“IN HARM’S WAY”

Video: The Way We Get By (84 min); http://www.thewaywegetbymovie.com/

Directed by Aron Gaudet
Produced by Gita Pullapilly

Photo caption: (l to r) Jerry Mundy, Joan Gaudet, Bill Knight


Released: November, 2009

The Way We Get By offers an intimate glimpse into the lives of three elderly Maine Troop Greeters at the Bangor Airport. Because of its eastern-most location, the Bangor Airport has served as the major departure and arrival point of more than a million U.S. troops involved in the Iraqi and Afghanistan theaters of war. The Troop Greeters, largely older adults, have welcomed every flight of soldiers, 24 hr a day, year-in and year-out, since 2003. Despite sharing a common commitment to their role as greeters, these three individuals are rather different from one another.

Joan Gaudet is the 75-year-old mother of videographer Aron Gaudet. Troop-greeting activity now exists alongside her involvement with her eight grandchildren. Because flights arrive around the clock, much of her activity occurs at night while her family is sleeping. She deals with her fear of the dark and the challenges that her failing knees pose for her walker. She explains that “You get addicted to it; you can’t give it up.” However, she greets only those who are arriving, as she is too saddened to see off the soldiers who are leaving. She lives 24 miles from the airport.

Bill Knight is 87. He served 32 years in the Army Air Corps and the Navy. He fought in the North African Campaign during WWII. His commitment as a greeter is sustained partly by lingering sadness and anger over the “lack of recognition” given to troops returning from Vietnam. Outside of the airport, Bill has serious problems in his life. He has heavy financial debt. His house reflects obvious signs of his increasing inability to manage everyday living. Inside his home, his footsteps crunch across a deep layer of clutter composed mostly of empty pet food cans as he attempts to clear several hungry cats from his path: “I can’t take care of them; look at the mess they got my house in.” Adding to his ongoing state of depression, Bill received a diagnosis of prostate cancer during the filming interval.

The third greeter is 74-year-old Jerry Mundy, a former construction worker. Like Bill, Jerry is a veteran. His constant companion is his dog, Mr. Flanagan. At the airport, he is at ease with the soldiers: “We support their dedication to their country; we don’t necessarily support the reason they’re sent there.” At home, he confesses profound loneliness. He identifies with the parents of the younger soldiers. His 10-year-old son died very suddenly from a brief illness: “You see them [the child] all the time. I was very angry. You just have a hard time reconciling it.” Later in the film, Jerry follows the advice of his veterinarian to euthanize Mr. Flanagan due to advanced old age: “A lot of people say he was just a dog; not if you know him.” He experiences a profound sense of loneliness as a result.

Upon approaching this film, it would be easy for someone to misidentify its basic message. This is not a film that champions war, the military, or patriotism. It clearly involves these components, but it is not about these elements. This is a film about the inevitability of aging, the chronic and acute challenges that come with it, and the way we get by. Despite the age and generational differences that separate the greeters from the soldiers, they share much in common. Both populations are “in harm’s way,” walking parallel paths that involve elevated
personal risks that can suddenly alter quality of life and end life itself. Indeed, a large component of this film deals with older and younger individuals recognizing and confronting increased probability of personal death. It is an obvious issue for soldiers, of course, given their mission. The beauty of this film is the way it allows death as a fact to emerge within each of the greeters, who daily confront it in their memories, their failing bodies, and loss of intimate social support.

The Way We Get By aptly illustrates Freud’s observation that “behavior is over-determined”—that is, prompted by multiple causes at both conscious and unconscious levels. Although not an explicit message of the film, I believe that some of the elderly greeters, particularly those dealing with the prospect of personal death, may seek out the greeter role in the Bangor airport because it provides a relevant place for them to deal with end-of-life issues on both conscious and more subterranean levels. For both soldiers and greeters, this particular airport may signify the transition between peace and possible chaos, between safety and heightened risk, between “the person I am now,” and “the world without me.” A “Wall of The Fallen” is displayed in the terminal; it shows photos of all soldiers who have lost their lives. The film shows soldiers searching the board to learn the fate of those they know, dealing with the sudden discovery of their loss. I do not know if it also contains the names of the several Bangor greeters who have passed away since 2003 as causalities of their own war against the infirmities of aging.

Gerontologist Robert Kastenbaum (1975) suggested long ago that “it would be interesting to learn what developmental sequence, if any, obtains in the perception of death stimuli” (p. 23), particularly for personal discourse with death in late life. Enacting this advice, we might understand better the psychological value of physical environments such as the Bangor airport—replete with death stimuli—for those dealing with later life issues (e.g., Erikson’s “integrity vs. despair”). We might also appreciate the psychological value of the cultural environment for elders dealing with end-of-life issues. For example, patriotism is a prominent value many of the elderly greeters in The Way We Get By. Of interest, “terror management theory” suggests that “when people are reminded of their mortality, they tend to increase the strength with which they defend their culturally supported worldviews” (Koltko-Rivera, 2004, p. 20). It proposes that displays of patriotism may be embraced in service of this need for some individuals (Castano, 2004).

My notions about the “coming-to-terms with death” theme are actually suggested by the narratives offered by the three greeters. The comments offered by Joan, Bill, and Jerry are saturated with attempts to reconcile the sense of inevitable and irreversible loss—the finality—of death. Joan expresses worry about her granddaughter, a medical helicopter pilot, who faces deployment to Iraq: “I never wanted war, but I guess somebody did.” Bill states that he is resigned to death, but worried about dying alone: “It’s nothing to get excited about, but things will be what they will be.” Jerry is philosophical and humorous: “There are all kinds of things I want on my marker. ‘Here’s a diet that works.’ Or, ‘I finally quit smoking’. ‘Here lies Jerry in his final rest, no better and no less than all the rest.”

The nicest feature of The Way We Get By is its documentation of what happens when the greeters purposively insert themselves along the concourses used by the flowing streams of troops. The ability to have a meaningful impact on the lives of others is articulated by each of the greeters. Bill says that he has “nothing to live for but what I do for other people. I’ve outlived my usefulness. Helping other people puts meaning back into my life.” Joan uses her greeter role as an anodyne for her chronic pain: “A lot of times you go out when everything hurts. My back is bothering me, my legs are bothering me, and my shoulders hurt. But if you get out and get down there and you’re around people and you get to talking to soldiers, you kind of forget.” In turn, the soldiers express appreciation to the greeters of the warm reception. They give the greeters service coins, patches, flags, souvenirs, macramé bracelets, and, in one instance, a Purple Heart. In exchange, they are recognized with applause, hugs, phones, and candy. Soldiers recognize the corresponding need for recognition that exists among greeters, particularly those wearing military regalia. One tells Bill that “I don’t feel we’ve done enough, compared to what you guys have done.” Bill is moved by the compliment: “Everybody does their share,” he muses. Being remembered is a high priority for both groups. A soldier heading to the war zone gives a service coin to Bill and tells him “Keep it until I get back.” Bill replies, “What if I don’t recognize you.” The soldier responds, “I will remember you.”

(Bill Knight died on December 25, 2013. He was 91.)
References


Rick J. Scheidt, PhD
School of Family Studies and Human Services
Kansas State University
Manhattan, KS 66502
E-mail: rscheidt@ksu.edu
doi:10.1093/geront/gnu030

Photo Caption: (l to r) Jerry Mundy, Joan Gaudet, Bill Knight