

Girlhood in 2020

By LAURA CAMPBELL

Though I am very clearly, in the most obvious of ways, a feminist, I rarely describe myself with that particular label. I haven't done any major advocacy for issues that pertain especially to women, nor do I write about them (though there are many that I worry about constantly). I do support, in every way available to me, the work of feminists (especially women of colour) who are working for justice, and equality. The reality is, I have privilege. I am a straight, white woman, who lives in a country where it is safe for me to express my femininity in whatever way I choose. But this doesn't mean I uncritically live my life, oblivious to the work that still needs to be done.

But this is not a column about feminism and injustice (though more on that in the coming weeks). It's more about how I've been personally grappling with the ongoing pressures of 'girlhood' as a parent. I didn't really become aware of how deeply ingrained capitalist conceptions of man and woman are until I had children of my own. Indeed, it is in my parenting that I am the most challenged by the cultural norms that feminism has attempted to deal with for many generations now. And it is hard work. Though I should also note, the challenges are equally as confounding in parenting a boy.

Coming of age in the late 90s and 2000s meant that feminism became a sort of underground force- over the course of my childhood, feminism disappeared from pop-culture. And it is through pop culture that most children receive signals about what our world values (it transmits both deeply entrenched norms and emerging ones). For instance, in adolescence I sang the feminist anthems of Fiona Apple, Alanis Morissette, and Gwen Stefani. But then by the time I entered the teen years, those rebellious girls had faded from the spotlight and were replaced by Britney Spears, and similar popstars who I deeply resented on some level. What impact did that have on me?

Indeed, participating in or expressing traditional femininity has always felt awkward for me personally, despite the fact that I've always found all women beautiful and fascinating. But with my daughter, I want to show her that she can be whoever she wants to be- but to always appreciate her own inner strength and beauty. Unfortunately, despite all the years of western feminism, girls are still told that 'thin' is beautiful. They are still told that they should remove body hair. They are still told that makeup and diet shakes and laser hair removal is the solution if they are not born with all of the things that our culture deems beautiful.

I've read all the manuals. 'How to Raise a Conscious Child' or 'How to Raise a Feminist' or whatever. 'Tell your daughters they are funny. That they are strong. That they are smart. That they are kind.' etc etc. And even still, she asks me, 'Mama, am I beautiful?' I tell her that of course, she is! That I love her to the moon and back for everything that she is. She IS beautiful, and funny, and brave, and strong. She crashed her pedal bike this summer and skinned her elbow badly and within a few hours she was right back on. She's smarter than most adults I know, and often arguing with her is a game I'd rather not engage in, for certain defeat is imminent.

And even still, while I know she has the strength to make up her own mind about what she likes and dislikes, I still want to arm her with the tools to resist the crushing weight of expectations that our culture places on girls. I want her to resist. This means that I have hesitated to put her into dance class, I have never allowed her to watch the more traditional Disney films like The Little Mermaid or Cinderella. (Though we've seen Frozen 2 three times in theatres and I'm grateful to Disney for writing a narrative, at the very least, about reconciliation with indigenous peoples, protecting the natural environment, and the love between sisters). And I try to encourage her to choose practical clothing- though this is a battle I won't win. We don't watch TV with commercials, and yet somehow, she still knows about all of the latest dolls (dolls with a full face of makeup, long eyelashes, large plump lips etc etc). Luckily my kids have both accepted that plastic toys are not allowed in our home (unless they are used or LEGO). Sometimes, it feels like an uphill battle this resistance. And she's only 4! I shudder to think what the teen years will be like. How can I gently encourage her to LOVE every part of herself, and indeed, to focus on what makes her truly happy, rather than being preoccupied with her appearance, or the appearance of others? I have no clue.

All of this work is part of a larger struggle we are in with ourselves. Our planet is melting. And yet, rather than taking responsibility

for this destruction, which is driven by consumerism in so many ways, corporations are telling us over and over to focus on ourselves. To cultivate our own 'well-being'- wellness, self-care, meditation, keto diets, mindful moments, strength training, self-optimization. In some ways, each of these are not bad in and of themselves. But in other ways, they still feed this dominant narrative of what is beautiful and 'good' and successful and desirable and what is not.

I don't just want my daughter to resist. I want all women to resist. Especially my close friends and my Mother. What does that look like? I don't know all the answers. But here's how I've been trying: I will never speak about my appearance, my weight or otherwise, in front of my children. I will only do exercises that are a whole lot of fun for me (I love yoga, and hiking and riding my bike, for the sheer joy of it!). I always eat a second cookie if I feel like it. I wear my emerging gray hairs with pride. But beyond that, and the daily feminist modelling that I think my kids deserve, I'm at a loss. I can't do it on my own. So I need my community to join me on this quest! Dads, Moms, Grandfathers, Grandmothers, Teachers, community elders? please don't pigeon-hole children into the two categories we've created: boy or girl. Make it safe for them to be whoever and whatever they choose.