

The articles printed under the heading 'Professional Exchange' represent the views and opinions of the writers and do not necessarily reflect the attitudes or opinions of the California Association of Marriage and Family Therapists.

DUDE WHERE'S MY CAR- THARSIS?

Phil Stark, AMFT

Most people don't know that when writing the early drafts of the script that would become the movie *Dude, Where's My Car?*, I was heavily influenced by post-Kantian philosophers like Hegel and Schopenhauer. In fact, the first completed version of the script wouldn't even be considered a comedy; it was originally more of a *Waiting for Godot*-type philosophical back-and-forth between two characters questioning their place in the universe (Beckett, 1952). Only after getting lost deep in the existential considerations regarding human consciousness and the meaning of life did I finally decide to go with the lighter, funnier version that eventually got made. The movie's original title was *Dude, What Is the Meaning of Life?* and I fought against the final title decision tooth and nail. Despite the change, I believe it's still worth exploring how the story of the film is a metaphor for how we help our clients understand the story of life.

Two dudes spend the movie looking for their car while stumbling between comedy set pieces, trying to order Chinese food, finding tattoos on their backs, and encountering a gang of people wearing bubble wrap jump suits. Most people who talk to me about the movie point out which scene is their favorite or what line of dialogue is most memorable. What nobody has ever said to me is, "I liked the movie, but while I was watching it I found that I couldn't enjoy it because the whole time I was thinking about when they were going to find the car." That's because the point of the movie isn't finding the car. The point of the movie is what happens during the

professional exchange

journey to find the car. It's the manifestation of the saying "Life is the journey, not the destination." I've heard this truism my whole life. I'm sure you have, too. But many times our clients don't truly comprehend sayings like this until they experience moments that force them to embrace the deeper meaning behind them.

The idea of catharsis, meaning the process of releasing and thus providing relief from strong or repressed emotions, is central to talk therapy (OED Online, 2022). Our clients often seek therapy because they are being impacted by strong, repressed emotions caused by traumatic events they have experienced at some point in their lives. One goal of therapy is to uncover these strong emotions and process them. The problems these emotions cause may not be solved immediately, but clients often experience a palpable sense of relief after they've achieved a greater awareness of these emotions. For many of our clients, therapy is very much about identifying, accepting, and releasing the strong emotions that guide their lives with an invisible hand.


Many people want to avoid situations that force them to embrace the kind of powerful emotions that get repressed. It's our natural reaction, our default setting. Repression, the unconscious blocking of unpleasant emotions, impulses, memories, and thoughts from our conscious minds, is one of the most common defense mechanisms we develop to protect ourselves from emotional and physical trauma (Cherry, 2022). Put simply, we don't want to think about things that make us feel bad. However, moments of catharsis tend to bubble up no matter how much we try to avoid them, and often this happens toward the end of our life, just as it does toward the end of a movie. In movies this makes sense because a cathartic ending is satisfying, as well as expected, and we can leave the theater having learned whatever lessons we are supposed to learn as we continue on with our lives. In real life this is often the case as well, though I find this result less desirable. Why wait until the end of your life to experience something that could improve the quality of your life long before that? The lesson here is, don't spend your life avoiding difficult moments that could lead to catharsis.

What else can we draw from the spiritual lessons of this cinematic classic to inform our clients' lives? (Yes, we are still talking about *Dude, Where's My Car?*) We can apply this understanding to encourage our clients to learn to live in the moment, to recognize themselves in the present and not be overly concerned with what will happen in the future or what occurred in the past. Let them see their lives as an opportunity to learn to enjoy the search for their own metaphorical car. The one certainty in life is that we will all eventually find our car (die), and if we've been thinking about finding this car our whole life we will be underwhelmed at the end of the movie (on our deathbed wishing we'd taken more vacation time). We certainly don't want our clients to find their metaphorical cars and then realize at the end of their lives that they wish they'd spent less time thinking about finding it and more time enjoying the search for it.

The idea of using movies as tools to help our clients process their lives is not new. While it's difficult to pinpoint exactly how a movie could create change and understanding—which movie? what part of the movie? what kind of change?—"plenty of anecdotal evidence and conventional wisdom suggest myriad outcomes related to improved mood, physical health and well-being" (Clyman, 2012). In addition, the use of shared experiences from popular culture, in this case a popular movie, can help our clients process concepts that are more difficult to grasp with a clinical approach. (I'm not saying you have to add a requirement to your intake paperwork that prospective clients have seen *Dude, Where's My Car?*, but if you did I might make more money in residual income, which I would be ethically obligated not to share with you.)

Our clients can benefit from an understanding of the concept of catharsis and the journey we take to reach it. Correlating this process to the experience of watching a movie can make it more relatable and easier to understand. If our clients feel resistance to the idea of exploring the emotional material that seems to be contributing to the reasons they've sought therapy, we can remind them that it's all part of the plot of the movie. If our hero doesn't encounter any difficulties along the path to eventual triumph over the forces of evil, we

have a boring movie with no real emotional range. If our clients instead feel as if it's too painful to embark on this path and choose to do nothing so as to avoid dealing with the strong emotions and potentially painful self awareness that come with the journey to catharsis, then we do not even have a movie to talk about.

Sometimes clients feel like the saying "Life is journey, not a destination" is a cliché. I like to tell clients that while it's true these kinds of overused phrases are often trite and unoriginal, it's also true that in each person's life there are times of contemplation and realization when a cliché makes perfect sense. Clichés simplify things. They make a complicated situation feel more manageable. Identification with a cliché can be a sign that we're on the right path. So let us encourage our clients to focus on the present moment and enjoy it without worrying about what is to come and without fixating on the choices they could have made in the past that might have led them to a different place in the present. The happiness they regret missing out on in the past and that they hope exists for them in the future is actually all around them right now. Remember, as a wise man named Gautama Buddha once said, "You will find your happiness in the searching for the car, not in the finding of it." 



Phil Stark is an Associate Marriage and Family Therapist in Los Angeles, CA, as well as an author and screenwriter with credits including Dude, Where's My Car?, That '70s Show, and South Park. Learn more about Phil at www.StarkTalk.net.

References

- Beckett, S. (1952). *Waiting for Godot*. Grove Press.
- Cherry, K. (2022). What is repression? *Verywell Mind*. <https://www.verywellmind.com/repression-as-a-defense-mechanism-4586642>
- Clyman, J. (2012). Cinematherapy: Film does more than meets the eye. *Positive Psychology News*. <https://positivepsychologynews.com/news/jeremy-clyman/2012061522748>
- OED Online. Catharsis, n. Oxford University Press.

*This article is adapted from *Dude, Where's My Car-tharsis? A Friendly and Engaging Guide to Talk Therapy* by Phil Stark, available on Amazon.