

Literature and the Arts in Medical Education

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Feature Editor

Editor's Note: In this column, teachers who are currently using literary and artistic materials as part of their curricula will briefly summarize specific works, delineate their purposes and goals in using these media, describe their audience and teaching strategies, discuss their methods of evaluation, and speculate about the impact of these teaching tools on learners (and teachers).

Submissions should be three to five double-spaced pages with a minimum of references. Send your submissions to me at University of California, Irvine, Department of Family Medicine, 101 City Drive South, Building 200, Room 512, Route 81, Orange, CA 92868-3298. 949-824-3748. Fax: 714-456-7984. jfshapir@uci.edu.

Family Systems at the Movies

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The father eats salty food and the son is thirsty.
Vietnamese proverb

Family medicine has shown a long-standing interest in family systems. In fact, our specialty's use of family systems techniques marked a radical departure from most medical specialties and has produced an impressive body of literature.¹⁻³ Curriculum describing the nature of family life and its relevance to families confronting medical problems remains essential psychosocial material for family medicine residencies.

Our introductory family systems conferences make heavy use of focused film clips to stimulate lively discussions about family dynamics and their application to common

medical problems. This paper reviews a three-part series, each series focusing on a different "film family." Instead of using extended film screenings, we substantially edit the films to remove subplots and retain only the themes we wish to focus on. By concentrating on the most evocative video material, we are able to draw even the most reluctant residents into lively discussions.

To prepare for the series, residents are asked to read a succinct review of family systems concepts: *Family Treatment* by Sonia Rhodes, DSW.⁴ In it, she compares family life to "a social system in which family members relate to each other in patterned ways that can be observed and understood." The overarching objective of combining the reading with thought-provoking video clips is to heighten each resident's understanding of multi-generational issues, the importance of genograms, the impact of family secrets and family dynamics, the

effect of stress on family life, and the attributes of a functional family. Concepts such as homeostasis, boundaries, coalitions, and scapegoating are then applied to the clinical setting.

Selected scenes from *The Joy Luck Club* are used to illustrate the impact of a secret that ripples down through the generations of a family. The movie is about four women who, having grown up in China during the early 20th century, immigrate to the United States and invest their past hopes and dreams into their American-born daughters. We show the story of only one woman, Suyuan, and her daughter June.

The movie begins 4 months after Suyuan's death. The remaining members of The Joy Luck Club, Suyuan's mahjong club, invite June, now an adult, to take her mother's place at their game table. Through a series of flashbacks, we learn about Suyuan's life in China and how the family's secret concerning

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her experiences there impacted American-born June.

One of Suyuan's dreams for June was for her to become a concert pianist. Even though June performed poorly at her first piano recital, Suyuan continued to force June to practice. In a burst of anger, young June shouted at her mother that she wished she herself were dead "like . . . the babies you killed in China." The story of the twin babies was the family secret they had never talked about. June believed that her mother had abandoned the babies to die to save herself, and June could never forgive her for that. When the present-day story resumes, we learn that the twins did not actually die and that they were discovered in China by the surviving members of The Joy Luck Club. The club forces June to go to China to tell the twins about their mother's death. June feels totally inadequate to perform this task because she claims she "did not know anything about her." They respond, "How can a daughter not know her own mother?" A discussion ensues with the residents in which they explore different answers to this question.

The process of creating Suyuan's family genogram with the residents helps them identify the unresolved guilt, shame, and low self-esteem that resulted from her having left her twins. The residents recognize that Suyuan compensated for these feelings by transferring all of her hopes and expectations to June, placing her in an untenable position in which it was virtually impossible to fulfill those expectations. We also explore the cultural similarities and differences between June, who was born and raised in the United States, and her parents, who emigrated from China. Since a majority of our residents have either immigrated themselves or are first-generation Americans, they enrich this discussion with their own personal experiences. Finally, we discuss the differences in expression and communication between the Chinese and American cultures.

We complete the story by showing how the family has a healthy resolution to their tension when the father openly discusses the family's secret with June. This enables June to finally understand her mother, thereby liberating her to pursue her own hopes and dreams with her newly found sisters in China. We conclude with a discussion about the cultural restrictions and family dynamics that prevented this positive resolution during Suyuan's lifetime.

To further illustrate the impact of family trauma on family dynamics, we show selected scenes from the movie *Shine*. Like *The Joy Luck Club*, *Shine* is the story of an immigrant family who had suffered tremendous loss; however, unlike *The Joy Luck Club*, the family in *Shine* is extremely dysfunctional.

Shine tells the story of David Helfgott, a child piano prodigy, as he struggles to break free from his domineering father, Peter. Peter's family had been killed in the Holocaust. As a result, he becomes driven to succeed and obsessed with keeping his own family together. Peter teaches David how to play the piano because "music will always be your friend . . ." His father enters David in a piano contest and is furious when he loses. "Because, in this world, only the fit survive . . . the weak are crushed like insects."

At an Australian championship, David is offered a scholarship to study in the United States. Even though Peter pushes David to do everything possible to win, he puts his son in a double bind by refusing to let him go to pursue this opportunity: "You are not going anywhere . . . I won't let anyone destroy this family . . ." Eventually, he earns a scholarship to the Royal College of Music in London. Once again David's father tries to stop him. "If you go, never come back into this house." Defiantly, David leaves, never to return. Then, in a powerful scene reminiscent of Nazi book burnings, Peter is seen burning David's music and scrapbooks.

In London, David learns Rachmaninoff's Third Piano Concerto. He plays this technically difficult piece perfectly in concert, only to suffer an emotional breakdown on stage. The remainder of the movie shows how David tries to overcome his father's haunting influence and regain his ability to perform in concert.

Using the Helfgott family genogram, we discuss with the residents the family's lack of internal boundaries and enmeshed relationships. We point out how the movie's director symbolically uses fences, closed doors, and looking through windows to depict how Peter Helfgott makes every effort to shut out the world and keep his family locked inside with him. We also discuss how Peter and David relate to one another through the piano, creating a triangular relationship with the instrument. Finally, we explore the similarities and differences between Suyuan's and Peter's families and their differing reactions to trauma and immigration.

The third film we show is *Secrets and Lies*. In this film, a middle-aged white London factory worker living a lonely life with her ill-tempered daughter is shocked when another mixed-race daughter she had placed for adoption as a newborn tracks her down. When mother and the returning daughter meet for the first time, a gut-wrenching exchange takes place in a diner. The camera angle remains fixed for the entire scene, placing added emphasis on the dialogue and raising tremendous tension. The mother's entire family begins to disintegrate as the secret of the mixed-race daughter is revealed. As the title implies, this film helps further the discussion with residents of the unanticipated consequences resulting from family secrets.

We have found the use of focused video clips to be an effective tool in teaching residents. Each of these movies is rich in family systems dynamics and brings to life the didactic material presented in the

chapter by Dr Rhodes. Residents are clearly touched by the movies as evidenced by their empathic reactions to the characters expressed during our discussions. These movies enable residents to explore emotionally charged family issues in a nonthreatening way. It is our belief that by experiencing and analyzing these "film families," residents become better prepared to understand

and take care of their actual patients and their families.

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