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Being Flynn

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Being Flynn

Abstract

This is a film review of *Being Flynn* (2012), directed by Paul Weitz. Problem Solving Group at the Columbia Correctional Institution is a mental health therapy group designed to not only improve the participants' adjustment to incarceration, but to also deepen their critical thinking capabilities and to connect them to both the world at large and to their inner search for purpose and meaning. It is comprised of adult men with varying educational levels, from middle school to high school. The majority are serving long prison terms, from 25 years to natural Life. The group meets weekly, and jointly tackles the central themes of books and films chosen for their mental health content. This review was created by (in alphabetical order) David Donnadio, Gerard Gowen, Anthony Jones, Nicholas Odegaard, Bennith Paul and Anthony Valdivia, inmates at Columbia Correctional Institution, Florida Department of Corrections. It was sponsored by Lisa Wiley, MA, Mental Health Specialist.

Keywords

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Author Notes

Lisa D. Wiley, MA, has a Master of Arts in Psychology from George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia. She has been employed in the mental health department of the Florida Department of Corrections for over 20 years.

Being Flynn is the film adaptation of Nick Flynn's gritty memoir *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City*. The screenplay was written by Paul Weitz. On the surface, *Being Flynn* is the personal story of the author's coming-to-terms with his homeless, alcoholic, grandiose father and the ghost of his mother who committed suicide when he was 22. On another level, it is the telling of how Nick, whose life is paralleling his father's downward trajectory, breaks with his going-to-hell-in-a-hand-basket mission, survives his own aimless self destructive drug abuse, and triumphs.

Nick (Paul Dano) and his father Jonathan (Robert De Niro) meet again as adults in Boston after Jonathan calls his son Nick for assistance. Jonathan has been absent from Nick's life for over 18 years. The senior Flynn asks that his son come over and collect his belongings as he is being evicted from his residence. Later, Nick is again thrust into a strained relationship with his father after he checks into the homeless shelter where Nick is marginally employed. Jonathan conceptualizes himself as a masterful writer, just a hair's breath away from global admiration. He asserts he is writing a book, *The Button Man*. In reality, he is an angry, belligerent, delusional, racist homophobe. In moments of clarity, Jonathan asserts he is actually writing *The Memoirs of a Moron*.

Father and son both require life rafts to survive their drifting on the fringes of society. Jonathan anchors himself to his delusion of being one step away from completing his literary masterpiece *The Button Man*, while Nick lacks an anchor, a moral direction, a salve for his spirit. Living in a dilapidated old strip club with two roommates, one a drug dealer, Nick starts work at a homeless shelter, The Harbor Street Inn. Nick drifts into drug and alcohol addiction, including crack cocaine. Throughout, he is constantly in search of his white whale, a relationship with his father, and absolution for his mother's

suicide. At times, the whale is sighted, only to slip below the surface once again. Over the years, Jonathan is ensconced into subsidized housing, Nick achieves sobriety, and, instead of going down with the white whale, he makes peace with his mother's suicide. Nick returns to school and becomes his father's son, a published writer.

There are parallels between living in prison and living on the streets. In both situations, the persons involved are outcasts from society. All tend to be emotionally drained and at the lowest points in their lives. There is the perception that no one is there for you, not even God to show you a way to rise up out of the belly of the beast. You are dependent on others for everything; you are wondering how this all happened. You took a wrong turn and lost it all. Like becoming homeless, incarceration can be a quick downfall. Homeless shelters and prisons are dumping grounds for personal and societal failures. It is a test of faith, a challenge to survive. Inmates can be vulnerable in the same way the homeless are: disenfranchised, subject to violence, intimidation, rape, theft of meager belongings, dismissal from humankind, blamed for situations not entirely within their own control. There becomes no inside or outside – only in your dreams and memories. As an employee of the shelter in the film states, “we catch them on the way to the morgue”. Prisons do, too. The heat of a vent on a freezing night on the street becomes as confining as the concrete walls of a prison cell. All want a second chance – a resurrection from hell.

In the film, Jonathan Flynn's core self identify is that he is a gifted artist, a writer. To others, he is a homeless, aggressive, mentally ill vagrant. Incarcerated people, too, retain core self identities to separate themselves from their prison numbers and convict labels. Spiritual redemption and moral growth can be contraindicated by serving a Life

sentence as a “murderer”, a “thief”, etc. Developing a moral compass when one has never done so can be a tortuous, albeit rewarding journey. The same thing can be said of realigning one’s moral compass to match society’s values. Removing hatred from your heart, forgiving yourself for your sins while holding yourself accountable for your actions, elevating oneself from the bottom of the totem pole, are Herculean tasks. Prison is a wake-up call. Progress can be lightening fast, such as a revelation when the handcuffs are first put on, or a specific moment of feeling “saved” or “born again”; but more likely the progress is more of a mellow sense of accomplishment. The alternative is to be lost forever, to drown.

There are many ways to drown in life. In the film, both senior and junior Flynn are marginal, unable to commit to steady relationships or career goals, and engage in serious substance abuse. Nick parts with his father and is able to soar upwards when he leaves drug abuse behind. He transforms theoretical propositions into action: he completes college, becomes a published author, a teacher, and has a family. In prison there are many ways to drown: sorrow, loneliness, pessimism, depression, anger, loss of faith, drug abuse, forgetting the outside world exists. Building a life raft can take many forms inside the walls: becoming self disciplined, connecting with faith, being honest, loyal, and responsible, by becoming respected among your peers. Jonathan Flynn complains about working for the “slave traders” but he does it because he despises self-pity. In Florida, Inmates are not paid for their labor, with some minor exceptions. Thus, working for the “slave traders” is a matter of course. By doing so, one can find salvation and purpose – and it is not so different from free individuals working to pay bills. Many

in prison were involved as slave traders of a sort – willing to enslave other people with drugs. Some continue the trade behind bars.

Nick Flynn’s mother Jodi, Jonathan’s ex-wife, connects the two men by her ghostly presence. The memory of her blends into the present by the non-linear movement of the film. For the incarcerated, connection to the outside world can also be visualized in a similar fashion. Mail call is an important part of the day. Visits are momentous occasions. Some incarcerated people feel they live in a graveyard of sorts, that they are the living dead. They arise from their grave when their name is called for a piece of mail, for a visit. A letter is like a rose left at a grave – a remembrance, a token of a life lived. Being incarcerated is living the shadow of a life that could have been, that once was pregnant with hope and possibilities. Now, resurrection is moving forward, not losing hope, never giving up. Jonathan Flynn states suicide is the result of self-hatred. To stay alive, one must move past self disgust into peace and self love.

“Life is gathering material”, states the elder Flynn. He describes himself as a survivor. In many ways, this is true. We are moving through life learning, reaching, grasping. We need to be more grateful for what we have, who we know, for who loves us. Most of the information we gather will never be written down, but will be demonstrated by the way we conduct ourselves and by what we hand down to others verbally. This film highlights some of the ways in which another’s life can alter someone else’s journey. Nick Flynn accomplished what his father could not: he became a true father, a successful writer. His impact was not felt by his absence. This film’s importance and target audience will be found not only in its ability to teach about homelessness, mental illness, and drug abuse, but more importantly about how our lives impact others.

Sometimes the best thing we can teach others is that the way to not drown is to simply keep swimming.