

Film Review: Peaceful Warrior and Positive Psychology

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On its surface, the film *Peaceful Warrior* (Amin, Welch, & Winikoff, 2006) describes the resilience of a college gymnast who shatters his right leg, is told that with luck he will be able to walk but that his career as an athlete is over. Ultimately he returns to gymnastics and is part of a team, which wins the U.S. National Championships. There are dozens of films like this and were this sole meaning of the film, it would not merit special attention even though it is “inspired” by true events. The significance of this film is found in the way in which the college student, Dan Millman, is transformed from what might be termed a callow youth into a young man whose personal sense of well-being is inexorably altered by setting goals based on intrinsic rather than extrinsic motives, by having positive social relationships, and the ways in which a human being can transcend limitations through Mindfulness and Flow. These, especially the first two, have been found to be key factors in life-satisfaction and well-being (Baumgardner & Crothers, 2009). The themes run throughout the film.

The real central character in the film is never given a name. Nick Nolte plays the role and we only know him as “Socrates,” a name Dan Millman makes up to identify him. As the film begins, Millman is a member of the gymnastics team at the University of California at Berkeley (UCB). Millman awakens from a nightmare, leaves a girl in his bed and runs alone. He comes upon a Texaco service station and its owner, the role played by Nolte. Millman purchases a drink. As he walks away from the station Nolte suddenly appears on the roof. Millman asks how he did it. He gets no answer. This is “the hook”.

We now see Millman at gymnastics practice. His specialty is the rings. The coach, a key role, is entirely focused on the team winning the Olympic trials. Millman tries something and fails. The coach admonishes him not to try something beyond his abilities. Millman believes he

can do it. The coach tells Millman to ignore his goal and focus on making the Olympics. In essence, focus on extrinsic goals rather than intrinsic goals. At this point, extrinsic goals are central in Millman's life. He believes that he will be happy if he makes the Olympics.

Nolte's unfathomable feat repeatedly draws Millman back to the Texaco Station. Again he is running alone in the middle of the night. Nolte asks Millman, "Are you happy?" Millman says "Yes," and goes on to talk about being happy because he has plenty of money, gets good grades without studying and "never sleeps alone." Nolte rejoins, "Then why can't you sleep?" Millman has no answer for this. Nor is there an answer when Nolte asks "What will you do if you don't make the Olympic Team?" Nolte challenges Millman. "You can live an entire lifetime and never be awake" "You have lived being what other people tell you to be. Are you willing to look inside yourself and be what you are?" Nolte admonishes Millman, "Take out the trash." Millman responds, "You take out the trash." Nolte, pointing to Millman's head: "The trash is up here. Empty your mind of everything except the only thing that matters, what's happening right now! There's never nothing going on." Nolte is saying that Millman exists in a world filled with the clutter of his subconscious thoughts. He is living in a state of Mindlessness (Langer, 2002). Throughout the film, this will be a central theme.

During the course of Millman's visit, a young woman brings Nolte food. This woman, her name is Joy, is the last central character in the film. A last key scene early in the film shows Millman with his teammates in a bar. Millman has slept with a teammate's girlfriend. It doesn't bother him. At this point, we have seen the essential character of Dan Millman.

What can we say about Dan Millman at this point? First, Millman already has a high degree of self-regulation. An athlete who commits the time and effort necessary to attempt a place on the Olympic Team in any sport, clearly possesses self-regulation. In the same context,

he is highly motivated and able to set goals in his life. The question is what are the goals and what is the motivation for them. The answer is that the goals while not financial, are materialistic and extrinsic. Millman is pursuing success in order to achieve happiness.

Throughout the early part of the film as Millman articulates this, Nolte asks in one form or another, “And if you win, what happens?” In these questions Nolte is questioning not Millman's goal, but his motivation. His insight ties directly to the studies done by Grouzet, et. al. (1995) showing that intrinsically motivated goals provide far more psychological well-being than extrinsically motivated goals.

Next, people are extraneous and unimportant except as they help or hinder Millman. His teammates are the competition. One of the team members falls off the balance beam and breaks his wrist. The other team members, Millman included, only care about who will replace him not about how serious his injury might be. They are not only competitors as athletes but in pursuing women. Women are merely sexual partners whose purpose is to give Millman pleasure and enhance his self-worth by sexual conquest. Everything in personal relations is framed in terms of competition and power.

As the film continues, Nolte reiterates the necessity of focusing on “the only thing that matters, what's happening right now.” One day, in a park, as Millman continues to not understand, Nolte seizes him and suddenly Millman becomes intensely aware of the events going on. He sees two people embracing, a man playing with his dog, a bird flying. He's shaken by the event. He goes to the gym, stands in the shower and is able to repeat the awareness Nolte has shown him. He finds Mindfulness as the term is used by Weston (1999). In the gym, he gets onto the balance beam, which he has never done well on. He amazes the coach and his teammates with a dazzling performance. Racing to the Texaco Station he exults over what has

happened by using Nolte's "trick." However, the "trick" is not Mindfulness but Flow. He loses all sense of self, is totally absorbed in what he is doing, he has clarity in his exact actions and he is in a state of exhilaration. This goes directly to Flow as articulated by Csikszentmihalyi (1990,1997). Nolte immediately remonstrates that he has learned nothing. By gloating about what happened, he is living in the past not in the present.

The film continues. While riding his motor-cycle with typical reckless abandon, Millman rides directly into the side of a car and is thrown over it. His right femur is shattered in 17 places. When he regains consciousness in the hospital and finds his leg in a hip cast, his sole concern is to demand to know how long before he will again be able to compete. He doesn't care that his parents are downstairs waiting to see him. He is told that with physical therapy he may walk again but he will never again be a gymnast. Over the course of months, Millman regains the ability to walk, first with crutches, then with a cane, and finally unaided. Clearly Millman has a high level of resilience, but this is not new

We reach the dramatic high point of the movie. Sitting under a tree, Joy, the girl who brings food to Nolte, comes and sits with him. She places her hand on his chest. He asks about the "old man." At this moment Dan Millman shows an interest in and concern about another human being without an ulterior motive. After the girl leaves, he encounters his former coach who shows no interest in him, indeed walks by and pays no attention. There is something subtly poignant about the contrast between Millman's concern for the "old man" and the coach's utter lack of interest in Millman who can no longer be of use to the coach. Millman tells the coach he wants to try to compete again. The coach says, "Forget it. You will never compete again." Hearing this Millman loses all hope. He is in a state of despair, a state of ultimate lifelessness (Erikson, 1964). Millman smashes all his trophies and climbs to the top of the tower

in the center of the UCB campus planning to jump. He doesn't. He is drawn back to the Texaco Station and to Nolte. He asks, "What do you do when you don't know what to do?" Nolte, "The beginning of true strength is in not knowing." Millman starts crying: "I don't cry." "Apparently you do." "What do you do when you can't do what you were born to do?" "Everything is for a purpose. Find it." At this moment, Millman chooses to follow Nolte's path. Nolte challenges Millman to "Go sit until you can tell me something of value. The answers always will come from within." After many days, Millman comes to Nolte and says, "There's never nothing going on. There are no ordinary moments." In this scene Millman is discovering Mindlessness and is at the beginning of a journey that leads to Maslow's Self-Actualization (1968).

Millman works with Nolte. They talk. One day he returns to his teammates in the gym to tell them, "I haven't always been a good friend. In fact I don't know as I've ever been a good friend." An important thing to note is that Millman's changing attitude toward others is nowhere "taught" as a goal. It is a consequence of practicing other things.

Nolte walks with Millman to the back of the station where he has set up a pair of gymnast's rings. When Millman asks why Nolte would do this, Nolte responds simply, "Do what you love." Millman is picked up by Nolte and grabs onto the rings. He slowly starts to exercise. Again, we are looking at Maslow's self-actualization.

Millman reaches a point where he is ready to compete. He returns to the gym but the coach will not allow him to try. Back the gas station, Millman talks to Nolte about being refused. Millman still sees gymnastics as a means to win a gold medal. In this rejection, Millman finally begins to understand that you do what you love, not because of what it will bring, but because you love it. Millman's motivation is becoming intrinsic rather than extrinsic. I would suggest that self-actualization cannot be achieved in a life built on extrinsic motivation.

Millman returns to the gym and goes directly to the rings not allowing the coach to stop him. He returns to competition. The team leaves for the Olympic trials and stops at the Texaco station. Nolte not only is not present, but the station attendant has never heard of him. Did Nolte ever exist? At the trials, the last element falls into place. Sitting on the bench, one of Millman's teammates asks if Millman will help him. Millman does. It has become more important to help his teammate than to win. Millman begins to understand the team as a community and its members are friends not competitors. Ultimately he not only returns to the UCB gymnastics team but also is a member of that team when they win the U. S. National Gymnastics Championship. In the film's closing credits we are told that, ultimately, the real Dan Millman married Joy.

So what has happened to Dan Millman from the time we first see him? Foremost is the change in his fundamental motivation. He has not compromised his love of gymnastics, but he no longer does it to achieve success but rather because it's who he is. His motives are intrinsic rather than extrinsic. Dan Millman achieves self-actualization.

It appears that this change has influenced his attitude toward his teammates and people in general. His life is no longer based on competing with others. When those in our lives are people rather than competition, our attitude toward them changes. Ultimately, this change occurs without consciousness effort.

Nolte teaches him to totally empty his mind of everything but the moment and to focus entirely on what is happening right now. Of all the changes this required the most work and effort. It also is something that only exists when consciously sought. This also is a subtle blend of Mindlessness, Mindfulness, and Flow. The three concepts are integrated.

In sum the film shows, the difference in life between having intrinsic and extrinsic goals,

the value of meaningful social relationships, and the way that we can accomplish things that would otherwise be impossible. And the result is Life Satisfaction. Ultimately the film traces the course of a young man who achieves not merely self-actualization, but self-transcendence.



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