



Letter From Florida

by Janet Scott Barlow

How I Spent My Christmas Vacation

The day after Christmas this family took off for the National Cheerleaders Association's High School Cheerleaders National Championship in Orlando, Florida. The National Cheerleaders Association's High School Cheerleaders National Championship is not the kind of event a parent—this parent, anyway—ever anticipates attending. It is the kind of event a parent discovers herself at because of the interests or accomplishments of her child.

I spent three days at this competition in order to see my daughter and her friends, nine girls I like, do a routine lasting exactly two minutes and eight seconds, a routine on which they had worked every day for four months while still maintaining civil relationships with one another—a feat I considered easily as impressive as making it to the National Cheerleaders Association's High School Cheerleaders National Championship in the first place.

These girls went to Florida as competitive novices, the first squad in their school's history to be so chosen. A hint that they might not completely reflect the nature of the event came at the Orlando airport when I saw countless flocks of girls (and a few boys) in coordinated outfits, carrying countless matching, custom-made garment bags, which held countless cheerleading uniforms, shoes, pom-poms, and hair ribbons. Shepherding these girls were countless parents and advisers, most of them attired in their kids' school colors. In addition, these adults appeared to be wearing what is referred to in the sports world as a "game face." They were *serious*.

As for my daughter, she was wearing

a sweatsuit, and her single cheerleading uniform was folded in a Baggie in her suitcase. To make things even more interesting, the suitcase containing the Baggie containing the uniform (not to mention the rest of her clothes) had missed the connection in Atlanta. The suitcase, we were assured, would arrive "in an hour and a half." Something told me that the chances of the suitcase arriving in an hour and a half were about even with my finding a game face for the National Cheerleaders Association's High School Cheerleaders National Championship.

Eight hours later the suitcase arrived, and we rushed it to our daughter's hotel. Parents were not allowed to stay in the same hotel with cheerlead-

ers, a rule I saw the wisdom of while delivering the suitcase. The elevators were jammed with barefoot girls. The hallways were filled with the sound of squealing and the smell of nail polish. The place was one giant slumber party—a glorious environment if you are 16 years old, a form of punishment if you are 42 and lacking a game face.

While at the hotel, my husband and I went to the ballroom to watch the girls practice. For those who tend to tense up at the sight of young bodies flying, flipping, leaping, and falling, this was another environment to avoid. Me, I tend to tense up. Fast. We stood against the wall, one of us nervous, one of us having a great time, watching the varsity cheerleaders from

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Cincinnati, Ohio (one of them in borrowed shorts), do their stuff.

Their stuff was not encouraging. The squad's big move, their finale, was an extension. An extension is accomplished when two girls on the floor lift their arms and lock their elbows while a third girl stands 12 feet in the air on their hands. It is the job of the girl being extended to balance herself securely, snap her arms skyward victoriously, maintain a smile, and generally look as though there is no place on earth she'd rather be than perched high in the air on the hands of two friends. While this is going on, the rest of the squad are creating a pleasing picture of symmetry by taking equally unnecessary risks.

The girl chosen to be extended is, of course, the smallest. The smallest girl was, naturally, my daughter. Over the past months, I had come to think of the extension as *The Extension* and to disapprove of it as a mother on principle. (Why go up there? Is this a skill you can use later in life?) However, as a physical coward, one who would pay to avoid both extending and being extended, I was forced to admire such a stunt.

But on this night, the night before the competition, *The Extension* was not going well. The girls were tired; their timing was off. Their arms would buckle, then my daughter's legs would buckle, then she would fall. Are we having fun yet?

Our daughter's squad was scheduled to perform at 3:56 Saturday afternoon. We were there by 1:30 to see what we could see. We saw plenty. The National Cheerleaders Association's High School Cheerleaders National Championship is an enormous event, with thousands of girls from around the country competing in routines that are physically daring, musically sophisticated, and altogether impressive. It quickly became apparent that the best squads had several things in common. They all parted their hair down the back and tied it high above their ears in fluffy little-girl "puppy tails." (I would like to have had the hair spray concession that weekend.) They all spoke with Southern accents. ("Go! Fight! Wee-yun!") They all smiled constantly and aggressively. (At one point my daughter marveled to herself, "The fakiness in this place is sort of

amazing.") And they were all very good at things like *The Extension*.

It was also obvious that the afternoon would be marked by an unrestrained adolescent emotionalism the likes of which I had never encountered. Whether doing well or "messing up"—"messing up" counting mainly as a fall, usually from an Extension—the reaction was the same: screaming, crying, hugging. With the squads that messed up, there seemed to be a little less hugging and a lot more crying.

Thirty minutes before Cincinnati's performance I went to the ladies' room. A mistake. The ladies' room of the Orange County Convention Center was on that afternoon the retreat of every cheerleader who had messed up. There was sobbing. There was wailing. One girl had locked herself in a stall and would not come out, despite the soothing words of her adviser. Scanning this scene, it occurred to me for the first time to question whether my daughter would lock herself in the ladies' room if she messed up *The Extension*. I didn't think so, but I knew for sure that if she did, I would not stand at the door trying to coax her out.

At 3:56 the girls we came to see walked on stage and smiled (though not aggressively) at the judges. By 3:59 they were busy hugging. Yes, *The Extension* worked. Yes, my daughter smiled and looked as though there was no place on earth she'd rather be—which at that moment might very well have been accurate. And yes, I felt like a million bucks.

No, they did not make the finals, a group of 10 squads (out of 100) chosen from their division to compete the following night. The finalists were announced back in the hotel ballroom, which held a terrible crush of people, most of them anxious parents. A Cheerleader Mom from Natchez, Mississippi—information I gathered from the large buttons pinned to her sweater—turned to me and said, "Before this is all over, I'm just gonna bust!" This rather startled me, since I didn't feel at all as if I was gonna bust. Faint, maybe; bust, no.

Later, we went back to our daughter's room for the most memorable half-hour of the trip. First, there was the room. Four girls had lived there for two days, which should give any think-

ing person an idea of what the place looked like. For good measure, they had told the maid she could skip 1639. Considering the state of the room, this decision (1) made no discernible sense and (2) probably saved the maid's life. Suffice to say there were piles of clothes everywhere, most of them having a life of their own. (They grew even as I stood there.) But amidst the clothes could be found the girls, and the girls were just right. Their attitude was a reassuring combination of desire and reality, competitiveness and common sense: If you are in a contest, you should want to win it; you should try to win it. But if the contest you're in is a cheerleading contest, well, "defeat" is not a life and death matter. Not one of them was about to lock herself in the bathroom. Way to go, Cincinnati.

Sunday was the big night, the finals. Having seen this much of the National Cheerleaders Association's High School Cheerleaders National Championship, I was not about to miss the main event. The place was standing-room-only. The place was hot. The program started late and ran long. More girls messed up; more girls cried. But I counted the evening a great success because the finalists included Cumberland County High School of Burkesville, Kentucky, my mother's hometown. And the winner and champion in the small varsity division was Barren County High School, Glasgow, Kentucky, where I have lots more kin. Way to go, Kentucky.

I don't think I would choose to attend the National Cheerleaders Association's High School Cheerleaders National Championship on a regular basis. It's possible I could get hooked. It's possible I could feel like I was gonna bust. But I'm glad I went this time. I got to see my daughter and her friends do their best and feel good about it. I was able to witness my 14-year-old son's amused and amazed reaction to adolescent femininity en masse. ("They *never* shut up," he said.) I got to watch my husband, easygoing to the point of foolishness, agree to deliver nine McDonald's breakfast orders to the rooms of the Cincinnati cheerleaders. After listening for 10 minutes to everyone talking at once, after hearing such instructions as, "I'll have a large juice—no, a small juice—wait, I'm allergic to

juice," my husband said, "Just write your orders down, and I'll figure things out later." He left the room with nine pieces of paper in his hand. Consistent with the theory that nothing having to do with kids is ever simple, the last slip bore this little brainteaser: "One cinnamon Danish, uncooked." And I had the pleasure of overhearing a Southern girl declare, "I just look ignorant in a T-shirt"—a use of the word "ignorant" I haven't heard since my last visit to Kentucky, a state whose small towns—maybe you've heard?—are now official bastions of high-school cheer-leading excellence.

Finally, I got to see an entire smiling family decked out in matching jackets on which were printed in large letters "Chadney's Mom," "Chadney's Dad," "Chadney's Brother," "Chadney's Grandma," and "Chadney's Grandpa." My only disappointment is that I did not get to see the object of this united pride and affection. I hope for her family's sake that she wasn't the girl who locked herself in the ladies' room. If she wasn't, then way to go, Chadney.

Janet Scott Barlow covers popular culture from her home in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Letter From Waterford

by Ivan Helfman

Old Wine Fermenting

One New Age guru still on a roll is Rabbi Sherwin Wine. Twenty-three years ago, before his rise, he was an unbelieving rabbi without a congregation. Known for his willingness to violate Talmudic law by marrying Jews to gentiles, this fall Wine became cochairperson of the International Federation of Secular Humanistic Jews. At the Birmingham Temple, Wine's congregation in Farmington Hills, Michigan, the synod fulfilled his dream of receiving emotional support and legitimacy from his soulmates around the world. The conference, wrote Wine in the December 1986 *Jewish Humanist*, confirmed that the philosophy of the Birmingham Tem-

ple was not a bizarre local phenomenon but a movement supported by an international gallery of celebrities, from Haim Cohn to Amos Oz.

Since secular humanism usually disguises itself as a neutral science, the candor of Wine's movement appealed to the Peeping Tom in me. Hanukkah was a day away, providing an opportunity to view Wine conducting a godless holiday service that I could not pass up. I rang up the temple for service times and was told that the building would be closed for the holidays. The congregation ministers to the "mid-winter travel plans of various members." I bided my time reading Wine's book, *Judaism Beyond God*, as well as his other publications, until the tanned brethren returned.

I discovered that the godless religion rejects prayer and worship: Prayer wastes time. When Wine had led prayers, during a stint as a Reform rabbi, nobody upstairs listened. *Judaism Beyond God* considers prayer a psychological kink caused by lingering nursery power-fantasies about the magical ability of baby sounds to procure milk delivery.

In Wine's eyes, worship resembles the appeasement rituals of wolves and is dangerous, irrational, and inappropriate for services. Dangerous because no power is sacred, taboo, or beyond human challenge; irrational because no power requires obsequious honor and devotion. Wine blames ancestor worship for "this bizarre ritual appeasement of invisible powers, immortals, icons, books, and abstract designs." Prayer and worship are replaced by silent meditation—which eliminates prayer books and Torahs from his start-up costs.

I attended an outreach session in early January at the temple, a rectangular brick and glass structure that resembles a suburban medical plaza. The only exterior ornaments were flat wood panels that framed the glass entrance to the large empty lobby. Wine waited for us to find him behind the windows of the cubical library, fidgeting his elbows against the formica tabletop and disparagingly looking over the small turnout. He wore a dark brown wool suit and a matching silk tie, and hogged a table-width to himself.

The pitch was theatrical. Vivid ges-

tures followed the words, palms sweeping the verbal spill off the formica tabletop. While he talked about unseen forces, his pupils dilated and brows lifted: "As secular humanists, we hold four tenets: naturalism, skepticism, consequential ethics and humanism," he said, and went on to explain each tenet well enough for a bubblegum card."

"Can you show me a supernatural being?" he asked, swaying spread palms and smirking.

He spoke of the scientific revolution: "There are no eternal truths, only fleeting objective scientific facts that the scientific method tells us are true. But who knows how long their truth will last in an age of active change or what science will discover tomorrow?"

Moral laws are as obsolete as close extended families. Anything that calls for unthinking submission to authority is unsuited to our individualistic age: "In the century of the Holocaust, we find it unrealistic to depend on a supernatural being for our safety and direction. Humanism, however, affirms the individual's limited but extraordinary abilities."

The human objects of the outreach ask questions: *How do you console the bereaved?*

"Let me tell you what I saw at a *shivva* that turned me completely off. A beautiful 32-year-old woman, in her prime, died in a car accident. The rabbi, a conservative, told the devastated husband, 'Maybe it's for the best.' It was too much to heap this absurdity upon his pain.

"I console people by complimenting them for taking it well and I tell them how much I admire their strength."

How do you tell kids that there is no God?

"You need not waffle because kids don't care," he said. Though afterwards, in private, he told a mixed couple, about to tie the knot, whose kids thought that Wine's services were not for the best, that "Rejecting secular humanism is all part of the process. Be sure to bring them back."

Do you observe any dietary laws?

"No, most of our members are on diets."

I asked, "What are your rituals like? How do you celebrate your holidays?—People's Day, for instance?"

"The few rituals we have are for the