

Overcoming the Role of Family Hero

By Christine Vander Wielen MSW, CAPSW

Nicole awoke feeling exhausted. She had worked an extra shift at the hospital and then had stayed up late working on the costumes for her son's school play. She felt a tinge of resentment toward Richard, as she forced herself out of bed to get the children ready for school. There was so much to do. Nicole had promised herself today she would go to her parent's house to clean out the refrigerator. If she hurried, she would have just enough time to finish the job before she had to take Grandma to her doctor's appointment. She was not looking forward to it but no one else could do it. They all had their own responsibilities. After school, there would be her daughter's soccer game to coach. Then, there was Richard. She had felt them drifting apart the past several months. When she thought of him, there were pangs of hurt and loneliness.

Something inside Nicole told her to slow down because something was out of balance, but how? She had learned her role well and did not see any alternative. After all, she had been groomed to be the family hero, hadn't she?

She was the oldest of three children. Her parents fought often and fought violently. Early, she learned she could distract her parents from their misery, even if it was only for a little while. As a child, she earned good grades, was a natural athlete and a leader of many activities. She was the one that her parents bragged about. She seldom played or had fun. How could she? There was so much to do.

As an adult, Nicole continued to be over involved in many activities, not out of enjoyment or calling but out of compulsion. She was looking for a sense of self. She felt pressure to perform and maintain an appearance. She thought she could not allow anyone into her private world of anger, resentment, loneliness and inadequacy.

Nicole's story and her responses are all too common. Although she may have felt an assignment as a young child, Nicole is now assuming the role. She has many choices. What would happen if Nicole allowed God to take over her life completely? Could she let someone else into her private world? Could she accept the fact that her parents' happiness was never her responsibility, nor was it in her control? Could she take responsibility for her own thoughts and behaviors and no one else's? Could she ask for help from Richard and others instead of feeling resentful they were not helping? Could she admit that she is not always right, nor does she need to be? Could she allow

herself some “down time” and not try to accomplish something all the time? Could she allow herself some fun time with Richard and reconnect with him on an equal footing? There is a loving God that wants to be invited into every experience and every pain of Nicole’s and ours. He desires to be with us in change and to change us.

Nicole is a composite of several real “family heroes.”

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