UNDOING THE DAMAGE OF MALE-BASHING, ONE DAUGHTER AT A TIME

By Kathleen Parker
Orlando Sentinel 3/2/05

WINSTON-SALEM, N.C. — While most American women obsess about the laments of frazzled mothers, a handful of their daughters at Wake Forest University are turning their attention to the study of that mysterious and often-demonized species — fathers. Yep, you read it right. Fathers. Dear ol’ Dad. Remember him?

Each week, these young women (and one young man, who signed up because he hopes to be a good father someday) arrange their desks in a circle with Dr. Linda Nielsen, psychologist, professor and author, to learn about fathers and fatherhood in the only such college course in the country.

The class is not a therapy session or support group, but a tough college course like any other, involving research, reading, field projects, papers, tests and grades. It’s just harder than most because it also involves introspection, self-analysis and the search for insight into one of life’s most important relationships.

I attended a class recently, both as an observer and quasi-lecturer, at Nielsen’s invitation. Nielsen’s and my discovery of one another was like that scene in “The Count of Monte Cristo” where Edmond Dantes suddenly hears the tapping of another inmate through the dungeon floor and realizes, joyously, that he’s not alone. Together they labored to tunnel their way out of captivity and darkness into freedom and light.

Similarly, these young people dig deeply to liberate themselves from the dark male stereotypes that pervade our culture, enlightening themselves in order to embrace their fathers. The title of Nielsen’s book and the course textbook is “Embracing Your Father: How to Build the Relationship You’ve Always Wanted With Your Dad” (McGraw-Hill, 2004).

Despite the popularity of Nielsen’s class, now in its 15th year, and rave reviews from alumni, Nielsen has received scant attention from our nation’s literary and cultural gatekeepers. She understands the problem. It is, after all, her job to understand the psychology of groupthink and the unconscious motivations of human beings.

Thus, the joke around Nielsen’s kitchen table is that her book might have been a best seller if she’d titled it, “Ten Reasons to Hate Your Father … While Losing 20 Pounds and Having Great Sex!”

Nielsen prefers to deal in reality, however, and is fearlessly steadfast in her conviction that most young women have been brainwashed by the culture into believing that men are inferior to women and that everything lacking in the father-daughter relationship is Dad’s fault. An avowed feminist, Nielsen tries to show her students that sometimes girls and women are not victims, but are arrangers of their own unhappiness and misfortune.

At the same time, Nielsen is careful not to demonize mothers, which she says would be counterproductive and unfair. Daughters need to respect the mother as well as the father part of themselves, which evolves from a deeper understanding of both parents.

Her approach is short on warm and fuzzy. She’s a teacher, not a baby sitter, and instructs the old-fashioned way, using hard facts, statistics and research that bear out what women who’ve
had good relationships with their fathers have always known — that most fathers are lovely creatures who teach their daughters, among other things, self-respect.

How peculiar that so many girls today learn a different story, often from mothers who, sometimes hurt or embittered by divorce, communicate negative messages to their daughters. Movies, books, television and other media are equally culpable.

By contrast, Nielsen’s book is full of documented facts that invariably take students by surprise. By learning, for example, that 2 million single dads are raising 3 million kids on their own, or that 80 percent of married fathers in this country earn most of the money for their families, students begin to see their fathers as hard-working, responsible men rather than as objectified wallets who routinely disappoint families by working too much.

They also learn that they share the responsibility for having a better relationship with Dad, and that fathers sometimes need permission to be more involved with their daughters. Such lessons offer dividends beyond grades, as expressed by grateful students who write to thank Nielsen for helping them discover their fathers as fellow travelers in life’s journey rather than as obstacles to gratification.

All students learn that most invaluable of lessons, that Dad is also “just” a human being, perhaps flawed and even struggling, and that he, too, could use a little understanding. Just like his little girl.

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