

We Have Got to Do Better – Violence in the Film “An Unfinished Life”
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Thomas A. Burns, Ph.D.

Klamath Falls, Oregon

I watched the film “An Unfinished Life” [2005] last night. It is a well acted, character study movie; but for a social scientist, this film raises a serious question about the contribution the film's message makes to modern life.

Set on a modern ranch near a small western, Wyoming town, the film focuses on a ranching father, Einar, twelve years after he has lost his 21 year old, recently married son in a tragic car accident in which the son's new wife was the driver – who, critically, fell asleep. Einar remains stuck in anger and resentment for his loss which he takes out on virtually everything and everyone around him, including his daughter-in-law who has just returned to the ranch seeking refuge for herself and her daughter [Einar's granddaughter] from an abusive, stalking boyfriend. The narrative is about how all of this unwinds with a subplot involving a grizzly bear who has mauled a ranch hand and left him physically disabled and in constant pain – paralleling the mental agony of Einar.

Much of the “unwinding” is revealing of the slow process of Einar gradually accepting his daughter-in-law and granddaughter while he grudgingly accommodates his ranch hand's desire to forgive and release from captivity the bear that mauled him. In contrast, Einar wants to shoot the bear in line with his violent reactive orientation. In the end, the bear is released and Einar releases his long held anger and resentment! All of this is interesting, engaging, and meaningful.

It is the part of the film that deals with the stalking, abusive boyfriend that is problematic! This aspect of the film picks up on the western cowboy “tradition” of settling disagreements/conflicts violently. It is not that the stalker does not deserve the beatings that he gets, given his own violent behavior. It is just that in an otherwise penetrating presentation of a psychological challenge for Einar, violence is the “solution” to the secondary, surrounding stalking problem. And this violent “solution” is prefigured in an early scene in the film where Einar beats up three drunk, rambunctious young men in a diner who have “corralled” a waitress – threatening one with a knife at his throat. Yes, the young men need to be put in their place, but Einar's physical “attack” is more excessive than the jocular behavior of the young men itself.

In modern life, and especially in films set in modern life, we do not need presentations that model violent solutions to both out of control adolescents and violent, aggressive stalkers. Such fictional presentations call upon our old

American western “hero” tradition of the gun and reactive violence as the appropriate response by the “good guy” in conflicts with the “bad guy.” Moreover, when this violence is an important element that first demonstrates and then “cements” Einar's break through to his changed psychological awareness regarding his dead son, his granddaughter and his daughter-in-law, the film doubly charges violence with a positive function. Even more telling, this presentation of violence as the solution takes place in a context where there is a sheriff readily available to provide an alternative narrative “solution.” But this sheriff – in a modern context – is not called upon, and is even complicit in Einar's inclination to settle matters personally and violently.

In modern life, we do not benefit from this message, especially when it is offered in an attractive, star studded film package!! And, being a film experience, we viewers absorb this message without reflection!! It is time that we seriously consider the role that entertainment and media play in encouraging important attitudes and behaviors in our modern citizens. Pervasive violence is such a constant element in so many different, modern fictional works, and in video games and sports that it is difficult to avoid it – even in character studies! And media, with its focus on the sensational, travels around the locale, region, nation and globe reporting on virtually any war, violent conflict, robbery, natural disaster, pandemic, refugee crisis, and/or major accident. In the process, the media constantly bombards the public with the worst of human behavior and the most negative social and ecological events. And the new, internet promoted, virtual reality – that is absorbing so many in the younger generations – is mostly a mean, violent place. The result is that it is becoming normative to at least “feel” that the social world around us – even our own communities – are fundamentally dangerous rather than supportive.

In a world that is in enormous need of much greater cooperation at every level of society in order to adequately address the major, global challenges to human complex society, we are living in an entertainment and media bubble that promotes anxiety and fear of “the other person as the ominous stranger.” Get your gun and protect yourself! Hover over your children. Be sure to keep your doors locked and your security system “armed.”

The presentation and underlying message in an otherwise fine film, “An Unfinished Life,” is just the tip of the iceberg. It is but one crystal in an iceberg that is expanding exponentially at the same time that we humans are inhabiting a world where our survival depends on our ability to substantially shrink the size of this iceberg every day.

We Have Got to Do Better!