

— The Magic — (and Lessons) — of Movies —

Revolutionary Common Sense by Kathie Snow, www.disabilityisnatural.com

Movies—whether pure fantasy or based on fact—aren't just magical entertainment. They can also be a source of insight and valuable life lessons.

In general, the portrayals of people with disabilities in movies have tended to be at one extreme or another: from the cute, but pitiful Tiny Tim personas, to the bad guy personas, like Captain Hook and the villains in many James Bond movies. In the last decade or so, films portraying people with disabilities as “real people,” instead of as caricatures, have hit the theaters. Still, the majority of these, in my opinion, include some degree of the stereotypical, mythical, and negative inferences that perpetuate old attitudes and perceptions.

My two favorite films about people with disabilities are *Born on the Fourth of July* and *My Left Foot*. Both are based on true stories, and both aptly demonstrate that individuals with disabilities are—like everyone else—multifaceted individuals. In other words, they really are real people! *Born on the Fourth of July* is the story of Ron Kovic (played by Tom Cruise), a young soldier who acquired a disability in VietNam. It's gritty, realistic, and not for young children. *My Left Foot*, based on the autobiography of Christy Brown (played by Daniel Day-Lewis), is the story of a man who has cerebral palsy. The film follows Christy from his birth to adulthood. (There are a couple of scenes with profanity, but otherwise, it's okay for children.) Both films offer profound insights—revealing the personal perspectives of individuals with disabilities, including their

changing attitudes about themselves. Family conflicts, unconditional love and support, issues about physical therapy and rehab, friendships, real-life struggles, failures and successes, and the competence of people with disabilities are included in both films. And these two movies also offer insightful, poignant, and long-lasting lessons.

X-Men is practically a metaphor for today's disability issues: people with differences (but who also have wonderful abilities) are misunderstood, feared, and segregated. Ultimately, they prevail, of course (and save the world in the process). And Dr. X, their fearless leader, is a powerful man who happens to use a wheelchair!

A Beautiful Mind is based on the biography of John Nash, a genius mathematician and a person with a mental health diagnosis. In one scene, his actions epitomize a simple strategy that can lead to community inclusion. After getting out of an institution and trying to reconnect with others, he returned to the college where he once taught and simply asked one of his former peers (a professor), “Can I just hang out?” At the time, he wasn't in a position to return to teaching, but he knew he needed the companionship of others who shared a common interest. His “hanging out” led to him becoming more involved, helped others see beyond his disability, and enabled him to regain his teaching position. He was later awarded a Nobel Prize!

“Hanging out with intent” is a strategy that can help ensure the inclusion of people with disabilities.

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If, for example, a child with a disability begins to hang out at a Park and Rec soccer game, he'll get to know the coaches and players, and they'll get to know him. Then when he signs up to play, he'll be welcomed because he's a friend—he's "known." The same can be true with an adult with a disability—if he hangs out at a potential job site or meets new friends in a typical community activity (a sports team, volunteer group, etc.) who are in a position to help him get a job.

We can also learn from movies that have no apparent connection to disability. Since becoming involved in the disability arena when my son was born in 1987, I "see" themes in many movies and books that are relevant to disability issues.

If you haven't seen *The Truman Show* with Jim Carrey, rent it today. Truman (Carrey) and his ordinary life are the focus of a reality TV show. It's a "created" world, but Truman doesn't know he's on TV every day, and he thinks the world he inhabits *is* the real world. As you watch this movie, compare Truman's experiences as he begins to learn the truth and struggles to get out of this artificial world, with what happens to people with disabilities and their families living in the artificial "Disability World" who think *that's* the real world. It's a feel-good, eye-opening movie!

The Lord of the Rings trilogy (my favorite movies of all time) offers wonderful lessons on the inherent, and not-always-visible-at-first-glance abilities of people who are considered different. For example, the small, gentle, apparently carefree Hobbits demonstrate the greatest strength and determination. They accomplish more than others who appear to be stronger and wiser.

Finding Nemo is, perhaps, the movie with the greatest number of lessons for us all—and this

movie isn't just for children! *Nemo* is about (1) inclusion, (2) seeing beyond differences, (3) focusing on strengths and abilities, (4) parents letting go, (5) natural supports, (6) the dangers of segregation, (7) the importance of community, and much more.

At Nemo's first appearance in the film, my then 16-year-old son (who has an orthopedic disability) happily exclaimed, "Look, Mom, Nemo has a fish disability!" One of Nemo's fins is shorter than the other, so he has to move it faster than the other one to

maintain an even keel—and he does this just fine!



"Look, Mom, Nemo has a fish disability."

Nemo is included in the "regular fish school" and he rides on the "regular" mode of transportation. He's just "one

of the kids"! But because of his "fish disability," his father is overprotective and has a hard time letting go.

When Nemo goes on an unscheduled adventure alone, he encounters many obstacles, but he also seeks and receives the natural support of other creatures. He inadvertently ends up in a "segregated setting" (a fish tank in a dentist's office), and he learns about the harm of segregation from the other "residents" (some of whom have been bruised and battered).

In the meantime, his father and a friendly helper, Dory, search for Nemo. Dory could be thought of as having a disability—she has short-term memory loss and is routinely confused. Still, she has valuable abilities, and she both gives and receives assistance during the long and dangerous journey to find Nemo. It's a great story, with valuable lessons for everyone.

The movies I've described, and many others, can give us new and better perspectives on life in general. If we heed the lessons, the world will become a better place for everyone!