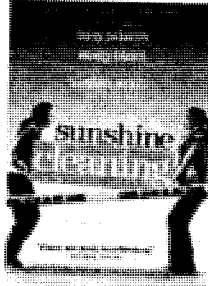


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Mopping Up Gore as a Spiritual Practice

Review By: Marcello Spinella

Review of: *Sunshine Cleaning*

By: Christine Jeffs (Director), (2008)

When a film's opening scene contains a violent suicide, it can raise a little doubt about one's viewing choice for that evening. Although we hear only the blast from the shotgun used in the opening suicide, that death reverberates throughout the rest of the film. How can a film cover such a topic without either being dark and depressing or resorting to callous humor? Fortunately, *Sunshine Cleaning* (directed by Christine Jeffs) does neither and instead manages to pull off a story that is far more bright and squeaky clean than one might imagine.

Rose Lorkowski (Amy Adams) is a single mother raising her eight-year-old son, Oscar (Jason Spevack), with some help from her less-than-responsible sister, Norah (Emily Blunt), and father, Joe (Alan Arkin). Norah has difficulty keeping a job, and Oscar has difficulty not getting kicked out of schools for behavior problems (e.g., he acquires a licking compulsion inspired by a bedtime story made up by Aunt Norah). In between offering his grandson heartfelt love and encouragement, Joe moves from one Ralph Kramden-esque business scheme to another.

Rose works as a housecleaner and is having an affair with a married cop named Mac (Steve Zahn), while fantasizing about a real estate career that doesn't seem to be panning out. Her life couldn't be more mundane. She's in a dead-end job, with a dead-end boyfriend, dreaming about a career that seems more intended to impress her former friends from high school than to provide her with anything deeper. She plugs along diligently and has her dream, but she seems to have neither the resources nor the steam, so she thinks, to do anything more than make ends meet. But there's nothing like a little adversity (e.g., needing tuition for her son to attend private school) to motivate a leap forward.

Rose learns through Mac that crime-scene cleanup and "biohazard removal" is a lucrative

business. If she can clean soap scum, then she can clean a little splattered blood, she reasons. How hard can it be? As it turns out, it's harder than one might think. The Lorkowski sisters learn things such as the illegality of throwing a blood- and body fluid-soaked mattress into a garbage dumpster and the intricacies of dealing with blood-borne pathogens. What Rose may lack in formal education, she makes up for with determination and willingness to learn.

Before long, the Lorkowski sisters are in business. They do get used to the blood and guts, along with the hefty paychecks that follow. But they quickly learn that some things are not so easily cleaned up. The bits and pieces they clean up (the bodies themselves have already been removed) belonged to someone who had an identity and loved ones. The Lorkowski sisters may be able to erase the crime scene, but the person is not so easily erased from people's minds. There do not seem to be any detergents for that task. Belongings are supposed to be discarded, but that is not so easily done when they are pictures of family members. None of their certifications could prepare them to deal with a stunned widow sitting on her front step when they arrive to clean up what remains of her husband's suicide. Fortunately they intuitively muster up the right tools for that job: compassion and presence.

The field of psychology has witnessed a surge of interest in mindfulness in recent years. What has emerged from ancient practices is being brought to bear on a myriad of forms of mental and physical suffering. In addition to research on mindfulness meditation, there has also been research regarding the effects of meditation on kindness and compassion. This budding area of research shows that these practices make practitioners more responsive to others, increase social connectedness, reduce pain, and increase positive affect (Carson et al., 2005; Fredrickson, Cohn, Coffey, Pek, & Finkel, 2008; Hutcherson, Seppala, & Gross, 2008).

But compassion can be a dangerous thing if improperly wielded. At the end of the film *The Green Mile* (Darabont, 1999), the benevolent character John Coffey chooses to allow his own unjust execution because his intense empathy for others is so excruciatingly painful to him. He describes it as feeling like pieces of glass in his head. While this may seem dramatic, it's not entirely untrue. Empathy levels are correlated with depression to some extent (e.g., Schieman & Turner, 2001). This is particularly a concern for people who work in helping professions, such as oncology nurses who regularly confront fear and depression in their patients, making them susceptible to vicarious traumatization (Sinclair & Hamill, 2007).

How (and how well) one copes with frequent exposure to suffering and death is of vital importance, especially when it's part of one's livelihood. After the initial suicide in *Sunshine Cleaning*, which takes place in a sporting goods store, police officers demonstrate several common coping mechanisms including humor ("He's here in fishing, too") and anger (one cop describes suicides as a "pain in the ass"). The depictions of these responses are not exaggerations, nor are they deserving of being judged too harshly. Without some coping mechanism (emotional distancing, in this case), nobody would be able to keep doing such a job and maintain sanity.

On the other hand, emotional distancing is arguably not an ideal coping response. To those who are grieving, it would seem cold and insensitive. It's arguably not an ideal response for those in helping professions either. If the only choices for dealing with adversity are either depression or callous detachment, then we're all in trouble. Fortunately there is a better way: cognitive reframing. In addition to amassed evidence for the efficacy of cognitive reframing, there is also evidence amassing for the psychological and physiological benefits of altruism, including less depression (Butler, Chapman, Forman, & Beck, 2006; Penner, Dovidio, Piliavin, & Schroeder, 2005; Post, 2005).

It's seemingly paradoxical: more empathy means more depression, but more altruism means less depression. Presumably altruists have some empathy, so how could that be? Perhaps a crucial difference between the empathy and altruism is the issue of self-efficacy. Empathy is an emotional response to suffering and could be experienced passively. But altruism, by definition, is a behavioral response. A sense of paralytic helplessness in the face of immense suffering seems a likely recipe for depression. But altruism allows the response to suffering to motivate action.

This is particularly effective when one makes a clear distinction between what is within and what is beyond one's control, and then acts accordingly. Lighting a candle is, after all, more effective than cursing the darkness. Tibetan Buddhists practice a form of compassion meditation called *tonglen* that involves visualizing taking on the pain of others and returning happiness and well-being to them. This may sound like an unpleasant thing to do, but the Dalai Lama (2003) points out that there is a significant difference between taking on another's pain and experiencing one's own pain. Taking on another's pain is something that is done voluntarily, so one has the ability to regulate when and how much to do it. Rather than producing feelings of helplessness, it can promote a feeling of strength and confidence.

Twelve-steppers regularly chant about the courage to change what can be changed, the serenity to accept what cannot be changed, and the wisdom to know the difference. Buddhist teachers similarly recommend balancing wisdom with compassion. Apathy is not a part of the equation, nor does it need to be. Research on altruism indicates that it not only buffers against stress and depression but also improves mood, self-efficacy, an internal locus of control, physical health, and life satisfaction (Post, 2005).

Ultimately people seek some sense of meaning and transcendence in life, and they are mentally and physically better off when they find it (McGregor & Little, 1998). But how does someone find meaning in something seemingly as senseless as a suicide or a murder? People spend years, even decades, banging their head against that one. It seems that rather than trying to wrestle sense out of something that's senseless, a far more productive route is to *make* meaning by being of service. The Lorkowski sisters are no exception and have their own personal past to contend with. Their business venture involves giving out more than they anticipate, but the same could be said for their return.

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