

## Wrestling With Real Life —“It Is More Shameful to Deny Fear Than to Run From Danger”


A Review of

*The Resurrection of Jake the Snake Roberts* (2015)

by Steve Yu (Director)

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0040412>

Reviewed by

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The media depiction of celebrities (entertainers, athletes, etc.) dealing with substance abuse issues and going through “rehab” has certainly become fairly commonplace. One might even say that a “cottage industry” has developed around the topic, feeding “real” and “entertainment” news outlets, reality shows, television, movies, and books. I have found many such presentations to be sensationalistic, unrealistic, and not infrequently, exploitative. For those of us who treat people who have substance abuse disorders, media representations are often “cringe-worthy.” (Lewis, 2014)

Thus, it was with a heavy dose of skepticism that I approached the independent film *The Resurrection of Jake the Snake*. Jake “The Snake” Roberts (Aurelian Smith, Jr.) is a 61-year-old, second-generation veteran of professional wrestling. At the peak of his career, there were few wrestlers more popular than Roberts, who would carry with him into the ring a huge Burmese Python with which to intimidate his opponents and his fans, but Jake had such talent speaking and taunting (“cutting promos”) as well as wrestling that the reptile was but icing on the cake. In later years, it became well known that Jake was battling substance abuse issues as he became unreliable, physically bloated, and uncontrollable by promoters.

“Diamond Dallas” Page (Page Falkinburg) is a 59-year-old ring veteran from New Jersey who did not quite equal the success of Roberts but who, uniquely, did not begin his professional career until he was 32, yet he reached the highest level of achievement in the “industry” and has been a fan favorite, still intermittently making appearances in the squared circle. Page may also be familiar to some because of his promotion of his exercise regimen “DDP Yoga,” including having (unsuccessfully) been on an episode of “Shark Tank” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qR4FXmlbJYo>). Page invited Roberts to move in with him and begin a “24/7” personal program to gain sobriety ostensibly based upon his faith that his exercise program could be a useful intervention, but in reality based primarily upon their interpersonal connection when Roberts was at one of the lowest points in his life. *The Resurrection of Jake the Snake* follows Roberts’ interactions with Page, later joined by one

of the other most popular and feared names in professional wrestling, 57-year-old Scott Hall (Scott Oliver Hall), whose substance abuse and related issues literally had him on death's door. At one point, making an appearance in Fall River, MA, Hall was so intoxicated that he collapsed in the ring (and had the promoter decided to take him to the closest hospital, rather than a few miles further into Providence, Rhode Island, I probably would have been the psychiatrist admitting him to St. Luke's Hospital in New Bedford, MA; Mooneyham, 2011; Mooneyham, 2012).

I was concerned that this movie might be a 90-minute promo for DDP Yoga but I was pleasantly surprised to find the focus to be the interactions of these men and the background story of their descent into substance abuse hell. Page appears wearing a "DDP Yoga" T-shirt, and the participants are shown participating in the yoga program, but there is not one promotion for Page's yoga program, and the yoga routines are discussed only from the generic standpoint of the importance of physical exercise to the process of gaining sobriety—especially in these powerful and large men (both 6' 5").

The movie follows Page, Roberts, and Hall in a documentary style. There are clips of the men performing in their heyday, and there are actual clips that depict how far Roberts and Hall had fallen. Natural interactions in Page's house are interspersed with interviews of colleagues and co-workers from over the years. Those who are not wrestling fans or are not at least familiar with the characters these men portrayed might not experience the same impact from those vignettes—and are unlikely to have as strong a reaction to the eventual success of Roberts and Hall in regaining stability and being inducted into the WWE Hall of Fame. However, it does not take any background in professional wrestling to appreciate the changes that occurred, as represented by Hall arriving in a wheelchair and later striding on stage in a tuxedo.

*The Resurrection of Jake the Snake* does not attempt to promote any clinical theory or program, nor does the movie denigrate or criticize the typical "rehab" processes, as has been occurring more frequently clinically and in the press. (Passy, 2014). Without providing details regarding the interventions, implicit full support is shown for Roberts and Hall receiving standard medical treatments (including, at one point, Roberts' equivocally effective use of Antabuse), having personal therapists (who are not depicted), and being involved in A.A./N.A. (at one point, it is made clear that the impact of Page's intervention had to be integrated with Roberts attending "90-meetings-in-90-days" if there was going to be any progress).

The interactions that are shown between these men clearly show mutual respect and caring of the highest degree, but in a very "real life" and unaffected manner. The language is, not surprisingly, coarse. Confrontations are rough and at times angry. Yet there is never a sense of any of the individuals "playing for the camera." There is no minimizing the risks or the uncertainty of the process of gaining sobriety, or in the terms often used, the "power of the demons." Relapses are shown unflinchingly, with objectively poignant scenes in which Page is obviously infuriated, concerned, and almost convinced that his efforts are futile—but still committed to "never giving up." From a clinical standpoint, there are sufficient references to early life experiences and victimization, ranging from poor relationships with parents to having been subjected to sexual and physical abuse, which make the difficulty of the paths of these individuals understandable. The movie does not delve into details of past traumas nor intellectualized discussion of treatment modalities. The psychosocial historical information arises naturally within serious conversations and is discussed openly with

intensely honest emotion, but non-exploitably and without elaboration unnecessary for the purposes of the film. Similarly, there are references to having to cope with chronic pain and the effects of multiple concussions that are frank and direct but provided without sensationalism and without "an agenda."

Viewing *The Resurrection of Jake the Snake* is an experience of watching what appears to be the very "real life" and unaffected interactions of inherently bright and well-meaning men who have been "cult heroes" but who are truly struggling to survive. The emotions are raw and powerful. While there is no new ground covered clinically and most of us who treat patients with substance abuse issues have seen all of these emotions emerge in clients, in my opinion, as therapists, we infrequently have the opportunity to view the power of the feelings and fears that are openly displayed in the film among peers in what is essentially an ersatz family setting, without use of any clinical terms, psychobabble, or rehab jargon. Within the wrestling community, professionals refer to each other as "brothers," and the term "Bro" is used frequently. But while the community certainly is not free of disputes, disagreements, and at times very real hatred and violence (Reiss, 2011a), the sense of a familial connection is obvious as these men, together and with disarming vulnerability, confront their past successes and failures and a very uncertain future. Regarding this issue, "X-Pac" (Sean Waltman), a frequent partner of Hall who is interviewed in the movie and who has been very open in the media regarding his own substance abuse struggles and "personal baggage" from childhood, explained, "You must have someone to believe in you. For Scott and Jake, it was Dallas. It's different for a professional athlete. In rehab they will tell you it is not but it's absolutely different. Other people can't relate to where you've been, how got there and the f'n (I'm sorry) costs. . . ."

In my opinion, the clinical significance of this film is the implicit message that without a truly caring and supportive (yet anything-but-co-dependent) cohort outside of the formal therapy/treatment/rehab structure—including outside of formal step-meetings—wherein powerful and painful emotions can be expressed and respected, the odds for successfully gaining sobriety are severely diminished; yet no level of external support is necessarily sufficient for success. These men struggle and do improve significantly but not without relapses and periods of failure and dishonesty (even among themselves), and not without a constant fear of the future. Roberts has embraced the motto, "My past is not my destiny," but despite his significant progress, Roberts himself and the viewer come to clearly appreciate that whether he will definitively reach that goal will always remain an open question.

Both Roberts and Hall had been through multiple rehab programs in the past with essentially no success. In my opinion as a therapist, *The Resurrection of Jake the Snake* provides an imperfect but unique view of the experiences of our patients outside of the hospital or the office, moving along the dangerous path towards sobriety, depicting the utmost importance of non-clinical but sincere and caring support, including at times protection, but also requiring no-nonsense, direct confrontation with willingness to acknowledge fear and weakness. The power of this film lies in observing men whose livelihood required appearing as immensely powerful, larger-than-life super-heroes allowing themselves to be stripped of any sense of invincibility while embracing fear. As legendary wrestling announcer "Mean" Gene Okerlund said to me, "I've known Jake for over 35 years. He was always professionally strong but his personal life was always up and down. But this is a very strong message that he has learned and for others, others who are proud of and benefit from what he is doing." I have personally spoken to Scott Hall over lunch and I

found him to be a bright, insightful, and compassionate man (speaking to his acting talent in having given life to the infamous ring character “Razor Ramon”). Yet in talking to me about his experience with Page, as is typical of veteran wrestlers, Hall blended his real self with “staying in character” (“kayfabe”): “I will only give you two words – *life changing*.” Perhaps the significance of *The Resurrection of Jake the Snake* is best summarized in the words that Jake Roberts comes to acknowledge, “It is more shameful to deny fear than to run from danger.”

## Addendum

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On a personal note, being involved with the sports community and specifically the professional wrestling industry, an issue that is not discussed within the film is that, in my opinion, professional wrestling is essentially a recapitulation of childhood trauma and abuse. Different from boxing, martial arts, or MMA, in which opponents are doing their best to harm their adversaries, in professional wrestling, the participants are definitely causing each other significant pain and “punishment” (and accidents and injuries are all too frequent), but at the same time, they are endeavoring to protect every person in the ring and prevent any “real” injuries. Clinically, I believe that the analogy to the abusive parent who is punishing a child “for your own good” is obvious to mental health professionals and unconsciously impacts and fully engages both participants and fans. When I first presented this theory in a seminar for professional wrestlers, (Reiss, 2011b), I need not have feared for my safety leaving the room as my co-presenter, the legendary Ted “Million Dollar Man” DiBiase, turned to me and said, “Now I know why I did all the crazy shit I did!” After the seminar, one by one the attendees came up to me to say in one way or another, “You know, Bro, that’s my story. . .”

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