

Not a Still Life
A film by Roberta Cantow

Discussion Guide
Academic
Clinical

For Use in Education: Counseling Psychology; Social Work, Aging/Gerontology
and Diversity Courses

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Synopsis

Not a Still Life is a documentary portrait of Steve Stone, a spirited, older, gay, Jewish man who shares the naked truth of his unconventional life. His stories are of childhood ridicule in the 1950's and coming out in the early 60's. He has lived openly gay for 50 years, found true love, experienced tragic loss and subsequent loneliness and aging. His gradual evolution includes embracing sobriety, connecting with a long lost relative and discovering his spirituality—only to find that he is in danger of losing his home and business. His humorous and engaging personality provokes reflections about our own identities, emotions, and cultural experiences.

Introduction

Steve Stone is a gay man in his mid 60's. The field of geriatrics emphasizes physical concerns, which may not be relevant to the "younger old generation." It is critical that service providers be aware of an assortment of developmental concerns, challenges and opportunities for this age group. For his part, Steve is an active virile person, yet he faces a variety of emotions issues related to grief, aging and adjusting to sever changes in his circumstances. Throughout the viewing of the film, it may be useful to consider how you would address certain issues presented if you were working with someone similar to Steve.

Facilitator Instructions

This guide is divided into questions by chapter, which match the “scene” designations on the disk. Selected questions are also organized by theme (in a supplementary document) as an alternate approach for reference/discussion. The Questions by Chapter and the Questions by Theme documents both include a select Concluding Questions.

Facilitators are encouraged to review both guides in their entirety in advance of a film showing. Questions in one particular category or document may be appropriate for another as well. Similarly, some questions may be appropriate for some viewing groups more than others. These are suggestions to help the facilitator with critical discussion.

Note - The chapter divisions on the disk itself are referred to as “Scenes.”

Pre-Viewing Questions

What do you imagine might be the difference between characterizing Steve as an older gay man as opposed to an aging man or a “gay elder”?

What are your assumptions about a gay man in his 60’s today? For those who identify as “young adults,” what are aspects of gay cultural history to know or understand?

What feelings do you have about identity based on one’s religion? How does this relate to your feelings about organized religion in general or your own religion in particular?

What are your criteria for feeling inspired by another person’s story?

What does “inclusion” in religious institutions mean to you and what might it suggest to you about the importance of a supportive one?

If you identify as a younger person, whether straight, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered or queer, what do you think you could gain by engaging with an older gay man’s story? What are your assumptions about a gay man in his 60’s today?

Questions by Chapter and Identified by Theme

- AG** - Aging and Grief
- S** - Sexuality
- I** - Identity
- R** - Religion
- PD** - Psychological Development

Chapter 1 – Steve

What is your sense of who this man is? What are the visual and spoken clues that inform your impression of him? - **I**

What is your initial emotional reaction to being introduced to Steve? Do you feel curious, provoked, drawn in, pushed away? - **I**

Chapter 2 – Flint

What is your sense of the importance of Steve’s relationship with Flint? - **S, I**

To what extent do you think Steve is aware that his version of life with Flint is an idealized one? - **I, PD**

Discuss the tension that appears present *within* Steve. - **I**

Chapter 3 – Early Evolution

What is your understanding of the cultural context of the 1950's and how it influenced Steve's development? - **I, PD**

How do you imagine Steve's childhood experiences might have led to his personal emphasis on being "unconventional?" How does his pushing back against convention serve him? What does he sacrifice? - **I, PD**

What is the importance of Steve's kindergarten story? - How is the importance of this story emphasized in the film? - **PD**

Chapter 4 – Thwarted Desires

In what ways do you think the denial of Steve's self expression and sense of self (as a child) influenced his development? - **PD**

Discuss the tension between insecurity and confidence that Steve exhibits. What might be some of the experiences that contribute to this tension? - **I, PD**

Discuss the tension between humor and rage. How does humor serve Steve? - **I, PD**

Chapter 5 – Later Evolution

What is the significance of the loss of Flint in relation to Steve's development (emotionally, interpersonally, and spiritually)? - **I, S, PD**

How did Flint's death call upon Steve to behave differently, and in what ways might it have been a growth opportunity? - **PD**

Steve counts the years without Flint. How does the loss of Flint become an aspect of his self-image or identity? - **I**

Chapter 6 – Inheritance

Steve describes his determination to hold onto his home in order to keep the memory of Flint alive. In what ways does this determination either alleviate or sustain his grief? - **I, AG**

Steve describes his determination to hold onto his home in order to keep the memory of Flint alive. In what ways does his determination either alleviate or support his grief? - **I, AG**

What kinds of challenges and opportunities is Steve faced with in assuming a business-focused identity? How does his new identity impact his sense of self? - **I**

How is Steve's motivation in maintaining the business a reflection of his past experiences and relationships? - **I, PD**

Chapter 7 – Roman

Some people respond negatively to Steve mentioning Roman's will. Do you feel you might understand Steve's hurt and what it is about? - **I, S**

How does Steve's reconnection with his family's religious heritage and cultural background influence his identity? - **I, R**

Steve acknowledges some ambivalent feelings in his relationship with Roman - tremendous gratitude and acceptance as well as hurt. How might Steve's experience of being discounted by his cousin impact his future relationships? - **PD**

How is the integration of ritual within a spiritual community important at this particular stage of Steve's life? Consider the particular importance of Steve's bar mitzvah. - **R, PD, I**

Chapter 8 – Alone, Isolated

How does Steve seem to understand the integration of his spiritual and sexual identity? What contradictions, if any, are present? - **R, I, S**

Steve complains of isolation and identifies the reasons for it. Do they explain an objective reality or does he set himself apart? - **PD, I**

Chapter 9 – The Meaning of Life

Steve declares that loving and being loved is the meaning of life, yet that is what appears to be missing in his life. He provides reasons for being "alone and isolated." Do these reasons explain an objective reality or does he set himself apart? What are some ways that one could counsel Steve to see his circumstances differently or be able to consider other reasons for his loneliness? - **I**

How has the death of Flint influenced Steve's current choices and decisions regarding relationships? - **A, G, I**

Steve responds to the filmmaker's encouragement regarding the possibility of transformation by saying, "Do they have gay butterflies?" How does this comment provide insight into his view of himself? Is it spoken solely for humorous effect or is there a deeper significance? - **I, PD**

To what extent is Steve's grief resolved and integrated? How has the shape of his grief changed over time? - **I, PD**

Chapter 10 – Predicament

Describe the resilience Steve demonstrates. - **PD**

How does Steve appear to respond to the potential threat of further loss in his life? -**I. AG**

Concluding Questions

Has your understanding of the person you were introduced to in the beginning of the film shifted in the course of watching it?

Some viewers have responded negatively to Steve. What do you imagine has provoked them?

In many ways, the paradoxical is an important feature of who Steve is. While some people are not comfortable with what they perceive as his self centeredness, others point out his advocacy for animal rights, vegetarianism, and concern for the environment as evidence to the contrary. Where do you stand?

Some people are inclined to perceive Steve as living the good life or of his situation having no relationship to other men of his age who might be facing more dire circumstances, such as being uninsured, living on a fixed income, etc. Do you agree or disagree? How might this be both true and not true?

What do you most appreciate or admire about Steve's story and Steve Stone? Do you consider him to be a nice person, a troubled person, a survivor? Is he open and accepting of himself and others? Do you find inspiration in his story?

What do you think will happen in Steve's life from this point forward?

In what ways do you find Steve's story either empowering? Disempowering.?

There is something intensely personal in Steve's story, but there are also things about it that are universal. Explore the relationship between the two.

How might the film be seen as dealing with universal themes? Do any of them relate to your own experiences, regardless of your own identities?

Summary

In your clinical work, you inevitably will encounter a diverse range of life experiences and stories – some of which may seem quite familiar, while others may appear foreign. How might similarities and differences between your life and Steve’s influence your approach in working with someone like him?

When we engage in the therapeutic process of life review (whether in relation to another’s story or our own), we are inescapably faced with a range of emotions related to past choices. Some of these may provoke a sense of regret or gratitude. Consider how your work with a client like Steve could empower him to find a way forward in his life.