

“Regarding Henry”

DVD release date: September 9, 2003; Theatrical release date: July 10, 1991

Don't listen to nobody trying to tell you who you are. It might take a while, but you'll figure yourself out.

—Bradley (Bill Nunn),
Physical Therapist,
“Regarding Henry”

“Regarding Henry” tells the story of attorney Henry Turner (Harrison Ford). He is depicted in the beginning of the film as being a workaholic, hard-drinking, tough-talking lawyer who intimidates friends, family and opposing counsel. After a night out with his wife, Henry decides to go get a pack of cigarettes at the local grocery store—a fateful decision that will change his life forever. Henry walks in on a burglary and is shot in the head and shoulder.

The film does an excellent job portraying the trauma, denial and confusion friends and family experience shortly after a serious injury of a loved one. Henry’s wife Sarah (Annette Bening) does not completely understand the extent of her husband’s injuries. Work colleagues expect him to be back at work and back to “normal” instantaneously. In a scene that puts the level of physical trauma Henry has sustained in context both for his wife and the audience, Henry’s admitting doctor (played by James Rebhorn) and Sarah have the following exchange:

Doctor Sultan: Mrs. Turner, your husband is incredibly lucky. The bullet wound to the head caused minimal damage. See, it hit the right frontal lobe—that’s the only part of the brain that has redundant systems. I mean, if you’re gonna get shot in the

head, that is the way to do it. But I (cough) can’t lie to you. I wish I had all good news. The other bullet hit the subclavian artery. There was excessive internal bleeding and cardiac arrest. Your husband suffered anoxia—it’s a lack of oxygen to the brain, and the anoxia caused some damage. What I’m getting at is that it’s going to be a long, tough rehabilitation.

Sarah: How long?

Doctor Sultan: We’ll know a lot more in 3 weeks. The brain is very mysterious. Even though your husband seems to have the capacity to recover, there’s no telling how well or how long it might take. In some ways, he’s starting from scratch here. Mrs. Turner, Henry can’t speak. He can’t move. His motor skills aren’t functioning properly. His memory might be deeply impacted. Now, certainly one day, everything might come back, but there are no guarantees. He might not be able to regain his speech or physical coordination ever.

Henry is transferred to a rehabilitation center and again, his wife is confronted with the reality of the situation:

Dr. Marx: Mrs. Turner. I’m Dr. Marx, chief of staff. [Looking at Henry]. Hi Henry. How’s everything? [No response]. Cause I’m the boss around here, so if you have any problems, you complain to me. [No response]. [Dr. Marx looks at a picture on Henry’s nightstand]. What a beautiful little girl.

Sarah: It’s Rachel.

Dr. Marx: How old is she?

Sarah: She’s gonna be 12. [Looking at Henry].

Dr. Marx: This is your little girl, Henry? [No response]. Is this your daughter? [No response]. Do you remember your daughter? [No response]. Do you remember your wife? [No response] Henry?

Henry is introduced to his physical therapist Bradley, a young black man played by Bill Nunn. Bradley deals with Henry’s inability to speak in a sensitive yet humorous manner:

Bradley: Look, if you don’t want to talk at first, that’s cool. I was a shy kid, kept to myself. The name’s Bradley. I’ll be your physical therapist for the remainder of the evening. Your own personal gym teacher. See that wheelchair? That’s gonna be your best friend for a while. Ready? Alright, my man. So, I hear you haven’t been talking very much—is that true? Tell me, Hank, is that true or just a nasty rumor? Hmmm ... must be true.

Through long, difficult, painful work with Bradley, Henry learns to walk, speak and, ultimately, live again.

Henry leaves the rehabilitation center and attempts to readjust to his life before his accident. But having had a life-altering event, massive memory loss and a glimpse into the man he was before the shooting, Henry begins to realize that, in fact, he really cannot go back to the person he used to be. His depression at being unable to be who he once was becomes almost overwhelming until his family and Bradley help him see that the person he has become may be the unanticipated gift of his

injury. This is beautifully depicted when Bradley comes to visit Henry months after Henry has left the rehabilitation center:

Henry: I thought I could go back to my life, but I don't like who I was, Bradley. I don't fit in.

Bradley: I got bad knees. Ask me why.

Henry: Why?

Bradley: Football. Wrecked them both playing college football. Man, that was my life. What else was there ... my life was over. Now ask me if I mind having bad knees?

Henry: Do you mind?

Bradley: No way. It was a test. I had to find a life. The therapist that helped me walk again, he was so cool. I thought, that's what I want to

do. When I told some of my buddies, they laughed right in my face— called me a nurse ... But check it out. You're walking. You're talking. You're sitting here drinking some pretty expensive ... beer. I had something to do with that. If it weren't for my knees I never would have met you. So, no, I don't mind having bad knees.

“Regarding Henry” is a story about redemption. It speaks to salvaging something good and worthy out of tragedy and trauma. The film is highly recommended.

Health education value. This film is a wonderful point of discussion for physicians, especially from the standpoint of accuracy and the portrayal of someone suffering from a catastrophic brain injury. For the lay person, the film is instructive in terms of recovering from a traumatic injury and reaffirms that there is positivity that can sometime emerge from a tragic event. The portrayal of medical pro-

fessionals in the film is one of the more positive in recent times, and this would be instructive for a lay person to see, from an educational point of view.

Other movies dealing with traumatic brain injury, redemption and overcoming obstacles. A film that has been mentioned several times in this column is “The Doctor” starring William Hurt. An early 1990s film such as Regarding Henry, “The Doctor” expertly deals with issues of redemption and surmounting obstacles in the face of medical adversity. “Rain Man” is another film that may be instructive in dealing with many of these issues. Several instructive resources include: the NIH website on anoxia: www.ninds.nih.gov/disorders/anoxia/anoxia.htm; the Brain Trauma Foundation website: www.braintrauma.org/ and the National Rehabilitation Information Center website: www.naric.com/.

*Reviewed by
Heather Butts, JD, MPH, MA
New York, NY
hmbutts@aol.com*