



A Poignant Case of Deinstitutionalization and Death

A Review of

God Knows Where I Am (2017)

by Jedd Wider and Todd Wider (Directors)

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Reviewed by

Ben Harris 

God Knows Where I Am is the most beautiful, disturbing account imaginable of the life and death of a deinstitutionalized psychiatric patient. Linda Bishop was a graduate of my university who later suffered from paranoia and a severe mood disorder, abandoned her 13-year-old daughter, and spent 8 years shuffling between homelessness, hospitalization, and incarceration for minor crimes.

At age 51, she was discharged from the New Hampshire State Hospital after refusing treatment and spent her last 3 months hiding in an empty house. There she survived on apples from nearby trees and waited for a sign from God. She starved to death in January 2008 and her body was found in the spring.

This documentary is based on a 2011 article in the *New Yorker* by award-winning journalist Rachel Aviv, who turned Linda Bishop's story into an examination of the human costs of psychiatric illness and the conflict between personal freedom and institutional responsibility (Aviv, 2011). She picked this case because Bishop left a journal of her last 3 months and Aviv found her to be "an eloquent and extremely thoughtful writer . . . who chronicled the final months of her life with depth and nuance" (personal communication, May 13, 2017).

Filmmakers Jedd and Todd Wider use that journal to show Linda's predicament: She could remain free from the hospital if she became a prisoner of an empty house as winter arrives. As read by actress Lori Singer, this journal offers unparalleled access to a former patient's mixture of insight and delusion. What is so affecting is her writing about the mundane and the cosmic, as she records temperatures, bird sightings, and dwindling food, mixed with plans for marriage with a stranger who will arrive on a date revealed from above.

The larger story of Linda's life and illness is told in interviews with her daughter, sister, and a good friend. They tell of a bright, sociable child and young woman, shown in home movies to be full of energy and optimism. They then describe a life altered by mental illness and how each of them tried to respond. In the case of her daughter, we see someone whose life was so disrupted that she cut off contact with her mother—a difficult decision that is not often discussed in depictions of chronic patients.

Linda's sister, in turn, tells of trying to help but having her petition to become Linda's medical guardian rejected by a judge. She was then denied notification of Linda's discharge when her sister refused to waive her right to medical privacy, removing any chance of helping prevent her death. Linda's friend, speaking to the camera, voices Linda's refusal to surrender her liberty, even if it leads to tragic results. Equally eloquent witnesses to Linda's self-isolation and death include a nurse from the hospital and the police who found her body and pieced together her final, hidden months.

The other actor in the film is Linda's environment: the empty house where she lived, the apple trees, and land that surrounded her. These are beautifully rendered by cinematographer Gerardo Puglia, as is the New Hampshire weather that gradually turned against her, curtailing her food and water. Puglia's work is accompanied by haunting music from composers Robert Logan and Ivor Guest, resulting in a film that would be as welcome in a film class as one in clinical psychology.

When Rachel Aviv's article appeared, it compared well with Susan Sheehan's Pulitzer Prize-winning portrayal of a woman with schizophrenia named Maxine Mason (Sheehan, 1982). That account appeared in the *New Yorker* in three installments and in book form was adopted by teachers wanting more depth than provided by textbooks in abnormal psychology. Updating Sheehan, Aviv's account of Linda Bishop showed the changed landscape created by the deinstitutionalization of the late 20th century, where the mentally ill often spend more time in nursing homes and jails than in psychiatric facilities (Appelbaum, 1994; Grob, 1995).

For those looking for documentaries that cover the plight of the chronically mentally ill, *God Knows Where I Am* is wonderful addition to the PBS programs that appear every few years and can be used in the classroom. The best of them combine a focus on a few individual cases with coverage of the state of mental health law and practice (e.g., Sage & Lyman, 1990). An alternative style is to focus on one patient, to better engage the viewer and offer a fuller case study. A fine version of this is *Imagining Robert*, based on a memoir by the brother of a man with schizophrenia who struggled to find the least restrictive setting for the treatment of his sibling (Hott & Garey, 2003). It's a touching story that combines humor and optimism with full awareness of the plight of the mentally ill and their families.

What these previous documentaries lack is the visceral impact of the story and the artistry of *God Knows Where I Am*. I think that most viewers will react to the film with the same deep sadness and frustration with the mental health "system" that my students and I experienced.

References

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