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Posted on Mon, May. 17, 2004

Films flick light on insights

Charlotte therapist uses movies to help clients

LAWRENCE TOPPMAN
 Movie Critic

Ah, the end of "Casablanca"! Humphrey Bogart declares, "I'm not good at being noble, but it doesn't take much to see that the problems of three little people don't amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world." Away goes Ingrid Bergman to fight the Nazis.

As you wipe away a tear, do you say, "What a sacrifice"? Or do you think, "Hmmm ... obvious fear of commitment. This guy needs to acknowledge his true emotions and act on them."

If it's the latter, you're ready for cinematherapy.

The 20th century's definitive art form has given rise to a 21st-century form of counseling.

Birgit Wolz started the trend two years ago in California. Now Charlotte therapist Michael Kahn leads a cinematherapy group, putting folks in touch with feelings by having them study characters' problems and responses to them.

"Movies have been compared to myths, fairy tales and fables: They have life lessons, and you can be reminded of them in a safe way, because you're a step removed," says Kahn, a former attorney who became a licensed professional counselor a decade ago. "It's also safer to talk about things in a group: You're not talking about yourself, at least at first.

"A movie gets beneath your defenses quicker than reading a book. Your defenses are up when you read; it's less `real' than a film, and you can close the book any time. But a movie will hit a nerve and be right in front of you."

A recent session found Kahn showing bits from Albert Brooks' "Defending Your Life" and Charlie Kaufman's "Adaptation."

Brooks plays a man judged in heaven by how fulfilled a life he spent on Earth; Nicolas Cage plays Kaufman as a writer whose attitude keeps him from realizing his potential. Kahn put out Twizzlers, popcorn and M&Ms for clients, who'd been assigned the films as homework and refreshed their memories with the clips.

"Everyone on Earth deals with fear," says heavenly scorekeeper Rip Torn to Brooks. "That's what little brains do. ... Fear is like a giant fog. It sits on your brain, and real feelings can't get through."

Brian, a 40-year-old entrepreneur and member of the therapy group, sees this as a metaphor for corporate America, which wants us to conform to preconceived ideas about religion or politics.

Jenny, a consultant in her 40s, has a different take: "I do live in fear, sometimes of my own inventions: what-ifs that could all go wrong." (Later, she said, "I never wanted to finish watching the movie before, because I found Albert Brooks so annoying. Then I found myself thinking, `I run my life with a lot of fears.' Maybe that's why I didn't like him.")

A clip from "Adaptation" kicks off a debate about self-doubt and obligations. Kahn quotes influential psychotherapist Albert Ellis about damaging concepts Ellis called "should-ding on yourself" and "must-erbation." For homework, Kahn asks group members to examine themselves for cognitive distortions, differences between the ways they perceive things and the ways they really may be.

Such intelligent detachment is a key to cinematherapy. Wolz teaches clients "right from the beginning how to watch. We're used to watching movies for entertainment, which is great, but if we add a component of conscious awareness, we get more out of it therapeutically.



L.MUELLER

Michael Kahn, a counselor, uses movies to get his patients to talk about their own personal problems.

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"I call this discovering your shadow material. We feel something and don't want to be totally aware of it, so we push it more into our subconscious. Then certain people will trigger aversions or hatred in us that ... have to do with our repressed material. In real life, clients deny this about themselves. But with a character in a film, it allows the moviegoer to look at that internal process.

"Movies can also help you access an inner strength you're not aware of. The shadow is not negative, necessarily. And when we're aware of it, it makes us stronger."

Kahn knows some movies provide pure escapist pleasure -- "we all like junk food at times" -- and a movie needn't be an Oscar-winner to help a viewer: He points out that "Joe Somebody," a Tim Allen movie about a dad who learns to assert himself, may be more digestible than a complex, offbeat drama such as "Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind."

"It's OK to show characters who don't resolve problems," he says, thinking of "Spotless" and the Jim Carrey character's final romantic dilemma. "The discussion is the important part: How did it affect you? You want to leave the group with a sense of hope, to ask, 'What are you doing differently?'"

The 44-year-old Kahn, a movie lover for decades, seems a natural to helm this group. He's drawn to films about emotional connections: "The relationship between the artist (Djimon Hounsou) and the little girls in 'In America' went right to me." He's also a fan of science fiction ("Star Trek"), political thrillers ("Enemy of the State") and action movies that don't rely on gore (the first two "Alien" or "Terminator" entries.)

A cinematherapist isn't creating the film equivalent of a book club or a coterie of budding film critics. At the same time, recruiting film buffs may mean giving the group a chance to talk about the pictures, not just themselves.

"I didn't really begin attending for the therapy aspect but rather the chance to dialogue with others about the deeper meaning of movies -- as well as the hidden meanings within myself," said Brian, who wished the group could watch entire movies together for a shared experience.

"It would be incredible to do this on a longer basis with people who've gotten comfortable with each other," said Jenny. "I've become much more aware of my own physical reactions.

"One of Michael's things is to pay attention to how you breathe. Watching at home, I see how I've stopped breathing or clenched my hands and kept something bottled up inside. I'll watch films with more self-awareness now; it's good to step outside yourself, and I don't do that very often."

After two cinematherapy groups for people who are generally in transition, Kahn's still tinkering with the formulas. He's thought of trying one specifically for people who are grieving or dealing with divorce or career changes. No matter what happens, his goals remain the same:

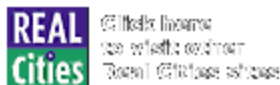
"If someone gets increased self-awareness, that's awesome. If it leads to action, great, but action can just be a different view of yourself, thinking less negatively about yourself. That's progress."

Watch and Learn

If you'd like to try some informal cinematherapy at home, here are a dozen movies Kahn recommends to get you thinking:

- **"My Left Foot"** and **"Breaking Away"** (moving through challenges).
- **"Life As A House"** (living your dream, reconnecting with others).
- **"Truly, Madly, Deeply"** and **"Moonlight Mile"** (grief work).
- **"Field of Dreams"** (listening to your inner voice).
- **"Groundhog Day"** (breaking old patterns).
- **"Defending Your Life"** (dealing with fear and how it affects you).
- **"Dead Poets Society"** (seizing the day, acting outside the box, looking at life from a different perspective).
- **"Adaptation"** (effect of negative self-talk and negative beliefs).
- **"Babette's Feast"** (awakening inner strength, appreciating the little things).
- **"My Big Fat Greek Wedding"** (challenging negative beliefs and family/cultural injunctions).

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