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Film Review

The Man Who Learned to Fall.

Feature documentary by Garry Beitel

**Beitel/Lazar Productions,
Montreal, Canada, 2004**

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Without the façade of Hollywood drama, this documentary film vividly and realistically portrays a family dealing with terminal illness.

Philip Simmons was diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), or Lou Gehrig's disease, at the age of 35. He was a teacher, writer, husband, and father in the prime of his life. Nine years after being diagnosed, he published the book *Learning to Fall: The Blessings of an Imperfect Life* and sent a copy to Dr. Balfour Mount, a professor of palliative medicine at McGill University. Mount contacted Simmons and suggested that a portion of his challenging journey be preserved on film.

The resulting documentary captures the ordinary and unique moments of his family's life in Center Sandwich, New Hampshire, and the physical changes that Phil underwent in the last year of his life. At times, Phil and his wife, Kathryn Field, speak directly to the camera, describing their thoughts and experiences and reflecting on their journey. They do so with such eloquence, honesty, and humour that the viewer is simply left in awe.

Beitel's film opens with a folksy blues song playing in the background - music composed by Phil when he was still strong. As Phil and Kathryn, an artist, tell the story of how they met, we immediately get a sense of the humour, openness, and tenderness that characterize their relationship. We are introduced to their two children, Aaron and Amelia, through photographs and then also in footage of their daily lives, as they perform routine chores such as yard work. As we see Phil dictating to his computer, see Kathryn walking beside his electronic wheelchair along a forest road, and hear Kathryn's descriptions of Phil before the onset of ALS, we come to realize the many ways in which their lives have changed in the 9 years since Phil's diagnosis.

Several segments of the film capture Phil's talents as a public speaker. Although forced to cut short his teaching career, he continued to speak at various academic and church gatherings. (The DVD version of the documentary includes an address, "Reflections on Healing," delivered by Simmons at Harvard Medical School.) His ability

to captivate an audience with wit, candour, and insight is obvious as he artfully incorporates his grasp of science with his passion for literature to examine and describe his experiences. He speaks, for instance, about discovering the value of religious language in “the business of rescuing joy from heartbreak.”

In one scene we see Phil in his wheelchair playing basketball with Aaron while explaining that the most pressing issue for him at this stage in his journey is imagining the family’s future without him. Here, he introduces the paradox that will be a theme of *The Man Who Learned to Fall*: “My delight in watching them is inseparable from my sadness in knowing I will lose them... my happiness is more profound because of my knowledge of loss.”

Phil and Kathryn movingly describe the ways in which they have come to accept his illness and the impact of this acceptance on their lives. Their everyday activities have been radically altered. “In the midst of all that activity and normal life,” says Phil, “I’m aware that I am dying, I’m aware that I am losing everything, I’m aware that my children will lose me, that my wife will lose me, and I accept all that as the nature of things.” Each small failure or loss brings home to him the beauty of accepting help. Kathryn’s acceptance has grown out of seeing her husband’s courage and out of her own use of art as a means of release. We see the couple learning to live in spite of death, letting go of the “drama” and using each setback as an opportunity to practise letting go.

After Phil is hospitalized for 2 weeks with pneumonia, the couple decide that his future care will take place at home. Phil and Kathryn explain that this has created a sense of living in “end time.” The ordinary moments of daily life such as a walk outdoors, breakfast, homework, and piano practice take on special meaning and become precious for the entire family. In these moments of closeness the family members also face the reality of letting go. While in hospital, Phil realizes that “fashioning language” is so integral to him that letting go of that ability will be unimaginably difficult, awakening his desire to “embrace the paradox... continue to strive and live while letting go of everything.”

As Phil’s health visibly deteriorates, husband and wife continue to immerse themselves in their work: Phil reads and Kathryn becomes absorbed in her art. The solitude of these pursuits offers them release from daily life and also gives them the strength to keep supporting each other. In recognition of his work and his exemplary life, Phil’s alma mater, Amherst College, presents him with an honorary degree in May 2002, just months before his death. In a weakened voice, Phil speaks of engaging ever more intensely in the process of letting go, as he is forced to let go of his external working life. With a smile, he balances suffering with humour as he reflects on the truth of Bob Dylan’s lyrics. “Just when you think you’ve lost everything,” Phil says, “you find out you can lose a little more.”

Phil’s 46th birthday celebration is an occasion for many friends and relatives to gather round. Even in his weakened state, Phil proposes an eloquent toast to those who have supported him and his family. (More than 35 people had joined FOPAK — Friends

Of Phil And Kathryn — a support network that allowed Phil to live at home throughout his illness.) *The Man Who Learned to Fall* closes gracefully with Phil narrating passages from his book, describing his perception of passing from one life into the next.

The individuals in this documentary exhibit an overwhelming sense of acceptance. While the film never shows the tearful and angry episodes they undoubtedly endured, Phil and Kathryn are honest about their long and difficult journey to acceptance. They articulate a new and challenging perspective of terminal illness as a time of healing and calm amid the most painful losses. The characters in *The Man Who Learned to Fall* verbalize the very experiences, emotions, and responses that nurses and nurse researchers find value in expressing.

Among my class of master's students who watched Beitel's film, there was an immediate sense that it captured the essence of themes we had been discussing in our nursing seminar throughout the semester. This family's sustained capacity to cope with the changes in Phil's abilities illustrates in a striking and moving way the notion of finding health in illness.

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