

Tuesday, February 27, 2007

Climbing Out of the Girl Box

Two years ago, I was on an NPR talk show. Girls on the Run, the national non-profit I founded, was growing like wildfire. The host and I were discussing the “Girl Box,” a phrase we have coined at Girls on the Run.

“The ‘Girl Box’ is that place that many girls go around fifth grade, where suddenly being themselves isn’t good enough,” I shared. “In the ‘Girl Box’ girls begin to feel more valued for their appearance as opposed to who they really are. In the box we are never thin enough, pretty enough, smart enough, perfect enough. We are never...enough. Formerly vibrant girls begin to question their worth. In an effort to deal with the ‘Girl Box’ many girls turn to alcohol, food addictions, eating disorders and various other unhealthy behaviors to help them cope with the turmoil of life inside the stifling box.”

The host suggested that Britney Spears was a perfect example of a girl who had “given into the Girl Box”. “She is a poor role model for girls by how she behaves and the way she dresses,” he commented. “We have a whole generation of girls wanting to look like, dress like and be like Britney. She is really damaging to girls. Would you agree?”

Of course she is in the Girl Box, I thought. I also realized that if I joined in on his derogatory commentary of Britney Spears, I would be doing precisely what our culture has done to her and many young, vulnerable celebrities. By actively participating in a dialogue that vilifies these girls and literally forces them into the Girl Box where they are judged by their appearance, lifestyle and sexuality, then I, ironically, would be placing myself into the Girl Box. So, I paused, consciously trying to craft a response that wouldn’t pull me into the mutual judgment and condemnation of this very young and manipulated pop icon.

“But what about her business savvy, and her ability as a performer— surely there are elements of Britney that are positive. You can’t achieve this kind of success without a tremendous amount of discipline and work. And her voice! All of the other stuff aside, her voice is pretty good.”

I think he got the point.

Britney is no different, at her core, than the rest of us. It’s hard NOT to go through life as a woman and NOT struggle at some point with body image, its connection to our self-worth and the “Girl Box.”

Take Sophie for example. Sophie is in fourth grade and in Girls on the Run. She arrived the first day of Girls on the Run in her mother’s silver Mercedes sedan. A large stack of fashion magazines lay in the passenger seat of the car. Sophie climbed out of the car, slammed the door behind her and reluctantly strolled over to me and the girls. “I’d like to introduce myself,” I said. “My name is Molly Barker and I will be your Girls on the Run coach for the next twelve weeks.” And so the program began.

A few weeks into our twelve weeks together, Sophie approached me as I gathered a few items necessary for the lesson.

“Am I ugly?” she asked.

I put down the items and placed my hands firmly on her shoulders.

“No. You are beautiful.” I replied with genuine certainty.

“Oh,” she said. “Okay.” She didn’t seem to want to say anything else and I returned to collecting the lesson items.

“Yeah, but my mom says I’m fat.” She paused, took in a deep breath and then spilled out the following words. “She put me in Girls on the Run because she wants me to run more so I’ll get skinny. She says I’m too fat. She says I’m ugly.”

Again, I put down the items I was holding and got on my knees to be eye-level with this little spirit. I took a moment and looked at this beautiful child. I mean really looked at her. I saw a piece of my aging self in her eyes. I pulled her close to me and embraced her.

She began to cry.

Oh how I wanted to hold her in my arms and take her back to the day she was born and let her see the beautiful child she was and how the world rejoiced at her birth.

“Your mother is wrong. You are not fat. You are beautiful,” I said as I held her - the two of us both needing each other. I knew my words might risk her alienation by contradicting her mother, but if only Sophie could see herself through my eyes.

If only I could see myself through Sophie’s.

She stepped back from my embrace. “My mother is wrong?”

“Yes, in my world, your mother is wrong. In my world, you are one of the most beautiful creatures on earth.”

I stood up and we looked into each others eyes.

“I don’t want them to see my tears.”

So we waited another minute and then walked back to the group, each carrying a handful of supplies and a new-found appreciation for each other.

Sometimes we all need reminders. Reminders of what really matters.

Like Sophie.

Like Britney.

I choose to see Britney as a young woman - a very young woman who was misguided by a culture of people - people within her intimate circle of advisors and the general population as well - who wanted something from her. They wanted her money, her body, her talent, her beauty and/or her fame. We sexualized her, objectified her, worshipped her, vilified her and now pity her.

I will not do that to one of my sisters. I did not do it to Sophie. I will not do it to Britney. I will wish for her a life filled with real and authentic people. People like those whom Girls on the Run attracts - caring, compassionate and gentle people who want nothing other than the best for her.

I want her to know that if I were with her I would tell her precisely what I told Sophie. "In my world, you are one of the most beautiful creatures on earth."

I have no doubt that she is on her way to becoming a role model for us all, as she painfully and publicly stumbles and searches for her footing on the ground where true beauty abounds and little girls are allowed to grow up into wise, beautiful and authentic women.

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