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Cinema Alchemy

A monthly therapeutic movie review column
by Birgit Wolz Ph.D

About Schmidt

Director: Alexander Payne

Producer: Harry Gittes, Michael Besman

Screenwriter: Alexander Payne

Stars: Jack Nicholson, Hope Davis, Dermot Mulroney, Len Cariou, Howard Hesseman, Kathy Bates

MPAA Rating: R

Year of Release: 2002

Released on Video: 06/03/2003

About Schmidt is an intricate character study of a man who falls into the abyss of retirement and widowhood then gradually climbs out of it by getting in touch with his heart. His salvation comes inadvertently, through a one-way series of letters he writes to an orphan in Tanzania.

As the movie begins we learn that Warren Schmidt, for decades, felt displaced in his own home, evaded family conflicts and defined himself by his work. He appears to lack even the slightest spark of intellectual curiosity or passion. Days after a meaningless retirement dinner he returns to the office only to find that his young replacement has upgraded Warren's entire system and discarded his files, using none of the legacy of business acumen Warren

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At home his wife Helen tries to be cheerful and surprises him with breakfast in a new RV. The stale dialogue displays a yawning absence of meaning in their marriage. Neither understands any longer who they are to one another. One night Warren finds himself, after 42 years of marriage, asking, "Who is this old women next to me in bed?" But when he returns home one day to discover Helen has dropped dead on the kitchen floor, his life quickly unravels.

Even as ineffectually as his marriage and work filled the void of his life, when both suddenly vanish Warren sinks into a depression. Then, at the nadir of his decline, he decides to adopt and sponsor a six-year old African boy for 73 "precious" cents a day. The viewer is given few clues as to why he decides to take this action. But as the film plays out, in hindsight it appears as if in this act he is subconsciously grasping a lifeline. A second lifeline falls his way equally as "accidentally," when Warren decides to take to the road in the RV in order to stop his daughter from making a tragic mistake by going through with her wedding.

En route to "save" his daughter, Warren flexes the wings of his new freedom by trying his hand at social relationships. But having practiced few social skills during his life, his attempts fail, either because he is oblivious to the other person's feelings or because he is bound by his own fears. His daughter keeps him at arm's length when he ham-handedly tries to intervene in her wedding. Her fiancée's liberated mother makes casual romantic advances and it scares him to death. Later, when temporary neighbors at an RV park invite him to dinner, he misinterprets the situation miserably, makes a pass at the neighbor's wife and gets thrown out.

But throughout this series of social catastrophes, Warren continues to write his adopted "son." The long confessional letters provide Warren his

one honest emotional outlet. It's almost as if he were writing them to his own long-orphaned inner child. Eventually, when he receives news of the benefits his sponsorship has on the boy's life, he sheds real tears of joy, and we realize that slowly, this accidental "therapy" has had its effect. Despite the botched efforts to connect to people, Warren begins to feel alive, reborn. He starts to appreciate himself and his defenses begin to dissolve.

Who can benefit from this movie?

One film critic wrote that teenagers should see this movie: "Let it be a lesson to them. If they define their lives only in terms of a good job, a good paycheck and a comfortable suburban existence, they could end up like Schmidt, dead in the water. They should start paying attention to that crazy English teacher."

I believe that this movie can serve as inspiration and as a wake-up-call for viewers of all ages who are struggling with a lack of purpose. Therapeutically, *About Schmidt* can serve as both positive and negative models for anybody seeking to add meaning to their lives. The film might affect especially viewers who approach retirement and find themselves confronted with the vacuum that is created when the most significant parts of their lives — work and sometimes family relationships — begin to come to an end.

Guidelines for watching:

Before you watch the movie:

- Keep the following question in mind while you watch: What makes Warren Schmidt such an "empty" and depressed person?

- What helps him start changing?

Answer these questions (best in writing) after you watch the movie:

- Is it possible there are things you are not aware of - like Schmidt?
- Did Schmidt demonstrate something that you need to avoid and other behavior that you might want to adopt?
- Do you have inner resources that Schmidt doesn't have?

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