

As Good As It Gets

Media Evaluation

Communications 2232

Interpersonal Communication

April 4, 2013, 7:30pm

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The 1997 movie *As Good As It Gets* portrays a man who is so inept at interpersonal relationships that it seems impossible he could ever overcome them. The main character, Melvin Udall (played by Jack Nicholson), is a misanthrope with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) who is unable to see past his own wants and needs to form any kind of positive relationship with another person. It is not until he meets someone who is exceptional at forming healthy relationships that he begins to see the impact of his poor behavior and is motivated to change to become a “better man.” It is motivating for the audience to watch his failures and successes as he struggles through this audacious quest.

The crux of Melvin’s problem is his inability to be other-oriented. To be other-oriented requires a person to see past his or her own interests and focus on the interests of another person (Beebe, Beebe, & Redmond, 2011). Unfortunately, much of Melvin’s difficulty with this can be attributed to his OCD, a disorder that causes a person to spend an exorbitant amount of time thinking about his or her own wants and needs. Throughout the movie we see Melvin engaging in all sorts of odd behaviors stemming from this condition, including compulsive hand washing, avoiding cracks on the sidewalk, and repeatedly locking and unlocking his door.

However, Melvin’s disposition goes beyond mere self-centeredness; it is also aggressive. An assertive person can stand up for himself or herself without stepping on the feelings and needs of others, but an aggressive person, such as Melvin, cannot (Beebe, Beebe, & Redmond, 2011). Melvin’s aggressiveness manifests as hate speech (offensive words) and negative stereotypes (rigid perceptions) aimed at those around him (Beebe, Beebe, & Redmond, 2011). In the opening scene of the movie, Melvin puts his neighbor’s dog down the garbage chute because of its bad behavior. When his neighbor, Simon, finds out and tries to confront Melvin,

Melvin turns the situation around so that the interaction is about his disturbed peace and quiet, rather than what he did to the dog. He blasts Simon with hate speech about his sexual orientation and humiliates him (as portrayed by Simon's sheepish facial expression and posture as he leaves Melvin's apartment). When Frank, Simon's art dealer, confronts Melvin about his treatment of Simon, Melvin again makes the situation about his own well-being and overreacts to Frank based on stereotypes about African-American males.

Only Carol "the waitress" seems to be able to help Melvin. She is a naturally other-oriented communicator and her warm personality helps Melvin feel comfortable and accepted, despite his deplorable behaviors. Carol works at Melvin's favorite restaurant, where he expects to sit at the same table and have her wait on him upon demand.

One of Melvin's peculiar OCD behaviors is that he takes plastic ware with him to the restaurant. Although Carol is curious about this habit, she does not want him to feel bad and is careful about how she asks about it. First she uses extended "I" language, which softens any criticism he might hear (Beebe, Beebe, & Redmond, 2011), and says, "I'm finally going to ask." Then, she asks her question, "What's with the plastic picnic ware?" Using this technique, Carol lets Melvin know that she is thinking about his feelings, which fosters trust with Melvin towards her.

Later, when another waitress who is not sensitive to Melvin's needs, sees Melvin bring his plastic ware to the restaurant, the result is disastrous. As Melvin pulls out his utensils, she picks up the plastic bag he carried them in and bluntly asks, "What the heck are those for?" She then goes even further and picks up his plastic fork. This greatly offends Melvin who now considers his fork contaminated. He perceives her actions as a violation to his well-being and

responds instinctively with aggression by calling her “elephant girl.” He then slams his hand on the table and demands to have Carol serve him. Unsurprisingly, this behavior causes him to get kicked out of the restaurant.

The other important aspect of Carol’s nature that influences Melvin is her assertiveness. Whenever he says or does something inappropriate that hurts her feelings, she clearly expresses her displeasure through verbal and nonverbal cues and tells him the consequences of any continued bad behavior. One day, Melvin overhears her talk to other people in the restaurant about her chronically ill son. Melvin thoughtlessly uses this sensitive information during one of his rants and tells Carol that it sounds like her son might die. Carol responds by sitting next to Melvin at his table and telling him very plainly and directly that any mention of her son is off limits and if he continues, he will no longer be able to patronize the restaurant. Since both the restaurant and Carol are extremely important to Melvin’s peace of mind, he heeds her warning and behaves more appropriately. Carol’s response profoundly affects Melvin as he begins to realize the effect his words have on him and others.

Carol is able to succeed with Melvin where Simon and Frank fail because she is both a sensitive, other-oriented person and assertive. Although Simon is sensitive, he is also passive. He is not able to stand up for himself during Melvin’s tirades. This causes him to loathe Melvin. Frank, on the other hand, is able to stand his ground with Melvin. Unfortunately, that behavior just causes Melvin to become more agitated. This is the distinction that makes Carol special. Her other-oriented disposition allows her to see the humanity in such a boorish person and treat him with the kindness everyone deserves, while her assertiveness ensures her own needs and feelings are not trampled.

Although it is fiction, this movie gives an insightful portrayal of a person trying to overcome his deeply-rooted interpersonal relationship problems. As we follow Melvin on his journey to improve himself, we are able to observe the extreme difficulty of such an endeavor and how easy it is to relapse into old habits. It is gratifying that this movie ends realistically. Melvin is not cured, but is continuing his journey of making small adjustments and we get a glimpse of his transformation from an incorrigible cad to someone we almost like. This gives us, the audience, hope and inspiration that we can make similar changes in our lives.

References

Beebe, S. A., Beebe, S. J., & Redmond, M. V. (2011). *Interpersonal Communication: Relating to Others* (Sixth ed.). Upper Saddle River: Pearson.