

A Scout's Honor

By Jamie Buckingham

No book influenced my young life more than the Boy Scout handbook. In it I found a wonderful world of semaphore flags, sheepshanks, clove hitches, lean-tos and reflector ovens. It was my personal guidebook from the time I was 12 until I was 16. It took me from Tenderfoot, through the exciting world of merit badges, all the way to the coveted rank of Eagle Scout.

Youth activities in our little town—aside from a spitball fight in Sunday school or a Friday night dance—were non-existent. Scouting was everything. In Scouting I felt the tug toward manhood. Older boys disciplined younger boys. Scoutmasters took us on camping and canoe trips. I learned how to apply a tourniquet and a splint, salute my superiors, have my uniform inspected and feel pride with hard-earned accomplishments.

As a Scout, I learned all the important concepts that would later make life rich and meaningful. I learned to relate to a small group in my patrol and troop. I learned to respect—not fear or destroy—nature. With only a hatchet, knife, rope and compass I could live in the wilderness. I learned Indian lore, loyalty, and how to be part of a world brotherhood.

A Boy Scout loved God and country. He respected his parents. He went to church. He believed in good deeds, loyalty, thrift, courage, physical fitness and—most of all—being prepared. I took a vow that I still try to uphold. *He must be prepared at any time to save life, help injured persons and share the home duties. He must do at least one "good turn" to somebody every day.*

But with the good times were times of disappointment—the same disappointment I have suffered in adult life and in my church.

It wasn't with Scouting; it was with Scouts. Particularly with Scout leaders.

One August afternoon five of us—young teenagers—headed for the girly show at the annual summer carnival on the fairgrounds.

The sideshow barker had gathered a small crowd of mostly teenage boys. Two



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tired, flabby women were gyrating on the platform in bathing suits. Inside, the barker told us, we could "see it all" for 50 cents. We gave each other knowing looks, told the ticket-taker we were "of age" (we were all 13) and entered the semidark tent where scratchy Egyptian music was playing.

An old bump-and-grind woman came out on the tiny stage and began to strip. She finally got down to what I imagined was the fabled G-string. Then, in a whirl and a flash, she pulled it down. Before we could blink, she looked at us, gave her hips a hunch and disappeared behind the drape. The show was over.

I felt dirty. It was the first time I had seen a naked woman. I felt degraded, and yes, cheated. I had wasted a week's allowance for a scar that would remain in my memory for a lifetime.

But the worst part was when we turned around to leave. There, in the back of the little tent, was our new scoutmaster. I knew we had been caught, yet inwardly I was relieved. I sensed I needed both punishment and help. Especially help. I didn't like what I had done and needed to be absolved. But the scoutmaster didn't see us in the dark tent. He had something else on his mind. Walking around the inside edge of the tent, he had found the other stripper and was talking to her in a hushed conversation.

We kept out of his sight, laughing quietly that we hadn't been caught—but had caught him instead. We got down on

hands and knees and crawled under the edge of the tent into the hot Saturday afternoon sunlight.

Ordinarily I would have been excited by the midway: the music, the roar of the motorcycles in the pit, the whirling colors of the octopus and the tilt-a-whirl. But I was sick at my stomach. My technicolor world had turned to gray.

Overshadowing everything was a deep sense of moral revulsion—sadness—over the woman who had degraded herself in front of a bunch of teenage boys. From my father I had inherited such a lofty concept of womanhood. I stood when a woman entered the room. I helped my mother or my sister with her chair at the table. To have spoken harshly to a woman, much less struck her, would have been a sin of the first magnitude. Now that pristine image of womanhood had been soiled by my first cheap glimpse of flesh—an image that remains in my mind even to this day.

Then there was the searing guilt. I had violated that deep sense of morality ingrained by the Boy Scout oath: *"On my honor I will do my best to do my duty to God and my country...to keep myself physically strong, mentally awake, and morally straight."* I desperately needed forgiveness, absolution. But the only man who could give it, my scoutmaster, was still in the tent.

That, perhaps, was the deepest wound of all. I had seen the dark side of a man I looked to for light. As my scoutmaster he had been my hero, the bearer of the torch, the lifter of the standard. He was the man who challenged us to excel, to be noble, to do right. If I couldn't trust my scoutmaster, how could I ever be cleansed of my own sin?

It was my first introduction to life the way it really is—unfair and full of disappointments. But it prepared me for what I later discovered was truth. It is God who cleanses and absolves—not man. While Scouts strive to be trustworthy, God alone can be trusted. My task: to forgive and love—for love covers a multitude of sins—even the sins of leaders. ■