

Friendship: A Spiritual Antidote to Loneliness

A review of the film



The Station Agent

(2003)

Tom McCarthy (Director)

Reviewed by

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Asking individuals about their social networks, friendships, and level of participation in religious and spiritual activities is becoming a standard component of most clinical evaluations. Many people are devoid of meaningful connections in their lives yet do not see this as a problem. In my clinical work, I continue to be struck by the number of people who reveal they have no one in their lives whom they feel they can turn to for emotional support.

The Station Agent, the critically acclaimed directorial debut of Tom McCarthy, delves deeply into the nature and development of friendship. Whereas many directors use heavy-handed techniques to develop psychological constructs, this film uses silence, subtle nuances, and nonverbal behavior to portray the life cycle of friendship—“how we make friends, how we become close, how we maintain friends, and how friendships deteriorate and dissolve” (Fehr, 1996, p. xiii).

The relationships in *The Station Agent* are communal ones in which individuals interact with one another out of a concern for each other rather than because they are planning for a specific outcome or hoping to receive something in return for their friendship.

It seems that such communal relationships are essential for human survival (Clark & Mills, 1993; Clark & Pataki, 1995). Certainly, these relationships are an important ingredient in adding meaning to life.

It is striking how many scenes in this film depict characters walking alone or with others in silence, waiting for others, or eating together but saying little; this allows the viewer to connect with each character's world and begin to care about the well-being of each character. The pacing of the film is slow but interesting and engaging, appropriately matching the slow, subtle changes that occur in emerging relationships.

The film tells the story of three distinct characters and the natural unfolding of their unlikely friendship. The hero, Fin (Peter Dinklage), is an isolated dwarf who devotes his life to watching and reading about trains and building model trains. After the death of his only friend, Fin inherits an abandoned railroad depot in rural New Jersey. He seems resigned to loneliness and isolation; helpless to change the random gawking and quizzical looks he receives wherever he goes. The viewer gets the sense that it almost pleases Fin to hear the isolation associated with his inheritance: "There's nothing out there...nothing." The schizoid Fin exiles himself to his new home, far removed from the busy city, and it is here that the viewer begins to understand that Fin is on a symbolic journey, traveling to Newfoundland (a metaphor foreshadowing Fin's journey of connection and transformation via friendship).

In Newfoundland (the depot), Fin meets Olivia (Patricia Clarkson), a troubled artist going through a painful divorce and still grieving the death of her son. The third character is Joe (Bobby Cannavale), a talkative hot dog vendor who seems oblivious to the pleasures of silence. Both Olivia and Joe take an interest in the reclusive Fin and make several attempts to connect with him, despite Fin's aloofness. This is where many of the film's unique comic moments emerge. Fin, in attempting to separate from the needy Joe, takes a leisurely walk along the train tracks to continue his study of train dynamics. Joe, who is fascinated with Fin and ignorant about trains, follows Fin like a puppy. Other scenes depict Olivia, preoccupied with her penchant for drinking coffee while driving, briefly losing control over her vehicle and nearly running Fin over on two occasions. She is exceptionally apologetic and tries to redeem herself by bringing a bottle of bourbon to Fin's home.

As a result of shared pleasure, emerging trust, acceptance of one another's quirks and needs, and self-disclosure, Fin slowly becomes friends with Olivia and Joe. It is clear Fin feels a responsibility for their well-being, particularly for the suffering Olivia. Fin challenges both his internal schizoid tendencies and the repeated external rejection he receives from Olivia, who often only wants to be alone in her misery; this saves the integrity of the friendship.

Sharing emotions, personal problems, and other intimacies is one way to deepen relationships. Fin and Olivia strengthen their friendship by exchanging their stories—Fin describes his suppressed anger about being a dwarf, and Olivia tells Fin about the death of her son and her love for her ex-husband. Becoming involved in a serious cross-sex friendship, Fin and Olivia begin to face predictable challenges.

There are four common challenges cross-sex friends must confront if their friendship is going to succeed: sexuality, the level of emotional bond, relationship equality, and the way of presenting the relationship to others (O'Meara, 1989). Fin and Olivia address these challenges with periods of silent connection and subtle, genuine interactions. One powerful moment occurs following a pleasant evening of dinner and conversation. Olivia insists that Fin and Joe stay the night, as both have been drinking. Olivia sits alongside Fin's bed, talking about the loss of her son; their eyes meet, and she kisses him once briefly on the lips and wishes him a good night. Rather than attempting to satisfy sexual desire or their need for succor, these two characters respect the boundaries of their growing friendship. This solidification of their friendship is reminiscent of a similar turning point in *Lost in Translation* (Katz & Coppola, 2003), in which the characters played by Bill Murray and Scarlett Johansson lie next to one another in bed and continue to manage their loneliness through talking and relating rather than sexualizing their relationship.

Loneliness is one of the most painful forms of human suffering. The protean loneliness in this film is expressed in the different personalities of the three characters: as taciturn and reclusive (Fin), as chatty and loquacious (Joe), and as rejected, depressed, and angst filled (Olivia). Fin's lifelong belief that he is different is continuously reinforced by strange looks and criticisms; in addition, he is transitioning to a new environment, has lost his only friend, and is unemployed. Joe feels a deep responsibility for the health of his father and works in such an isolative area that the viewer is surprised when a single customer shows up. Olivia's loneliness is triggered by a conflicted and deteriorating relationship and by living alone in a large but lonely house. Regardless of how loneliness is expressed, the result is the same—a painful sense of being disconnected from others and feeling hopelessly alone.

The Station Agent analyzes the coping strategies people use to manage loneliness. The characters implement a variety of unhealthy coping strategies to manage the stress of isolation, including cigarettes, alcohol abuse, isolation, denial, and even suicide attempts. Healthy approaches are also presented, including walking, developing a hobby, dining with friends, and creating expressive artwork. The social support and friendships that develop are probably the most important, healthy coping strategy that each character uses. Developing healthy, satisfying, and meaningful friendships is a powerful coping strategy that increases longevity (Ray, 2004). In the end, it is the healthy connection of the three friends that the viewer remembers. Joe has learned to appreciate silence, Fin has learned to interact and connect with others, and Olivia has learned to trust others with her pain; much of this is depicted visually. For further discussion of the coping strategies used in *The Station Agent*, see Wedding, Boyd, and Niemiec (2005).

The Station Agent depicts universal patterns: At different times, the film's characters reject one another's assistance despite tremendous needs, connect with one another, feel hurt and revert to old patterns of isolation, and reconcile with one another to experience healing and an even deeper sense of connection. This sojourn is a spiritual journey during which the

characters cultivate deeper meaning in their relationships with one another; ultimately, these relationships transform their suffering.

References

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