

April 25, 2010

OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

## Troop Therapy

By PAUL THEROUX

Haleiwa, Hawaii

SOME pizza deliverymen are safe drivers, and though it seems incredible given the recent news to the contrary, some clergymen are pious, some politicians monogamous and some car dealers honest. There are ethical Boy Scout masters, too. Yet nothing is so satisfying to the lazy mind as news that reinforces a negative stereotype.

In my progress from Tenderfoot to Eagle Scout back in the 1950s, none of the adult leaders I knew resembled the pedophile scoutmaster, Timur Dykes, who molested 17 scouts, resulting in an [\\$18.5 million dollar judgment](#) against the organization on Friday. Other Scout leaders have been accused of abusing boys on camping trips, their cases pending. During the Dykes trial it also emerged that the Boy Scouts' central office keeps a list of molesters that has yet to be released, known informally as the "perversion files."

"The actions of the man who committed these crimes do not represent the values and ideals of the Boy Scouts of America," the national organization stated in response to the Dykes case.

I agree, more or less. I can still recite the Scout Oath ("On my honor, I will do my best to do my duty..."), and the 12 points of the Scout Law ("A scout is trustworthy, loyal, helpful ..."); but I equivocate, because when I was a scout the abstractions of "values and ideals" mattered less to me than simply getting out of the house and away from the folks. Troop 25 in Medford, Mass., showed me how to make that elemental move.

We were only incidentally committed to being "physically strong, mentally awake and morally straight." We were black, white, thin, fat, rich and poor and united in being geeks. We rather disliked our uniforms. We knew we were different. Not one of us was good at throwing a ball or swinging a bat. Though we lived in suburban Boston, with its two Major League Baseball teams, I doubt that any of us could name a single player.

But we were keenly aware that being a Boy Scout allowed us to shoot guns, build fires and take overnight camping trips on our own. In every sense it was revenge of the nerds. You have a curve ball; I can hit a bull's-eye with my .22.

We were bookish, but in nonacademic ways. My interests were fingerprinting, Native-American skills and customs, rock climbing, map reading, canoeing and marksmanship. All of those represented merit badges that I studied for and earned. My Indian Lore badge taught me more about that aspect of American history than I was learning at school. And this wasn't warmed-over "cowboys and Indians" fare: from the beginning the Boy Scouts taught respect for Native Americans, their values, as well as reminders of their victimization

— indeed, their genocide.

Stifled by the hearty and the homoerotic in jock culture, I found refuge in the Boy Scouts, and an outlet for my love of hiking and swimming and solitude. It was important for me to separate myself from my parents. While other mothers and fathers cheered on their children at ballgames, we were on our own — two or three of us on an all-day hike, or target shooting up at the Stoneham sandpits.

Even Scout camp involved minimal authority, and its relative chaos was salutary. I earned badges for rowing and sailing — skills that have served me to this day. My lifesaving badges and Red Cross certification not only got me jobs at ponds and swimming pools in the Boston area, but enabled me, over the years, to rescue a number of hapless swimmers. The summer beach and the wooded path were as formative in making me a writer as the public library.

Occasionally we scouts operated as a team; but most of the time individual effort was what mattered. My heroes were explorers, mountain climbers and lone sailors (they still are) and my fantasy life revolved around bushwhacking and jungle ordeals (it probably still does).

Then, and later, when an adult mentioned the Scouts with a snobbish snigger, I would think: you have no idea. I also thought: you're afraid to let go of your children. Liberated by the Scouts, I had the confidence to be independent and was allowed to discover my identity in a way that I never could have through team sports.

The Boy Scouts isn't perfect, "neither the Hitler Youth of its worst detractors nor the virtuous community of its stalwart defenders," writes Jay Mechling in "On My Honor," a clear-sighted analysis of Scouting in American life. Mr. Mechling's criticism is unsparing, but he also speaks about the autonomy of the average troop, how decentralized the organization is, allowing for more latitude than the bureaucrats in the national office might wish — or outsiders might imagine. That was certainly my experience: we obeyed the rules while remaining ourselves, and it was never about winning.

Sexuality and religion were very far from being the core of my Boy Scout experience. And yet the question of Scouting's ban on homosexuals and atheists is an important one. The paradox is that the Scouts, with its diverse group of boys, can easily accommodate them. "Scouting is for all boys," runs the first line in an official Boy Scout publication, from 1967. This enlightened pamphlet (wiser than its title, "Scouting for the Mentally Retarded") goes on to say, "Scouting is also for each boy and each boy is different."

The Boy Scouts would be doing a great service if it made a few adjustments (as it did after the era of segregation) and acted on that crisp acknowledgment of inclusiveness. Far from eviscerating its principles, accepting gays and atheists would strengthen them.

Anyway, there are already closeted gay scouts, as well as quietly atheist scouts. Formally excluding gay scouts only makes those 11-year-olds more isolated and miserable, as well as violating their civil rights. Some boys are gay and some don't pray. Not only are such boys capable of being good scouts, but the recognition of such traits would help to make their fellow scouts more tolerant, especially at that awkward age.

*Paul Theroux is the author of "Dead Hand: A Crime in Calcutta."*