Dying To Be Perfect

Breaking The Chains: A Story of Recovery

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here are probably as many ways of looking at unhealthy or dysfunctional human conduct as there are manifestations of such behaviour. What Eileen Hoeter's Dying to Be Perfect shares with Teresa MacKinnon's video production, Breaking the Chains: A Story of Recovery, is a desire to understand certain types of well-being. Both feature the accounting of experts—neither clinicians or academics or social scientists, but people who have lived the disorders and speak from experience.

Hoeter's film (which she calls "an awareness film") deals with the eating disorder, anorexia nervosa. Dying to Be Perfect presents through the stories of three women, each of whom (Erin and Molly) are survivors of the disease, and one (Audrey) whose daughter died from it.

Each of the three discusses her involvement with anorexia—how the initial stage through its development, to treatment and the disorder's consequences on their lives.

Their stories are grim testimonials to the power of this affliction. Erin describes how in the beginning losing weight gave her a feeling of control over her body, ironic in the light of the lack of control she had over her disease. Even when she weighed less than 50 pounds (she's five feet, seven inches tall), she still felt she was overweight.

And as Molly explains, "This is damage for life." The repercussions of anorexia—kidney and heart damage, loss of menstrual period—do not disappear with recovery.

Audrey's attempt to understand the reasons for her daughter's death brings another perspective to the film—that of the third-person victim.

These women are remarkably articulate and insightful about their relationships to the disorder. The interviews with Molly and Erin move smoothly back and forth, and are interspersed with a dance sequence by C. Lee, a dancer outraged at the prevalence of eating disorders among her colleagues.

Spliced into the latter part of the film are stills of the three anorexic women in the advanced stages of their disorder, which reinforce their stories, especially juxtaposed with the not-unusual appearance of the women today.

Throughout the film the editing is tight and thoughtfully paced. The framing of the single camera is uncluttered, effectively simple.
Unfortunately, the dance sequence adds little to the film; it is less direct and immediate than the interviews.

_Dying to be Perfect_ is a nicely-constructed presentation of the problem, the victims, consequences and insights into anorexia.

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_Machines and Mackintosh's 45-minute video, Breaking the Chains_, is an examination of recovery from drug and alcohol addiction. It is composed of interviews with men and women who are in, or have been in, recovery homes which follow a 12-step program.

The major focus is on individuals in a men's house in Vancouver, and particularly on a step meeting there. These are tough individuals who generally have approached the problems of their lives with fists and fix caps. The straight world might categorize them as bikers, greasers, punks, junkies, or just plain trouble. But what is outstanding is their ability to speak with intelligence and understanding about the struggle to overcome their problems.

The people interviewed in this film explain what it is like to be an addict. How your entire life comes to revolve around satisfying the addiction, which is, as one young man puts it, only a symptom of the disease. And as one woman says, "When you wake up you don't know who you are, where you are or where you've been."

But they are equally articulate about recovery. And it soon becomes obvious that a large part of the process is this ability to communicate honestly, learning to face life and not hide from it, even to be able to laugh about their struggles._

One man jokes about hearing bottles of beer and syringes call to him, "Come on, let's go for a walk down town.

Breaking the Chains is structured in a series of questions, such as "Why does a drug user enter a recovery program?" Each question is followed by sequences of interviews in response.

The first question, "What is the cause of drug addiction?", is answered by well-intentioned non-addicts who can only speculate. This contrasts with the subsequent approach of only interviewing people with direct experience of addiction.

This film is powered by a dynamic of possibility that is charged as the people in it. It might be useful in encouraging others to break the chains of their addiction. As one fellow in the house described his experience there, "I feel I could help anybody, now."

_Calvin Wharton_

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**BREAKING THE CYCLE**

This film is dedicated to "the silent victims" - the battered wives who look at the camera and say: "He cut me up with a carving knife. I stayed because I was so damned scared..." and "The children sat on the sofa and my husband beat me."

A chilling document, it probes many aspects of the problem - the shame, the inherited violence - and also touches upon the therapy, the role of the police and specific advice to the victims.

As the litany unfolds, both beaters and victims paint a sad, desperate picture. The women, youthful and mature, say: "He saw his parents beat each other up..." "I was programmed to put up with it. You were married - you made your bed and you lie on it..." "I wrote every day with bruises."

"A young man: I was my Daddy's pet... I saw him dragging my mother across the room by her hair - it goes on and on. My girl friend is like my mother and I hate her... I broke her ribs - I was so mad, so mad."

"An older man who is receiving treatment, adds, "I always felt so bad afterwards - after I beat my wife..."

"The police role in domestic situations is described by one officer as "very dangerous," but changes in attitude have occurred, and things have apparently come a long way in two years. If the police lay a charge, the woman is more likely to follow it through and, also, the courts take it more seriously.

The solutions include awareness and education. The best advice is to touch base with somebody - a teacher or a neighbor. A victim says that children in violent families should not blame themselves and plead with fellow-victims. "Come out of the closet, come out of the house and say 'This is happening to me!'

A straightforward, hefty little documentary, where the strong content overcomes most of the warts. This is the film that had a Warhol-like flaring of some fame and glory at the 1988 Yorkton Short Film and Video Festival - the National Film Board/Kathleen Shannon Award for Documentary was torn from its grasp along with a $1,000 cash prize (Cinema Canada #154).


**SHOOTING STARS**

A Ilan Stein was luckier with his film at Yorkton '88, where it won the Award for Best Sports and Recreation.

The Grads (Edmonton Commercial Graduates Women's Basketball Team) was formed in 1915. Some of the graduating girls from the Commercial High School wanted to continue with this sport, and asked Percy Page to keep on coaching them. They were called "Canada's Wonder Team," an amateur women's team and for almost two decades the unparalleled queens of basketball. The Grads made headlines throughout the 1920s and 1930s, and travelled widely. Early in 1929, when international championship basketball was prominent in conjunction with the Olympic Games, The Grads went to Europe, sponsored by the Government of Canada. They dispatched their opponents with ease and won all of their games.

The Grads remained the undisputed world champions for the next 15 years. Memories of this unique sporting team are evoked through newspaper headlines, newscasts, home movies of The Grads and, especially, by interviews with some of the "old girls," while their final tour game and its dramatic highlight is recreated. Betty Bawden Bowen, Babe Belanger and Margaret MacBurney are some of The Grads who go to reunions and feel "one unit again."

"We sprightly reminiscences cover the modernization of their playing kit - "We had knee-pads and bloomers and were all covered up", but in the 20s, after playing a team from Cleveland which "had modern costumes," the "sweat bloomers were thrown out! As amateurs, by night they were famous world-class athletes, but by day they worked as secretaries and in department stores and were glad to have a job in the Depression. They would play 10 games in 11 nights without pay, and no federal money to help. They idolized coach Percy Page who never missed a game and never raised his voice..."

"he expected a lot but he was a gentleman."

By the 1950s the end was in sight. At the outbreak of World War II the arena was taken over by the military and the chain was broken. The Grads exciting game with the Tulsa Stenos is recreated - It's 39-39 and one minute to play, and the winning point is scored at the gun! Wily cheering some crowds and free game. The end came on June 10, 1940. In 25 years The Grads played 522 games, won 402, were North American champions 1923-1940; attended four World Olympics and won all 27 exhibition games they played. Coach Percy Page died in 1973.

An interesting look at Canadian women's early sporting, the history, nearly resurrected and served up in modern style. The archival material, the reminiscences from the remaining Grads and the dramatization don't quite work together, and the flow does drag at times. But there's no denying that this is an engaging, heart-warming document that looks good, and a few nips of editing might remedy the rhythm.

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**A GAME OF DEATH**

A tense little experimental black comedy which evolves the atmosphere of wartime London in 1943 in a story of espionage and murder. Divided into segments by titles, and using the sights and sounds of the era - Churchill's voice, Pearl Harbor, newspaper headlines - the film wends its way to a laconic conclusion. Clyde is tracking Simon Marquette (a sinister double-agent who murdered his brother), while his lover, Charlotte, worries him of the danger. Tinkling piano music, a lamp, pages being turned, a table setting and some conversation over brandy. Telephone rings: "Taxi!" "Ah, Mr. Marquette," a moving wheel; shots: footsteps... a door opens and woman's voice "Clyde! Come in! You have found him?"

"Done, finished. Never knew who I was."

A really small little epic, from its excellent titles on a mock-up of the front page of The Times newspaper to the succinct handling of the elements through voice-over and a first-rate sound track. A filmmaker to watch!