When I Left a Part of Me Stayed

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Recommended Citation

Bengford, Aidan JF, "When I Left a Part of Me Stayed" (2024). Honors Capstones. 1491. https://huskiecommons.lib.niu.edu/studentengagement-honorscapstones/1491

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NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

When I Left a Part of Me Stayed

A Capstone Submitted to the

University Honors Program

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements of the Baccalaureate Degree

With Honors

Department Of

English

By

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DeKalb, Illinois

February 27, 2024
Scouting has been a huge part of my life. I've been in the program more years than I have out of it. I am not unique. Scouting has been a huge part of millions of lives for over a century, but times have changed. Throughout the essay I explore questions about what scouting means to me, contrasting the negative experiences that so many others have gone through. Beyond the abuse, scouting has been around a very long time so it may be time to ask: has Scouting been left behind in our developing world or is this society exactly the environment Scouting was made for? Scouting has had declining membership for the past few decades, and some think it should stay that way. They argue we should leave scouting’s cultural predation, power tripping leaders, and antiquated views on sexuality where those views belong, in the past. Others lament scouting's slow tragic death, arguing its moral instruction is essential for training boys how to live in any time or place. In this essay I wanted to explore how that death affects me as a scout and scouting’s place in the moral makeup of American youth. As a part of this process I compared the historical ideals of scouting and why it was initially supported and then tie that to modern concerns about boyhood. Those concerns are not found only in the parents of children today, but the children themselves. Young people, including children, aren't happy about it being forced inside either.

Keywords: Scouting,
Aidan Bengford
Ms. Zeek
Independent Study
September 29, 2023

When I Left a Part of Me Stayed

I love being barefoot. The natural world beneath your feet. Soft or stone it feels right to be there. The best time I had this feeling was on a week-long camping trip along the Current River. We were rained out of the first two days of the trip. Our planned campsites would’ve been underwater. That didn’t change how far we were going. The plan was still 50 miles. We were just going to have to be faster and row longer into the evening. I remember a haze as night was falling when we crossed under a stone bridge into a sandy hill, the world tinted a slight blue and the air cool and wet. We brought out canoes up the small beach, unpacked our stuff from the 10 gallon buckets, and dragged the canoes up the steep hill now that all our heavy stuff was off them. After we set up camp I took off my shoes and socks and just walked around on the sandy dirt. Little bits of greenery were growing intermittently, softly brushing my feet as I passed. The sand under my toes felt divine. It was soft and smooth and felt great between my toes. The feeling was a little soured by one of the scoutmasters recalling he’d been there before. When they found it there were beer bottles and hundreds of condoms littering the forest floor. I doubt there were hundreds now, but at the time I believed them. I went barefoot anyway. The sand wasn’t the problem. The poison ivy was. I had strayed a little too far out of the campsite, stepped on a plant, and felt the itching start. I thought it wasn’t a big deal until the itch stayed. But it wasn’t a big deal. Mr. Parker was prepared. He was my scoutmaster and a great leader. At that moment he was the guy who had the poison ivy cream. I spend the next 30 minutes down the hill by the side of the river massaging the cream into my feet and washing it away in the water. This too felt very nice. It was like a massage stone was rubbing against my feet. Looking back, I felt so at peace.
I joined Cub Scouts when I was five years old. I got in there as early as I possibly could. My parents weren’t the ones who asked me to join. I got a flier at school about it. The story the flier told me was something I wanted to be a part of. I don’t remember anything the flier said. It probably said “Tiger” in there somewhere. If I joined cub scouts that’s the rank I’d be when I joined. The pictures are still hazy, but I remember those better. There were black and white pictures of kids in the blue uniforms. The kids were standing in a line, facing the camera, outside on campgrounds. I can picture another photo of some kids standing around a campfire trying to keep it going and a graphic of a tiger cub. This may not be exactly what was on the paper. I’ve written about this flier before and something else ended up on the page. The details of the story aren’t important. The fact that those details made a story I wanted to be a part of is what is really important. I talked to my parents and we went to the first meeting at my elementary school the same week.

When I look back at my time in scouting I feel a mix of frustration and pride. My troop experience was transformative and exhilarating. The frustration in my troop individually only exists because my troop was not made of angels. One time Joe was selfish with water on a canoe trip, sometimes Luke was a bit of a bully. Those are only small things that frustrate me. The scoutmaster made sure I was hydrated on that trip. Luke for all his faults became a good friend during our time in the troop. Without a worry or second thought I carved him a javelin out of reed. The frustration is from scouting in the bigger picture. I want to say I hate what scouting has become, but that’s not the case because scouting hasn’t really become anything since I left. It hasn’t transformed at all. Everything that annoys me about scouting started long before I was a scout and kept on going while I was collecting merit badges. The increasing cost of being a scout, double and tripling the cost of scouting registration and equipment was already happening when I was a scout. Misguided moral lessons were certainly a part of scouting when I was there too. Those are where I am most conflicted because some of the lessons are misguided. Others are exactly how I’d want them taught, sometimes better. The sexual assault
scandals and the payouts to the victims was already happening when I was a scout. When I was asked if I’d want my future kid in such a program my answer was immediately yes. I was actively researching my reservations about scouting, and yet the answer seemed so obvious to me. The core of the program, what it advertises itself to be about is there. It really is in the program, but that was just my experience. My frustrations were not made out of nothing. So it's not clear if scouting will or even can exist in the form it did when I went through the program. I want to interrogate what scouting was for me, where it has been, where it will be, and find out if my immediate answer would be the right one.

Foundations

The foundation of scouting is a story that every scout hears at some point. I joined cub scouts just a few years before the 100th anniversary so I heard it a lot early on. The story goes that a Chicago publisher, William D. Boyce, was lost in the dense London fog, when a boy saw him and offered to help. This boy led him to his destination and refused when Boyce offered him a tip. The boy said as a scout he would not take money for doing a good deed, referencing the scout motto. Mr. Boyce picked up a copy of Scouting for Boys and founded what would become the Boy Scouts of America the very next year, 1910. This moment is what scouting is supposed to be about: kindness without expectation of reward or recognition. We never learned the name of the boy in the story because he didn’t want to tell it. He didn’t want Boyce’s reward. He wanted to do good. That is the lesson we were told after the story was finished, but there’s another lesson in that story. This story is one the Boy Scouts of America were proud of. You can find a version of it on their website and I used that to refresh my memory. This lesson imparted the ideals of scouting and had another lesson too. It served to tell us scouts that we always had to be on our best behavior. One boy doing what he thought was right was why scouting existed.
in America. You never know if the stranger you are helping could turn out to be like Mr. Boyce. Your kind act could result in more good will given in the world.

Scouting as an organization was founded in part as a Christian organization. You can see it in nearly every merit badge the program teaches. A connection to God is mentioned as a key component of studying most merit badges, but today it is vague enough that it could be any religion. This Christian connection isn’t merely an implied artifact of the organization’s writings. Scouting for Boys, by Baden-Powell, the man who first founded scouting in the United Kingdom, explicitly states this as a central goal. In his section on religion he writes that Scouting is excellent for the instruction of the four best Christian values, Faith, Hope, Charity, and Humor. He further complains that the professed ideal for the instruction of young boys is boring, likening it to a milky water. It consists of silent bible study with the occasional treat of talking to the minister. There is nothing wrong with trying to make religious instruction more interesting to kids, this does make it clear that Scouting was founded intending to be a Christian organization with religious backing. Baden Powell didn’t found scouting in the United States, but William D. Boyce used this book as the foundation of scouting in the United States. The cute story with the boy in the fog inspired the purchase, but the structure of the organization starts with Scouting for Boys.

A connection to god wasn’t Baden Powell’s only goal. He thought that boys of England were getting too soft and losing a certain spirit in them. Numerous sources, like the documentary Leave No Trace and articles across the internet agree that military preparation was part of the goal, but you don’t need historical analysis to see it. In the second page an essential element of scoutcraft is to “Drill” the scouts. Furthermore, Powell brings up the defense of the British Colonial town Mafeking being easier because of the frontier training similar to his scouting program. There was an express military purpose in training boys to be scouts. I briefly considered joining the military to help pay to get into any college I wanted. Knowing that my eagle rank would get me a promotion in a military service helped and while that is all I thought about it, the general atmosphere of scouting made the military a more approachable idea. My
parents of course were aghast when I told them about going to the meeting with a friend, but the effect on me shows that even with a civilian focus the space still prepares for military involvement, like Powell wanted.

For decades Boy Scouts has built up its dual reputation. It is thought of as a highly prestigious organization that instills discipline, obedience, and manners into its boys. At the same time it is an incredible, raucous adventure. The paintings of Norman Rockwell reflect his image. The Boy Scouts of America hired him to paint scouts and create an easily recognizable image of scouting. The image he created in the Rockwell paintings shows the scouts with a face of resolve. These boys know what they want and aren’t going to screw around on their way to that goal. At the same time they are trekking out into the wilderness on a fun trip without parental control. When you are a scout it feels like something you are doing. It’s not something being set up for you to learn from. It’s not an artificial scenario. At least it doesn’t feel artificial. It feels like you are going through something real, something important. As a kid I couldn’t articulate why scouting made me feel more connected, but these pictures show the Boy Scouts of America did.

They are standing together, obedient and poised, going off to new horizons. It's everything a
parent or child wants. The paintings of Norman Rockwell are easy for anyone to understand, young or old. Rockwell paints in a style that exaggerates real life, but not to such a degree that it's hard to parse. He exaggerates a reaction to make it more clear that reaction is occurring. He exaggerates the Scout's attitude to convey the theme the BSA wanted him to create. The BSA wanted to create the idealized perfect boy with these paintings. In fact, the Leave No Trace documentary tells us that a lot of Norman Rockwell's ideals were rejected because they didn't live up to the mythic ideal the BSA wanted to present. For example Rockwell wanted to paint a scene where a scout was doing some scout-worthy task to help people out in the rain. As a part of that painting Rockwell included some raindrops on the uniform, but ruining the crisp uniform the tiniest bit was rejected by the BSA. In the paintings below you can see the perfection in these photos. They are going on an adventure, and the youth will pick up on their bravery and the fun they are having, but they are also clean and crisp scouts. Not a blemish on the uniform, just the natural wrinkling of the clothes necessary to make the picture look remotely realistic.

Knowing all the tools and strategies Rockwell and the BSA used in creating these paintings doesn't make them less effective for me. In the painting on the left where all the boys are in green I am inspired by the youngest scout on the scoutmasters left. His face shows that he is still learning what's going on and intently listening to learn navigation. On the scoutmaster's other side we see an older boy he too is listening intently, but his eyebrows aren't raised indicating he has a better idea of what the scoutmaster is saying. He still has much to learn, but he's more sure of the direction they need to go. The boy holding the flag is paying attention, but he doesn't seem to need the directions. His relaxed manner with hands at his sides indicate that he is waiting patiently for the explanation to be over, furthermore he's looking in the right spot, but he doesn't know where the scoutmaster is pointing. He doesn't need to know, he already knows how to find what he's looking for. This painting shows the progression of a scout's career encapsulating what scouting says it's about. Scouting is supposed to be a place where parents can send their children to learn what the parent can teach them. It's a place
to learn self-reliance and how to work as a team. It’s a place to learn about the natural world and respect it. It’s about service, both within the community and in nature.

Boyce wasn’t on the board of the Boy Scouts of America that long after its founding. He did still support the BSA, but he wasn’t a decision maker anymore. Instead, he set his mind to creating the Lone Scouts to serve boys who lived in the countryside and couldn’t join a larger troop. He wanted to create an organization for boys who were like he was when he was young, with little opportunity, and even though there was a uniform he made it clear that the boys didn’t have to purchase one. Less than 10 years later the Lone Scouts merged with the Boy Scouts creating the inclusive and character-building organization Boyce always wanted. The problem was that it was as inclusive as he wanted. The Lone Scouts weren't all that inclusive. As racial tensions were rising in the early 1920s the masthead for the book changed from “The Real Boys Magazine” to “The White Boys Magazine” and proclaimed they would only accept whites. Curiously, early letters from Boyce indicate he wanted to include all “races and creed” in the Boy Scouts of America. The heart of the Boy Scouts of America was inclusive from the start, but when it came down to it, when Boyce had to make a choice in a difficult time, he chose to exclude other races. Contradictions like this are found throughout scouting’s history, but I have to wonder why Boyce made this choice. Online sources don’t have anything to say about this contradiction so it's hard to know why it exists. Did his mind know that tolerance was the correct choice, but his emotions got the better of him as tensions rose? Did his mind change on the importance of tolerance within scouting? Was it a response to external pressure? Regardless, it was an evolution to intolerance, not the other way around. This would not really affect Boy Scouts were it not for the fact that the Lone Scouts merged with Boy Scouts in 1924, just four years later. Official overt racism was spread by the organization's leader and parts of the organization itself. The exclusion from scouting has been there from the beginning and the inherent contradiction between Boy Scouts stated goals and what they actually do has always been there too.
The Boy Scouts of America wasn’t the only major scouting program created in 1910. The “Perversion files” were also created the same year. The most publicized release of the files dates back to the 60s, but the files themselves go back way farther. All the way to the creation of Scouting in America. If you are unaware the perversion files a list of scouting volunteers who are no longer allowed to be a part of scouting because they inappropriately touched boys or were otherwise sexually inappropriate for scouting. Really the BSA did a phenomenal job of tracking these cases, but they did nothing to stop the abuse. Take a look at one of the notes from a file.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

1. That Subject be immediately dismissed from the volunteer service of the Boy Scouts of America. This action all ready has been taken.

2. That Subject be placed on the list of undesirables published by the National Council and that he not be allowed to hold any position in Scouting except by decision of the National Council, Boy Scouts of America.

3. That Subject be encouraged strongly to seek professional help.

4. That no further action be taken against Subject by the Boy Scouts of America.

It was never the policy to report these crimes to the police or help the victims in any way. The documentary Leave no Trace, an in depth exploration of sexual exploitation throughout scouting’s history described the purpose and function of these files. The policy was to not tell anyone. The BSA was concerned with protecting confidentiality of the perpetrator. No one could access these files unless you were high up in the organization and people outside the organization had no idea that these files existed at all. What’s worse is that there was a probation policy for these perpetrators too. Not real legal probation, but when these volunteers abused kids rather than going to the police the BSA would give the pedophiles a second chance as a volunteer. That’s how they worked, but the purpose of these files was to protect the reputation of the Boy Scouts of America. People abusing the program on the massive scale shown by the files would ruin the name of boy scouts so they didn’t want any of this information
to get out. The icon they used to symbolize these files was a man putting out a fire. This was them putting out fires, hiding their shame instead of fixing the problem. They were good at hiding it. Everyone who was abused thought they were an isolated case, thought it was just something wrong with their troop. It wasn’t that though. This was a national problem.

Now what do we do so solve this national problem? The lawsuits are in and the Boy Scouts of America needs to pay their victims, as they should, but the structure of scouting isn’t changing to solve the issue. If you look into it you’ll see that the BSA now has the Youth Protection program which states that it was created to “uncover and prevent child abuse,” but clearly the program has not been as effective as hoped. The organization was founded in 1988 and at the very least there are perversion file records as recent as 2011 meaning it was still hidden and prevalent decades later. We know this because in a 2012 case in San Antonio “The judge ordered BSA to produce perversion files from 1985 to 2011 as evidence.” Clearly this organization is not enough because these files wouldn’t exist if it was. The CEO of Child USA claims the problem with the scouting program is the model. The structure of the scouting program as a whole is what creates the opportunity for abuse. The CEO goes on to say that BSA is bringing children into the wilderness with very few adults, they should’ve thought about what to do about the model years ago. Scouting is about adventure, being out in the woods, self-reliance, and learning skills. Scouting represents what every young boy wants. But often you’re in a remote place where there’s no one to go for help. It can’t be right to just accept abuse is going to happen, but getting rid of it while maintaining the same adventurous freeing atmosphere seems impossible. Maybe bringing the parents along on these trips would help. It certainly wouldn’t stop all abuse, but it would change the model and could bring the abuse down to a similar level to what happens without scouting. Simple answers are satisfying, but simple doesn’t mean effective. It may not work, but it is a place to start.

With these lawsuits came the bankruptcy. The Boy Scouts of America declared bankruptcy on February of 2020 and have been selling off assets ever since. They didn’t have
enough money to pay for the settlements and damages. My summer camp was sold as a part of paying these damages. Every time I look up Camp Freeland Leslie there is some new information about what has happened since I was there. It’s not fun facts. For the past two years, I constantly rediscovered that the camp was sold in 2021. My first year there was 2013 in early June placing us at a month before July 5th, 2013. A boy, a few years older than I was, thirteen years old, was sexually assaulted at that camp. On July 5th, 2013. I kept telling myself that it was not the camp; it was some scout leader who just paid to be there. That has nothing to do with the camp. I keep telling myself that the camp shouldn’t be sold because of this. It isn’t right. But the camp was sold because those men were at every scout camp in America. The perversion files were released one year before this happened. When we were scouts we all knew about these court cases, but it never felt real to me. I thought of it the same way I thought about priests in the Catholic Church. It’s real, but not something that could come to me. I thought it was something that happened a long time ago. When picturing the victims I always imagined a man in his 40s. It always felt like something far away, far away from the scouting I knew. I never met that kid and I probably never will, but it wasn’t far away. It wasn’t something that happened 30 years ago (and neither is what happened in the Catholic Church) and the seeds of the bankruptcy didn’t stop it from happening.

“A boy is not a sitting-down animal.” - Baden Powell

I didn’t really know who I was when I joined sub scouts. By now I’ve built myself a persona of being a quiet intellectual. The type to spend their time indoors and carefully consider their thoughts before action. People are surprised when I tell them that I was a scout, that I earned my Eagle. I don’t seem like the type. I added this program to my repertoire before I really knew what direction I was going. I added a little diversity before making my story match what people expect of me. The funny thing is that scouting was built for people like me. Built to make
young boys less of the homebodies its founders thought would soon plague America. When the US and world at large was urbanizing, people were worried boys were becoming less hardy and losing touch with the outdoors. Those ideals are why scouting got so much support in its early days. Franklin Delano Roosevelt attended national scouting events praising the organization and its ideals. In his speech, he said “Scouting. It's based off the spirit of service [and cooperation]. And it's going to work.” The US was urbanizing and the adults of that generation were worried the youth would lose its connection to the natural world, only living in an urban environment. In a way they were right. In our modern cities and towns, young people don’t have that many places to go. Young people have made memes about this phenomenon for years. We want to go outside, but the opportunities for it are more limited than they were for previous generations. Scouting makes those opportunities. It takes kids away from these concrete forests and takes them to actual forests.

Older folks: “Why don’t kids go outside anymore?”

The outside they built:

Scouting has names for its group meant to evoke a more organized and yet more natural feel to them. In cub scouts you are organized into dens and packs. The pack is the entire group of scouts that meet every week. The pack has its own number and ours was 131. Each pack is composed of four or more dens. Their website recommends dens be about 6-8 scouts in size,
but in our pack each den was organized by rank. There was the tiger den, the wolf den, the bear den, and the webelos den. Reading it out it sounds like a secret club and an adventure. I wasn’t thinking about this at the time, but when I was a wolf it really felt cool to say that and have it be true. Scouting is an adventure and this naming makes that journey really feel wild even though cub scout’s “adventures” are really sheltered. On every outing there are a lot of adults and they really bridge the gap in ability between what the kid wants to do and what they are capable of in the forest. Boy Scouts transitions from these wild sounding names to more militarized units, matching a shifting interest in a growing boy’s mind. The organizational units in Boy Scouts are patrols and troops. Troops are the Boy Scouts equivalent to a pack. It’s the whole group of scouts that meets together and shares a number. The patrols are analogous to a den where a smaller group of close knit scouts with an elected leader of each patrol. There is also the Senior Patrol, the smaller group with the most experienced scouts and their leader is decided by the whole troop. The Senior Patrol takes a leadership role over the whole troop. The format of scouting changes beyond the surface level of militarized names instead of wild ones. The scouts themselves lead other scouts making the scouts live the story scouting is trying to teach them. As young scouts, we are mostly independent from adults but are still obeying authority. Other organizations have young leaders with real roles in the organization, but not to the degree of a scout. At the same time, there is an intense lionization of obedience. It is the simultaneous furthering of conflicting ideals of obedience and independence that’s so odd to me.

Boy Scouting is a compelling narrative. It’s a narrative we as Americans are drawn to. The quintessential American man. Roughing it in the woods and living off the land. I can picture this man. A well groomed mustache and beard wearing a red and black plaid shirt, he is sipping from a steel cup while roasting some meat thing over the fire. This rugged individual is part of the appeal of scouting. Scouting is in part here to allow men to live out this fantasy. Going back to the old ways creates an odd sense of purpose. It’s like you always know what you are supposed to be doing. It removes the complex questions about life. No longer are you worrying
if you are pursuing the right career or if you really matter in the world. Focusing on survival gets rid of those worries. This is a near universal aspect of the human condition. Even people who don’t follow scouting often still pursue this in other ways. Stardew Valley is a farming game that scratches this very itch. In the game your character is plucked from their life as an office worker and given the task of starting their own farm after inheriting some land from grandpa. With this goal you get to leave the monotony and stressors of modern life. Scouting provides the same glimpse into this primitive world. This is romanticism. Life was not better before we had all the modern conveniences and while the struggle for survival gives purpose, in scouting we are not really struggling for survival. We know we will survive. We just have to follow the right steps. What we are doing is playing at a struggle for survival. The wilderness imposes limitations on us that aren’t artificial, but it was our decision to go to an environment where those limitations exist. That decision doesn’t change how it feels. It feels like I have a purpose out there. Like my existence doesn’t need to matter in the grand scheme of things because my energy goes into surviving out there.

Scouting’s values are something that has been instilled in my life. The scout law goes “A Scout is trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, and reverent.” We were supposed to be ready to say it before any ceremony and every meeting. Our troop thought living it was more important than saying it so we skipped reciting it most meetings, but learning it was important. We spent weeks drilling these words into our head in the exact order stated here. We used big sheets of paper with each word taped onto old buckets of Folgers coffee to practice. Whoever was learning it would try to line up the coffee buckets in order. If they got it wrong (which they usually did) we’d tell them which ones were wrong, kick the buckets around, and tell them to start again. I’ve thought that it might’ve been a better idea to test which of the 12 laws the scout even knew or maybe to just use the papers instead of complicating it with buckets. I think we did it this way because our troop didn’t want to hide the core values. Studying this way makes the whole thing not about gatekeeping, but
getting the scout to think about the values they are supposed to follow. Kicking these buckets around was pretty fun. It wasn’t like studying for an exam it was like trying to get better at a game. The buckets were a soft plastic so you could hit them as hard as you wanted. If you were frustrated it was nice to kick them across the room and I remember doing just that to see how hard I could kick it. Showing them the laws as a part of the exercise instead of just getting them to look at the book until they memorized it made the process more special. It wasn’t memorizing a speech, it was making the values of scouting a part of you.

Environmental conservation has been a key part of the scouting experience for decades. I think it would be hard to find someone who would disagree that the environment is important. Maybe it’s really easy to find someone who would do things to hurt the environment, but people tend to agree it’s something they should do even if it’s something they won’t do. A great majority of projects in scouting I remember having to do with clean ups. When a tornado hit Fairdale in 2015 it was our job to clean up all the debris. Picking up trash when we find it was drilled into my head multiple times a year. It was almost my cub pack’s slogan. Joining a sub pack is the thing younger kids do when they aren’t old enough for scouts yet. I first learned about how to save energy here, priming me to be more receptive to learning more about conservation later on. Scouting has been instilling care for the natural world in its members for decades and those
values are very much needed by our society, now more than ever. Aside from conservation the scout law and the stories of brotherhood scouts learn about it viscerally instill these values. Anyone can tell you the value in courteousness or service, but in scouts you feel it. The troops are gathered around the fire just after night has fallen, with the beat of the drum in the back, hearing stories of a man patching up a roof in the rain. The Order of the Arrow ritual induction ceremony is about to begin. First we get the background that the chief was dying and the men of the tribe were trying to prove themselves worthy to earn the mantle of chieftain by climbing to the top of a great mountain in a test of physical and moral character. Our hero walks along the trail up the mountain where he comes upon an old man who asks to talk. The hero agrees and hours and hours pass without the hero even noticing. He then departs and soon after it begins to rain. With no shelter nearby he simply smiles and walks on, cheerfully enduring what cannot be avoided. Then he finds an old woman and her leaky hut. Without a word or a second thought he collects wood to patch up her roof and hunts a rabbit for her to eat. After speaking with her over her meal he goes on on his journey. He then encounters a final obstacle, a shear wall miles high. This is where all the other men had turned back. He was about to leave when a man suddenly appeared before him. After the hero says he has no way to climb it so he must turn back, the man reveals himself to be the North Star. He had been watching our hero show dedication to brotherhood, cheerfulness, and service (the three tenets of the Order of the Arrow, a scouting subgroup). With that the North Star turns the hero into an arrow and shoots him to the top of the mountain. The hero then returns as chief.

This is not an incredible story. It is a simple moral tale directly teaching a straightforward lesson. The atmosphere and scouts around me made the simple story fill my heart. The beating of the drums, the firelight in the darkness, the mythic quality to the story and delivery, that is what draws someone in. I wanted to be like the man in the story. Looking around you can see most of the scouts are quiet out of respect and staring at the firelight attentively. These firelight stories are a ritual to imbue the feeling into a scout. The atmosphere and environment make a
scout like me feel like this is more important. Even when I wasn’t fully immersed, the memory of
the story remains strong. If you pay attention you can see scouts chatting with each other and
playing on their phones, but not all, not most. We know it’s amateur. It’s not high art. Even the
story filling my heart is a simple moral lesson. What it is is sincere. We perform these rituals
because we mean it. We are people and don’t live up to our ideals. The point isn’t to kick out
imperfection. The hero of the Order of the Arrow’s mythicness does make him less relatable, but
it also makes him something better to live up to. The stories are told right after we established
friendship and camaraderie with the other troops putting on our own silly plays. They are often
recycled, but as you go to more and more campouts the recycled ones become nostalgic and
any scout creative enough for a new one is novel and fun no matter how bad it is. Really that’s
what all artists want to achieve. When I told a professor of mine about this story and how base it
was they shared their own perspective. She thought that in a way it was the highest form of art
because it actually got its audience to feel and change with the story, and it got them to do so
together.

Stories are better really aren’t they. As much as I’ve learned from Boy Scouts, the
feelings and instincts are what remain the strongest. When I want to talk about how much
scouting taught me about the environment my first thought isn’t about the lessons. I don’t initially
think about chlorofluorocarbons or ways to organize to clean up the local environment or what
we learned about plastics. What I want to do is tell a story about a campfire. These rituals are
powerful emotional tools that make the story scouting wants to be about a reality. Preserving the
natural world so we can bask in its beauty or tell tales around the fire. The courses are
necessary too, but the foundation of what makes those lessons stick is in the unique feeling
created by scouting. Nevertheless today I am partly ashamed of that story. The first time I wrote
the Order of the Arrow ritual story I tried my hardest to exclude the Native American elements. I
was ashamed about how the iconography, story structure, and costuming is stolen from them. If
it is high art it isn’t high art produced by scouting. Scouts stole the cultural significance from
Native culture to make their own program more effective. It worked. It told a better story and made me want to be a better person. I really did feel the story and I still do. It was inspiring, but it also cheapens Native American culture and religion for the purposes of making a Christian organization better. It feels exploitative to be inspired by this, but that inspiration led to actual tangible service. That doesn't feel morally wrong, but I can't say if it actually is. Not that I'm not qualified. I just don't know.

The Scouting educational materials too advance the life narrative the Boy Scouts of America want its scouts to live. While it's ideal for a scout to learn a merit badge alongside a trained guide, the BSA produced guidebooks for scouts without someone to show them the way. By using these guidebooks the scout can do the merit badge on his own and present his work to someone trained to earn the badge. As a part of my training as a scout my Scoutmaster, Tim, (who was not Family Life certified) used one of these guidebooks to help us earn that badge.

The Family Life guidebook helps outline what a family is, implicitly outlining what a family should and shouldn't be. Stating this as what a family is means the book is saying a family not living up to these standards isn't really a family. The standards imposed by the book are actually what an ideal family should be. They should “give and receive love and support from the others” in the family. Talking to each other, listening to each other, sharing thoughts and ideas. That is what a family should be. Not all families are like that. Not all families with kids in scouts are like that.

This portion of the family life merit badge is doing the work of teaching kids how to have a family even if their parents won't be able to impart that lesson on them.

This is scouting fulfilling its story of doing the work some parents aren’t equipped to do. Scouting can fulfill that narrative. The book too does not treat itself like a substitute for good parenting. It has a long list of skills that need to be learned in the family including speaking, learning to trust, express emotions, develop social and emotional skills, and have their basic needs met. It tells scouts this to remind them of what their parents do for them, but it also says this to show these kids how to be parents if theirs aren't really doing it right. Not all parents
create a space safe for emotional development and kids raised in that environment will think of that as normal. This scouting handbook is teaching kids another way, a better way to be a parent if they ever choose to be. The situation isn’t always so dire either, but scouting teaches valuable lessons. Even with parents who know these lessons and treat their kids with respect, sometimes they forget that kids need to learn these lessons in the first place. Many times my parents have questioned how I don’t know something at my age. Whether it’s etiquette in a new context, what soaps activate allergies, how to properly use a ladder, or any number of tasks they seem to forget who raised me. Parents don’t always remember all the lessons they need to learn and scouting can help fill in those gaps.

The book even brings the scout motto into the chapter “Do a good turn daily.” I admit the motto is phrased oddly, but it just means do something genuinely nice for someone every day. The motto puts some responsibility back on the kid to make the lives of their family better too right after learning all the parent’s responsibilities. Sharing funny stories, picking up around the house, doing someone else’s chores, and so many more. The “someone else’s chores” thing was big for me to hear because in my household that is a constant complaint. It’s not always important who does what, but it is important that everything gets done and everyone does an equal part in the end. I think because of scouting I had a better outlook on that than some of my siblings when we were kids. When my siblings were complaining about having to do each other’s chores, including mine from time to time, I was just fine doing there’s when it needed to get done. I’m not any more special than my siblings or a better person. We have the same parents and similar enough upbringing. The difference I see is that I stuck with scouts. I had a leg up in these lessons to feel more content about what I was doing in the family. I knew a story about how a family was supposed to run. Scouting’s story about how a family runs efficiently and happily worked for me, and most importantly I heard it and I saw how I could place myself in that story. This is a sample of the nuanced and helpful lessons that scouting can teach its students even with its old moral framework, but the book doesn’t end here.
Growing Up And.. Out?

The twelfth law is a problem for me. I can’t follow it while remaining trustworthy. I could twist the definition into something more general. I could twist it into meaning a general feeling of respectfulfulness, but it was always taught to me that it meant reverence to God. Beyond the basics of being a scout it is required to show how they perform their duty to God in order to receive their Eagle badge. The Boy Scouts of America is fairly broad with how that duty can be performed or what can qualify as God. You can be Hindu and believe in many gods and easily fulfill that requirement or even a religion with no god, but it is pretty much universally accepted that, to be an Eagle, the scout does have to be a part of a religion, and they certainly can’t be an atheist. Boy Scouts has been accepting Buddhists into their ranks since 1920 and for the time was incredibly tolerant. To this day the Boy Scouts of America are tolerant of other faiths for a predominantly Christian organization founded for Christianity. Even so, today the only people that have a hard time passing their board of review are professed atheists and sometimes agnostics. I say sometimes because I’ve read that it can be hard, but I got through my board of review when I was questioning my faith that way. Does an organization that discriminates on a faith basis belong in our society? To rephrase the question, do religious organizations belong in our society? For churches the answer is yes, but for scouts it’s harder to say. Just because I don’t like it doesn’t mean it’s wrong. This organization is heavily supported by religious faith and it has been core to the organization since its founding. Changing it for our modern sensibilities seems wrong, but putting a faith requirement at the end of it is wrong too.

Religion is in the bones of a lot of merit badges. When I was studying Family Life, an Eagle required merit badge intended to teach scouts how to be good parents, it recommended that you choose a partner of the same religion as yourself. It’s intentions were good. The idea is to reduce serious arguments in a relationship. Religion can be a huge part of people’s lives and
if they don’t share that or even oppose each other on it that can cause serious rifts… but I want us to be beyond that as a society! A lot of us aren’t yet though. That’s not because we aren’t enlightened enough yet, but because it is a really important issue that fundamentally affects how people live. Except that’s not the exact phrasing from the original text. It actually says “the ideal situation is to find someone with whom you agree on important issues, such as religion and ethics.” This is phrased differently and I think that actually changes the meaning. Maybe I’m just growing up, but this phrasing could mean you have the same perspective on the importance of religion, on tolerance, on how a person should express their faith rather than having the same religion. Regardless of whether the old book phrased it like this, the conversation I had did not go this way. My troop thought of it as saying you should be the same religion. Even then the reasons for that idea seemed good enough. We told each other that religion, like ethics, is a fundamental aspect of someone’s life that will impact that path they take. Partners should be on the same general path in life and thus should be on the same page about morality and the religious plan. I wanted to see how much more explicitly older texts stated the same idea so I took a look at the 1991 version of the book, and I’d certainly say the change was pretty big. Rather than being slightly flawed or possibly misinterpreted the idea simply doesn’t exist. The 1991 edition just doesn’t offer any advice for seeking a long term romantic partner. Instead the book is shorter and seems to just focus on the kid’s life in his family right as the kid reads the book. It’s a bit crude, but I guess this would be the easiest change to implement. Instead of giving problematic advice, just don’t give advice. That doesn’t really help anyone though. With the new guidebook at least there is something to think about when deciding a partner. Scouting’s evolving messages show there is internal change in the scouting program. The old book didn’t even think about the scouts starting their own families.

I fit right into what kind of family the Boy Scouts of America thought was normal and acceptable. There are a lot of family styles the Family Life book thinks are good. It wants to be open and accepting of many different types of families. It states that for many scouts the family
is made up of parents, brothers, and sisters, but it also states there are other family structures too. There are single parent families, families with stepchildren and/or stepparents, adoptive families, foster families, and even some families with no parents at all. This is all very inclusive, but the scouting book is very quiet on parents with two fathers or two mothers. The words on the page say parents, but if you go to a scout meeting or just look at the pictures in the books you know what the BSA means. This is not inclusive language, this is evasive language. With the long list of different family types their exclusion feels intentional in a way. For a long time Boy Scouts did not allow gay people into scouts and if it ever came out that a scout was gay they would have their eagle revoked.

**Types of Families**

- Nuclear family (parents and their children)
- Extended family (members beyond the nuclear family such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins)
- Single-parent family (one parent with children)
- Blended family (made up of stepparents and stepbrothers or stepsisters)
- Adoptive family (family with children who are not biologically linked to their parents)
- Childless family (couple who does not have children)

This Family life book is actually the modern version of the book. It is more accepting than previous versions. The 1991 version intends to have a positive message by saying “God created families. As a Scout, part of your duty to God is to do your best to help make your family strong and successful.” While there is a positive sentiment in the older book, the message is flawed. For how long BSA has accepted members of other faiths its lessons were heavily catered to a Christian audience. The core message about teaching people the importance of love and trust in a family is there. That is a prominent feature in even the 1991’s definition of a family, but how a child contributes to that family only includes physical tasks rather than emotional ones. The more recent one told kids that helping out with emotional labor is part of
being in a family too, and that is important for young boys to hear. Societal standards already tell boys they need to be physically handy and the new message about emotional availability and adding levity is useful. These new stories about scouting are only one of the ways that scouting is changing, but it is the way I remembered the most from my time in scouting. Maybe that's because I was aware enough to see some of the relics of the old ways of scouting. The quote about agreeing on ethics and religion struck me as off when I read it as a kid and it made me question what I was learning about. I was questioning the narrative scouting was telling me about who I was supposed to be. The old scouting book isn't all bad on the emotional front. It still gives the advice to open up about your feelings, but in the context of the book it feels like the exception rather than the norm. If something goes wrong you need to deal with your feelings.

It is strange for an organization created for the development of young men to cut off this path of development. Who I want to be, including religiously, and questioning this faith is an important part of development and scouting forces and answer to the question. Developing for yourself will be punished if you come to the "wrong" conclusion. Perhaps a way to still have the reverence requirement would be to change the requirement to have legitimate consideration of faith. Take a deeper understanding in your beliefs and reflect on why you believe what you believe. It is important in these requirements to not imply that atheism is the right choice. I don't want to switch the right religious choice scouting believes in, to be close to what I believe. I want to have the program ask its scouts what faith means to them in a new way. The exact language is important here. For instance, scouting should not require you to question your faith (though that can be a part of gaining a deeper understanding) because having doubts is not what I or scouting wants to instill, but it is important to consider what faith means to you and why. I felt I had to lie to reach the highest level of the organization that taught me values including not to lie. All the guides (merit badge or otherwise) I had are valuable, but ultimately I
am the one who has to write my story, live my life, and find out how to help others live their stories.

Boy Scouts did a lot to shape who I am as a person, but I didn’t stop growing when I left scouting and I didn’t only grow as a part of scouting. In high school I learned about Kholberg’s stages of moral development. In the first stages morality is motivated by reward and punishment, in the middle stages what is moral is determined by either: what is accepted by a peer group or external authority, and in the final stages morality is internally motivated and people will act according to their own morals. When this was posed in class I was told you could only go up on the ladder, only develop more as a moral person. I don’t exactly believe that to be the case. With enough doubt or punishment people can go back down that scale. Even though this was part of my growth I can still question the accuracy of that claim. That’s actually part of the growing up process. Critical evaluation of what you’ve learned is a part of growing up. Not everything you learn is just true or false anymore and school has been preparing me for this. It is possible for this moral development scale to be partially correct. It is possible for the institution of scouting to be partially, or even mostly correct about the morals it tries to instill. Scouting is acting as that external authority, but it is also trying to inform how its youth determine what morals they individually seek to uphold as they reach the later stages of development. Since then I have learned about other development scales theorized around the same time. James Fowler proposed that development of faith in a higher power follows a similar scale of progression, and even though he was developing this idea from a christian perspective it can include a final stage of development without faith in a higher power. I have always struggled with a connection to faith. It is only now that I have actually done something with those feelings. Coincidentally these perfectly coincide with the ages associated with Fowler’s stages of faith.

Stage 3 – "Synthetic-Conventional" faith (aged 12 to adulthood), is characterized by conformity to authority and the religious development of a personal identity. Any conflicts with one’s beliefs are ignored at this stage due to the fear of threat from inconsistencies.
Stage 4 – "Individuative-Reflective" faith (usually mid-twenties to late thirties), is a stage of angst and struggle. The individual takes personal responsibility for his or her beliefs and feelings. As one is able to reflect on one's own beliefs, there is an openness to a new complexity of faith, but this also increases the awareness of conflicts in one's belief.

Reading this so clearly is really profound to me. This is exactly my experience. I chose to ignore the conflicts with my beliefs because of the threat the inconsistencies had on my future. I was thinking that if I interrogated those consistencies I might not be able to be an eagle scout anymore. I intentionally put off self reflection to avoid material consequences from the result. Now I am finally open to the new complexity of faith and actually question what I believe. Maybe this is like a horoscope and reading it makes you think it applies to you. Maybe it's a natural feeling all kids get for irrational reasons. Maybe the same external pressure I felt has always existed and development is artificially stifled until young people are out of the environment stifling them. I'm leaning towards the last one. That makes the most sense to me. It wasn't really that I'm older, it's that the external threat of not earning my eagle is gone. Even if they take it away I still earned it. An organization created and advertised as fostering the development of young boys may be stifling that development in others.

While the Boy Scouts were fighting sexual misconduct lawsuits for letting those men hurt people under their watch, they were fighting over membership policy in the Supreme Court. They were fighting over which people they could exclude from the program. James Dale achieved his eagle scout in 1998 and in interviews with the creators of Leave No Trace he expressed that scouting was the most formative experience in his entire childhood. For scouts that spend a lot of time in the program like myself, this is absolutely true. A week hasn't gone by where I haven't thought of my time as a scout. The lessons it teaches you. They live in you. Two years after James Dale earned his eagle The Boy Scouts of America sent him a letter saying that he no longer held the rank of eagle because he was homosexual. He told the interviewers as a scout he didn’t know he was gay. He had thoughts in the back of his mind, but it wasn’t
something he thought about. But that doesn’t matter. I don’t think the point James is making needs him to not know he was gay. James Dale had the same thoughts I did. He said the BSA taught him to use truth and integrity “Everything I’m doing now is because of what Boy Scouts taught me.” Going on to say it's a great program with a bad policy. That is why he fought to be an eagle scout. This is a clear example of how my personal hangup on religion isn't the only thing to grow out of in scouting. There are a lot of mistakes in scouting. I remember in First Aid we were taught the classic myth about urinating on a jellyfish sting. That's just not true. In a similar case the Fingerprinting merit badge is based on junk science too. Matching fingerprints is really a dubious science at this point and it is being taught the same way people thought of it in the 60s. This is just the stuff I have personal connection to and already knew about. These merit badges seem to be based on general cultural knowledge rather than actual science. It’s only now that I'm questioning how much I learned is just a repetition of American cultural myths. I don’t even know where to start to find out what's wrong and what’s right.

I put in a lot of work to get my Eagle badge done. I had my stumblings. Getting the final project done took a lot of coordination and concentrated discipline to actually find the time to get it done. The years leading up to that studying nature, learning survival skills, and sweating in -10 degree weather was hard work. Rewarding work, but grueling all the same. If that was all taken away from me because I was honest about my faith I would be livid. Beyond the personal investment, Scouting is a huge boon for any sort of application. Applying for an internship, the recruiter perks up hearing you were an Eagle scout. Getting a corporate job any employer would be happy to have a scout. Want to work at the courthouse and being an Eagle scout shows diligence. Being an Eagle scout opens doors. That was one of the selling points our leaders told us to encourage us to get us there. They were right and that encouragement helps many scouts reach a goal that most don’t achieve. However, it’s a door that is, at least to an extent, opened by believing in god, and up until very recently being male. This reminds me of a homeschooling podcast I listened to too. A woman used the same investigatory tools her mother taught her to
realize that homeschooling wasn’t good for kids. Her mother really was trying to teach independence, but she couldn’t see what independence was. Scouting wants to teach independence too, but has its idea of what independence allows and looks like.

Thinking about that government position for a second. That is adding a small preference for religious faith. The government isn’t supposed to do that, but it’s not easy to say they just should stop giving that preference. Scouts have a lot of valuable skills in and positive values that should be in leaders. It’s not Boy Scouts’s fault that there is this preference. Other than doing a good job at making young boys learn about life. Employers and government agencies like seeing Eagle Scout on the resume because it tells them that the person has done a few things they really like. The scout has led a big project, been committed to an organization for several years, learned a myriad of personal life skills including cooking, has a basic understanding of finance, thought about their place as a citizen, and has been taught to handle emergency situations. Who wouldn’t want someone like that on the team. This is a needle sized hole in the separation of church and state and ignoring the Eagle would close the door on a lot of highly qualified people. The same way atheists who went through the same process have the door closed on them by their chosen faith. Simply removing religion from Boy Scouts would be to remove part of why the organization exists in the first place. Stripping it away is not so easy and may not be good for it either. Despite the fact that I have this tension within myself, when I am asked if I would have my kid go through this the answer is absolutely yes. If scouting doesn’t change at all it would be worth it.

The Death of Scouting

Scouting as a program is dying and it has been for decades. A former scout put together a graph of the BSA’s membership rates over the decades and it is a clear decline in membership across each program offered by BSA. Some programs are declining more than
others, but since Boy Scouts’s peak in the 70s it has had a steady decline now plateauing in membership. That plateau has to be qualified though. While it’s good that the BSA is longer taking on water, its boat still looks like it’s sinking. The population in the United States has nearly tripled since the inception of the Boy Scouts. Cub Scouts in particular are seeing membership drops. The biggest losses come from Cub Scouts. There are a lot of theories as to why. Some believe it’s because there are fewer stay at home parents so the after school meetings are harder for parents to get their kids too. Some attribute it to the general decline in membership in service-based programs like Rotary and Kiwanis. I’m not sure why.

My own cub scout troop doesn’t exist anymore. Well technically it does, but everything about it is completely different. Den 131 is no more. It was “combined” with Den 133 a year or two after I moved on to Boy Scouts. A few of our leaders moved to their troop too and taught some of the younger scouts. My brothers were some of the scouts who moved to the new pack and for a while it felt pretty similar, just that my old pack was meeting at a new location. By now our pack uses their meeting space, it's leadership entirely composed of their leaders, uses their policies, and we have their number. The Troop that the pack works with changed immediately to
troop 33 from troop 13 and it's been that way ever since. Pack 131 answered the ship of 
theseus riddle for me. It’s not the same pack. Different crew, different components, different 
rules. In effect it's like our pack disbanded and the members of 131 joined their troop. When it 
was 131 parents didn’t need to be directly involved at every event. When I learned that new rule 
was imposed I felt like an important part of the program was gone. My brothers would never 
have the chance to experience cub scouting the way I did. My busy parents couldn’t take them 
to all the camping trips so they wouldn’t have the chance to go on as many as I could in 131. 
We weren't a small program when we merged either, not already on the brink of death like my 
Boy Scout troop. I remember more than 20 kids being in the program. My troop combined with 
another because we didn’t have any leaders who were staying in town. Without the LittleJohn 
meeting spot I wonder if the same type of kids who I saw in my pack could join them in the 
lodge all the way across town. I doubt it. My parents would still be willing to take me, but some 
parents who work late, who couldn’t drive their kid out there at 5:00pm and then on top of that 
stay there for an hour? They just couldn’t. The kids who need scouting, who need that extra 
parental figure in their life can't have it. This is the change that I was talking about earlier. 
Limiting the potential for abuse of Boy Scouts to hurt little boys, but this limits who can access 
scouting to kids that need it the least. Nobody picked up where our leaders left off. That 
particular quirk is unique to our pack, but I'm sure there are similar disbanding reasons all 
across the country. There were dozens of parents involved in the den, but there weren’t enough 
who wanted the mantle of leadership so we went somewhere else. Individually those are valid 
decisions, but together they tear a little at the fabric of scouting. The death of scouting is a slow 
burn. Scouting tells a story we Americans want to hear, a story we want to be a part of, but it is 
hard work and the structure of the program hasn't changed.

In 2000 after spending 10 years and millions of dollars the Boy Scouts of America won. 
They could exclude homosexuals from leadership positions and the ranks of scouting. The 
Supreme Court agreed they could exclude homosexuals because homosexuality went against
the values the BSA was trying to instill in youth and forcing the organization to have him as a
leader would be a form of compelled speech. In 2013, 13 years later the Boy Scouts of America
changed their mind. A new group of leaders came together and rescinded the ban on gay
youth's involvement in the program, effective January 2014. In another 4 years, 2017, they
started to allow transgender men to join the boys only program. Then in 2019 they made the
most controversial decision yet: girls could start to join scout troops. There were a few
restrictions on exactly how those girls could join, but those measures seem to be protective in
nature. I was a scout when all these changes were made. For a few months gay people were
technically not allowed in the program (but everyone knew about the change so no one really
enforced that). A member of my troop joined the very same year the ban was lifted and if the
BSA knew about his sexuality, he may not have been allowed to join. Similarly nothing
noteworthy seemed to shift in 2017. I vaguely remember hearing about the change, but I don't
remember having any conversations about it.

Letting girls into the program was another story. For months after the change it was all
anyone could talk about in their free time. We still got our badges done, but the change was
huge. Even my typically liberal self was wary of the change. I didn't want the atmosphere and
space to be lost. I genuinely believe in the value of male only and female only spaces. These
can exist beyond reasons of personal safety. The connection I have with my brothers is different
from the connection I have with my sister and this is just fine. This change does help to fix the
imbalance between the prestige of the Boy Scout's Eagle Rank and the Girl Scout's Gold
Award. I only learned that the Gold Award even existed in my last years of scouting by
personally talking to someone who was working on it. Everyone knows what being an Eagle
means, despite how strange the first half of this sentence is. Now girls can earn their Eagle
without having to explain how the Gold award is the same amount of work and is just as high an
honor. This was a move towards the diversity, equity, and inclusion that people have complained
Boy Scouts didn't have for so long. Their outdated morals and standards have been a primary
reason cited for why scouting is dying today. In Matt Farwell’s article “Let the Boy Scouts Die Out, Already” this was one of his complaints and he argued they deserved it. When I was in scouting, myself, my troop, and a lot of scouts I talked to weren’t happy about the change. It felt like we were losing a part of scouting. Complaining about the loss of a male only space feels crass with how aware I am of the benefits men get in society, but there is a value in single gender spaces. We were concerned Boy Scouts would turn into a place where boys and girls tried to impress each other. As the change was actually implemented I came to understand this is not how it would work at all. Rather than integrating them together it was more like the BSA had a concurrently running Girl Scout program. Each troop of girls had to have some female leaders and no male membership. They could be run alongside a boy scout troop, but not together. This convinced me things wouldn’t be too bad, but I was still conflicted about it. The Girl Scouts of America weren’t happy either. They thought the BSA was trying to poach their members and to be honest they weren’t exactly wrong. The BSA had been hemorrhaging members for years at the point. Membership in the organization was a far cry from the nearly 5 million in the late 90s to just over 1 million across both Boy Scouts and Cub Scouts when they made the change. When boys in my troop were discussing it we all thought that was the primary motivation. Open up another group to increases membership.

But their plan backfired. The largest single constituent of scouting left the program after the BSA made this change. For a long time being a Mormon boy meant being a boy scout, but after girls were allowed in the program that was no longer the case. This was a part of a growing disconnect between the church and the BSA’s diversifying membership policies. It wasn’t just the girls, but also that the Boy Scouts had begun officially allowing transgender men and openly gay scouts and leaders. In an interview with the Salt Lake Tribune a Latter Day Saints (LDS) priest said “The reality there is we didn’t really leave them; they kind of left us.” He went on to say the direction the boy scouts is going is not consistent with what they want to teach their youth. Religious groups like the Latter Day Saints have been huge financial contributors to the
boy scouts for decades. It was a huge hit to membership when Scouting lost these people and with them all their money. At the same time religious groups have contributed members and meeting spaces to scouts throughout its history. Speaking personally my scouting meetings where held in the Bethlehem Evangelical Lutheran Church, entirely out of the kindness of their heart. I don’t think any of us went there on Sunday ourselves, but they still let us use the space. This membership debacle leaves scouting in an awkward position. Scouting is simultaneously losing members for not being modern enough and when it tries to modernize it loses members for being too modern.

Warren Cole Smith is an evangelical writer who laments the slow and tragic death of scouting in his article of a similar name. He has some great insights as to why the decline is happening. He argues part of the problem is that “When rumors of the sex abuse scandal started circulating, leaders become more concerned with institutional preservation than in caring for the victims.” The tune of the leadership has changed and take ownership of the victims. In an interview with the creators of Leave No Trace about why the BSA declared bankruptcy an executive said it was the best way to fairly compensate our survivors and keep scouting going for the next 100 year. I’d like to note “our survivors.” He words it possessively acknowledging they are victims of BSA. They are taking ownership of their victims now, but the damage has already been done. He also cites the inclusion of gay scouts as a reason for the declines arguing “Scouts have strayed from the values that made it great.” While I don’t personally agree that is true his perspective is a valuable one to point to to figure out why scouting is dying. It is being attacked at two angles. It’s traditional followers who want it to remain as exclusive as its been and those who want scouting to modernize. They’re either leaving or refusing to join. Making he Diversity Equity and Inclusion badge Eagle required is either a bridge too far or just the first step that the Boy Scouts haven’t even taken yet. Both groups are upset at the rising cost of scouting. Matt Farwell and Warren Cole Smith both cite prohibitive and rising prices as bad things. Its either why scouting should die or why it currently is.
Warren Cole Smith offers alternatives to scouting at the conclusion of his article, in particular Trail Life USA. Trail Life USA advertizes itself as “a Church-Based, Christ-Centered, Boy-Focused mentoring and discipleship journey” on it’s website. Replacing scouting doesn’t seem like a good solution. Anything that replaces scouts will be worse for the average person. The organizations cropping up have stricter religious requirements. Rather than a belief in some kind of higher power, it would be belief in a specific sect of Christianity’s interpretation of the bible. The LDS church has already replaced scouting with their own program, which they have a right to do. However as their website states “The main purpose of Children and Youth is to help you strengthen your faith in Jesus Christ.” While trying to make the program hosted by the BSA have a wider reach and be more inclusive a huge portion of kids who would be scouts are not going to experience that diversity at all. The prohibitive membership costs are going to limit diversity. External groups pulling their boys are going to limit their interaction with an already diverse group because it took steps to make itself more diverse.

Some think that scouting deserves to die. Their reasons are well founded. Matt Farwell’s own board of review had a difficult question for him. He was given a hypothetical where a friend of his came out to him as gay and he had to decide what to do with that information. He is ashamed that he said that he’d try to help his friend be a little less gay if the friend wanted that. I know scouting membership policy has changed, but scouting should never have someone go against their taught out moral framework to get the eagle. Getting the eagle should be about developing personal integrity and having to abandon that even for a single question should not be a requirement. He makes other good points about how Boy Scouts executives were raking in millions while providing no good support system for victims of sexual assault and actively fighting to keep news about it away from the press. He sumurizes his complaints as by saying scouts is full of men like its leaders: “self-righteous, well-scrubbed creeps who kept their external aura of civic virtue shiny, obscuring the grubby evil in the institutions and traditions they oversaw.” Its hard to say he’s wrong knowing all I do about the organization. And still, despite
the fact that I have this tension within myself, that I agree the reasons scouting should die are valid, I’d still send my kid to the program if it didn’t change at all. I can’t just throw it all out. The Aura of civic virtue wasn’t just an illusion for me.

Why I Say Yes to Scouting

Honestly there is a lot to love and hate about both versions of the family life books. The 1991 version’s section about sex it has the standard abstinence message and reasons like STDs, early parenthood, and moral standards, but there is more to it. The 1991 BSA advises young scouts to instead become friends with girls their age. There are pragmatic reasons to do so, like learning “the difference between masculine and feminine viewpoints,” but their first listed reason is because the boys will form genuine friendships with these girls. This is present in the new version of the Family Life guidebook, but it is reframed as something dating would help someone with. This reframing changes the story from becoming friends with someone as an end itself to something that you’d get out of dating. The new family life guidebook agrees that abstinence is the right way, but has a much more compelling reason. It warns that prioritizing sex can lead to relationships based solely on physical attraction rather than deeper feelings. This is the kind of stuff I want my kids to learn if I ever have any. There is a lot to think about with relationships in the future and your family right now. In the older book’s 40 pages and the newer one’s 60 they have a lot to say about this. It isn’t pure instruction telling you exactly what to do and when, but a moral guidebook. I’ve noticed that the staunchly independent America doesn’t like moral instruction, but I think it has value. The Family Life guidebook is just one example and one way scouting goes about emparting that moral instruction. The majority of merit badges I earned was from the instruction of someone who knew the subject. If they were using a guidebook to help them we didn’t know it. The Family Life book isn’t the only place with these lessons, its not the only place with misguided teachings either. I chose to discuss the
Family Life guidebook because it was the first place I questioned what scouting was teaching me as I was learning it. We talked about it in the meeting. Scoutmaster Tim helped me gain a better understanding about what is important in a relationship by discussing what the book taught.

Scouting promises a young boy everything they could want. It promises adventure, excitement, and self-discovery. It then teaches boys how to behave, scouting presents itself as a way to give parents everything they want from a kid, including freedom to learn who they are. I think it sometimes almost reaches that unattainable goal.Something is missing in scouting. Something is missing without it. While there is something unidentifiable that scouting doesn’t have getting rid of the program whole cloth would hurt a lot of people. Going back to the Order of the Arrow ceremony we can see how both of these are true. In the ceremony it is missing its own creativity and originality. It is a borrowed story never given back, but the weight of the atmosphere is created by the Boy Scouts. The atmosphere is modeled on Native American traditions, but a lot of it can be done without them. We may not be able to find the perfect missing piece, but we can get close. I am confident in my yes. Future kids should be able to be a scout and the moral instruction in scouting is done very well. My heart wants the changes to be small, but my instinct tells me they will not be. Part of the appeal of scouting it the wilderness and separation from your parents, but that model is open for abuse from bad people who want to hurt scouts. It feels impossible to uncouple the model’s openness to abuse from the model’s intended purpose to give freedom, independence, and real consequences not externally imposed for using that freedom wrong. We want those consequences so these boys learn, but how to do so while being inclusive enough to teach these boys the lessons and stop them from getting hurt feels nearly impossible.