in to teach them how to use this new approach each time the old stimulus comes up, reminding them constantly that they have a choice. It takes a willingness to ban any negative comments about each others bodies. It takes a willingness to intervene each time they say something negative about their own bodies. Nowhere can this be more easily or effectively done than in camps, but as of now I only know of a few who go the distance with it.

Many are content with thinking that because the girls are happier at camp than at home thing at camp must be great. I caution anyone from being complacent with this – all this happens at your camp too, even when

you don't think it is! The camps who are having success in moving girls effectively in this direction, are using a multi faceted approach. Some of the things do in common are:

- Intervene immediately and consistently when incidents happen between girls and make certain the issue is processed and resolved. Many camps think they do this but in reality many counselors let many comments and small incidents go by without intervention. Sometimes this is because it is just so exhausting as each one can demand so much time and energy! "I train my counselors in the skills to resolve conflicts and process through personal issues," says Ann Batley, owner and director of Camp Mont Shenandoah in Virginia. "Then I insist that they intervene every time something comes up. They must be consistent and persistent about this. We don't always have the answers but our campers know that they will not slip through the cracks and that here it is never okay to be hurtful to another girl."
- Empower by making ongoing comments which point to strengths and what is working. "We have built into our activity program a series of achievable goals which our girls aspire to. In fact they come back to Camp to work on these goals." says Louise Johnson, co-director of Camp Arcadia in Casco, Maine. "We celebrate each of their successes - many times this is done publicly - and encourage our older campers to support our younger ones. This has become our culture. It is not that the girls don't ever have issues, but they are so much more oriented towards the positive and what they can do while at Camp, that these negative issues do not come up nearly as often."
- Encourage laughter of the most innocent nature. There is massive research supporting the positive impact of laughter and the subsequent release of endorphins. These are exactly the endorphins that the popular culture inhibits being present in girl's lives. "When they laugh," says Jani Brokaw, Owner and director of Campus Kids Minisink in New York, "their problems go away – they simply can't exist simultaneously. I only hire counselors who are positive and we build silly, playful fun into their schedule every day." As a result of this and many of her intentional efforts, many girls who struggle at home and even who struggled at other less intentional camps, thrive at Minisink.
- Select, train and support the right counselors with the right personality type. "We looked at this age group over several years and recognized the difference between the amount of issues that happened with different counselors on duty," says Marc Honigfeld, co-owner and director of Trails End Camp in Pennsylvania. Trails End has perhaps one of the most proactive programs for girls this age of any camp in the country, beginning each summer with an overnight retreat for their 13 year old girls the very first night of camp, where they address these issues with their campers and lead them to commit to creating their ideal culture. "We identified certain personality traits in counselors which this age group responded better to – and we knew we needed strong assertive young women who would be willing to intervene

without hesitation the moment things went off track.” They now are uncompromising about placing only strong, positive confident role models as counselors for this age – not young women with many unresolved issues of their own sense of security and self-confidence. In addition to placing the right counselors with this age group, they provide them intensive extra support and guidance from specialists who help lead them through the challenges of helping these adolescent girls rise above their old ways, including an extra day of training before camp.

The key to this whole process is both being uncompromisingly intentional about how we work with them, and believing it is totally possible for girls of this age to learn what it takes to become happy, healthy and centered young women. With this attitude and this approach, success – though it may take time and much effort – is guaranteed. Despite their initial resistance to it, they and the future generations of women who will follow, will thank you for it.

Best Regards,
Jeffrey Leiken, MA

March 2005
San Francisco, CA