

FILM REVIEW: *THE HOURS*

By Agathi Glezakos, Ph.D., California State University, Long Beach

The Hours, which received multiple accolades at the 2003 Academy Awards, (including a best actress Oscar for Nicole Kidman), has recently been released on video and DVD.

This is not a film for those seeking light entertainment or laughter. *The Hours* is filled with sadness, human misery, misunderstanding, hopelessness and self-destruction. The film leaves one, however, with a deep appreciation of the multiple forms that art, human ingenuity, and creativity can take. The relationships portrayed and explored are nuanced and complex. The viewer is forced to consider questions about social norms and expectations, and a person's right to make free choices—choices which might ultimately lead to personal destruction, or even death.

The film focuses on the defining moments in the lives of three women: Virginia, Laura, and Clarissa (played respectively by Nicole Kidman, Julianne Moore, and Meryl Streep). The women are of three different eras; we are presented with a day in each of their lives as it unfolds during their different chronological periods.

Virginia, the author, has been exiled from the fast-paced London of the early 1920's to a quiet suburb for mental health reasons; she is in the painful early development stages of a novel which she will eventually title *Mrs. Dalloway*. Laura, a 1950's-era Los Angeles homemaker, is the mother of a young son and pregnant. Her challenge for the day is to bake her husband a birthday cake; we, and her intuitive and sensitive son, watch as Laura struggles to meet the expectations of her roles as a wife and mother. In New York City, Clarissa is frantically planning a party for her close friend Richard, a poet who is dying of AIDS.

In the course of the movie, a series of back and forth movements – between Virginia's preoccupation with writing a novel that centers on one day in a woman's life, Laura's desperate attempts, years later, to immerse herself in reading that very novel, and the modern-day Clarissa's planning of a party as did the fictional Mrs. Dalloway - can be confusing. Familiarity with Virginia Woolf's novel *Mrs. Dalloway* would almost certainly enable the viewer to follow the unfolding events more easily.

The personal, relational and ethical issues and dilemmas that occur in the socio-cultural contexts of the 1920s, 1950s and the beginning of the new millennium, seem to be more similar than different. In three relational sets—Virginia and her husband, two upper-middle class Britons, and the Euro-Americans, Laura and her husband and Clarissa and her friend Richard—we witness similar intrapsychic conflicts, expression of caring, interpersonal misunderstandings, and self-annihilation of will. It is neither lack of material goods nor inability to access external resources that lead these women into crises. Rather, it is an intrapsychic war with the self that leads them to a state of Durkheim's *anomie*, in which no amount of support and caring from loved ones is powerful enough to alleviate their despair and hopelessness. The ravaging effects of Virginia's clinical depression interfere with her creativity; the need to continue to write, coupled with the expectation to manage her household, and to maintain her relationships with her husband, sister, niece and nephews, threaten to eventually overpower her. The efforts that Laura's husband makes to help make her daily tasks as the mother of a young son and pregnant woman less taxing and to assure her

of his love for her, are not sufficient to stem her despair and desperation. And Clarissa, despite her frantic attempts to elevate her dear and long-time friend Roger's spirit by celebrating his literary and poetic accomplishments, is unable to deter him from his course of self-destruction.

The socio-political atmosphere during each of the time periods that the protagonists' lives evolve are different. Nonetheless, their intrapersonal and interpersonal issues do not differ qualitatively. It is these issues, the caring attempts by loved ones to help with their resolution, and the choices each person makes which have implications for mental health professionals.

The movie's implications for competent practice are multiple. The clinician's ability to listen carefully in order to connect with the client's indirect verbal messages as well as with the client's unspoken words is underscored. The importance for the clinician to empathize with and validate the client's subjectively felt predicament and to respect the client's ultimate right for autonomy and self-determination is demonstrated clearly. There are events which reflect the inherent limitations of mental health practice and from which the clinician can learn to view client self-destructive behaviors, not as a reflection of his or her lack of skill or knowledge, but instead, as possible characteristics of human nature which, in some situations, can lead the client to self-annihilation. Witnessing how the individuals are the ultimate decision-makers in their life's course is simultaneously an empowering, as well as a humbling experience for the mental health professional.

The film has also implications for social work curriculum content and for the two opposing camps in the profession of social work which have fought to define the profession's mission. On the one hand, direct practice courses in social work focus on helping MSW students learn how to conduct biopsychosocial assessments, how to develop

clinical diagnoses and treatment plans, and what choices to make about treatment interventions. Students are instructed to use their knowledge and skill in their direct practice with clients from all walks of life. The mission of the social work profession, from this perspective, is to assist individuals in need of material, concrete services as well as individuals in need of clinical services. On the other hand, in their exchanges with both instructors and practitioners, the same students also hear that the mission of the social work profession is to help the poor, the disenfranchised, the discriminated against, the oppressed; clinical practice takes second place.

More than once I have engaged in lengthy conversations with students trying to jointly understand who is a "legitimate" social work client and who is not. During my 30 years of social work practice, I have worked with destitute and disenfranchised clients. I have also worked with privileged and affluent clients. In both cases the clients represented diversity in the areas of culture and ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religious belief systems, disability, and age. I have come to believe that while their needs and problems might be different, they all deserve our services equally. If we teach our students the knowledge and skills of direct practice, they should be expected to use these in their work with all who might benefit from that knowledge and those skills. Clients who struggle to meet basic human needs might not, in the end, suffer more than do clients who fight relentless intrapsychic torment – a lesson that the film makes vividly clear.

The Hours is skillfully directed and magnificently acted. The metamorphosis of Nicole Kidman as Virginia Woolf is truly astonishing. The film well deserves the critical acclaim that it has received, and I recommend *The Hours* to the readers of *Reflections*.

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