

# Five *on* Friday

*Musings on Mental Health*

## And the winner is...

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*Oscars will be distributed with much fanfare this Sunday evening. Extraordinary stories, scores and scenery. Each year, I look forward to watching the Academy Awards with my son, Ben, who knows far more than I do about film. I don't know how he does it, but he has always seen more movies, knows more backstory and has way more interesting observations about the music and lighting and acting than I could ever muster.*



[Photo Credit](#)

*So ... sticking with what I know, I have a few reflections and a few questions as I ponder the exceptional works of art that have been nominated for “best picture” and what they have to say about mental health.*

**1. [I, Tonya](#).** The story of Tonya Harding is the story of beating the odds. What are the chances that anyone gets to skate in the Olympics, let alone, a girl who faced all kinds of adversity growing up? As one of only two American female skaters to land the triple axel in an international competition, Harding’s tenacity and resilience speak for themselves. A great story about [defying negative prediction](#). What concerns me about this biography, however, is that it is a new take on the past, a sort of revisionist history. As opposed to the true documentary, [Sharp Edges](#), by Sandra Luckow, *I, Tonya* feels like Harding’s chance to invoke childhood experiences to explain and account for her missteps and dirty deeds off the ice, most famously her connection to the assault on Nancy Kerrigan. As a clinician, I listen to people’s histories, told from the vantage point of the present and realize we run the same risk.

**2. [Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri](#).** Racism, substance use, rape, suicide, loss, and grief. This is a psychologically intense movie from the opening scene. In this era of [#MeToo](#) and [Time’s Up](#), Mildred Hayes (Frances McDormand) embodies the pain that torments us when interpersonal violence and unresolved loss riddle our lives. It is an especially compelling film because Director Martin McDonagh manages to stay away from simple good guy – bad guy characterizations. Thanks to incredibly effective storytelling, we come to know these highly flawed characters and feel compassion for them nonetheless.

**3. [Lady Bird](#).** If the Academy Awards had a category for “Best Female Coming of Age Story,” *Lady Bird* would win hands down. Christine “Lady Bird” McPherson, acted by Saoirse Ronan, is a senior at a Catholic high school in Sacramento, California. She is railing against everything her family and town represent. *Lady Bird* brings to life the challenges adolescents face in the journey to adulthood – new loves, betrayal, family struggles, and

longing to be understood. She heads off to college with great conviction, but for me, she is truly victorious in her “coming of age” as the film concludes with her call to her mother. It is a simple but brilliant moment. And it is a crescendo that tells the story of the psychological construct of [theory of mind](#).

**4. [The Post](#).** Okay, first of all, Meryl Streep plays Katharine Graham. Need I say more? But most importantly, this film is a remarkable and true story of attempts by journalists at *The Washington Post* to publish the *Pentagon Papers*. There are many aspects to this story that are extraordinary and volumes have been written about the Vietnam War and government cover-ups. It is all interesting, but the single thread that stands out for me is the impact of mental illness on the Graham family. In just a single line, Meryl Streep as Katharine Graham breaks the silence around her husband’s death and says aloud to all the men in the boardroom that her husband Phil died by suicide. They knew. She knew. But no one spoke the truth aloud till then. Phil Graham had bipolar disorder and died by suicide at the age of 43. What is even more remarkable is that Phil and Katharine’s son, William Graham, died on December 20th just before the release of *The Post*; also by suicide.

**5. [Call Me By Your Name](#).** Another coming of age drama. This one would receive “Best Male Coming of Age Story” if the category existed. Directed by Luca Guadagnino and written by James Ivory, *Call Me by Your Name* is based on the 2007 novel of the same name by André Aciman. The film takes place in the Italian countryside and is intoxicatingly beautiful. Elio, a Jewish American-Italian teenage boy, is also beautiful in his spirit, character and innocence, and somehow, we have the sweet sensation of witnessing his exquisitely personal sexual journey of identity. It is beautiful. But I cannot think about this film without some concern. Oliver is older, a bit too slick and manipulative for my liking, and I cannot help but experience him as taking advantage of Elio’s innocence. What would we think if Elio were a girl?

*The Academy Awards. Great stories, scores and scenery. Great narratives for exploring our human experience and all the varied dimensions of mental health and illness. Ben, are you ready to get comfortable and pass the popcorn (I don’t know how to turn on the TV without you)?*