My Mother, My Father: Seven Years Later

Robert E. Yahnke, PhD, Jeannette Franks, PhD
My Mother, My Father: Seven Years Later, Video/1991/42 min. Directed by James Vanden Bosch, Produced and Distributed by Terra Nova Films, 9848 South Winchester Ave., Chicago, IL 60643. 773-881-8491, Fax: 312-881-3368, E-mail: tnf@terranova.org, Web: www.terranova.org. Purchase $185, Rental $55.

Even if you never saw the original, My Mother, My Father (1984), the subsequent film, My Mother, My Father, Seven Years Later, shows a story worth seeing. Four diverse families providing care to older parents demonstrate the rich rewards and profound anguish that daughters and sons experience.

In the first family, the Geralis, the three adult daughters frankly discuss the conflicts, surprises, and problems of caring for their mother. As in most families, the burden falls more on one person than the others, and the working daughter whose mother lived with her for years expresses relief at having her own life back after her mother finally moves to a retirement facility. The sisters share their realization that they had actually done too much ("We spoiled her"). Now 93, the mother does much more for herself and frankly looks and sounds better than she did 7 years before.

An African American family, the Hagwoods, cares for a mother with Alzheimer's disease, who manifests the unattractive symptoms of tardive dyskinesia, subsequent to medication received in the nursing home for combative behavior. The daughter's well-articulated anguish at nursing home placement after several years of progressively difficult home care is a poignant illustration of the grief and guilt of so many families in similar circumstances. She also illustrates the subtle and sometimes less subtle blaming of other family members who do less. As in the first family, the viewer realizes that caregiving most often is an unequally shared responsibility.

The Tjeerdemas deepen the viewer's understanding of why different family members may provide support in various levels. With admirable candor, the oldest daughter openly discusses her mother's disdain for her: "My mother had to get married and she projected that shame on me." The daughter uses her self-knowledge and insight to nurture her own grandchildren in a way she had been denied. Interestingly, her sister, who provides the care for their mother, declines to discuss her role.

These three families show some significant differences and powerful similarities in daughters caring for frail mothers. The complexity of the mother/daughter relationship, here further strained by disability, is illustrated by the rich interplay of love, dislike, compassion, and obligation. Of course, many caregivers are men, and their role is sometimes neglected in the caregiving literature. So the film is rounded out well by the Honels, where the father was a primary caregiver to his father, who died a year after the first film. The son acknowledges some of the rewards of caregiving. His father's ability to verbalize love and appreciation came late in life, and might never have happened but for living with his son.

The film concludes with a frank and emotional discussion of the Honel family's end-of-life preferences. The father confesses to his six adult children that it is embarrassing to tell them that he wants them to care for him if the need arises. The dilemma of what "extraordinary measures" means is particularly telling. The father questions the wisdom of a pacemaker for his demented father. He says that in retrospect it was appropriate in that situation because they were able to share love at the end of life. But if he were in similar circumstances, he states quite specifically that he would not want a pacemaker for himself. One of his sons overtly disagrees and tells his father that he would insist that he receive a pacemaker, regardless of his wishes now or in the future. Another son is horrified that the older son would defy the father's command. Clearing the air has made it all the more murky for this family.

Because this film demonstrates such varied situations and viewpoints, it would be a useful resource for educators and family caregivers alike. Too often it is tempting to overgeneralize. Yet empirical research on older people suggests that the older people become, the broader the range of variability. Thus most attempts to generalize about the older population tend to be untrue. The same may be true for caregivers. To paraphrase Tolstoi, happy families are all alike; unhappy families are all different.

These families also illustrate that even though their situations differ considerably, they are not unhappy. Most family members found a level of love, acceptance, understanding, and satisfaction in their caregiving situations. The human experience, including the experience of caregiving, is an opportunity for growth, and the film documents that growth. It is made even more poignant by the fact that these families were all coping with caregiving issues 7 years earlier.

Jeannette Franks, PhD
Faculty, University of Washington School of Social Work
Box 354900
Seattle, WA 98195-4900
E-mail: jfranks@u.washington.edu

I'd Rather be Home, Video/1997/30 min. Directed by James Vanden Bosch. Produced and Distributed by Terra Nova Films, 9848 South Winchester Ave., Chicago, IL 60643. 773-881-8491, Fax: 312-881-3368, E-mail: tnf@terranova.org, Web: www.terranova.org. Purchase $219, Rental $55.

I'd Rather Be Home is a heart-wrenching documentary of the cycle of family violence and the specifics of elder abuse. Filmed over 7 years, Norman shares each occurrence of abuse, the likelihood that it will never happen again, and his strong desire to go home to be with his family. Each time his young-est son, Norman Jr., beats his father the consequences are more severe and the precipitating factors are