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UNLOCK YOUR MIND

6 Films That Will Inspire You

Amazing stories of resilience and transformation from the Esalen Inspirational Film Festival

BY MATTHEW GILBERT ON APRIL 19, 2014
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Esalen, a storied getaway perched above the thundering waves of the central California coast, was the setting for the second annual Esalen Inspirational Film Festival. While the resort itself is a powerful motivator for self-reflection and renewal, the festival played its part with a week of memorable images, skilled storytelling, and constant reminders that human beings are remarkably resilient. Woven together by Corinne Bourdeau and Mary Murphy of the film promotion company 360 Degree Communications, the event featured an eclectic mix of films and panels and plenty of spirited conversations with filmmakers and film aficionados.

Subtitled “Films that Empower and Enrich the Human Spirit,” the workshop began with an illuminating talk by Lindsay Doran, former president of United Artists Pictures and now a script doctor and independent producer, who made the case for a more uplifting model of movie-making. Doran pointed out that “the majority of movies that win major awards are often

the most depressing. Think *Cold Mountain* or *No Country for Old Men*. As moving and well-executed as these films are, she was fed up with such unrelenting downers and found herself drawn to the pioneering work of University of Pennsylvania psychologist Martin Seligman. A couple of decades ago, Seligman wondered why the medical and psychiatric community focused only on pathologies and not on the elements of a happy, functional life. His research helped give birth to a new field called “positive psychology,” which he described in a series of books, most recently *Flourish*.

Seligman identified five basic components of well-being that Doran also considers the elements of a good movie: positive emotions, engagement, achievement, relationships, and meaning—living with a sense of purpose.

“What we are basically talking about here,” she concluded, “is human resilience”—a storytelling motif that leaves audiences with a satisfied glow. Think *It’s a Wonderful Life* and *Rocky*. And the festival delivered, presenting new films that demonstrate how the human spirit can overcome even the darkest moments of a person’s life. A few of my favorites:

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Keeper of the Beat: A Woman’s Journey into the Heart of Drumming

This joyous, toe-tapping story of acclaimed 68-year-old percussionist Barbara Borden was runner-up for the Audience Award for Best Documentary at the 2013

Mill Valley Film Festival. Borden and her drums traveled the world as ambassadors of healing and peace—she commissioned the making of “the heart drum”—and I was especially moved as she described her evolution from “master of the drum” to “lover of the drum,” a realization that took place while performing in war-torn Croatia.