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Movie Review with Exercises:

by Birgit Wolz, Ph.D., MFT

Frida (2002)

Directed by: Julie Taymor

Starring: Salma Hayek (as Frida) nominated for Best Actress Oscar 2002
and Alfred Molina (as Diego)

Dr. Wolz reviews this film with an eye to its usefulness in therapy, especially as a tool in the healing process of grief and transformation. Such a process may be most successfully pursued in the context of individual or group therapy. For further information about how to get the most out of viewing "Frida" and other films see www.cinematherapy.com.

"Frida," the movie, beautifully reveals the many incredible challenges that Frida Kahlo, the woman, faced with strength and courage throughout her life of 47 years. In director Julie Taymor's magical memorial to the fiery artist, Kahlo grows up in Mexico City, at a time when the city was teeming with famous exiles like Leon Trotsky. In her family, "It was with great difficulty that a livelihood was earned," her parents have a relationship filled with conflict. Despite financial constraints, she demonstrates, what in her time and culture is an unusual confidence, by going to school to become a doctor.

Frida's studies are cut short by a horrific traffic accident that almost kills her. A trolley crash shatters her back, pierces her body with a steel rod and leaves her with several broken bones in her spine and pelvis, a broken collarbone, several broken ribs, a broken leg and foot. While recovering in bed, her young lover leaves her. Frida goes through anguish and despair. Isolated in a cast in bed - "Bored as hell," she recalls - she begins to paint. Throughout her life Frida has multiple surgeries and is never free of pain. For long periods she has to wear a body cast and suffers from multiple medical complications.

As the trolley crash plays out on screen, the director cuts to a shot of a bluebird flying out of Frida's hand. Later, in another instance of magic realism, a gold leaf falls earthward, lighting on her cast. These elements suggest how Frida, through art and imagination, finds the strength to live despite her constant pain. She paints with the same bold courage that helps her to survive. Art transforms both Frida and her pain.

Feeling better, Frida falls in love and marries her mentor, the muralist Diego Rivera. Rivera is already a legend when she meets him. Frida, who had been such a serious student and confident young woman, is suddenly and completely dependent on her husband. She paints almost exclusively for him. And this, once again, causes her pain that gets reflected in her art. Most of her paintings from this period depict Frida either alone or with Diego. His massive murals dwarf the scale of her paintings - it appears her work might remain overshadowed by his forever. But slowly, with much endurance, she rises out of that shadow and her work begins to garner recognition.

At the beginning of their relationship Frida tells Diego she expects him to be "not faithful, but loyal." Both view sexual fidelity as "bourgeois." But both also know the green passion of jealousy, and both maintain a double standard - though each has their own affairs, they blame the other for theirs. As if Frida's physical wounds aren't enough, Rivera's extramarital affairs, especially with Frida's sister, make her marriage a great source of ongoing pain.

The film shows how Frida uses bodily wounds in her art to suggest the dimensions of these psychic injuries. The greater the pain she wishes to convey - especially pain caused by rejection from Diego - the bloodier her paintings become. The peculiar intensity of her paintings suggests that they are therapeutic, crucial to the artist's wellbeing. Many of her paintings are linked in the film to a specific emotional event that served as the catalyst for each painting.

Both, Frida and Diego eventually demonstrate emotional endurance and a willingness to discover whom the other person is, as well as discovering their own true identity. When the film ends with Frida's death, the impression remains that despite

the many crises in her life, she never lost her passion and remained full of courage to be who she was, taking life as it came, even the suffering. Exercises for clients:

After you have finished watching the movie, take a couple of deep breaths and let the impressions of the film help you with the following exercises.

Exercise 1. Acceptance

In order to heal and transform we need to first accept ourselves: admit that we are wounded. We need to take powerlessness and reclaim it as surrender. We need to take vulnerability and draw out of it the freedom that comes with self-acceptance. Our strength and hope lies in the acceptance of our limitations. In the acceptance of our limitations we become, ironically, a fuller self.

Write without interrupting your stream of consciousness what you learned from this movie about acceptance and how this relates to you and your own struggle.

Exercise 2. Small Acts of Courage in Spite of Fear

Though fear can paralyze the spirit it also calls us to the access one tiny act of courage to keep hope alive. These acts can start put us back in control of our lives. We need to take fear and move it into courage. Did you see a character in the film take some small acts of courage in spite of fear? Have you done this in the past?

Describe, how you felt when you did this and how it helped you prevailed.

Exercise 3. Determination and Endurance

It is ironically the very process of responding with determination to each element in our struggle that nourishes hope. We need to face the exhaustion struggle brings and endure to the end.

We need not give in to the thing that defeated us. We need to refuse to give up, either on ourselves or on the world around us. Endurance is the light of hope in a continuing darkness that must somehow some way give way to the light of dawn. Endurance makes transformation imperative. Did you see examples in the film, which show that determination and endurance helped certain characters get stronger? Have you experienced this in the past? Describe your experience and how it could apply to your current situation and potential future.

Exercise 4. Transformation

Struggle with loss and disappointment can scar us, but it can vitalize us too. A hole we feel inside us needs to be filled with something better. Out of all this can come new strength, a new sense of self, new compassion, and a new sense of a very purpose of my life. There are some parts to the human character that are honed best, and may be only, under tension. The hard thing to understand is that it is the becoming that counts, not the achievements, not the roles we managed to mantle ourselves in. Struggle can transform us from our small, puny, self-centered selves into people with compassion. It not only can transform us; it can makes us transforming as well. For this to happen we need to learn to listen better. We cannot walk quickly, so we learn to wait. Did you see examples in the film, which show this kind of transformation? Have you experienced this in the past? Take a couple of slow breaths and listen inward. Describe your experience and how it could apply to your current situation and potential future.

Birgit Wolz, Ph.D., MFT has a private practice located in Oakland, CA. where she facilitates cinema therapy groups. Currently, she is writing "The Cinema Therapy Workbook: A Self-Help Guide to Using Movies for Healing and Growth". Birgit can be reached at (510) 336-0915 or bwolz@earthlink.net. Informational web sites are www.cinematherapy.com and www.bwolz.com.

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