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Another Earth

Abstract

This is a review of *Another Earth* (2011), directed by Mike Cahill.

Problem Solving Group at the Columbia Correctional Institution is a mental health therapy group designed to not only improve the participants' adjustment to incarceration, but to also deepen their critical thinking capabilities and to connect them to both the world at large and to their inner search for purpose and meaning. It is comprised of men from ages 21 to 53 with varying educational levels, from middle school to some college courses. The majority are serving long prison terms, from 25 years to natural Life. The group meets weekly and jointly tackles the central themes of books and films chosen for their mental health content. Thus, once a week, the men come together as individuals, not just as inmates with numbers. Once a week, intellectual demands are made of them. Once a week, they truly do enter "*Another Earth*."

Review by (in alphabetical order): Brandon Bennett, Enrique Brown, David Donnadio, Jeff Grant, Anthony Jones, Joquan Mathis, Nicholas Odegaard, Bennith Paul: Inmates at Columbia Correctional Institution, Florida Department of Corrections; Sponsored by K. Fabian, MS, and L. Wiley, MA-Mental Health Specialists

A synopsis of the film *Another Earth* is as follows: Another earth has been discovered, called Earth 2. As news of the discovery plays over her car radio, Rhoda Williams, a MIT-bound high school student, stares into the night sky, drunk and unaware of anyone else on the road. She hits another car, killing a woman and a small boy and injuring the male driver. Rhoda spends the next four years in prison. Upon her release, she chooses a path of withdrawal and works as a janitor in a high school. Motivated by her guilt, desire for atonement and love of astronomy, she writes an essay to compete for a seat on the first private space flight to Earth 2. Partly because of her criminal record, she wins the contest. It is learned that both planets lived in synchronicity until the moment of discovery. Rhoda hopes that by traveling to Earth 2 she will escape the emotional fallout of the accident, by finding her alternate self and starting anew. Under false pretenses, she becomes involved with John Burroughs, the man whose family she destroyed. She decides to sacrifice her seat to him with the goal of giving him a second chance at happiness. The ending is ambiguous and allows the viewer to formulate alternate possible endings, akin to alternate possible universes.

Rhoda's life in prison remains an unknown, so viewers can only surmise what it was like based on what popular media depicts about life behind bars. As a society, incarceration is deemed the right way to deal with people who break the law. But are redemption and atonement achieved simply through isolation and the passage of time? Incarcerated individuals can choose to "do time" in a variety of ways, the majority of which may look very similar to their lives prior to prison. Unfortunately, drugs, gangs and violence continue to thrive. However, there are those people who do seek to make amends for their past transgressions, even while incarcerated. Like the many mirrors

found in *Another Earth*, inmates are forced to see themselves or the victims of their crimes in the faces of fellow inmates. When faced with guilt, we can assuage it in two basic ways: active or passive. In the film, Rhoda takes an active role in seeking to cleanse herself of guilt by assuming a helper role in John's life, literally scouring away dirt and grime from John's house but also attempting to scour away John's pain and bitterness. Inmates, limited by concrete and steel, necessarily take a passive tack when seeking to make reparations. They reflect on their actions, seek improved paths to wisdom, and often find hope within religious faith. They become more active in the search for atonement when they discover that helping others, a tenet of most faiths, is rewarding and life-affirming. In essence, incarcerated individuals create their own version of Earth 2.

Though confession can be good for the soul, it is not always the best choice when faced with incarceration. Some individuals, like Rhoda, do not contest their guilt. It then becomes a matter of dancing with the legal system to determine the degree or length of punishment. Others, blinded by the prospect of freedom, cling to their Earth 1 status, and resist all offers of deals, often winding up with lengthy, even Life, sentences. Still for others, confessing a wrong is not even an understandable concept when all they have ever done is wrong, making it the norm. Confession, to self/God/society, is part of a cleansing and rebirth experience. Incarceration can foster moral development via its harsh, lonely, barren landscape. Rhoda's confession to John, that she caused the accident that swept away his world, his Earth 1, allowed John to consider the possibilities of a fresh start on Earth 2. Without confession and forgiveness, at least to one's self or God, the siren call

the Shaman Janitor in *Another World* refers to, that of “seeing himself everywhere”, becomes irresistible.

In most religious faiths, a belief in an afterlife motivates the believer’s thoughts and behavior in this life. Earthly suffering does not exist in heaven for the faithful, but is prolonged in hell for the nonbelievers. Incarceration could be thought of as a kind of afterlife. It is the life after judgment, a consequence of misdeeds. For Rhoda, Earth 2 was her anticipated afterlife, a place where she could start over. She fervently believed it would end her anguish on Earth 1. However, she realized that there can be many kinds of afterlives. Life continued after the accident, after prison, and after she met John. The film viewer realizes her life will continue after she meets her mirror self on Earth 2. Ultimately, the concept of an afterlife is about transition, growth, and, most importantly, hope.

The use of mirrors in *Another Earth* wonderfully symbolizes Rhoda’s reflections on her life. She is finally able to move forward when she confronts herself and faces reality. When we use mirrors, we can see all sides of ourselves, the good and the bad, even when it is hard to acknowledge. She finds possibilities revealed in her reflection. This is much like the process incarcerated individuals go through in their minds. For some, prison is one long reflection on their lives. This plants the seeds of emotional and spiritual redemption and allows them to flourish. Using mirrors also reminds the film’s viewers that though we are outsiders looking in, we have a window into Rhoda’s soul.

Another Earth was an excellent choice to use for our group therapy project. The film sustains interest during repeated showings and has a broad appeal across age groups. In some ways, it is the antithesis of a Hollywood formula film: it is slow paced; the

musical score has a haunting, other worldly flavor; and, the viewer is afforded time to ponder as the plot unfolds. It is limited as a family film or for those not given to entertaining alternate realities. Though it does not answer the question “Are we alone?”, it encourages reflection and shared discussion of our personal journeys.