

Liberty: 3 Stories about Life & Death

**Produced/directed by PamWalton,
2004, 55 minutes, color.**

**Distributed by New Day Films, PO
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The Statue of Liberty is a main signifier in this three-part representation of the lives of several older lesbian women afflicted by cancer. The initial section, "Death to Life," is presented in reverse chronological order, so we begin with a living wake during the final days of Joyce Fulton's life. It is a strong beginning and changes the film from a search for hope to an understanding that death is about life, as well as a recognition of an end to life. I was particularly struck by the realization that the filmmaker, Pam Walton, had begun filming this project quite some time before Joyce was diagnosed with a brain tumor. Beginning at the end allows the viewer to appreciate the openness and intimacy of the filming situation, because few individuals are comfortable being filmed so close to impending death. Yet the atmosphere of music, love, and laughter reinforces the viewer's appreciation of the very strong, long-term relationships between the women attending the living wake.

This becomes clearer as we meet more of the group as the film moves backward in time, and see them accompany Joyce to the hospital. It is poignant to realize that just before Joyce's initial surgery the group's general opinion was that Joyce would recover. The hospital staff was extremely accommodating to the film crew, which suggests that the staff had become involved with Joyce as an individual, as well as a hospital patient. The next section, "Life to Death," includes Joyce as an active participant in the group, because it begins long before she develops her illness. This section, which was clearly the initial thrust of the film, begins in 1993 with the Gay Pride March in Washington, DC, where another of the film's characters, Mary Bell Wilson, is being

pushed in a wheelchair after her diagnosis of lymphoma. Her story covers a longer time frame than that of Joyce, as Mary Bell and her partner are able to build a new house and live in it as a symbol of hope and as a fulfillment of one of Mary Bell's lifetime desires. Mary Bell clearly has a central role in the circle of friends. This is exemplified at a retirement party where she is presented with a ten-foot replica of the Statue of Liberty. All women see the statue as indicative of the strength and pride they find in their community. They recognize that Mary Bell's struggles with sickness and pain are kept to herself, and that she presents a warm and loving face to the world. Although Mary Bell goes into remission and the children in her life do not believe that she will die, she succumbs to the lymphoma in 2000.

The third story, "Life," ties together the other two sections as artist Nan Golub unravels the network of relationships binding these various women together. Nan is introduced in the previous section (though she remains unnamed) during a scene in which the group is vacationing at a holiday resort where Nan begins to discuss life as she sees it. In the third section Nan continues to explore the relationship between life and death. The vibrant colors of her artwork, which is posted for sale on a brick wall, and her obvious relish at walking the streets of New York City make it clear that she celebrates life. As she says, "there can never be enough life," even as she reminisces about all the friends she has lost to cancer and AIDS. The deep sense of relatedness to her constructed family, whose family tree she sketches in caricature, is as important to her as her biological mother, whose ashes she keeps close by in her studio. The constructed kinship network bonds her socially and emotionally to a group with shared past, shared losses, and shared love.

Altogether, *Liberty* explores anxiety, love, fear, and pain through the words and activities of the participants, which most emphatically includes the filmmaker. She is addressed, kissed, and responded to through the eight or nine years over which the material was filmed. In many ways, this is not a documentary, but an experience: a window on a group whose members face love, life, and death, each in their own way, but who are strongly supported by the others. The use of minimal timeline

subtitles to keep the viewer on track is very helpful, but it is the candor, emotion, and honesty of the participants' words which lift this film from a discussion of death to a celebration of life.

The enclosed documentation with the DVD provides some guidelines for using this film in a variety of educational settings. The film is particularly well suited to courses such as Death and Dying, Women's Studies, Gerontology, Society and Illness, Medical Anthropology, and other courses that examine the social context of death. The fact that all the women are lesbians is an integral aspect of the work, and serves as a useful resource for decoding attitudes toward sexuality, grief, and alternative lifestyles. Its nontraditional construction and the way the film allows those being filmed to express themselves make it particularly beneficial to visual anthropology classes. The questions suggested for classroom use will contribute to viewers'/students' appreciation of the variety of material covered in the film. The questions in the supplemental material also refer to the filmmaker's impact on those being filmed, an area all too often ignored when studying film structure. The material also encourages viewers to use the film as a springboard for thinking through loss and death in their personal lives. To me, the underlying lesson of Liberty is that although you can plan a project, life or death may intervene. This is evidenced by the material from 1993, which serves as the foundation of the film, but was shot for another purpose entirely.