

The Odds of Recovery

This is an imaginative documentary film, by director-producer Su Friedrich, of her experiences with health problems, physicians, the health-care system, and how these affected her relationship with her female partner over a period of more than two decades. The narrator-subject takes us through her numerous surgeries, hormonal (prolactin) imbalance, and her growing disenchantment with the traditional health-care system.

She films herself: getting dressed into the "humiliating" paper garb prior to being examined by her physician; in exchanges with her various physicians; reading from medical texts and self-help books as she tries to understand her condition(s); taking t'ai chi classes and preparing herbal potions; gardening and doing needle work. As the film ends, she is grappling with the prospect of menopause, but she feels that she has taken charge of her body and of her own care, that she tends herself as she tends her garden.

Commentary:

This film would be useful in "physician, patient, and society" courses or in any class that addresses the illness experience or concepts of the body/self. While documenting one person's experience with illness and the health-care system, it raises a number of questions that have general applicability, such as, to what extent are individuals responsible for their own health/illness; what kind of control do individuals have in interacting with physicians; what can be said about the approach and effectiveness of various physicians shown in the film; what about the role of alternative therapies?

In addition to these considerations, the film addresses how repeated medical problems may cause real or imagined difficulties in relationships with loved ones. Not only is Friedrich demoralized by her many surgeries, but she becomes convinced that her partner must be fed up with her. Her sexuality is threatened by her physical state and this causes her considerable anxiety. These topics may not be dealt with by practicing physicians or medical educators and it is worthwhile for those groups to appreciate their significance to patients. Not to mention the fact that medical forms may not take into account current life-styles (she is asked whether she is "married, single, or divorced" to which she responds, "domestic partner").

The film has a nice balance of documentation and creativity. There are frequent images of colorful garden flowers that Friedrich grows, inter-woven with physician visits and medical tests. There is the story of the turtle that she and her partner found and adopted, and eventually let go. There is the needlework in which she is engaged over the years, as if she is stitching together that which has fallen apart.

---Felice Aull

Keywords: Alternative Medicine, Body Self-Image, Communication, Disease and Health, Doctor-Patient Relationship, Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual Issues, Illness Narrative/Pathography, Individuality, Medical Testing, Menopause, Pain, Patient Experience, Physical Examination, Psycho-social Medicine, Sexuality, Suffering, Women's Health Summary