Badges I Have Earned
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First: the Girl Scout badges, now in a storage box, the last few badges hastily pinned on the sash, not sewn. Badges for homemaking, hospitality, folk dancing, camping, bird watching, safety, campcraft, music, citizenship, backyard cooking, public speaking. In the Girl Scouts there was nothing covert about your merits: you wore them.

Two years ago, I gave my Stanford t-shirt to a thrift shop, embarrassed that I even bought it, even thought to wear that badge for a while, a flaunting of intellect, when, in reality, I had been in the right place at the right time: there were funds in 1990 to support a Ph.D. candidate for four years to research post-secondary writing issues.

Other badges I have earned remain hidden: the four inch scar from an appendectomy before the days of microsurgery. The divorce papers—badge of failure, grief, disillusionment, and eventual growth. And what about the badge for surviving the tenure process, including an alcoholic colleague’s rants against me in a pre-tenure meeting, yelling at me to “suck it up.”

Or what about a badge for making quiche in France without a recipe, without a thermometer on the oven and my French friends coming back for seconds? Does keeping an orchid alive for ten years earn a badge? What about the fact that a college junior in Indiana emailed to ask if she could interview me after reading my book for a class on literacy studies, and this, coming from the state that told me, some 30 years ago, they wouldn’t honor my BA in Education with an English minor and my MA in American Studies and start a new BA if I wanted to teach English in their state.

Can I earn badges for staying faithful to the New Yorker for 20 years? What about a badge for surviving suburban Long Island for six years as a transplanted Bay Area girl? Or is the whole damned notion of badges a vexed and stupid idea? Look at trees: they need no badges. They just are, and we bow.