Mortality, aging, physical change, and deterioration—all are important subjects to be discussed and deconstructed in the women's studies classroom. The special challenge is to bring these issues into a forum of both traditional-aged and slightly older students in such a way that multiple and diverse perspectives can be honored and heard and feminist analysis can begin. These films about women of all ages, their bodies and their lives, can help start the discussion.

Many of us use Jean Kilbourne's *Slim Hopes* and *Killing Us Softly* series in the classroom to introduce students to the pernicious effects of advertising on women's self-image and body image. The first two films reviewed here approach that topic differently and more directly, by pulling us into the frame to accept and then admire the ages and shapes of women, thus starting the conversation in a different place. They offer a physical world filled with images that sharply contradict the ones we see in commercial media, where thin, young, physically active, sexy women compete vigorously for "prizes" like mates, prime careers, wardrobes, houses, cars, and enviable lifestyles in order to make us dissatisfied with our bodies and ourselves and believe that a product or a procedure will make us beautiful, prosperous, and happy.

*Your Name in Cellulite* attacks head-on the issue of body image, with a romp through the "industry" of
altering body parts to suit fashion standards. The magic of animation allows filmmaker Gail Noonan to shift screen shapes rapidly, demonstrating the effects of liposuction, breast augmentation, corseting, foot binding, and other actions that manipulate and mangle a woman’s shape and size. At the end of the film, the body rebels: the breasts pop out of the corset, the false eyelashes fall off, the feet jump out of their constricting shoes, and the augmented lips recede to normal. The message: left alone, the body heals and normalizes itself.

Gracious Curves, at 52 minutes, is a longer, more elaborate panorama of womanhood. It begins with the image of a full-figured nude woman with large breasts, floating on her back in the water. The setting is a lake where seven women are vacationing, enjoying the summer day and each other--swimming, boating, swinging on a large swing, painting. They range in age from about 10 to 80; one is pregnant; and early in the film they line up nude on the lake's dock, displaying their range of ages and body types. Filmmaker/narrator J. Kiti Luostarinen provides commentary and intercuts other visuals to remind us how these natural bodies and ages are denigrated and ignored by media. "When we're middle aged, women no longer have any value," she asserts, and she shows how "the internalized hatred of the imperfections of the human body" cause women to become victims of cosmetic surgery and to mutilate themselves to attain manufactured standards of beauty. She herself refuses to do that, proudly retaining a facial scar she got in an accident. "The body carries its own history," she says. The film has several messages, but the most powerful one is visual: the interaction of generations of women, petting each other, doing each other's hair, massaging flesh, and smoothing skin. One elderly woman asserts, "Touch means a lot to human beings. We ought to be stroked to the very end."

Three other films focus on individual women by profiling women who have made a difference in their own and others' lives. These personal narratives, often involving the filmmaker herself, act as oral history documents, thereby stretching the boundaries of the classroom.

In Standing Still, filmmaker Catherine Quinn seeks to understand the value of living by listening to the recollected stories of four women: Mildred MacLeod, born in 1911; Ellen White, born in 1922; Ida Pearson, born in 1904; and Dorothy Cameron, born in 1897. The film is "experimental" rather than realistic, with somewhat intrusive recurring images of tunnels and airplanes and a woman peeking through a window blind. It also foregrounds the filmmaker herself, with comments like "Ida's vulnerability made me squirm." The best part of the film is the women's stories, told in words and pictures, revealing their pioneering spirit in youth and middle age, which has continued in their later life, when slowing down has allowed them time to reflect and become wise. The final shot is of a message painted on rocks on the beach, delivered from these women to the filmmaker and us: "And so I learned to stand still."

Some Ground to Stand On: The Story of Blue Lunden begins with a close-up of 61-year-old Blue Lunden saying, "I'm confident that I'm a real lesbian." Thus begins the story of her long journey of self-discovery and her increased involvement with the feminist, lesbian, anti-nuclear, and peace movements. The film combines personal and public history in useful ways for students who will have only read about these movements, as Blue tells of her life, growing up in New Orleans, being in a reform school, discovering her sexual identity at age 13, becoming pregnant, giving up her child and then reuniting with her. She talks frankly about her problems with alcohol and the healing effect and camaraderie of becoming a lesbian activist. She reflects on being an old woman and affirms her confidence that she will be taken care of--as she took care of others--at the Sugarloaf Women's Village in Florida, founded by Barbara Deming and Jane Verlaine. The last shots of Blue show her wearing a "Lucky Dyke" t-shirt at a Gay Pride Parade in New York City, looking toward the future.

Like the Blue Lunden story, Golden Threads shows how adversity can open the way to community and strength. The film centers on Christine Burton, who founded the organization Golden Threads to bring together older lesbians to discuss, participate in workshops, and socialize once a year. The 90-year-old Burton opens the ninth annual gathering in Provincetown, Massachusetts, in June 1995, with typical statements: "It's not a revolution; it's an explosion." "The second you stop living and growing is when you start to die." Later she speaks of her own revelations: "You're not free unless you're fearless," and "I never started to live until I was 80." Shortly after the celebration, the film changes direction when Christine suffers a stroke and ends up in a nursing home. But she is surrounded by friends, and seems determined to recover lost speech and mobility, which she does before the OLOC (Old Lesbians
Does the process of aging bring transformative power? Although some of the films discussed above treat the issue in passing, the next three focus more directly on the way that--given the right inspiration, will, and circumstances--aging can enhance personal growth, most often by trading the individual achievements of youth for a collective and collaborative achievement.

The achievement is remarkable for choreographer Jiri Kylian and the dancers of Can't Stop Now: A Choreographer Validates the Older Dancer, all of whom are over the age that seems to mark the end of an athlete's or dancer's career. But the Netherlands Dance Company III accepts only dancers over 40 (whereas Company I features mature dancers, and Company II beginners). The film profiles six male and female dancers in the company who speak about themselves as we watch them in rehearsal and performance. The visual and verbal text highlights differences between past and present. As older artists, they can take "more risks, dramatically and emotionally," since they no longer need to prove themselves, and they talk of the excitement of having dances choreographed for them, with more nuanced emotional content to replace the physical and athletic prowess of the younger dancers. "The ground of what an older dancer can do has just begun to be broken" seems to be the consensus. The film's final performance brings together all three of the Netherlands Dance Companies, showing very clearly how aging is a process of change rather than of deterioration.

As its name implies, Timbrels and Torahs: Celebrating Women's Wisdom also focuses on the positive values of aging, this time specifically for Jewish women. One woman, Miriam Chaya (formerly Harriet Field), has led a movement to establish a ceremony, Simchat Hochmah, in which Jewish women "come of age" at 60. Because men conduct almost all rituals in Judaism, a new ceremony to counteract the invisibility of older women enables such women to celebrate their lives and their contributions as Jews in the presence of other women. When women celebrate themselves and other women in this way, they choose new names, like Miriam (the biblical leader of women), that are meaningful to them rather than inherited from their parents, and they make a new commitment to themselves, each other, and God. Throughout the film, numerous women comment on the connection between Jewish women and feminism, and express hopes that the new ceremony will change the face of Judaism for the better.

As Savina Teubal, one of the first women to go through the ceremony, says: "It's wonderful to be old."

The final film in this group is fiction: Strangers in Good Company, by the documentarian Cynthia Scott. Eight women in their seventies go on a day trip to visit the lakeside summer home of one of them, Constance, but they are stranded when the small school bus they are riding on breaks down, so they set up basic housekeeping in an abandoned house. The characters are a rich variety--a nun with mechanical abilities, a blues-singing bus driver, a Mohawk, a lesbian who loves literature--and the film brings them together in various ways. They talk to one another, sharing their past as they construct their present--from scavenging food to birdwatching--while speaking honestly of their fears, their health crises, their sexuality, their jobs and families. One climactic moment occurs when the frail Constance manages to find her summer house and tells the others: "I'm going to die soon anyway, and I'd rather die here than in a nursing home or hospital." Alice (the Mohawk) responds: "I'm not going to die. I'm going fishing." The film is wonderfully affective, using its scenic Quebec country setting in distance and close-up, intercut with the intimacy of the women's conversations and shared activities. Catherine, the nun, finally rescues the others by hiking out and returning with a floatplane, which appears through the misty morning light. As they walk off into their own misty futures, they all say goodbye (in Mohawk) to the place.

All of these films offer opportunities to open up the classroom to discussion and debate or to projects on a range of topics. They can also serve as a springboard for guest speakers and community activists in fields like health care, religion, and lesbian and elder rights.

Note

1. I am grateful for the assistance of my UW-Parkside colleagues Helen Rosenberg, Department of