

Who's
Looking
Out
for
You?

Folk Music

Papa don't preach
I'm in trouble deep
But I've made up my mind,
I'm keeping my baby.

—Madonna, “Papa Don't Preach”

IT IS BRUTALLY unfair to the children involved, but there are almost 12 million one-parent families in the U.S.A. Single mothers run the majority of those families, and most of those mothers are poor. According to the U.S. census, about 70 percent of all African-American babies are born out of wedlock, as opposed to 27 percent for whites. So do the math and face the result: Millions of American kids are getting hosed from day one.

And there is little any of us can do about it. We live in a free society. If irresponsible people have kids, there is nothing any American authority can do to stop it. In China they kill babies. In some Islamic countries they'll kill a woman who gets pregnant without a husband, or even has sex outside of marriage. These policies, of course, are barbaric and constitute major human



rights violations because, believe it or not, women and babies are human beings too.

Here in the good old U.S.A. our Constitution gives careless, foolish citizens all the leeway in the world to bring children into the world and then not care for them. Millions of fathers abandon their kids—and it is rare that any of them sees a day in jail. We all know people who are absolutely awful to their children, just as we all know heroic parents, single and otherwise, who raise successful, happy children despite heavy odds.

There is no question that our society has now embraced the casual approach when it comes to having children. Columnist Kathleen Parker nailed it. “Today having a baby is like swinging through McDonald’s for a burger. One baby all the way, hold the dad.”

And the damage is incalculable. Over the next two years, about 40 percent of American babies will be born out of wedlock. One million teenagers are likely to have a child this year, and only three in ten will be married. Half of all the mothers who have kids in their teens will be poor *the rest of their lives*. The government spits out these stats like baseball players spit out sunflower seed shells. The politicians use these poor children as pawns in the never-ending game of government entitlements. Society recognizes the problem but can’t solve it. Almost all of our social ills can be traced back to chaotic homes.

Luckily, most of us are born into a home with two parents. And thanks to Norman Rockwell and Walt Disney, there is an ideal embedded in many of our minds. Two loving parents, clean clothes, nice toys, a picket fence around the yard, and a dog named Barney.



Does that sound like your household?

My home was a mixture of tradition and chaos. My father wasn't Ozzie Nelson, the TV ideal dad in the '50s and '60s, but he wasn't Ozzy Osbourne either. I wrote about my late father in *The O'Reilly Factor*, the book, and I think it is safe to say that I had a rough-hewn upbringing. Simply put: There was *plenty* of tension in my house. Along with a lot of yelling and martial arts. My father was the Kung and I was the Fu. The perceptive writer James Ellroy, writing in *GQ* magazine, had an interesting take on my upbringing.

[O'Reilly's] old man died of melanoma. He was a rough-edged guy. Fear ran him. He peaked in World War II. He was a naval officer. He did important work in the Jap Occupation. He settled in Levittown, New York. He raised his son and daughter strict. He worked as an accountant. He hated said work. He stuck with it. Fear made him stick. He lived through the Depression. He fed off pix of hobo shantytowns and bean lines. He stayed spartan middle class. He was class bound by fear. He bought the implicit American line. Stick where you are and wish your kids more.

O'Reilly père held his mud. O'Reilly père cracked a bit on his deathbed. He told his son that he never fulfilled his promise. Bill O'Reilly vowed to do it for him.

The old man gave him some tools. His strict legacy served more than hindered. The old man was a moral exemplar. His preachings were sound. He erred only in this rigid enforcement. The old man ruled by fear. O'Reilly hated it as a kid.



O'Reilly gained respect for it years on. The old man emerged as a teacher. He taught by positive and negative example. He was responsible for his own failures. He was complicit in sustaining the American class system.

Ellroy understood my dad's basic résumé but left out one important item: Despite his ordinary life he was an extremely perceptive man. My father was Abe Lincoln: honest and also knew instinctively who could be trusted and who was auditioning for the role of Judas. But this knowledge did him little good because he was afraid to act on it.

The upside in my house was this: There were standards. There was no binge drinking, no drugs, no cursing, no weird displays of inexplicable behavior (except by me). My folks were like their folks before them—reactors. If I acted like a jerk, the reaction was Allen Iverson quick. My parents did not spare the rod, they brooked no disrespect, and they had no concerns at all about my “self-esteem.”

There were times when I hated my father. I admit it. He knew it. The punishment that descended upon me was mostly uncalled-for and born of the frustration of his life. But even in my teens I realized that my parents wanted me to do well and succeed. As dim as I was, I knew that there was love in the house.



So now when I see children at risk, it makes me furious. Take four-year-old Rilya Wilson, for example. I told her story on *The*



Factor and it is heartbreaking. She was born in East Cleveland, Ohio, and her father split soon after her birth. Her mother was a drug addict and lost parental rights. So little Rilya went to live with her “godmother,” Geralyn Graham, in south Florida, a situation that was paid for and supposedly supervised by the state of Florida.

Trouble is, the caseworker assigned to Rilya, Deborah Muskelly, did not make the state-ordered mandatory visits, although, in the state files, she falsely recorded that she had. When Rilya turned up missing from her “home” in early 2001, nobody seemed to care. It took sixteen months for the state of Florida even to find out about it.

Now, you would think the authorities would be all over the case once the facts came to light. A defenseless four-year-old missing and possibly murdered! You would think everyone in power would rally to see justice done.

On television I asked Florida Governor Jeb Bush to get directly involved in the case. He would not. I asked for the resignation of the head of the children’s services department. She stayed on for almost a year until the pressure finally forced Bush to sack her. I asked for the caseworker, Muskelly, to be immediately arrested. She was not, and neither Bush nor anyone else offered an explanation. To say the situation was disgraceful is insult-light.

Finally, just before the election of 2002, Governor Bush had to act because he was slipping big in the polls. Both the caseworker and the “godmother” were finally charged. But the hard truth is that nobody in the world cared for little Rilya Wilson. Nobody looked out for her even though a number of adults were being



paid to do that. And so she's still missing and most likely dead. Next time you have parental issues, think about Rilya.

Poverty is an enormous problem for children, but even having money often doesn't solve the parental dilemma. Let's take a look at Julio and Enrique Iglesias, the father and son singers. These guys are fabulously wealthy, so it is hard to believe that with all their talent and fame, a smooth relationship did not evolve. But according to *Parade* magazine, the two are now rivals in the world of pop music. Enrique Iglesias is quoted as saying this about his famous father: "It's not a normal relationship. After I sold millions of records he [Julio] would say 'but you'll never win a Grammy.'"

Nice. Julio Iglesias has been blessed with enormous material success but apparently is competing with his own son for outside adulation. Does that make sense? Of course not. As everybody knows, money and privilege can screw a kid up fast. Enrique Iglesias was the product of a very messy divorce. As a young child, he lived with his mother in Spain. But her journalism career caused him to be left often in the care of a nanny. When Enrique turned seven, he was sent to live with his father in Miami. But according to friends, the child had to learn music outside this house because he was afraid Julio would put him down. Enrique has become a music superstar, but his road was tougher than some might think.

In a perfect world, every parent would love, nurture, and protect his or her children. If anyone should be looking out for you, it is your mother and father. But as we know, there are no parental guarantees in this life. You can ask Enrique Iglesias, or, if you get to heaven, you can ask Rilya Wilson.



Many of us are deeply conflicted about our parents. My father and mother certainly provided for me and made damn sure I got educated and was taught the essentials of life. But can I say that my father was always looking out for me? No, I can't. My mother's instincts were much more in that direction, but my father had demons that intruded on his parental duties. As with millions of other American parents, my father set a terrible example by inflicting unnecessary pain on his children. He did not do this on purpose. He simply could not control himself.

And therein lies the big parental dilemma. Just like everyone else, a parent might have to do battle with a powerful inner demon—that part of the mental makeup that is self-destructive and evil. If those demons win the battle, the child as well as the parent takes the hit. Abandonment, abuse, addiction, and apathy can scar a child for life. And there's little the kid can do about it.

Ask psychiatrists and they will tell you that children who are mentally or physically abused often grow up to be abusers themselves. In the ongoing scandal in the Roman Catholic priesthood, for example, it's become clear that many of the abusers were themselves abused when they were young.

This is not an excuse, but it may be a partial explanation. And once understood, the cycle of emotional or physical abuse that spins down from one generation to the next has a better chance of being stopped. It takes awareness. It takes courage. It takes discipline.

Most of us have unresolved problems with our parents. Some of these problems are trivial, some much more intense. For your own welfare it is important that you get to the root of the parental



issue and ask this question: Did your parents really look out for you? Did they want you to have a happy and successful life? The question is a bear, frightening and unpredictable. It can be painful even thinking about it. But here are a few guidelines to clear the air a little.

Call them the Ten Commandments of Effective Parenting.

1. A parent who is looking out for you will make time for you if he or she possibly can. Hint: Serial golfing is no excuse.
2. All punishments will fit the crime. Discipline is essential, but no parent should inflict frequent physical or mental pain on a kid. Childhood is supposed to be a wondrous, joyful period. Parents are the grown-ups and have to be patient, within reason. Words can deeply wound a child. Parents must display kindness and understanding. Corporal punishment should be a last resort, and used within guidelines that have been clearly established before any physical punishment is administered.
3. Parents who are looking out for their children will be under control in the house. There will be no random violence, intoxication, sexual displays, uncontrolled anger, or vile language (sorry, Ozzy). The house should be a refuge, a place where the child feels protected and loved. If it is a chaotic mess, the parents are not looking out for the kids.
4. If a parent is looking out for the child, he or she will educate that child in the best possible way. That includes paying college tuition if at all possible. Parents owe it to the kids to give them the tools to compete, and those tools are often expensive. But they come before the vacation, the Harley, the leaf



blower. If you don't want to sacrifice for your children, don't have them.

5. Parents should be available at all times for emergency talks. "All access," as the rock stars say. No excuses here. Ditch the meeting, get back from the mall, get off the phone. There is nothing more important than dealing with a child's crisis immediately, even if it seems trivial to the parent.
6. If a parent is looking out for the child, then that child's friends will be screened, the kid's whereabouts will be known at all times, and scholastic progress will be monitored daily. Homework will be looked at and questions about school will be asked. That's how trouble is spotted before it gets out of hand; that's how you bring out the best in your child. Children know you have a strong interest in their lives. They may bitch, but kids badly want that kind of attention. All the research shows that close parental monitoring is the leading factor in whether or not adolescents will engage in high-risk behavior.
7. Rules will be enforced but explained. Parents who truly look out for their kids understand that there are rules in society and that high standards of behavior are the key to a successful life. Rules are good. But rules must have a logical objective. "Because I say so" can be effective when the kid gets stubborn, but before that conversation stopper is trotted out, try connecting some dots with your child. It doesn't always work, but the effort is worth it.
8. Parents will be honest at all times. Lead by example. No lying, no cheating, no nasty gossip, no cruelty, no manipulating, no jealousy toward your kids, no competing with them, no



overindulging their various whims, and no overprotecting. Parents who are looking out for their children will prepare them for the rigors of this world. They will educate them *after* school, encourage generosity and spirituality, and generally do the right thing *all the time*. Or at least in front of them.

9. Parents will be respectful of *their* parents. Grandparent abuse or neglect is among the worst possible things a child can see. This is a very important commandment. You can't effectively look out for your kids if you don't look out for your folks. (Even if your folks don't deserve it.)
10. Finally, effective parents will remove the TVs and computers from their kids' rooms. All media absorption should be done in public space. This is a dangerous world, and the danger is now in the house. If a parent is really looking out for the kid, subversive material must be kept to an absolute minimum. Corrupting influences on children are everywhere, and parents must be full-time firefighters. Life is tough and getting tougher. The demons, the exploiters, want your kids. You must look out for them. Fight hard.

So, did your parents obey all the commandments? Chances are they did not—they are human, after all, even though few kids take that into consideration. The key question once you reach adulthood is, did your folks *try* to do the right thing by you? If they did make an effort, then they were looking out for you. If they didn't, then they were not. End of story?

Well, not quite. If you truly believe that your parents failed you, what then? It seems to me that you have a couple of choices. You



can resent them for the rest of your life, which is a colossal waste of time and energy. Or you can do NOTHING. That's right, nada. You can't change anything, so drop it. This is a HUGE lesson. Everybody has bad stuff happen to him or her in life. Sometimes your parents are the bad stuff. Let it go.



HERE'S A PERSONAL STORY. In the 2002 NBA finals some idiot gave Shaquille O'Neal's father courtside seats at the home court of the New Jersey Nets. The powerful L.A. Laker knew his father was there but would not look at him. That's because the guy, I won't call him a man, walked away from Shaq when he was a baby and never returned.

I say, good for O'Neal. By all accounts his mother is a very special woman and Shaq is devoted to her. He has obviously succeeded in the NBA, and right now he is a positive influence in this country. He has a right to ignore a father who did not look out for him.

And for good measure I hope the deadbeat dad knows how much O'Neal is making putting balls through hoops. How about close to \$30 million a year!

Most parent-child relationships are not as clear-cut as Shaquille O'Neal's. Many of us have very conflicted emotions about our parents; it is hard to nail down the absolute truth. But you definitely have to sort it out and decide the best course of action.

Here's what I did. When I was seventeen my father and I had a mini-brawl. Lamps were broken; my mother was horrified. But it



had to happen. The man had to learn that no longer would his son put up with his unreasonable wrath. And my father surrendered. He knew the physical stuff had to stop. His words were exactly these: “You’re on your own.”

Fine. I went away to college and began to compete. It wasn’t easy, but I made my way. I spent summers living at home but moved out entirely after graduation. But I always kept in touch and I was always respectful. Eventually, any resentment I had stored up dissipated because I understood that to harbor it would hurt the entire family. So as Hyman Roth told Michael Corleone while discussing the dueling atrocities of their two gangs, “I let it go.”

But I also did a lot of serious thinking about my father’s behavior and how it compared with the role of a parent who is really looking out for his child. I think it is worth restating the theme of the commandments: *The primary duty of a parent is to give his or her children the tools to build a happy and successful life. These tools are educational, emotional, and spiritual.* If your parents or parent did this, that person truly was looking out for you. And you are one lucky stiff.

