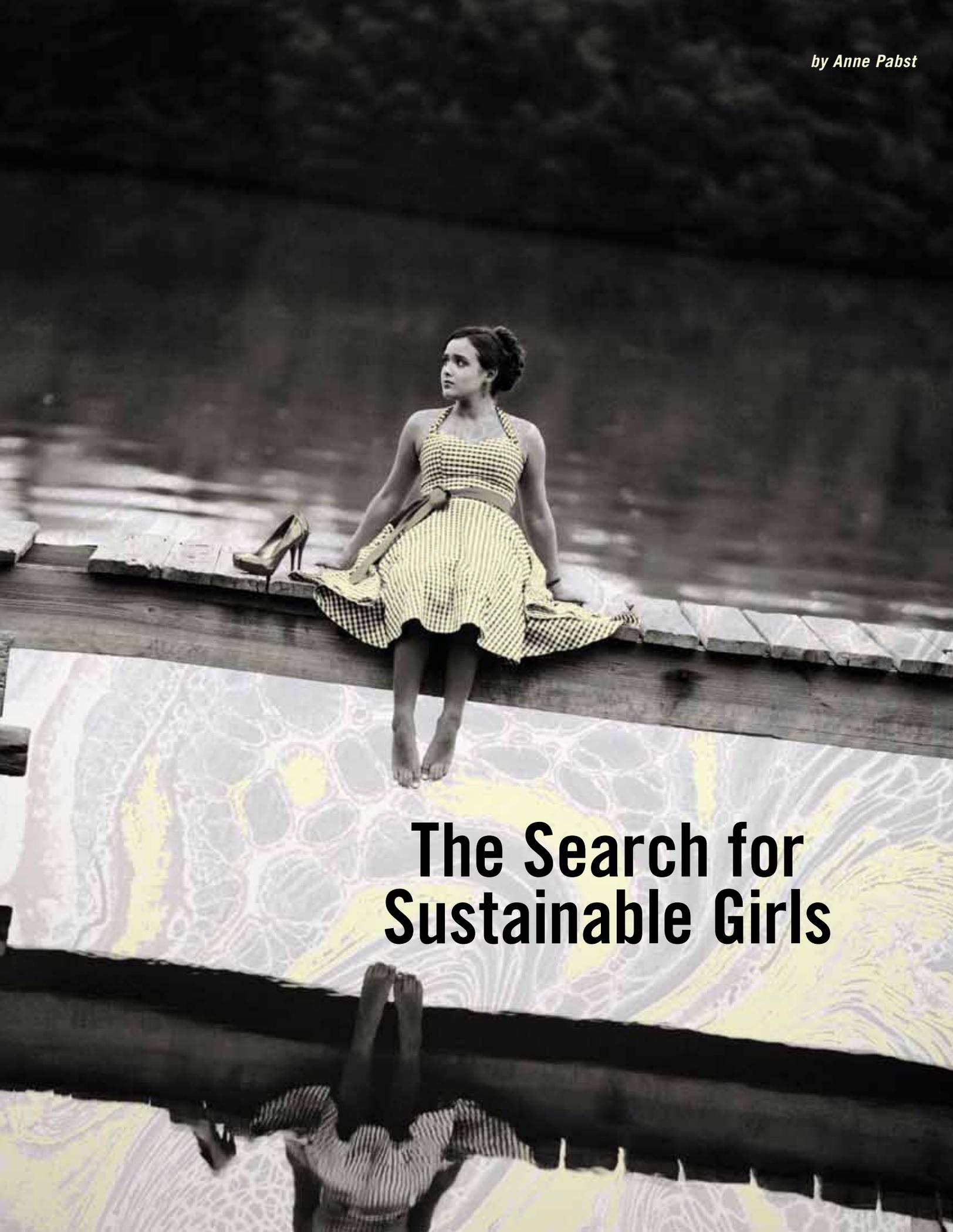


*by Anne Pabst*



# The Search for Sustainable Girls

**It is a Sunday in early June, time for most of us to be seated in a folding chair at another graduation. I join my colleagues and look toward the tiers on stage at our 77 graduates who smile back at us. All girls, all in their girls' school graduation finery: long white dresses, a large spray of roses in each pair of arms. They glow, resembling other girls' school graduations throughout the country. Each is Daisy from F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*.**

In fact, Fitzgerald's mother graduated from our school, as did James J. Hill's daughters, as well as the daughters of St. Paul's other empire builders, beginning more than 135 years ago. Similar histories and seemingly interchangeable sepia photos of other white dresses and roses may be found at our sister schools, no matter the region, religion or beginnings. White dresses and bouquets are part of our common currency.

History, flowers and family wealth are only part of the girls' school portrait now, however. These young women in many ways belie our past. Gone are the days of finishing school academics; this graduating class has been academically diligent, joining some of the most accomplished students anywhere. Fewer are the white faces and mostly Irish names. Many are on scholarships. Some will have run in the state track meet the day before; some come fresh from a job making ice cream cones at the mall; some come from suburbs; others from either St. Paul or Minneapolis; some from contented families; others from difficult homes. For this June afternoon, difference disappears and each girl is proud of her white dress and gladly holds her roses on her lap, just as Sister Marie Therese trained her. Their forebears would gasp at the range and depth of the girls' accomplishments today. (They would also be unnerved by the modern dresses; how bare shoulders have replaced lacy high neck virginal finery.) Reflecting on all the girls who have passed through this ritual, I think of Natalie.

### **Natalie**

It is the winter of her junior year and Natalie stands at my office door. Behind me on a cinder block wall is a favorite black and white photo: a large piece, in which an old, French window opens out to morning mist on the horizon. The photograph is intended to add

not only beauty to the room, but also suggest a vision of future and possibility, the ideal that college counseling is about beginnings and dreams, about youth and hope.

Dreams and hope beam neon from Natalie. She sits across from me, perched on the edge of a chair, her usual eager position. She wears her navy blue uniform skirt and sweater, both looking worn, ballet flats, sandy hair in the ubiquitous messy ponytail. She is breathless, come from a distant classroom with a heavy bundle of books. A huge red purse hangs on her arm. On top of all this is the blue AP Biology text; she has just finished a test in this class. When I ask how the test went, Natalie smiles weakly and says, "Fine." I then ask how much sleep she got last night, and she smiles again and replies, "Oh, a few hours, but it's almost the weekend." Through the years I have learned to doubt how restful a student's weekend will be; I know too well how Natalie's life works.

Natalie and I are now in earnest with our college search conversations, and my concerns about her are in high gear. Concerns we counselors find too familiar this time of year. Several conversations ago, Natalie intoned the opening line of her narrative; I could have predicted it almost word for word: "My parents and I want me to go to a really good school—the best I can get into. I've been thinking about college since 6th grade and we started visiting colleges in 8th grade. I have a list of my favorites already. I want to go east. I know the colleges there are really hard to get into." Here is the smile again, and an attempt to look knowing. "My Dad thinks I have a good chance at an Ivy League. Someone in his law office went to Princeton, and she's willing to help me." I can hear the Greek chorus rustling in the wings.



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In fact, Natalie qualifies as a heroine of Greek proportions, and she should look at some highly-selective colleges. She comes with a reputation for accomplishment and hard work. I knew this before I met Natalie, as one knows such things in our small school. Natalie is managing her own expectations, her parents' expectations, our school's expectations, and the expectations of society. We are watching her like she is some Platonic Form of promise—this graceful (the hair and torn sweater notwithstanding) ingénue, as she takes the stage in the college process. She has set out to conquer as we cheer from the audience.

In addition to the chorus on this now crowded stage, however, I hear the echo of those many professional development occasions where a brave, exasperated counselor says, "Why are we so absorbed by this privileged bunch, these high-flying students? They are only a tiny minority and we spend entirely too much time bemoaning their pain and anguish in the college process. Meanwhile the huge majority have *real* problems. "Who cares if another rich kid doesn't get in to her dream school?" Everyone nods and mutters in assent, some clap. I get this. I know my students are a mere fraction of a whole, that they suffer the problems of privilege. However, I believe the girls of girls' schools really are a kind of Platonic Form of American girl, an ideal to which most of the rest of society, of our country's meritocratic system, aspires for their daughters, a reflection of our deepest values. I believe girls all over the country, in all high schools, in ways like and unlike Natalie, want The Dream. They want to achieve and succeed in major ways unheard of in the past. Their forbears in the photographs and oil paintings of our school's halls often led the cause for women's rights, for access to worldly accomplishment. I claim my ground, therefore, my close-up view of today's female aspirations, at their most piquant: in my school, my office and in this young woman. Girls like Natalie, girls everywhere, deserve our keenest attention.

Natalie is going for her dream. She lives a life utterly defined by delayed gratification, by creating a beautiful résumé. She is more than good enough for her so-called good schools: National Merit semi-finalist,

top grades in all our most difficult classes, strong runner, leader, pianist, friend... hers is a litany of prowess, one high schools of every kind see yearly. She was told she was free to strive and she has. Natalie has the means and aspirations of her upbringing and schooling along with the new opportunities of her gender.

### Symptoms of Un-Sustainability

What I find worrisome about our young women is that in the quest to develop talents and aspirations, they have carved for themselves a frightening new territory where there is no concept of enough. The chance to become anything has become an impulse to become everything. When counselors get together, especially those from girls' schools, we concur that our girls seem to have a mechanism that leaves them without sufficient boundaries. Girls just keep adding... and adding... expectations, creating an endless list of chores and goals. *Which sport should I choose; which one will help my resume most? I'll start my college search early, (Mom and Dad think this is fun!). I had better think about a career... medicine, of course. I dream of being a doctor and a marathon runner with a beautiful house and having a handsome, smart husband who is also a professional. And I must be cute and thin, so better curb the eating and bleach my teeth. I need the right clothes and must know how to act at a party. I must get A's, take as many AP's as I can, write for the paper, and work for Habitat for Humanity. I have to be there for my friends—talk to them all night if they need me. I could have a boyfriend, but that's an awful lot of work right now and I may not have time. Above all, I simply must get in to a brand name college..."*

How do these wonderful creatures live like this for just a week, let alone months and years? Then they graduate only to do the whole thing all over again in college and beyond. Is their future to be nothing but a relentless physical, psychological, academic boot camp, as far as the eye can see and the list can go? Weekends are as full as weekdays. There simply is no time to breathe. Natalie is fragile, so tired, and I am worried. She may very well get into her dream college, but at what cost, and what if she does not?

Here are just some of the symptoms I see of girls at risk, threatened by unsustainable dreams, including hyper-selective college admission at the climax, symptoms of nearly impossible day-to-day existences. A wilderness of girl-children losing pieces of themselves each year to their own overdevelopment...

- **Fatigue.** Tired faces and tired words, only youth itself provides the adrenaline necessary to pull through. Full days, full evenings of sports, activities, followed by homework into the night. Weekends at jobs and doing service and trying to have a little social life. More homework.
- **The need to do more.** Always more. “Should I volunteer more? My parents think I should. Should I petition for another AP?”
- **The constant measuring of themselves.** Self-measurement anxiety fills the office, rising to a din. “Am I good enough? Will I get into a good college, good enough to impress everyone and please my parents? Maybe if my times are really good this summer, the college coaches will call.” The constant talk about college, the comparing college lists.
- **Being easily disappointed in themselves.** The beautiful B and C students, who have also worked very hard, see themselves as losers. “Will I get in anywhere?!” To which I reply that many wonderful colleges are not so selective, and that success is really a function of a person, not of a college name... My reassurances do not quite hit the mark. They know they are out of the running for what society tells them are dream schools. They know they are not Natalie and feel like they are settling for a consolation prize in the lower bracket.

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- **The need to care for others.** Too many are carrying emotional loads at home with family issues. They are busy taking care of friends, too... birthdays, organizing pre- and post-dance arrangements for parties, dinners or just making plans for weekends. They are still learning the age-old female care giver/hostess roles in spades; in this, their finishing school forebears cannot claim superiority.

- **The passion for appearances, the worry.** What lesson do girls learn from a teeth-whitening appointment from mom and dad for Christmas? So many work out at the gym—even those who play sports are seen running on their own, doing yoga or Pilates, or swimming at the club. Trim girls win, thin being our cultural obsession. Some thin girls keep growing thinner, heading into the arms of self-destruction. Then there are heavy girls who seem to have given up, their eyes speaking of resignation to second-class status. Some gain a lot of weight in late high school, making obvious their battles with the forces of obsession and dying self images.
- **The hyper-awareness of parents’ desires.** Too often I talk to parents who have really tried, or at least believe they have tried, not to put pressure on their daughters to produce the big résumé and come up with a prize college sticker. The same daughters often cite parent desires in our college conversations. Somehow, the seemingly innocent trips to see Princeton (NJ) or Columbia (NY) Universities (just as tourists, of course) in ninth grade translate into Ivy aspirations in students and a sense that if their parents took them to visit such places, the parents must want this as well. Too often I have a student who has fallen in love with a Northwestern University (IL) in 10th grade and is devoted to the place in that way that girls have, in the same way they become devoted to the Jonas Brothers or a best friend. Our girls understand devotion. They also feel deeply their parents’ psychological over-investment in their worldly success.

- **The wistful looking into their pasts,** especially to days spent reading the beloved *Harry Potter* series, when they had time just to read, be, think, and dream dreams that had nothing to do with the overpowering dream of creating the perfect self.
- **Devotion to coffee.** The daily trips. The best gift for a friend in need is to deliver to her a large coffee house coffee.



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Coffee before school, after school. A favorite homework spot is often a coffee house. Our girls need caffeine to sustain the dream. (As for other substances, and sex, of course, we have well-founded worries as well.)

#### College Dreams: The Endgame

Just as The Dream has grown to unsustainable proportions for girls, their numbers and high achievements are crowding college admission offices, crowding out boys' numbers and making it harder to maintain gender balance on too many campuses. As Natalie and her sisters are stronger than ever, their chances of admission weaken at many selective colleges. It's not the end of the world, but certainly a problem for girls' fragile self-concepts. I am all for facing life in all its challenges, and many girls and families will surely grow from finally hearing "no" in a life otherwise full of entitlement. If only, however, girls could withstand better the plot turns in the biggest stakes scripts of their young lives. If only college admission did not represent the threat of clear cutting in the green forest of girl land.

As Dean of Admission and Financial Aid at Kenyon College (OH) Jennifer Delahunty outlined with feeling in her op-ed piece in *The New York Times* in March, 2006, "To All the Girls I've Rejected," being good, even great, is less and less adequate to get into selective schools, especially for girls. Of a 2006 applicant, Delahunty remarked, "Had she been a male applicant, there would have been little, if any, hesitation to admit. The reality is that because men are rarer, they're more valued applicants." At a recent spring counselor breakfast with a group of very selective colleges, I asked my perennial question: "How was it for girls in your offices this year?" I received the expected, good-hearted attempt to point out that results are pretty much 50-50. Then I pressed on, not for the results, please, but rather for the getting there, "How hard was it for girls?" This time a smile, and a slow, deliberate, "Let's just say, we allow for more late-blooming in boys." All the Natalies lined up in files in these offices like supplicants, and now the goal, for which they have exhausted, denied and pushed themselves to inhuman lengths, is moved further out. This creates pain for many young women too taut to absorb the punch.

Have we taught our girls to ask too much of themselves? Have we groomed them for impossible dreams? Unknowingly aided and abetted an exquisite kind of self-abuse that seeks perfection? Have we, as our counseling colleague, Willard Dix, has said so well, encouraged our girls not to be themselves, but to "create a character?" Dix notes, taking from Jean Paul Sartre, "Becoming subject to the Gaze of the college admission process, adolescents create shells (becoming objects, rather than persons), transforming into applicants they think colleges will admit." (2008) To this I add that for girls, my girls, all girls, this goes beyond the college process—though it reaches the eye of the storm there—to losing themselves in the creation of a dream self, one that must be everything.

In fact, Natalie gets through the storm and achieves success, though not without tears. She gets in not to her first-choice school, but her second. The summer after graduation she manages to get some sleep, recharge a bit, and then she mounts the treadmill of becoming remarkable all over again in a new setting. One of Natalie's classmates must postpone college for treatment of an eating disorder; still another has decided to stay near home and her psychologist to deal with anxiety and depression.

The Mall of America has a very popular princess-themed store. Any given weekend, you will see a steady stream of preteen birthday parties coming and going through its doors. Inside, the girls are put in full makeup, have their hair done, don crowns and accessories, and then march out looking happy: too old and too sexy, but positively glowing. Their mothers proudly lead them in and out. The symbolism is clear; I cringe each time I pass.

#### Graduation

The graduates carry pink roses this year. Looking fresh from the princess store, they display newly-streaked, styled hair and tans, manicures, dark lipstick, big earrings, all meant to provide a pleasing set for the serious theater of this great, accomplished crew. Some have academic award medals placed around their necks. We applaud from the faculty and family seats; we tear up a bit when the girls sing the school song and as they listen attentively

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to the rather dry visiting speaker. We watch proudly as a student speaker, chosen by her classmates, far outshines the guest speaker. The audience eagerly reads through the list of colleges to which this class was admitted. The girls are remarkable, at this girls' school and in every school, this we cannot deny. Some of our girls' dreaming has done great things for them, and this we celebrate.

Afterward, I go back to my little office with the window photograph, and I begin to worry all over again about the next

acts in other college dramas, the next crop of dreamers and what we can do to save our young women from themselves, from their impossible dreams and from the impulse to become everything. How might we write a new female script: sustainable girls in the lead roles, girls who manage without exhaustion, without too-high expectations and with a chorus of youthful joy in the wings?

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