

MOVIE REVIEW: *THE STRAIGHT STORY*

By Agathi Glezakos, Ph.D., Department of Social Work, California State University, Long Beach

The Straight Story

Walt Disney Pictures

David Lynch, Director

"...and the gentleman over there is Mr. Aston, our new admission," said the social services designee of the Skilled Nursing Facility (SNF) where I work as a social services consultant. "We would like you to interview him today and help us with his health care plans; he is difficult to manage," she continued.

"Difficult to manage" is the most frequently stated reason for which I am asked to interview an SNF resident. Over the years, I have learned that the phrase is used to label older residents who refuse to comply with some aspect of the facility's regimen, who question the reasons for their prescribed medications, who express unhappiness over their placement, and who ask to be allowed to go home. The "difficult to manage" resident is usually an elderly man or woman who does not want to relinquish his/her right to take initiative, to make free choices, to remain autonomous and independent. In some cases, these "difficult to manage" or "non-compliant" residents suffer from physical and/or cognitive impairments and need skilled care in the institutional setting. In other cases, however, elderly individuals are admitted to SNFs without adequate preparation and with health care needs that could be met by home health care providers, or in a lower level of care facility.

Over the years, I have come to look at our practices in the treatment of older men

and women critically. I now know that individual and institutional ageism continues to affect the decisions and attitudes of health care professionals. Age, rather than a careful assessment of individual capabilities and appreciation of the power of self-determination, is sometimes the criterion used to make health care and placement decisions. It was with this experience-based worldview that I entered the movie theater to watch the *Straight Story*. The movie, skillfully directed by David Lynch, unfolds in the beautiful farm landscape of Iowa and Wisconsin.



Seventy-three-year old Alvin Straight (Richard Farnsworth) has spent much of his life on the road and has "seen all that life has to dish out." He ambulates with the assistance of two canes and his general health is poor. Alvin's doctor, whom he visits reluctantly following a fall in his small house, instructs him to slow down and to

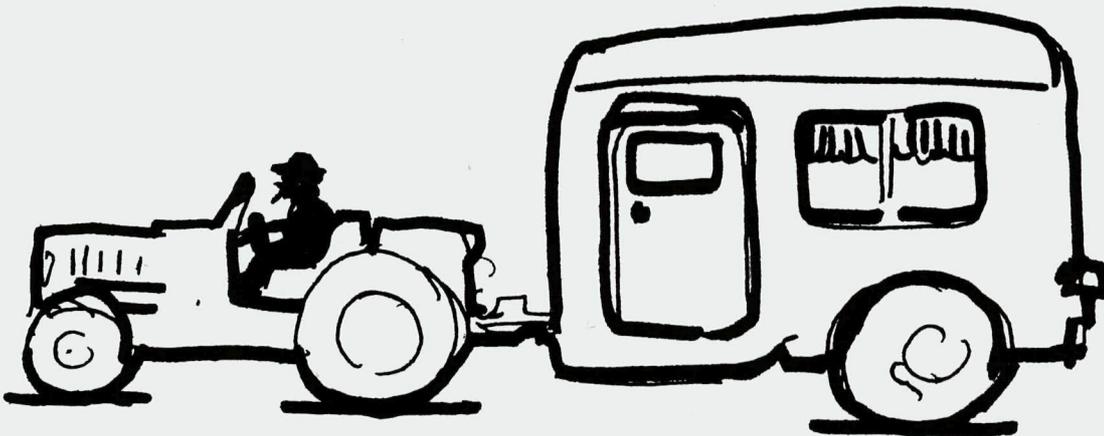
make changes to his lifestyle. But Alvin declares to the doctor and to his friends that he makes his own decisions and will choose how he will live his life. He disregards the physician's recommendations and, instead, he makes plans to visit his elderly brother in Wisconsin soon after he receives news about the latter's recent stroke. The physician does not interfere, and the townspeople nod their heads with skepticism, but they let Alvin proceed with his plan. No one calls Alvin "difficult to manage" and no one takes action to ask for an assessment of his mental capacity to make sound judgments. In Laurens, Iowa, the formal health and social services system does not seem to be part of Alvin's world.

Alvin is unable to make the trip from Laurens to Mount Zion, Wisconsin, by car because of his poor vision. But he is ingenious: he makes plans to pull his trailer with his lawn mower, a 1966 John Deer model. His home town buddies find his mode of transportation non-conventional and dangerous. Some of them try to dissuade him from taking such a trip; but not Rosie (Sissy Spacek), his adult "slow" daughter who lives with him.

Though her developmental disability imposes certain limitations on her, Rosie, more than all of Alvin's developmentally "intact" friends, seems to be in sync with Robert Butler's (1998) belief that "Human beings have a fundamental right to make their own decisions... Each of these decisions represents the individual's control over his or her own life, with the under-

standing that the consequences may be unfortunate as well as fortunate, folly as well as wisdom. When Rosie hears her father announce "I've got to make this trip on my own," she respects his right to make his own choice, even in the face of uncertainty and risk. She understands that seeing the brother with whom he has not spoken for more than ten years because "anger and vanity mixed with liquor" estranged them is what matters the most to her father. The dance of stubbornness and acceptance between father and daughter makes the moment of Alvin's departure a powerful illustration of one person's respect of another person's right to self-determination. Alvin makes his own choice and Rosie does not complain that he is "difficult to manage."

Over the course of his long journey, Alvin remains a "sensible" old man. At the end of each day, he camps by the roadside, builds a fire, cooks his dinner, and sleeps in his trailer. He is congenial with the people whom he meets along the way. As he crosses the colorful Fall farm quilt, he shares his life—earned wisdom—with young and old alike. To a middle-aged woman who wonders if he might be concerned about his safety at a time when there is so much violence in the world, he responds with, "I fought in the trenches of WWII; why would I be afraid of the Iowa corn fields?" When a young male bicyclist asks him what is the worst thing about being old, Alvin replies: "The worst thing about getting old is remembering when you



was young.” Some days later, as Alvin reminisces with a stranger-contemporary about their WWII experiences, he triggers bottled-up emotions in his companion with the statement, “Everyone is trying to forget, but I can see it in a man right away.” And it is in the course of this conversation that, for the first time in his life, Alvin reveals the war secret that pushed him to drink: he had accidentally killed a fellow soldier somewhere in Germany. The verbal exchanges between the two old men and the swiftly changing expressions of their weathered, wrinkled faces in a small country bar present an impressive example of the cathartic and therapeutic effects of *Life Review*. I wonder whether this could have been their experience in an institutional setting!

When Alvin drives his lawn mower over a majestic Mississippi River bridge and crosses the state line into Wisconsin, he encounters strangers, each of whom provides him with pieces of the information he needs to locate his brother. A young priest, a bartender, a tractor driver, each one of them is intrigued and moved by Alvin’s ingenuity and fraternal love. This “difficult to dissuade” man took the journey to complete a personal mission, and touched many lives along the way.

Alvin Straight’s story is the true story of a simple, wise, insightful, and determined, if not stubborn, old man. Alvin is not affected by what others might say or think about how he chooses to live his life. In his small rural community no one seems to think that Alvin should be referred to a formal services system for an assessment of his capacity for sound judgement. He knows what matters the most to him and what will make a difference to the brother whom he claims to “know better than anyone else.” From the beginning of the movie to the end, Alvin mesmerized me; watching him more than once brought to my mind Robert Mellert’s (1997) statement that “...of all our obligations, the primary one is to know thyself.” Can it be, I ask myself, that this “self-knowledge” pushes so many institutionalized men and women to become “difficult to

manage” residents? Sissy Spacek in the role of Rosie delivers an impressive acting performance. But it is Richard Farnsworth, the aged actor playing the story’s protagonist, who captivates the viewer. The years have not eroded his dramatic talent. To the contrary, his powerful performance becomes convincing evidence of how age can contribute to the refinement of a performer’s acting skill. Maturity and wisdom from the actor’s many and diverse life experiences seem to have enhanced his talent and deepened his insight into the nature of man. His nomination for the Academy Award came as no surprise to me.

The *Straight Story* is an old man’s life narrative that should not be missed. Many lessons can be learned from it, lessons about dignity, compassion, mutually beneficial intergenerational exchanges. Above all, it loudly illustrates the need to assess carefully an older person’s capacity to exercise his/her right to self-determination before labeling that person as “difficult to manage.” This right is essential to the preservation of one’s sense of self-worth, which ought not diminish in the presence of age-related frailties. □

References

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