

Teaching Tools & Techniques

Teaching Relationships in a Family Law Course

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Purpose

- To acknowledge the importance of relationships in family life
- To recognize the premise that family dissolution is often caused by deteriorating relationships
- To explore how to use books about improving relationships as an intervention strategy

Objective

- Discuss three books/texts about improving relationships are discussed in the context of improving relationships as a possible intervention to reduce the rate of family dissolution and thereby reduce the need for family law in divorce courts.

Rationale

In my previous article on teaching family law (Barton, 2002), I mentioned two books that I used on relationships to introduce the Family Law course. My philosophy is that when teaching family law there needs to be a segment on relationships. The breakdown of relationships is the main factor of the high divorce rate in the United States. If there is a better understanding of relationships, a better understanding of what teaching professionals and others in the human services arena might do to better understand relationships, and then to teach creating and maintaining effective relationships, there might a very positive impact on reducing the divorce rate. The two books are [The Flying Boy: Healing the Wounded Man](#) by John Lee (1989) and

Beyond the Blame Game: Creating Compassion and Ending the Sex War in Your Life by

Dmitri Bilgere (1997). This article will be a review/elaboration of these two books, and then I will finish the review with a discussion of John Lee's newest book, which is Courting a Woman's Soul: Going Deeper into Love and Being Loved (2003).

Personal narrative and autoethnography are becoming a more recognized form of research and scholarship (Irvine & Klocke, 2001). Atkinson (2002) in his chapter on the Life Story Interview, says,

The stories we tell of our own lives today are still guided by the same patterns and endearing elements. Our lives unfold according to an innate blueprint, following the pattern of beginning, middle, and resolution, with many repetitions of this pattern.

Our lives consist of a series of events and circumstances that are drawn from the well of *archetypal* experiences common to all other human beings. (emphasis added, p. 121)

Likewise, autoethnography is an evolving qualitative methodology (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). It is a means of showing how personal experiences inform both research and analysis. The Flying Boy is John Lee's personal narrative of his journey into manhood.

Before continuing, I do want to provide more of an explanation of me, my social location, and parts of my own personal journey. I am a white male, well into mid-life, having personally experienced a number of major mid-life crises (Barton, 2003). Those crises led me to my first therapist. I started doing a lot of self-help reading. I found out that I could complete a non-thesis master's in the Department of Family and Child Ecology at Michigan State University, and decided to get credit for the self-help reading that I was doing. Basically, I am a men's studies scholar in a family studies department. Having said that, I also look at the family of orientation

as an ecological system and one part of that ecological system is a man except in female-headed households. Until we start cloning children or there is another immaculate conception, there will be a man involved in the procreative process. Also, I want to be very clear that it is not my intent to say anything that is anti-woman or anti-feminist. In fact, there are parallels between mythopoetic men's work (men's emotional healing work) and selected feminist theories (Barton, 2000). I do believe that it is important that all aspects of the family unit be better understood, and that includes understanding the man as a gendered part of the family system. Now back to The Flying Boy.

In The Flying Boy, John Lee (1989) relates his personal narrative of moving toward mature adulthood. Every time that I re-read The Flying Boy, there is another part of John's story that really resonates with me, although in some respects our journeys have been very different. The Flying Boy starts with John Lee's move to Austin, Texas, to start at a Ph.D. at the University of Texas, Austin, and to teach at the local community college. As his life progresses, he moves through a series of unsuccessful relationships. In an attempt to understand why his relationships continue to fail, he chose to go into therapy, Jungian analysis, shamanism, and emotional release work (Jones, 2002). Each of these played a part in allowing John Lee to become more aware of himself, start an inward journey, and go back and process some of the emotional wounds that he received growing up in a family with an alcoholic father and a mother which looked to him, her older son, to provide much of the emotional nurturance that she was not receiving from her husband. Aspects of this were for John to actually touch and feel the wound, grieving the wound, going into that wound in spiritual ways, releasing the anger that he, as a "good boy" had carried because of these childhood wounds and, in the end, letting go.

Part of John Lee's process was confronting his father on a deep emotional level and

starting to understand why his father had been an alcoholic and recognizing that there was a built-in dynamic of jealousy on the part of his father, as he could see his wife getting emotional support from John that the father was not able to provide. One of the most touching parts of the book for me is that point in time when John flies to Tampa and has a five hour “reunion” with his father, where they share, argue, cry, shout, hold each other in their arms, and come to some resolution and understanding based on sharing feelings as adult men.

Another important piece of John Lee’s narrative is his reconciliation with his mother. Part of that reconciliation is his realization that most of the women with whom he had been in relationship were very much like his mother and carried similar personality traits. Also, John often found himself in a relationship wanting to be mothered.

John Lee had been struggling with doing an academic dissertation on the works of Robert Bly, the poet and author of *Iron John* (1990). As John Lee went through the journey described in The Flying Boy, he came to the realization that the dissertation wasn’t what needed to be told, what needed to be told was his story. One of the very touching discussions in the book is when John shares the talk that he had with his parents about his need to write his story. At that point in time, his father said that John could write anything about his father, but to not say anything bad about his mother in the book. John replied that he had to be honest and truthful about his whole story. His father then said, “Okay. Write whatever you have to write.” What a blessing from a father to his son. What a demonstration of elder energy (Jones, 2001).

I have used this book in every class that I have taught. I have shared it with a number of other men and women. All have found The Flying Boy to be an insightful, personal narrative about how men can go on a healing emotional journey, discover their essence, find themselves and, in the process, demonstrate how men can search, find emotional healing, and move toward

healthy relationships.

Everyone that has read the book has found it very helpful. Men who have read the book have found that there is another way in which they can be in relationship. Women find the book helpful and interesting in providing somewhat of a different insight into a man who is on a healing journey. The only person who did not have this kind of a reaction was a medical doctor friend of mine from Belize, Central America. After he finished reading it, he said, “Interesting. So what?” With that comment, I recognized that meanings of this book may be very culturally specific to white Eurocentric individuals.

The second book is Dmitri Bilgere’s Beyond the Blame Game (1997). Instead of paraphrasing, I am going to quote the author’s perspective on equal compassion that permeates the book and is a means to move beyond the blame game.

How can we tell when we are seeing with both a male as well as a female perspective? We are seeing with a male as well as a female perspective when we judge women and men with equal compassion. We are seeing with a balanced perspective when:

- We seek equally to explain the reasons behind both men’s and women’s behaviors. We don’t seek to understand one gender’s behavior, while seeking only to punish the other gender’s behavior.

- We care about and are considerate of *both* genders’ emotions. We see both men and women as wounded, and seek to heal those wounds equally.

- We understand the emotional blocks that tend to hurt both men and women. We understand the shame that many men experience about being men.

We understand that rather than constantly feeling shame, many men shut down

emotionally and feel nothing at all. We learn to see the effects of this shame in male behavior.

- We understand that male-female relationships operate as systems of behavior, and we use this understanding when analyzing relationships.

- We have a knowledge of the stereotypes that hurt women, and a knowledge of the lesser-known stereotypes that hurt men. We act on this understanding when we make judgments about relationships.

Compassion is the thread that draws all these points together. We have to be compassionate to seek to understand, rather than to simply look for a “bad guy” to blame, label and punish. Developing a compassionate view of both men and women, a perspective that loves and supports both genders equally, is one of the first steps in creating gender reconciliation. (p. 5-6)

Bilgere sees a need for seeing men as compassionately as we see women. This lack of compassion starts at a very young age when little girls are called sugar, spice, and everything nice, while little boys are called snippets and snails and puppy dog tails. There certainly is a lack of compassion for little boys when they are described in that way and Bilgere demonstrates how this is carried on and directed to adult men, as well.

Bilgere outlines the six most important understandings from Beyond the Blame Game.

They are as follows:

- (1) Shame. Men and women experience very different kinds of shame, and our lack of understanding of shame dynamics wreaks havoc in relationships.
- (2) The different ways in which men and women are empowered.

Women and men do not become empowered in the same way. Bilgere

explores how a child growing up finds different “empowerment doors” opened or closed, depending on his or her gender.

- (3) System of male-female relationships. Codependency theory and family role therapy have taught us that relationships exists as systems to which both parties contribute, and from which both parties benefit.
- (4) Dehumanization of men. Men are one of the few groups that otherwise socially aware, equality-committed people still feel free to degrade and abuse. Stereotypes pump men into one “bad” being, and treat all men as the worst of what human beings can be.
- (5) Violence. The ways in which our society explains violence between men and women keeps men and women apart. We’ll examine the fallacies and how our society explains intergender violence, and chart a route to creating a society made up of relationships that loving, supportive, and truly non-violent.
- (6) Sex. Men and women have profoundly different experiences with sex and sexual availability.

Each of one of these then is the basis for one of the chapters in Beyond the Blame Game, where each of these elements is examined and discussed in detail.

Coming from the theoretical approach of transactual analysis is the rescue triangle. One of the major strengths of this book is the in-depth analysis and application of the rescue triangle to relationships. The three elements of the rescue triangle are rescuing, victiming, and

perpetrating. The relationship is a system. The partners in a dysfunctional relationship often play different parts in the rescue triangle and may shift from rescuer to perpetrator to victim and back to rescuer within one cycle of interactions within this relationship system. An understanding of the rescue triangle is deemed important if we're going to improve our own relationships and/or teach others about relationship dynamics and ways of emotionally healing relationships so that they can be healthy, providing a healthy relationship system. According to Bilgere (1997),

Relationships between men and women have changed. Over the past few decades, women have articulated a new, more compassionate perspective on women. Rude, demeaning, or devaluing behaviors that used to be accepted by women have been called into question. Women have insisted that our society empower them economically and politically, just as men are empowered, and have made great strides. Meanwhile, men have not been developing a new, more compassionate perspective on men. As a result, our society has developed a more compassionate perspective on women, while continuing to believe that men have everything and that men, exclusively, are the problem.

When only one side of a conflict is understood, it is very tempting to blame the less-understood side. This is exactly the trap men and women have fallen into. Having compassion solely for women's experiences, while having little compassion for men's experiences has led us to blame men as the sole cause of all women's problems and the problems of the world. Because we have not seen both sides, and understood both men's and women's experiences with equal compassion, we have had an unbalanced perspective on gender issues. The war

between the sexes has continued to rage. (pp. 141-142)

Bilgere also cites Demming's 85-15 Rule. Demming is the person who was so readily adopted by the Japanese and largely ignored in the United States with respect to his management studies. Demming's 85-15 rule is that "85 percent of the problems come from the system under which people interact, and only 15 percent of the problems come from the people themselves." (Bilgere, 1997, p. 143-144). So here again we have relationship system, which is 85 percent of the problem because of the use of stereotypes, shaming, and blaming.

Compassion and resolution came not from fighting, but from understanding. The solution, then, is for us to marshal our understanding, rather than marshaling our arguments. We must be willing to set our hurts and grievances aside long enough to actually understand the experience of the other gender. When we do this, we create peace in our relationships. We no longer have to fight battles about who's at fault for the problems between men and women. When we compassionately understand the experiences of the other sex, while still having compassion for our own, we move from a way of thinking in which someone has to lose to a way of thinking in which both sides can win. We find innovative new solutions to our differences. We find similarity where previously there was separation. We create compassion where previously there was competition. We are spontaneous in our relationships, rather than having to control them. We no longer have to win at the expense of the other sex. When we have understanding, we win along with them. (Bilgere, 1997, p. 142)

Bilgere points out the extensiveness of the blame culture that we have in the United States. He also points out that it is necessary to get beyond the blame game if we are going to

create compassionate relationships and end the sex wars in our lives in this country.

There is one caveat with respect to this book. Clearly, it was written from a heterosexual perspective. At first blush, it might appear that this is not inclusively written, not inclusive in its language. I judge the better way to reframe this is with the use of the language of partners, although in some instances, partner means a married and/or committed relationship, as opposed to a more casual dating relationship.

For a teaching tool, the questions that I ask are the following:

- (1) How do you see this applying to same-sex male relationships and same-sex female relationships?
- (2) Are there any differences between heterosexual relationships and same-sex relationships with respect to the various dynamics discussed in this book?
- (3) Are there similar relationship dynamics in parent-child relationship, employer-employee relationship, mentoring relationship, faculty-student relationship, or any other relationships that you can think of?

A third related book is John Lee's (2003) newest book, Courting a Woman's Soul: Going Deeper into Loving and Being Loved. In this book, John Lee continues his personal narrative and starts with his therapist's question to him of how long it has been since he's taken a vacation. Vacations were difficult for John because of his being "an off-the-scale introvert. The only time I tolerated the company of other people was when I was drunk, stoned, or teaching college students, which often feels as surreal as the first two" (pp. 2-3). As a teacher of college students, the surrealness that John speaks of provides an interesting observation of classroom experience.

John has no idea where to go for his vacation, so he calls his travel agent and leaves it in her hands. The next thing he knows, he is booked on a Club Med vacation in the Turks & Caicos

Islands, about 100 miles south of Miami and a stone's throw from Cuba. John was surprised to learn that Club Med resorts have changed since they started in the 1970s and many of them were more adult/family oriented.

Much to John's surprise, he did have a good time on his week's vacation. One of the things that John experienced and had insights into his relationship issues was with respect to the foursome that he was a part of during that week. The other aspect of the week is that he met a very attractive young woman 16 years than him by the name of Susan. The very first time that they met, Susan announced that she was involved in a relationship and was at Club Med just for a getaway from Miami. So John and Susan would meet and talk and share briefly at least once a day between the times that John was palling around in his foursome. John and Susan exchanged names and phone numbers on the day that John was leaving Club Med.

John did not think that he will ever hear from Susan again and headed back to his life in Austin, Texas. Soon his first love from high school calls and wants to talk. Another old high school friend calls and invites John for the holidays. In addition to this, Susan calls John shortly after her return from Club Med and they start to have phone conversations as friends nearly every night and exchange letters at least weekly. This turns into an extensive courting and, in the end, John Lee, the flying boy, comes home. As part of that process, John made a list of the things that he had to do if and Susan and he were to develop a healthy relationship. These are as follows:

- (1) I would have to let go of as many expectations as possible, since an expectation is a predetermined resentment.
- (2) I had to stop performing the part of a lover, and instead learn to give and receive love.

- (3) I would create a new 12-step program for recovering control addicts.
- (4) I would give up my lifelong desire for perfection in both myself and the one I loved.
- (5) I would actively court Susan's soul, and not just talk about it. (pp. 127-128)

As you can see, this is a rather expensive list of what John Lee sees is needed in his relationship if the relationship is going to thrive. In Courting a Woman's Soul, his personal narrative shows the ways that he grieved, healed, sabotaged the relationship, and the decree to which he successfully accomplished the five steps that he set out for himself in his list above. I could tell you the outcome of the relationship but I choose not to do that. It would be like telling in the review the surprise ending of a story.

Using this book in the classroom, I would use the same or a similar set of questions to make this text more inclusive. That same set of questions are those outlined above after the portion of this review on The Flying Boy.

In summary, all three of these books have major relationship materials. I reiterate that nothing in this review is intended as anti-woman or anti-feminist. There are, however, two gendered sexes. Men do go through life changing transitions in their lives. Women have substantial power. Men, some men in particular, do have substantial power and privilege, which is more clearly seen and perceived. "But the way we have set up that world of power causes immense pain, isolation, and alienation; not only for women, but also for men...This is men's contradictory experience of power" (Kaufman, 1994, p. 142).

Bilgere (1997) points out the manner in which many aspects of men are negative stereotypes. Television sitcoms and other media repeatedly reinforce these negative stereotypes.

As a result, the media and the popular culture upon men, women, and children in the United States constantly reinforce these negative stereotypes. In my judgment, “the battle between the sexes” will not end until the negative cultural stereotypes of men are studied, reviewed, assessed, and reframed so that there is a more equitable, egalitarian, and understanding of a truer human nature of women and men. One of the best ways I have seen this demonstrated is in Beyond the Blame Game.

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