On Using Movies to inform Conscious Aging Courses

Over the past 4 years I have taught nine, eight-week Conscious Aging courses at Sydney University’s Centre for Continuing Education in Australia.

In 2010, I attended the first International Sage-ing Conference in Denver, CO, where Judy Steiert (CSL) gave an inspiring presentation on using movies to inform the Sage-ing materials. I was hooked.

Having taught a number of 8-week courses (2 hours/week) without the use of movies, I came home to Australia and designed a course around 8 movies. I extended each class to 3 hours, to allow the time to watch a movie each week and leave some time for discussion.

Using movies is a powerful tool for illustrating Sage-ing themes and allows students to really ‘get’, with an emotional catharsis, the importance of the various processes described as necessary in the sage-ing journey.

Students find it much easier to discuss and relate to the topics, when they’re portrayed in the lives of characters in a film, than having to find examples in their own experience. It gives them extra time and space to locate the emotions and events and do the required harvesting and healing work in their own lives.

Fiction, speaks to deep truths in ourselves. By addressing universal themes, it also allows us to see that we are not alone; it points to the communion of all people and by holding up a mirror to our shared humanity, allows us to see ourselves more clearly.

I have found using movies to illustrate and guide the discussion and exploration of the Sage-ing process extremely rewarding and wanted to share some information about the movies I have used with Sage-ing International members. I hope the information will be useful and interesting to CSLs who would like to experiment with a different structure for presenting the Sage-ing material. I have thanked Judy Steiert every time I prepare and present a film-based course for introducing me to the potential of this wonderful tool.

When first using movies, I taught a couple of courses, where we watched a movie each week. I found that this structure didn’t leave sufficient time for discussion, experiential exercises and exposition of
the theory and concepts entailed in the Sage-ing model. In fact, by the second time I taught the course, I didn’t show a movie in the last week. Instead, I used excerpts from *Tuesdays with Morrie*, which we had watched in week 1, as a review of the topics we had covered and lead into a discussion of mentoring, being an elder and leaving a legacy.

I have redesigned the course to show a movie every 2\textsuperscript{nd} week, leaving 3 hours on alternate weeks to introduce, discuss and do the experiential work with the essential Sage-ing concepts. This has proved a good balance. Students love the movies and also get the time to process the ideas and work with the material, relating it to their own life’s journey.

**Naming the Course**

Over the years, I have tried a variety of names for the course, including variations on ‘Wisdom Journey in the Second Half of Life’ and ‘Conscious Aging: Finding Meaning in the Second Half of Life (A Film Study)’. I have settled on the latter, informed by research done by the University on which words attract more hits in Google searches for courses.

**Course Description & Outline**

Below is the description of my course given on the [University’s website](#):

You’ve lived Adulthood I – you’ve built a career and perhaps raised a family. You’re in your mid-50s, 60s or 70s and you probably have another 20, 30 or 40+ years of good life ahead of you. So, what’s next?

Human life expectancy at birth in industrialised countries has increased by some thirty years since the beginning of the twentieth century. Career and child rearing, by which we have defined ourselves, no longer occupy the majority of our time. We are in new territory. We need to reimagine the life we want to create in this second stage of adulthood – Adulthood II.

A ‘good old age’ does not come automatically, especially in a culture that worships youth and shuns ageing. However, there is a growing chorus of voices proclaiming that the later stage of life has within it the unique potential for growth for those willing to pursue it. This course provides the opportunity to begin
imagine and creating the next stage of your life, on purpose. It’s an exciting process.

**The themes to be explored over the 8 weeks:**

**New Models of Ageing**

- Images of ageing – the need for a paradigm shift
- Personal and cultural images of ageing and how the images we hold determine our experience
- What does it mean to be an ‘elder’ and the possible roles of elders in society

**The importance of looking back: Harvesting Wisdom from our Life Story**

- We will look at the way early experiences connect to the rest of our life, identifying significant patterns in coming to be who we are today and looking with new eyes at what has been lived so far.

**Healing the Past: Forgiveness**

- A crucial aspect of life repair and completion work is to attend to the unhealed emotional scar tissue, which we often carry for years after the acts of betrayal and hurt which caused the pain.

**Doing Our Philosophical Homework: Clarifying Our Deepest Values**

- Contemplating the big questions, such as, ‘what has it all meant and what is my purpose?’ may not yield the answers but helps to clarify our values; what is important to us from our present perspective?

**Facing Our Mortality**

- We will explore the impacts of the denial of death in our culture; the benefits of accepting our death so we can live a rich and full life and have a peaceful death.

**Leaving a Legacy: How do we want to be remembered?**

- What do we want to contribute to the world and how do we want to express our life lessons and deepest values?
What Now?

• Living a meaningful second half of your life – creating a vision for your future.
  What do we still want to do?
• We will explore possible ways to make the contribution we want to make, such as mentoring, expressing our creativity, or supporting societal transformation.

Movies Used and the main Sage-ing Themes they Inform

(a) Using 8 films over 8 weeks (in the order in which they were shown):

**Tuesdays With Morrie** (1999. With Jack Lemmon)

Excellent film for starting the course as it deals with all the Sage-ing themes addressed in the course: Images of ageing, becoming an elder, encountering mortality, life review, forgiveness & healing the past, mentoring, leaving a legacy, spiritual wisdom.

**Evening** (2007. Vanessa Redgrave, Toni Colette, Meryl Streep, Natasha Richardson)

This film deals with life review, healing the past and life completion. It is particularly powerful in demonstrating how stories we make up about events and relationships in our life can be carried around for years, creating regrets, resentments & disappointments and how revisiting the event and story from another perspective can free us.

**One True Thing** (1998. With Meryl Streep, William Hurt, Renee Zellweger)

Sage-ing themes covered include healing relationships, facing mortality, clarifying our values, forgiveness, mentoring and intergenerational relationships.

Like **Evening**, this film is powerful on the rewards of seeing our beliefs about our past with a new perspective, and especially on the
importance of reviewing and healing our relationships with our parents.


This is a wonderful film about forgiveness. It is a powerful portrayal of the crippling effects of holding onto resentment, the freedom and spaciousness delivered by forgiveness and the necessary journey between the two states.


Sage-ing themes informed by this film include: clarifying our values, life lived within the box, turning points, forgiveness, mentoring, intergenerational dialogue.


As its name implies, this film deals with facing our mortality and life completion.

My Life (1993. With Michael Keaton & Nicole Kidman)

This film touches on all the Sage-ing themes, though the protagonist, who is confronting death, is very young. It deals particularly usefully with life review, forgiveness, healing relationships and leaving a legacy.

Peaceful Warrior (2006. Nick Nolte, Scott Mechlowicz)

Sage-ing themes dealt with in this film include: Values clarification, meditation, Inner Elder, Transformation, mentoring, mastery in the art of living/wisdom, living a meaningful life.

(b) Using 4 films over an 8-week course, (showing a film every 2nd week)
Films were shown in weeks 1, 3, 5 & 7 of the 8-week courses. To-date, I have used 2 sets of 4 films:

**Set (i)**

*Wild Strawberries* (1957, directed by Ingmar Bergman). This is a wonderful film, described as “one of the masterpieces of world cinema”. It deals with all the sage-ing themes covered in the course: facing one’s mortality; life review & regrets; life repair, healing the past and relationships, forgiveness. The ageing hero, following a dream about his own death, sets out on odyssey of self-discovery, leading to ultimate hope and redemption.

The film was regarded by Erik Erikson, as a prototype of the Elderquest, dealing with the essential components of that quest – the call, the search, the journey, the guide, the struggle, the breakthrough and the return.

*About Schmidt* (2002. With Jack Nicholson, Kathy Bates) This film has been seen by some as an example of a failed Elderquest, or sage-ing journey. This, in itself, is an interesting discussion question. The film deals with transitions (retirement, loss of spouse), regrets, broken expectations, forgiveness, values clarification and the search for meaning.

*Ladies in Lavender* (2004. With Judi Dench and Maggie Smith)

Sage-ing issues raised by this movie include regrets, resurrecting un-lived life, love & longing, acceptance, mentoring.

*Venus* (2006. With Peter O’Toole, Vanessa Redgrave, Jodie Whittacker)

This is quite challenging film, in which the octogenarian character played by Peter O’Toole falls in love with a 19-year old girl. It addresses facing our mortality, love & sex in old age, life review and completion, forgiveness, mentoring and choosing how we die.

**Set (II)**
The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel (2011. Director John Madden, with Judi Dench, Maggie Smith).

Excellent for starting off the course, as it deals with all the sage-ing themes to be covered: transitions; images of aging; fears; life review; healing, forgiveness; life completion; new beginnings; love and sexuality; mentoring and intergenerational relationships.

And if We All Lived Together (2012. With Jane Fonda, Geraldine Chaplin).

This French movie, about 5 baby boomers who have been friends since their twenties, also touches on all the themes covered in the Sage-ing course: transitions; fears/losses; life review; regrets; forgiveness; facing mortality; choosing how we want to die; choosing how we want to live; mentoring.


The Way depicts the odyssey undertaken by the grieving father, played by Martin Sheen, to walk the Camino de Santiago. The film touches on self-knowledge; regrets; forgiveness; healing relationships; new beginnings; values clarification and the search for meaning.


This film is excellent in its portrayal of the value of facing one’s mortality and undertaking a conscious process of doing the work of life completion. It particularly focuses on forgiveness, including self-forgiveness, telling one’s story and choosing how one wants to die.

Some Elements of Class Structure

On the weeks in which we watch a movie, after the preliminary opening of the class (including a short meditation), I alert the students to the Sage-ing themes to look for in the movie.
Following the movie, students are divided into groups of 2-4 to discuss 1 or several set questions relating to the movie. Sometimes the students choose the question they'd like to discuss from a list; sometimes, I allocate each group their question(s).

Following the small group discussion, we come together and share discussion in the whole group. Participants are given homework exercises each week, to begin applying the concepts and processes raised in the film and discussion.

On alternate weeks, the whole 3-hour class is devoted to presenting the Sage-ing themes to be covered that week, doing experiential exercises, small and large group discussions. Illustrating the way the various sage-ing themes were portrayed in the movies we’ve watched, is very helpful to the discussions, making the ‘theoretical’ real.

Students are given ‘work books’ at the beginning of the course, which contain an overview of the course, reviews of & questions relating to each movie, exercises which are completed in class or as homework and discussed, short articles and references.