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Psychiatry in movies

Estrangement and reconciliation between fathers and daughters in three short films

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Like short stories – potent, compact works in which every word tells – in short films and animations each small gesture matters. Grouping evocative short films together affords an opportunity to explore a specific theme in depth within a single presentation and can also provide an innovative medium for clinical teaching. The films discussed below illustrate three trenchant variations on father–daughter relationships, estrangement and the dynamics of reconciliation and forgiveness at the end of life.

Daughter (Daria Kashcheeva, Czech Republic, 2019) explores conflict resolution at the time of approaching death. In this animation a single father repeatedly tries but fails to compensate for the absence of a mother in his young daughter's life. Not comprehending why her father is so wanting, the daughter is consumed by anger throughout her childhood, adolescence and young adulthood. But she reconciles with her father just before he dies, an act that is a developmental milestone for each, reflecting a new level of maturity for her and a long-awaited sense of relief and completion for him. This final resolution was an experience denied to many during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, when in-person family visitation to dying patients was curtailed.

Mare Nostrum (Rana Kazkaz and Anas Khalaf, Syria, 2016) depicts parental sacrifice when survival itself is threatened. A father takes his daughter to a Moroccan beach for a day of recreation but suddenly hurls the girl into the sea. She flails about in the water desperately until he at last dives in to rescue her. He responds to her distress and anger with silence, offering no explanation, but the viewer discerns his pain. Eventually it is understood that they were to undertake a perilous journey across the sea to Italy in a derelict refugee boat; unknown to her, the daughter is being trained to avoid drowning if the vessel should capsize. The father himself does not survive the journey, so reconciliation will rest on the daughter's appreciation of how he had endured the loss of her love and trust to offer her hope for a better life.

Father and Daughter (Michaël Dudok de Wit, Netherlands, 2000) is an animation that demonstrates the lifelong effects of the disruption of a father–daughter relationship in the daughter's early childhood – in effect, a traumatic abandonment. A young girl is seen to have a deeply loving relationship with her father, but he abruptly and mysteriously rows away in a small boat. The girl is left to bicycle through her life alone. For years she searches endlessly for her absent father, keeping alive the hope for his reappearance, a hope that gives her purpose but also inhibits her from living fully. Then, on the cusp of her own death, there is forgiveness and a reunion with her father, no less joyful for existing only in her imagination. Now she can re-experience the warmth and love she enjoyed with her father as a young girl.

The three films were screened at Medfest-Egypt, a medically themed film festival for an international audience of physicians and students (https://medfestegypt.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/MEDFEST_document.pdf).

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