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Still Alice

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Abstract

This is a film review of *Still Alice* (2014), directed by Richard Glatzer and Wash Westmoreland.

The enthusiasm for narrative in recent decades has led some to declare that the loss of the ability to narrate one's life means the loss of the self. *Still Alice* depicts the loss of just such a "narrative" self, as Alice Howland, a Columbia linguistics professor is afflicted with early onset Alzheimer's. This deeply affecting, if flawed film, challenges her husband and adult children, as well as the viewers of the film to assess where we stand on what might seem a reasonable claim about the fundamental importance of narrative.

Narrative has caught our attention as scholars of religion because of the strength of the form and of the self characterized by it. To encompass the present, past, and future; to comprehend the far-flung reaches of the self; to live as an "extended self;" those are values of a genuinely religious scope, and that is why it is of deep ethical concern when race, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, or many other factors are used to deny people the undeniable power and agency of narrative identity. Alice Howland exemplifies such a strong, extensive self with her preeminence as a scholar in linguistics, author of a textbook that is "a cornerstone of linguistics education." Julianne Moore has been justifiably honored for her depiction of Alice in her decline (including a Golden Globe, an Academy Award, and a BAFTA award, among many others), and her illness is so wrenching because she is, first, the center of her family, welcoming its very various personalities and fashioning them into a whole, and, second, an intellect and teacher of remarkable scope. She is a woman who *comprehends* the mind in its linguistic nature, embracing that field and her personal and familial life in true narrative fashion. She is an exemplary of the narrative self.

The tragedy of the film and its deep emotional impact are due to the loss of that self, and it is surely well within the purview of religion to have particular concern for such profound loss. The film (and Moore) depicts that loss with a brilliance that is hard to match, though one thinks of Julie Christie's dementia in *Away From Her* (2006). Starting with small errors and forgotten names, *Still Alice* displays what Alice calls, quoting Elizabeth Bishop, "the art of losing." The ironic, embarrassing and painful "art" of losing, as Alice practices it, means forgetting she's already been introduced to her son's girlfriend; it means not remembering what she is to lecture on and needing to ask a student to check the syllabus; it means not recognizing her daughters, even just as one has given birth; it means peeing herself when she can't remember where the bathroom is. As she says to her husband, "Something just drops out of me," suggesting the astonishing vacancy of loss. "I wish I had cancer," Alice says, in despair. And, as viewers, we have to – terribly – agree.

There is no "art" to losing (as Bishop's poem knows well), but the film helps us think more carefully about "loss." The drama of the film is social; it is about how others view Alice's losses and the loss of Alice. Her husband loves the brilliant and successful Alice. He calls her the smartest person he's ever met. But with Alzheimer's she's no longer smart, and he leaves her to accept a job in another state. "She's not the Alice she was," he says, and we can't really disagree. Alice speaks to the Alzheimer's Association and laments, "Who can take us seriously when we're so far from what we once were?" And, in fact, fewer and fewer take her seriously as she declines. She's lost the ability to survey a life, narratively, and have some real command of it. She makes us acutely uncomfortable.

Perhaps most poignantly, Alice rejects herself and feels *she* will be lost when she loses command of basic memories, like the name of her oldest daughter and her own birthday. She leaves a video addressed to her future lost self with instructions to swallow a cache of pills and lie down and go to sleep. Brilliantly, the film has us, the viewers, sympathizing with the smart Alice who can choreograph that move. We, too, believe she will not still be Alice. We, many of us, hope that the suicide plan will succeed.

The film rejects that view, as it would reject those who feel that the self without narrative is no longer a self. Alice's most conflicted relationship is with her younger daughter, Lydia. Her other children are conventionally successful, a lawyer and a medical student, but Lydia is a struggling actor, a path that Alice cannot fully accept. Yet it is Lydia alone who can accept Alice's struggle and stays with her through a descent that is so far below narrative that it nearly lacks single words. "Please don't think I'm suffering," Alice says in the Alzheimer's Association talk. "I'm not suffering. I'm struggling, struggling to be a part of things...." In a final scene that is among the finest of recent films, Lydia recites the ending of *Angels in America*, the account of other lost people who were often not considered fully selves, those dying of AIDS. Tony Kushner's play imagines the grace of "souls ... rising from the earth of death" to become part of the ozone for "nothing is lost forever," and Lydia asks Alice what the play is about. What cruelty, we think. Alice can't know. Alice can't comprehend. It takes the full powers of the self to connect to great literature like *Angels*. And, indeed, Alice mumbles incoherently. The brilliant scholar babbles like – an idiot. But she forms a word, a single word – not a theory, not a story. A one-syllable word. "Love." It is a single brilliant insight of fundamental connection. And then the screen shows a

monotone gray, a wordless, selfless gray that slowly, slowly, so slowly clarifies to the title, *Still Alice*, in wordless rebuke to all who consider Alice not a self.