Flowers for Charlie

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Dorothy Buckley-Jones, the third interviewee in this video, reveals in her comments a similar disdain for promiscuity. She likes men’s company but is not out there “ready to catch.” She recalls, “One asked me at the singles’ dance about sex, and I said I wasn’t interested, and he said, ‘What do you come to these things for?’ And I said, ‘I come to dance, you know.’”

As the account of her past experiences unfolds, details of betrayals and hardships emerge, and the ocean setting—a backdrop to this section of her narrative—provides an appropriate visual commentary with its calm healing power and its turbulent crashing waves. Much of her traveling during the interview is during the dark, and her insights are moving and poignant, as in this phrase: When you have a hurt in your spirit you can’t see yourself getting better, and never know if you are or not. Yet her account of the life she now leads emphasizes an acceptance of things as they are and an affirmative religious and philosophical position. The video's last view of her is in daylight, beside the sea. All three of the persons featured in this film are taken through a dark, introspective phase to a scene of confidence and daylight.

In conveying both the value of social activity (represented in the world of the mobile home travelers) and the importance of personal reflection as aging occurs, this video adds its unique contribution to gerontology and can readily be recommended for various purposes in connection with study groups, seniors’ learning groups, and professionals in the field. Its virtues far exceed its potential as a learning tool or discussion starter. Time on Earth, through its creative approach to documentary filmmaking, is a carefully scripted integration of sound, image, and idea. For this reason it will draw viewers back to it several times, with each viewing opening new levels of understanding and appreciation.

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Flowers for Charlie, film/1996/12 min. Written and directed by Mark Haller Wade. Based on a true story by Jean M. Hendrickson. Produced by Karen Johnson and Shelley Wenk and students at the University of Southern California. Distributed by Terra Nova Films, 9848 South Winchester Ave., Chicago, IL 60643. 713-881-8491. E-mail: tnf@terranova.org; Web: www.terranova.org. Purchase, video $129; Rental, video, $45.

Here is a film guaranteed to trigger discussion about stereotypes of aging, the mutual benefits of intergenerational friendships, and the rewards and risks of intimacy and emotional commitment in old age. It evokes a hopeful, affectionate attitude toward aging, intergeneration, and intimacy by not patronizing the old and by not downplaying the losses of aging. Not since the classic film Peege (1973) has there been a film that delivers such powerful emotions in a small package.

The structure of this fictional film is deceptively simple. Viewers are shown several encounters on a city bus over a short period of time. In each of the first four scenes an old man, Charlie, boards the bus. Each scene is part of an overall pattern of emotional progression for characters and viewers alike. Each encounter focuses on Charlie’s interaction with five major characters: the bus driver (a young man) and four characters who ride the bus to work each day. Linda, a woman in her 20s, is the major character in this group. The others include Gus, a typical hardhat; Kurt, a young Latino man; and “Hammerhead,” a stoic construction worker who utters only one word in the film. The way these initially “stereotypical” characters evolve (based on their interactions with Charlie) and the way the audience responds to their interactions, become the ingredients for a wistful and humorous view of the risks of intimacy in old age and the value of intergenerational friendships. These themes are brought together in a richly conceived climactic scene.

At first Charlie stands out as an atypical bus rider. He is smiling, cheerful, and greets everyone (certainly inappropriate behavior in our self-absorbed, anonymous society). He seems eager to interact with others. But he faces great odds. At first the other passengers practically ignore his cheerful exterior. The second time he boards the bus they reluctantly answer, “Good morning.” But as soon as he forms a one-to-one relationship with Linda, one of the “regulars,” the others seem to warm to him. By the third scene viewers learn Charlie is dating a woman at the senior center (glimpsed in an earlier scene). The old man is ebullient, self-confident. In the fourth encounter the basis of the interaction between Charlie and the people on the bus reaches a new level. What began as rejection has given way to grudging acceptance, shared interaction, and finally emotional commitment. Now Charlie and the passengers form a community committed to aiding his hope of a shared intimacy with the woman at the senior center.

Along with the motif of repeated bus-stop scenes, the director has incorporated a recurring visual motif that comments directly on the action of each scene. Every scene begins with a close-up of the front of the bus, shown from the side of the curb. But in each shot a small flower also is visible in the lower right of the frame. This tenacious flower is growing out of the concrete of the curb. In each successive scene the flower is larger and its blooms have increased. The flower motif reminded me of a metaphor for old age in one of William Carlos Williams’s poems, “To Waken an Old Lady” (1921). In that poem Williams compared old age to a flock of small birds that manages a fragile existence by searching for seed husks on a snowy landscape. In Flowers for Charlie the flower growing out of the concrete becomes a metaphor for the determination of old age to sustain itself and
flourish, even in harsh and seemingly limited conditions.

After a comic adventure that ends the fourth scene, the fifth scene begins with the flower's blossom drooping toward the concrete. And for the first time, Charlie does not appear at the bus stop. Now the unlikely community of bus passengers, nurtured by Charlie's optimism and eagerness for friendship, has to decide what to do next. Their initial response is a stereotypical one: Charlie was an old man. Therefore, Charlie must be dead. Eventually they rally around the idea that Charlie's girlfriend, back at the senior center, will know his whereabouts.

Their decision leads to a beautifully filmed and emotionally charged climax. Suddenly the music changes from upbeat to an edgy synthesizer vibrato. After three reaction shots of the characters on the bus, the director cuts to the bus entering a cemetery. Every viewer suspects the worst—Charlie is dead. The next shot is even more impressive: a slow tracking shot along the exterior of the parked bus showing everyone inside glued to the window and looking out at the cemetery. What do they see? Then the director cuts to a reverse angle point of view shot and there stands Charlie, with a few flowers in his hand, in front of his girlfriend's grave. The scene ends with a tender interaction between Charlie and the bus passengers. Everyone on the bus brings “flowers for Charlie” as a symbolic gesture acknowledging the depth of his loss and honoring the way this old man has touched their lives.

This film was completed by students in a cinema studies program at the University of Southern California. Some of the weaknesses of the production include inconsistencies in screenplay, plot development, and the quality of acting. But the student director and his crew should be commended for an essentially well-crafted film that effectively uses shot selection, camera movement, and music to convey its emotional core. Potential users include introductory-level gerontology students, adult education programs, and professionals in the field of gerontology.

An important note: discussion of the film is absolutely necessary in order to acknowledge and process the emotional responses of viewers.

*Flowers for Charlie* shows that a full response to life, a zest for living, can be positively contagious for others who are leading busy and anonymous lives. What is it about Charlie that changes the world of these bus passengers? Perhaps it is his infectious smile, his positive outlook on life, his user-friendly name (Charlie is easier to accept than Charles), his willingness to break down intergenerational barriers, and especially his willingness to risk romance (even in old age). Whatever the case, Charlie changes people. He becomes a role model for the younger generation. He acts on his emotions and seizes the day.

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