

# ORDINARY PEOPLE

Directed by Robert Redford  
Produced by Ronald L. Schwary  
Distributed by Paramount Pictures  
Released in 1980

A suicide attempt exposes a person's vulnerabilities for all to see. But what about the people who don't try to kill themselves when they're in pain? How do they find the humility to seek help?

Dealing with his surviving son makes Calvin, played by Donald Sutherland, realize that he has problems of his own. He quietly looks for help. A stockbroker friend is only obsessed with making money. A law partner has given up on his kids and takes a selfish, even fatalistic view of parenting. So they offer no solutions. But the real problem is not the loss of Buck, but Beth, played by Mary Tyler Moore. There are three broken people in the family, but only one will not admit it. Beth, who was closest to Buck and loved him obsessively, will not acknowledge her loss, though it may have been the greatest of all. She is fixated with propriety and masks her vulnerabilities. She chastises Calvin for revealing at a party that Conrad (played by Timothy Hutton in an Academy Award-winning performance) is seeing a psychiatrist (even though Calvin minimizes it, saying it's just to fortify the progress that has already been made), she refuses to see Dr. Berger with Calvin, and she speaks glowingly of prospects for a Christmas in London—leaving their only surviving son behind! She has nothing to say to Conrad, ignores his attempts to reconnect, and seems fixated on his bad language. He must do well in school, he must stay on the swim team—everything must be *just so*. She'd rather keep up appearances than make her family happy. Because she can't engage Conrad and help him with his pain, like her husband has done, she cannot help herself.

The only time she allows her fears to surface is when visiting friends in Texas on a golf trip. She reveals how forbidding the world is to her now, rife with hidden threats and ready to destroy our loved ones. Every other time Calvin tries to open up to her, like when he asks her about Buck's funeral, she deflects, minimizes, or walks away.

Early in the film both Calvin and Beth decide they don't want to go to the party and would prefer to do something spontaneous like go to the movies. But they agree without agreeing to go to the party anyway. This is the rut that Calvin tries to climb out of, the rut of behaving in the proper way for propriety's sake. But in striving to be genuine his marriage crumbles because Beth is happier with a well-ordered lie.

First-time director Robert Redford even manages a metaphor of sorts for the whole movie by beginning everything with a play. It's some kind of domestic comedy, about a husband and wife married for 24 years. The acting is mannered and amateurishly hammy. Beth of course loves it. Calvin can't keep his eyes open.

He wants something real.

Buck's death was not only a major loss but it has exposed rifts already present, threatening a placid upper-class existence. *Ordinary People* contrasts Conrad's rehabilitation with his parents' crumbling marriage. Beth has a mania for control, and Dr. Berger, from his

first meeting, disabuses Conrad of his need to be in control, to look better and sound better so that everyone will think you're better so they'll be happy and leave you alone. Indeed, maybe we have to learn to lose control—or recognize we never had it—in order to find a measure of peace.