

Patch Adams

Film release date: December 25, 1998; DVD release date: June 11, 2002

*Afoot and light-hearted I take
to the open road.*

*Healthy, free and the world
before me.*

*The long brown path before
me leading.*

Wherever I choose.

—Walt Whitman

“Where I lay my head is home,”
from “Patch Adams”

“Patch Adams” begins in 1969 at the Fairfax Hospital Psychiatric Ward. We are introduced to Hunter Adams (Robin Williams), described as “suicidal.” He is a self-committed patient at the hospital:

*My father died when I was 9. I
have moved seven times in the
last year. Nothing seemed to
fit—I didn’t seem to fit.*

The film portrays this early Hunter as an individual who finds salvation not from the medical community at the hospital but rather through helping fellow patients. Hunter strikes up a friendship with fellow patient Arthur Mendelson (Harold Gould), who advises him to “see what no one else sees. See the whole world.” When Hunter fixes Arthur’s coffee cup, he is given the nickname “Patch”: “You see something besides a crazy old man.” Against medical advice, Patch decides to check himself out of the hospital: “I want to help people.”

Forward two years, and Patch has enrolled in medical school in Virginia. His first introduction to medical education is from the school’s dean, who gives the welcoming address to the new class and advises students not to become too attached to patients:

*We will ruthlessly train the
humanity out of you and make
you something better. We are
going to make you doctors.*

Patch questions this philosophy: Isn’t the charge of a doctor to help people? “Treat the people and the disease?,” he asks fellow students, many of whom are portrayed as being more concerned with the next exam than the larger question of why they are in medical school and what motivates them to want to practice medicine.

But question Patch does—and fight, and disobey. He challenges the role that patients can have in helping each other heal and being active participants in their own medical care: “Patients helped me. By helping them, I could forget about my own problems.” He wonders why there is reluctance on the part of some of his instructors to encourage connecting with patients:

*Transference is inevitable.
Why don’t we want that in a
doctor–patient relationship?*

He struggles constantly to have more contact with patients, often inappropriately going into patients’ rooms and speaking with very ill individuals, even when they don’t wish to speak with him: “I think we would learn more if we had more contact with patients.” He ends up opening a clinic as a medical student, which is funded by his old friend Arthur, and, in essence, practices medicine without a license (an act for which he will pay dearly both personally and professionally, as the film shows).

There is a back story involving Patch’s romantic partner and her being put in harm’s way because of his actions. The film nicely deals with the guilt Patch experiences at having put his own values and desires ahead of a loved one.

The film has received criticism

over the years, and there is much in the film to debate and question. Is there merit in really preparing medical students fully before their first encounter with a patient? Absolutely. Should medical students that completely buck the system and ignore the rules of school be allowed to do so in an unfettered manner? Unquestionably not. Can the medical system be revamped to allow for more of our citizens to be cared for in a humane and caring manner? Without a doubt. And so, it is the debate, the discourse, the discussion of these and many more issues that gives “Patch Adams” merit. For discussion, disagreement and debate purposes, it is recommended.

Health education value. “Patch Adams” will frustrate some in the medical field for inaccuracies and seeming encouragement of unrealistically insubordinate behavior. These and many other parts of the film (including medical education overall and why individuals become physicians) are all points of discussion that the film can be helpful in exploring. It is excellent for use with lay people as well because many of the themes will resonate on a broad spectrum.

Other movies dealing with medical education and ethics. A movie that does not really deal with medical education until the very end, but does so quite expertly, is the 1991 William Hurt film, “The Doctor” (reviewed in a previously printed column). The film “Something the Lord Made” (also reviewed previously in this column) is also instructive with respect to medicine, education and learning.

The “Patch Adams” DVD has some extras that show the back story of the film as well as the real Patch Adams.

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