

### **The Gift of Therapy: An Open Letter to a New Generation of Therapists and Their Patients**

by Irvin D. Yalom, M.D. HarperCollins, New York, N.Y., 2002, 288 pages, \$23.95.

An office visit for even a simple condition like hypertension may be routine to a physician, but patients, in the back of their mind, may fear the implications of the doctor's assessment for the length of their life or changes in their lifestyle. Existential concerns are never far from a physician's daily business, yet we receive little formal instruction in how to use the doctor-patient relationship to talk with patients about issues like death and life meaning in a helpful way.

While Yalom's intended audience is the young psychotherapist, physicians of any specialty will find both the existential theme and his reflections on the healing relationship quite relevant to their own practices. *The Gift of Therapy* is a brief work written as a series of 2- to 3-page tips of the trade, with a tone somewhere between that of an informal memoir and off-the-cuff teaching on morning rounds with a seasoned psychiatrist. It is peppered with brief clinical examples invariably on point, as well as well-distilled literary references.

The first 40 mini-essays address the therapeutic relationship, stressing how Yalom works by keeping the content in the moment rather than analyzing past conflicts. The next 10 sections describe how he discusses the issues of death, freedom, and life meaning with patients. Seven sections are devoted to working with dreams, and the remainder of the book is composed of miscellaneous observations and advice on the conduct of therapy with its joys and hazards.

A work of this nature is brief by necessity, but it would have been helpful to include a discussion on isolation, since he lists it among the 4 existential life concerns and since it is an integral part of the experience of physical or mental illness.

*The Gift of Therapy* is not an exposition of theory or philosophy—it is meant as a high-yield, practical guide to building healing relationships with patients. Yalom has done a service by demystifying the act of engaging with patients about their ultimate concerns in the moments of great life transition that we physicians are privileged to share with them.

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### **Movies & Mental Illness: Using Films to Understand Psychotherapy, 2nd ed.**

by Danny Wedding, Mary Ann Boyd, and Ryan M. Niemiec. Hogrefe and Huber, 2005, Cambridge, Mass. 258 pages, \$34.95 (paper).

In our society, movies hold a prodigious power to reflect and sometimes shape our culture. In the last 10 years, we've gained easy and inexpensive access to large numbers of movies through libraries, rental stores, cable TV, and the Internet. This should be good news for teachers of all

kinds, but how often do we use movies in our teaching? For most of us health educators, the leap from viewing movies as easy entertainment to using them as effective teaching tools requires guidance by experts who know both the movies and the health topic of interest. For teachers of topics relating to mental illness, the first hurdle is the question, "What do we do with so many good movies and so many bad movies about mental illness?" The number of movies about mental illness overwhelms most of us. Then the process of finding the right movie for a class session, selecting the key sections, and preparing the relevant questions can seem like more work than it's worth.

In their second revised and expanded edition of *Movies & Mental Illness*, Wedding, Boyd, and Niemiec have provided us an informative guide that draws on nearly 1000 films. This encyclopedic but friendly paperback volume is written for teachers and students of psychopathology courses and is intended for use as a supplement to core psychopathology texts. Medical educators such as teachers of behavioral science curricula in family medicine, other primary care disciplines, and psychiatry will find it a valuable time-saver for those who want to add drama to the classroom.

The authors, 2 psychologists and a social worker, organize this second edition of *Movies & Mental Illness* around 13 diagnostic or assessment categories. Each chapter begins with questions to consider while watching the specific movie the authors selected to illustrate the category. The authors then demonstrate their clinical approach in the form of a "fabricated case history" of the key character. *A Beautiful Mind* and John Nash provide the focus for the chapter on schizophrenia, and *Psycho* and Norman Bates provide the focus for the chapter on dissociative disorders. Elaboration on the disorders, including theoretical background, and on other movies, including "additional questions for discussion," gives breadth to the chapters. The authors are not timid about pointing out the misrepresentations of mental illness that contribute to stigma, as listed in Appendix E. However, the book might have been stronger if the authors had acknowledged the potential influence of the disproportionate number of female villains (32%) to female heroes (12%) in Appendix B on perpetuating gender stereotypes.

The authors have accumulated a wealth of knowledge, most compactly collected in "Appendix G," their annotated list of nearly 1000 movies, organized by psychopathologic topics, each movie receiving the authors' 5-point rating for the movie's value as a teaching film as well as a work of art. They also maintain a Web site with this information plus periodic updates at [http://mimh.edu/danny\\_wedding](http://mimh.edu/danny_wedding). The only shortcoming of the book is the absence of an index.

I've found this book useful for teaching a class of psychiatry residents a session on the psychodynamics of depression, for which I showed a clip from *House of Sand and Fog*, prompted by this book's chapter on mood disorders. I also used this book to select movies and notes for a Web site for medical students interested in psychosomatic medicine. With the help of *Movies & Mental Illness*, learning and teaching about psychopathology should become more fun, more dramatic, and more effective.

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