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# Living



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Therapy in the reel world

## Movies can help clarify feelings and provide the impetus for change

BY CASSANDRA BRAUN  
Contra Costa Times

"What would you do if you were stuck in one place and every day was exactly the same and nothing that you did mattered?" pleads Bill Murray's Phil in "Groundhog Day."

Birgit Wolz asks the same question of her patients, but she adds an instructive spin by urging them to imagine how they would enrich their lives if they were "stuck" like Phil.

It's one way the California psychologist is using movies in the latest trend of the world of therapy, cinema therapy.

Movies like "American Beauty," "Annie Hall" and "Dead Poets Society" provide copious material for her eight-member Cinema Therapy Group, which meets weekly for three months to discuss how the movies relate to issues in their lives.

Participants talk about why certain movie characters leave strong impressions, good or bad, and what that might say about their own values and hopes. Movies can help clarify these feelings, Wolz says, which can then be used as an impetus for growth or at least awareness.

Wolz, who's been a practicing psychologist for 10 years, was introduced to the therapy last year at a workshop, "Movies and Mythic Imagination: Using Films in Depth Psychology."

"Movies are images that can be used in the same ways as dreams," Wolz says.

Like dream interpretation, cinematic images can be seen as symbols that represent deep, unconscious expectations and anxieties, Wolz says. But she's careful to point out that the counseling group is not appropriate for people with serious psychological disorders.

A movie fan herself, Wolz is well aware how important these images can be in a person's life. In fact, Wolz's favorite movie, "Sliding Doors," was a powerful reminder to her of the diverse directions life can take.

The 1998 film stars Gwyneth Paltrow and plays with the classic "what if?" question.

If that film opened the door for a new future for Wolz, the classic baseball film "Field of Dreams" propelled her to act on it.

"'Field of Dreams' reminded me that it's really important to follow your inner guidance, as opposed to your fears. It gave me encouragement to pursue my dreams," says Wolz, who switched from economist to psychotherapist after recovering from a debilitating stroke.

"Sometimes we lose hope or worry how things are going to continue -- a movie like that reminds us to really follow these dreams."

Some critics might argue that we do this already when we grab a rental copy of "Terms of Endearment" or "Erin Brockovich."

True, says Wolz, but cinema therapy requires the movie viewer to take a more active role and consciously observe how the "reel" life reflects the "real" life.

Take "Groundhog Day," again. On the surface, the 1993 film is an absurdist romp with Murray's sarcastic, narcissistic character trapped in the same endless day.

Phil is initially bitter and negative. As one character says, "I bet you he is a 'the glass is half empty'"



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kind of guy. Am I right?"

"First he was his old self, hitting the wall, and then something shifted and he tried to use it in a way that benefits him," Wolz says. "Then finally, he surrenders and tries to make the best of it, and discovers his true self."

When Wolz asked members what they would do to enrich their lives if they were "stuck" like Phil, one participant used it as way to make a change in her repetitive daily schedule.

Wolz admits not everyone is ready for action, but at the very least the therapy gets people thinking and talking.

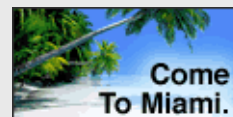
"I've used movies in individual settings, but for me the inspiration came when I led groups," Wolz says. "When we discover things about ourselves with witnesses, it is very powerful."

But with more witnesses come more tastes, and as they say, everyone's a critic. So what happens when someone simply dislikes a particular film?

"That's always a case," admits Wolz. "One person didn't like 'Forrest Gump.' It's more about being moved -- that can also be in a negative way. We can learn from what we don't want to look at in life, and that can be very valuable."

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