

On “What About Bob”
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I’ve learned to go with my impulses. Even if they don’t make sense to me when they come up, invariably later on they do. This was the case with the old movie “What About Bob?” I’d seen it when it first came out in 1991. It had little if any impact on me at the time, and as far as I knew, I had forgotten about it. Yet, here it is 28 years later, and for no apparent reason, “What About Bob?” popped into my consciousness along with the thought, “See that film again.” And I did; it’s on streaming.

“What About Bob?” is a comedy starring Bill Murray and Richard Dreyfuss. Murray plays Bob Wiley, a walking bundle of neuroses, who, uninvited, follows his psychiatrist Dr. Leo Marvin (Dreyfuss) to Lake Winnepesaukee in New Hampshire when Marvin and his family—wife, teenage daughter, and eleven-or-so-year-old son--go there on vacation.

What particularly struck me this time with “What About Bob?” was how Bob introjected himself into a situation and with people where he didn’t fit and was unwelcome and at best endured. Simply, he didn’t belong there. Charming to the family (at least initially) but irritating-and-then-infuriating to Dr. Marvin, Bob inserts himself into the family’s daily life. Despite Dr. Marvin’s best efforts to get rid of him—first polite and then “GET OUT!—Bob cheerfully won’t go away. Finally, the entire family, not just put-upon Dr. Marvin, tells him that it would be best that he leave. And he still stays.

I was prompted to think about the way the Bobs of the world—let’s make a type out of the Bill Murray’s Bob, they are a common lot--experience themselves, and how they go about trying to serve their needs in light of that self-perception. I’ll share what’s come up for me; the reflection has seemed productive. I speculate that Bobs:

- At a basic, fundamental level, feel worthless, useless to the

world, unnecessary in the eyes of others, unwanted or “diswanted” (viewed with indifference). They don’t matter. They have no value. They are unneeded. That deeply grounded—it pervades their being—sense of themselves is a message they internalized very early in life, likely from their parents; and as the years went on, through childhood and adolescence and into adulthood, that message was reinforced, affirmed, as a consequence of how they conducted their lives referenced in, directed by, that self-conception. This is the root of their problem.

- They keep their personal story going, so to speak. Their story is to try to win over disinterested, indifferent, and even hostile people. And they fail at it. Unconsciously--they aren’t aware that they are doing it--they seek out these kinds of people and keep trying, and failing, to win them over, time and time and time again as the years go by. Understandably given how they, in the words of the old song, “try to find love in all the wrong places,” they never hear, never experience, what they hope to hear: you are worthwhile, you count, I/we celebrate you; be here with me, with us. They marry someone who, really, would prefer to be with someone else; they find a job where their employer quickly would just as soon that they leave; they try to make friends with people who don’t value them.

- Needless to say, Bobs can’t wait around for invitations; who’d bother. They invite themselves.

- Since their needs don’t matter to anyone, or so they believe, they serve their own needs, nurture themselves, in ways that produce distress and unhappiness—drugs, alcohol, junk food, pornography, excessive television watching, video games, sport spectating, and the like.

- They take on self-demeaning and self-defeating “chase” strategies trying to get a rise out of distracted people: playing the funny guy, the entertaining guy, the servile guy, and the self-deprecating, less-than-you guy (building up someone’s ego might get him to want you around).

- They present themselves as needy, troubled—I’m messed up, please help me. Which people do for a time and then turn away.

- They lead a “not now, later” existence. If the world is indifferent or even hostile, one way to deal with it is to see that circumstance as temporary. “It’s bad now but it will be OK as soon as I drop weight [or change jobs, resolve the issue with my girlfriend, move to Seattle, etc.]” But given their fundamental “I’m worthless” self-definition, things don’t get OK, ever.

What can Bob do? He can get down, now, to the fundamental cause of his issues: his experience of himself as being worthless, useless to the world. Connect with it, feel it. Articulate it, put words to it in order to understand it. Acknowledge that reality, accept that it exists.

And then take it on with all he has. Declare to himself, say it out loud and silently to himself and write it down: “I Have Worth.” “I matter.” “My needs matter.” Affirm that; tell it to himself over and over, regularly, all day, every day.

And moment by moment, choice by choice, ask himself, what would a person of worth do now? And then do that.

Would a person of worth follow a psychiatrist and his family to Lake Winnepesaukee? Would a person of worth eat candy bars and drink cheap wine to get through the evening? Would a person of worth spend time with a woman who doesn’t appreciate or support him? Would a person of worth play sick and subordinate himself to a therapist?

What would a person of worth do right now? This instant. The answer might be cook a fine meal or watch a classic film or do woodworking. Whatever it is, it will be something that builds him up, not brings him down; it will be honorable, not dishonorable.

Over days and months and years, in small increments, his state of being, all of his organism—the “me” that directs his life—shifts, from worthless to “worth-full,” full of worth.

And the world accommodates to that changed human being.

In “What About Bob,” Dr. Marvin has written a self-help book called “Baby Steps.” Get healthy, become worthy, one small baby step at a time. Acknowledge and praise every success, no matter how small. Be persistent and patient.

Yes.