evolve into a deep and respecting intimacy, versus a youthful erotic passion that flames out into little more than cold coals or wispy ash? And what is the role of a natural maturation process (which we have come to call “aging”) in either of these evo-or devo-lutions? Are there identifiable patterns? Or is it so unique for each couple that there is no hope of teasing out a pattern? One would think that such topics so full of potential would be visited again and again both artistically and academically. Is it a reflection of the deep roots of ageism lodged in our culture that we turn our collective attention away from such questions or any attempted answers?

Back in 1993, a documentary was released that actually did look at the long-lived marriages/partnerships of five older couples. For Better or For Worse, produced and directed by independent filmmaker David Collier (Collier, Thompson, and Collier, 1993), is a beautifully done film that explores intimacy in older marriages by letting the individuals in those marriages offer their honest and often deep reflections on the character of their relationship, and what contributed to its life and longevity. (For a review of this film, see Sykes, 2001.) This documentary is as valuable as the two feature films just reviewed for exploring the characteristics of late life marital intimacy. All three of these films would serve well as a way to introduce students to the various trajectories of long-lived marriages and the inherent questions those trajectories pose.

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COMFORT WITH MY OWN DEMISE

Video: What Time Is Left (64 min)
Terra Nova Films (www.terranova.org), Distributor
Directed by Dakin Henderson
Produced by Dakin Henderson, in association with Vital Pictures
Released: September 2012

Video: How to Live Forever (95 min)
Wexler World, Inc., Distributor
Directed by Mark Wexler
Produced by Wexler World, Inc. in association with TAJ Luxury Hotels
Released: October 2009

As young videographer Dakin Henderson (What Time Is Left) drives to a family meeting to discuss his Grandmother Deedee’s desire for a living will, he sings a lament: “And I’m young and stupid. Oh to be old and wise, to be comfortable with the process of my own demise.” The lyric accurately captures the common theme of these two films—the life-long, continuous attempts that people make to come to terms with the meanings of aging and of death. Both films were motivated by different yet personally relevant death experiences. Henderson’s film was launched by his own “off-time” near-death episode (his heart stopped during a team sporting event) and by the loss of his Grandma Polly to the inexorability of fronto-temporal dementia. Filmmaker Mark Wexler’s How to Live Forever is a response to his own “morose state of mind” about aging following the death of his mother at age 85, which—in his words—“got me thinking about the inevitable.” Wexler ventures outward on a selective international journey to discover if the ways that others approach aging and death may inform his thinking. Henderson, on the other hand, points his camera more intimately inward, toward the ripple effects that Grandma Polly’s dementia and her eventual death send through family members of all ages. Though the films share the same overarching goal, from an educator’s perspective they differ in notable and useful ways.

What Time Is Left focuses on the members of a three-generation family that is in the midst of serious transition. The shift is prompted by
changes among its oldest individuals, who are now more seriously affected by the slings and arrows of late-life aging. Parents and grandparents are not the same as they used to be. They are growing more vulnerable, more disabled. Dementia has left Grandma Polly increasingly inaccessible to her family. Affected by this event, still-vital Grandma Deedee becomes more vocal about her persistent intentions to establish a living will. Deedee’s 95-year-old sister Ruth is displaying progressively slower thinking and greater physical frailty. These events generate an awareness among many younger family members—and some of the elders as well—that the comfortable constancy of their everyday lives is endangered by their own aging and, perhaps sooner than desired, by their own demise. The film documents their awareness that they may die, will die, and, eventually, do die.

Though death is a preeminent theme of the film, its indirect psychological implications for members of the family are more prominent. It is the awareness of death—as a process and as an event—that forces each of the adults to confront the question: How do I use the “time I have left to live?” By necessity, this requires an awareness of one’s own aging. Henderson’s film documents the diverse personal views of family members about both aging and death. Henderson himself admits that “death is about the scariest thought I can conjure,” whereas his brother Nathan admits to a greater fear of being alone: “If nobody gives a crap, that would be hard.” A grandchild fears for her mother: “I can’t help but wonder what Mom will be like when she is Grandma’s age. I don’t want my mom to be scared of aging.” Perception of the speed of time is heightened. Grandma Deedee observes that “changes in my life [in her late 80’s] are the same as from 6 months to 2 years [of age]. They are very rapid.” Polly’s son Ned talks of attending an annual neighborhood Halloween party: “I go and I say ‘weren’t we just here?’ So whatever that feeling is happens all the time now.” Dakin Henderson compares it all to a memorable roller coaster ride he experienced as a child: “In a heartbeat, the ride was over. At that moment I wanted to speed up and slow down time. And yet the future came and went anyway at its own pace. The day was over before I knew it and now that thought is just a memory…”

“Grandma Polly’s long demise constitutes a “leaving point” for her daughter, who no longer makes her children visit their grandmother. The most poignant moment in the film occurs at Polly’s family death vigil as a preteen grandson breaks down in silent tears at her bedside. Henderson transitions to Polly’s snow globe as its flakes fall quietly to the bottom.

Polly’s death releases her from a life with dementia. Someone notes after her funeral that “it’s actually easier to remember her now that she’s gone.” Her demise signifies a milestone for Dakin, who observes that she died “the same week I was moving out of my parents’ house.” The wheel turns.

Mark Wexler’s odyssey in How to Live Forever is an energetic, sometimes serious, sometimes amusing, but always interesting popular culture panorama about humankind’s efforts to extend both active and maximum longevity. It shares brief visits with creators of and participants in these efforts, including scientists, inventors, super-centenarians, religionists, philosophers, doctors, cryogenicists, futurists, aging celebrities, funeralists, roboticists, as well as longevous peoples (e.g., Okinawans) and places (Iceland’s waters). Most gerontologists are familiar with this terrain. What is useful here, however, is that these efforts are brought together in a single video; each is treated with respect by Wexler, the guide and narrator of this journey.

The film focuses more concretely on the types and stripes of life-extending measures and philosophies existing in the world today than on the value of the film-making journey for Wexler himself, a journey that powerfully illustrates a hopeful love of life itself. A wise friend of his sees this distinction—this confusion—and tells Wexler that “this movie about extending your life is complicating your life. You just need to get away.” Wexler offers one small personal nod in the concluding moments of the film, acknowledging that “death makes sense of everything that comes before it.”

Wexler leaves to others the job of evaluating the truth value of these philosophies and interventions. He offers no criteria for sorting out their credibility. They represent “raw data” in a sense—“claims and artifacts” that await verification. He makes no attempt to evaluate the validity of potion-like life extension claims from those that have more serious empirical support. For example, credible science has been conducted on why Okinawans outlive many other populations on earth (Willcox, Willcox, Todoriki, Curb, & Suzuki, 2006); as well, though findings are mixed, caloric restriction theory is a serious target of research in biogerontology (Maxmen, 2012). Do these deserve to be presented on the same playing field as cryopreservation or World Laughter Day or cranky super-centenarians like 101-year-old Buster Martin? Such questions
might be answered in a brief and balanced way and still preserve the fun offered by the film.

In closing, each of these films is best served to students with a few other essential ingredients. These include caveats about faulty yet excusable assumptions contained in each; neither video was produced strictly for training purposes. For example, students should appreciate that Grandma Polly’s dementia (“What Time Is Left”) is an age-associated disease that is neither usual nor a consequence of primary aging. The viewing of How to Live Forever might be yoked with Olshansky, Hayflick, and Carnes’ (2002) still-relevant position statement on anti-aging medicine designed “to inform the public of the distinction between the pseudoscientific anti-aging industry, and the genuine science of aging that has progressed rapidly in recent years.”

As both videos have deep implications for negative stereotypes of aging, I recommend Levy’s (2009) work on the origins and dangers of stereotype embodiment as a companion reading. Also, I believe that “terror management” theory (Martens, Goldenberg, & Greenberg, 2005) has high catalytic value for interpreting the age- and death-related fears shown in each film, as well as for the motives that spawned each video.

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