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Therapy enters reel world

Therapist looks to the cinema as a way to help clients work through issues

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 character 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 Piedmont-based psychologist is using movies as therapy in the latest trend of the psychiatry world, cinema therapy. Wolz is introducing East Bay residents to the avant-garde methods with her Cinema Therapy Group.

Movies like "American Beauty," "Annie Hall" and "Dead Poets Society" provide copious material for the eight-member 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 values and hopes. Movies can help clarify these questions, Wolz says, which can then be used as an impetus for personal growth -- or at least an 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," held at the Center for Symbol and Stories. It's a professional psychology training group based in California.

"I was very inspired because I always use imagination in therapy," Wolz says. "Movies are images that can be used in the same ways as dreams."

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 flickering 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, exploring the alternative path Paltrow's character would have taken if she had made a different last-minute decision.

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," admits the German native, who switched careers late in the game 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 Phil trapped in the same endless day.

Phil is initially bitter and negative. As one token parochial character puts it, referring to his half-drunk glass of beer, "I bet you he is a 'the glass is half empty' 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

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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 about questions they either couldn't talk about or weren't even aware were there.

"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. People inspire each other in the group. It can deepen the experience."

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."

Still, Wolz says she tries to steer the conversation away from critiques. At the first session she establishes guidelines that include a gentle reminder about respecting others' opinions.

But for those who don't work well with others, Wolz says, you can use similar methods from your own couch.

#### VIEWING TIPS

Therapist Birgit Wolz has these suggestions for using cinema therapy at home.

- Prepare your viewing area. Clear things away and make sure you're comfortable.
- To help you focus on the present, observe your body and your breathing. Without forcing it, notice any areas of tension and try to release them through your breath.
- Try to turn off your inner critic. Warning: This may a tough one for some. If you're struggling, don't fight it; just observe the voice.
- Once you feel calm and centered, start watching the film. Notice how the movie's images, ideas, conversations and characters affect your breathing. Remember, try to do this without the inner critic.
- Once the film is finished, reflect on it and ask yourself some questions. Did your breathing change at certain scenes? What part of the movie moved you? Did you identify with any of the characters? Was there any part of the film that was particularly hard to watch? Write down your answers.
- For further pointers, Wolz found these books helpful: "Reel Power: Spiritual Growth Through Film," by Marsha Sinetar, and "Rent Two Films and Let's Talk in the Morning," by John W. Hesley and Jan G. Hesley. For a more playful read, try Nancy Peske and Beverly West's "Advanced Cinematherapy: The Girl's Guide to Finding Happiness One Movie at a Time."

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