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The Feminist Disdain for Nursing

By Ellen D. Baer

PHILADELPHIA

At a recent party, a lawyer friend with whom I've shared feminist causes introduced me to her house guests as "almost a doctor." "No," I protested, "I am a nurse" — to which she replied, "Oh, no, Ellen, you're more than a nurse."

I know her intent was to enhance my status in her friends' eyes by describing my expertise in non-nurse terms, to rescue me from the indifference or even denigration that being "only" a nurse often engenders.

This has happened so often over the years that it has come to exemplify for me the terrible paradox of feminism, which glorifies women who emulate masculine behavior while virtually ignoring women who choose traditionally female roles and careers.

I consider myself a dedicated feminist, but I refuse to accept a sort of feminism that abandons feminine caring roles in order to achieve progress. Such capitulation to masculine definitions is unacceptable and extraordinarily disappointing, when promoted by women.

I believe this has occurred with nursing because many feminists have found it too painful to look seriously at nurses' experience. It has easier for them to hope that the fault lay within nursing, blaming the victim as it were.

The term “feminism” has come to mean “women doing what men do.” If a woman merges and acquires, negotiates or forecloses and wields an ax or scalpel with the same effect as a man, she is judged to be liberated. I know it is important to struggle for a woman's right to choose to be a neurosurgeon, a lawyer or a banker. But why should that also mean that millions of us who choose to be nurses, teachers, librarians, mothers and homemakers are depicted as dumb, unliberated or prisoners of patriarchy?

It isn't surprising when men denigrate nurses. But when ostensibly liberated women do so, it is infuriating. I look at the shelves of libraries and bookstores, or at television, and get angry.

**No, I'm not
'almost a
doctor.'**

How dare Robin Norwood argue in “Women Who Love Too Much” that women from dysfunctional families are “overrepresented” in fields like nursing? Why did Working Women magazine list nursing, teaching and social work in its 1988 “Ten Worst Jobs” report? And why didn't Esther Shapiro of Spelling Productions correct the dumb and oversexed nurse image portrayed on the now defunct television series. “Nightingales?”

The answer is that, in general terms, nurses are women whom people can denigrate and still get away with it. No angry feminists write books protesting the poor treatment of nurses. I think that nurses and other “care givers” are women about whom many feminists like to feel superior.

For 100 years, periodic nursing shortages have generated flurries of articles, salary increases and campaigns that yield some new recruits. But there will be no fundamental changes until people, including feminists, realize the critical importance of nurses in health care.

Professional nursing requires brains, education, judgment, fortitude, inventiveness, split-second decision-making, interpersonal competence and day-after-day determination. When feminists or their families are sick, they want their own nurses to have all those traits, but they don't assign those attributes to the group as a whole.

Yet the fact that more than two million people — 97 percent of them female — choose to be nurses in the face of hostility and contempt testifies to the tremendous appeal of nursing, an intellectual challenge with exquisite personal satisfaction.

Just imagine life without nurses. If some feminists have their way, and all the smart women end up in law firms, banks and boardrooms, what will become of the quality of our lives?

Lewis Thomas, the eminent physician and biologist, has described nurses as the “glue” that holds the health-care system together. But that glue is losing its grip because the attitudes expressed by the women's movement cause many young people not to choose to be nurses, hospital boards not to include them in decision-making, doctors not to act like colleagues and politicians not to support their education or reimburse them for their services.

To fully comprehend how much nurses know, how important their work is and how little they are credited is to understand the depth of the negative status of women in this society. It is imperative that real feminists address the needs of women doing “women's work.”

Feminism will have succeeded not only when women have equal access to all fields but when traditionally female professions like nursing gain the high value and solid social respect they deserve.

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