Love, Sex, and the ‘Open Road’

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Love, intimacy, and sexuality in old age remind us of the enduring values of emotional bonds that exist throughout one’s life. These options are not automatically denied to the old. Indeed, older adults have by all rights access to the fruits of intimacy and sexuality. The “open road” is a metaphor for the freedom and independence of the old—a freedom to explore their intimate and sexual selves, and a reward they have earned by virtue of their contributions to society throughout the middle portion of their lives. How older adults seek to renew intimate ties and take advantage of the promise of the “open road” is one of the main themes of this selection of audiovisuals.

The first video, The Best Is Yet to Be: The Art of Aging in America, is a conventional documentary that surveys the concept of creativity and aging from the perspective of several older adults. The individuals in this video are healthy, engaged in relationships, and committed to living creative lives. For example, one of the women, a widow, drives a large recreation vehicle across the country as a testament to her continuing curiosity and sense of adventure in old age. One artist is featured in the video; but the focus of the documentary is the way exercise, intellectual activity, meaningful relationships, and a zest for new experiences sustains and stimulates individuals in old age.

Two documentaries reviewed tell stories of widowed individuals who are seeking renewed ties of intimacy. In Daughter of the Bride, a widow’s decision to remarry leads her children to renegotiate their identity. In effect, they are challenged to adapt just as their mother chooses to adapt to a new life. In A One & A Two, a widower seeks recreation and intimacy by participating in afternoon ballroom dancing at a local senior center. Although the video provides some insight into the old man’s character and values, it does little to inform viewers about the rules and rituals involved in finding a new partner after widowhood.

Time on Earth, a visually rich and evocative documentary, features several older adults who spend their retirement years traveling about the country in campers and travel trailers. Some of the men are looking for a new relationship; many of the women are cautious about new commitments. Whatever their concerns, all feel that life on the “open road” is filled with possibilities for them. Finally, Flowers for Charlie, a short fictional film, provides a delightful example of a vibrant old man whose interest in renewed intimacy and intergenerational friendships affects the lives of fellow passengers on a city bus. This film tries to break down stereotypical attitudes toward the old and engage viewers at an emotional level by showing the bonding process of an intergenerational community. All of these audiovisuals offer fresh perspectives on the risks and rewards of intimacy.

The Best Is Yet to Be: The Art of Aging in America, Video/1997/57 min. Produced and written by Angie Westengard and Deborah O’Neal, PhD. Distributed by American Program Service, 120 Boylston St., Boston, MA 02116. 617-338-4455, ext. 129. Contact the distributor for purchase and rental information.

What does it take to age creatively and find a life that is both meaningful and satisfying? This video attempts to answer those questions. Broken into six main sections, the video touches on the importance of positive attitudes, healthy lifestyles, meaningful pursuits, continued learning, loving relationships, and reflections on the last stages of life. It opens with the general message that in our society no one wants to get old because of the negative aspects associated with old age. This concern is then countered with a short list of people who accomplished great things in later life with the message that the “art of aging creatively” is the norm and not the exception.

Interviews with five older people offer viewers a glimpse into how each person copes with age and cultivates a satisfying life. Gladys Cade, a 71-year-old widow, is touring around in her recreation vehicle while she sings to the radio. Her vitality, bright eyes and smile are infectious as she seems to take life and some minor setbacks all in stride. Robert Brown, an 86-year-old cowboy, is a leather worker and collector of antiques and assorted artifacts. Of the five people interviewed, he is the only one who talks about what we normally think of as “creative activity” by commenting on his leather work and how it allows him to keep busy and not worry about age. Helen Ware, an 84-year-old housewife, offers insights that are valuable for all age groups including the following statement: “There are so many thing in life you cannot control, but the attitude is one thing you can control.” Her message is that life will throw many things