

“The Sessions” – Polio and Sex on the Big Silver Screen

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Hollywood has a history of portraying people with disabilities as objects of pity, inspirational “supercrips” or embittered villains. So going to see a film about a man with a disability seeking to lose his virginity sets alarm bells clanging. “The Sessions” puts those expectant fears to rest.

Beyond “disability correctness,” however, for polio survivors this film stirs deep memories of our own growing up experience.

Based on the writings and life of Mark O’Brien, a poet and writer who had polio and spent most of his time in an iron lung, the R-rated film is an engaging, often lighthearted, portrayal of a 38-year-old severely disabled man who lives independently in an apartment in Berkeley, California. Mark manages his personal care attendants, gets out into the community on a gurney, and writes poetry in addition to essays and articles for several publications.

He’s no wallflower or shut-in, but, like all of us, he has his self-doubts and struggles. He yearns for love and intimacy. He falls for Amanda, one of his personal assistants. Finally, he screws up his nerve to tell her he loves her. Pause. For while Amanda cares a lot for Mark, “love” and all that that means frightens her off. Mark is left feeling his old sense of low self-worth and shame.

I’m sure many of us with disabilities have felt the sting of hearing “I really like you, but...only as a friend,” or words to that effect. I can relate.

Deeply distressed, Mark, who is a devout Catholic, consults his priest about his desire to experience sex. He wants permission to follow his therapist’s urging to hire a sex surrogate. After some dramatic reflection, the priest says he thinks God will give him a pass on having sex outside of marriage. “Go for it,” he says.

The film follows Mark’s halting journey with sex surrogate Cheryl. Sensitively played by actor John Hawkes, Mark stumbles and is awkward in his first encounters with Cheryl, who has her own learning curve but is very matter-of-fact and professional.

In their first session, Cheryl asks Mark: “Do you have any area of unusual sensitivity? Any parts of your body you don’t want me to touch?”

Mark responds, “I have normal sensitivity all over. It’s just that my muscles don’t work. You can touch me anywhere.”

That's polio for you.

You've got to see "The Sessions" for yourself to see how it plays out. But the context of the film is pretty realistic in showing that a polio survivor with a significant disability can live a remarkably normal life and experience mature feelings of real intimacy and love.

Kathi Wolfe, a writer and poet herself who has a disability, writes: "... it was with Mark as it has been and will continue to be for so many of us: joy, pain, hurt, pleasure, humor, shyness and chutzpah are indelibly intertwined in life. Keats spoke of what he called 'negative capability' – of the poet being capable of being 'in uncertainties, mysteries, (and) doubts....'"

In reviewing the film, long-time disability advocate and scholar Anthony Tusler said, "O'Brien was one of those polios [*sic*] that used his intellect and sense of humor to connect with the wider world. We've known many of them, and most are now gone. I'm not sure what it is about polios. One theory of mine is they gained confidence in who they were in the open wards and the polio camps of the 50s. They found their disabled brothers and sisters early on, and they changed the world.... [T]hey refused to believe it was okay to exclude their disabled brothers and sisters, their community, from life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

The reaction among people with disabilities has been overwhelmingly positive. People embrace the honesty and matter-of-factness of how disability, especially polio, is portrayed.

The credit goes to Ben Lewin, the screenwriter and director who is a polio survivor. He has said that he wanted Mark to be depicted as a human being who could, like all of us, be at times, "a jerk." The cast, Hawkes as Mark, Helen Hunt as Cheryl and William H. Macy as the priest, is spectacular, and bring the great script to vibrant life.

"The Sessions" is now in theaters across the country and in Canada. Go see it. I would be surprised if it doesn't unlock some memories, both good and uncomfortable. It did for me.

Bill Stothers is a long time editor and consultant on media and disability policy. He edited Mainstream, a national advocacy and lifestyle magazine for people with disabilities and major newspapers in Toronto and San Diego. He is a member of the Board of Directors of Post-Polio Health International and currently serves as its Chair.