



The Chicago International Film Festival

Cinema/Chicago and the Chicago International Film Festival
Education Program Screening: *A Light Beneath Their Feet*
Director: Valerie Weiss
90 minutes

Please use the below synopsis/study questions to lead your students in film preparation and post-screening discussion. Following the field trip, students are required to respond to the screening with a one-page essay. Essays must be sent to Cinema/Chicago in order to be invited to subsequent film screenings.

Synopsis

Beth, an Evanston high school senior, has a bright future ahead. Her mother is wrestling with bipolar disorder and the uncertainties associated with an imminent empty nest. As she prepares to go to college, Beth must decide if she will stay near home and remain dedicated to caring for her unpredictable mom or follow her own path. Emotionally raw and bracingly honest, this coming-of-age drama balances the pull of familial obligations against personal aspirations.

Bipolar Disorder

Bipolar disorder, also called manic-depression, is a brain disorder causing frequent and extreme mood swings, which can result in the inability to complete certain tasks. People with bipolar disorder go from a state of “mania” or an extreme high, to an inactive down feeling of depression, to periods of “regularity” and emotional balance. Talking fast and becoming easily agitated are two symptoms of a manic episode, while forgetfulness and losing interest in activities can be a symptom of a depressive episode.

The result of these swings can make it hard to maintain a stable job and can be damaging to many relationships. It can also be dangerous with depressions leading to attempted self-harm or thoughts of suicide.

While there are medications to treat the symptoms associated with bipolar disorder, there is still no cure. Many patients also seek psychiatric help or therapy. Treatment, both in terms of medication and therapy, is most effective if it is continuous, not on and off.

When caring for someone with bipolar disorder, it is important to be patient and understanding, especially about their mood swings. Sometimes, the care feels like a full time job with limited free time, making it potentially very stressful. This can cause a strain in relationships.

Study Ideas/Questions

1. How would you describe the relationship between Beth and her mother? What about her relationship between Beth and her father?
2. Did you relate to Beth? Why or why not? In what ways does the director try to help viewers connect with Beth in the film?
3. What do you think of the decision Beth ultimately makes in the film? Would you have made a similar or different decision? Why or why not?
4. How do you balance your responsibilities at home with your academic and social lives?
5. When Daschulla makes the pamphlet about Gloria being the “crazy lunch lady,” Gloria’s illness becomes a part of Beth’s identity. How, if at all, does Beth try to distance herself away from her mother?
6. How does the director show the differences between Beth’s life with her dad versus with her mother?
7. Is there someone in your life (sibling, parent, relative) who you are often compared to? Does that change how you present yourself? Why or why not?
8. Do you feel like you have an obligation to your parents? Why or why not? Is it similar or different to how Beth perceives her obligations?
9. How is Daschulla shaped by her family life? Is it similar or different from how Beth is shaped by her mother’s illness?
10. What do you think of Beth’s relationship with Jeremy? Do you think he offers her an escape from her problems? Why or why not?
11. Do you know someone with a mental illness? How does their diagnosis impact your relationship with them, if at all?
12. Imagine that you are a friend of Beth’s and that you see her, visibly upset, at school. How would you comfort her and what advice would you give her regarding her mother, Jeremy, and her choice for school?

13. The film is directed by a woman, and the plot is primarily about relationships between women and decisions young women must make. How do you think the film would have changed if the filmmaker had been a man? Or if Beth was a high school boy instead of girl?

Useful Resources

Chicago International Film Festival [website](#)

New York Times article [Patient Voices: Bipolar Disorder](#)

Metro U.K. article [What I Learned From My Mother's Bipolar Disorder](#)

Guide prepared by Hannah Hoffman, Rebecca Fons – Cinema/Chicago, 2015