I'd Rather be Home

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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 grandchild 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.

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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 youngest son, Norman Jr., beats his father the consequences are more severe and the precipitating factors are
more insignificant. For example, one beating occurs because Norman mistakenly uses Norman Jr.’s toothbrush. The consequence is a black eye, skull lacerations, and a fat lip. After each beating the director/interviewer asks Norman, “Why do you want to go home?” Norman replies, “It’s my place. It’s where I belong.”

Norman lives with his wife of 50 years and his two 40-something sons: Fred, the elder, and Norman Jr., the abuser. As the documentary begins, Norman is at the police station talking to an exasperated detective who has considerable experience with this dysfunctional family. Norman is uniquely honest about his frustrations at being continually beaten, but he seems ignorant of the economic exploitation or the emotional abuse that is simultaneously occurring by all of the family members. As is common with family violence, Norman wants the abuse to end but cannot participate in bringing charges against his son. As the documentary nears its end, 7 years later, Norman resides in a nursing home. He is frail, unable to walk, and demonstrates diminished cognitive competence. Nevertheless, Norman adamantly wants to go home. An interview with his wife reveals her desire for Norman to return home even though he will need considerable care. This interview also reveals her role in enabling her son, when she is caught in a lie concealing Norman Jr.’s whereabouts.

As a documentary, I’d Rather Be Home is a revealing look at elder abuse and the complicity of all members of the family in hiding the situation and protecting the abuser. The fact that Norman is an elder man and a father is a powerful reminder of the vulnerability of elders within dysfunctional families regardless of gender or gender role. Moreover, Norman’s reactions to the abuse and his desire to remain a member of the family illustrate the difficulty human services providers confront and the complex reasons why abuse cases are so rarely reported and so rarely rectified.

Wonderfully and quite intentionally, this film has an additional benefit. It is a terrific training device, with natural breaks in the interviewing and filming sequences to pause the video and engage discussion among audience members. For example, after viewing the initial interview over the latest beating, the tape can be paused and witnesses can discuss what should be done. Should Norman be allowed to make his own choices or should the state and law enforcement officials intervene? How does this case differ from those commonly reported in the literature and how is it the same? Although the documentary does not facilitate such pauses with freeze frames or instructions, there are at least two additional opportunities to pause the video and engage the audience in discussion. The documentary ends with an examination by a physician charged with determining Norman’s disposition. Is Norman responsible enough for himself so that the doctor may recommend termination of the guardian who adult protective services appointed after the last beating—which landed Norman in the hospital? Should Norman be allowed to go home? The outcome of this case prompts great debate about what it means to be competent, the price of autonomy, the reliance on family, and the consequences of dysfunction within families, especially for the abused. Norman would rather be home, but the state’s hands are tied. As with each previous incidence, the crime remains the same: Norman is beaten and the solution is to remove Norman from the home. Sadly, there do not appear to be many options in abuse cases.

The documentary does have a few technical problems, especially with the audio quality in a few scenes. Nevertheless, I’d Rather Be Home holds several surprises valuable for stimulating great discussions. For example, Norman speaks of the loving and close relationship he has with both of his sons—especially with his younger son: “He used to run and jump in my arms when I came home from work.” It often surprises the viewers to learn that the abuser in this case is not the older son, but is in fact Norman Jr., the younger son. Another surprise noted by students is the indifference of Norman’s wife, even though she receives enthusiastic praise from Norman. In one scene he proclaims, “She’s a great girl.” These reactions by abuse victims are normative in many family violence cases. Witnessing it so overtly in this video can help gerontology and social service professionals with a hands-on, direct look at the commonalities of physical abuse, the total isolation that accompanies the situation, and the duplicity on the part of the victim. Male or female, husband or wife, mother or father, physical abuse happens far too frequently, and I’d Rather Be Home opens this taboo topic for discussion and learning.

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