

Films for the Journey Toward Wholeness

An anti-oppression discussion guide to popular films



Faith in Action Department
Unitarian Universalist Association
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INTRODUCING A VIDEO DISCUSSION SERIES

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Welcome to *Films for the Journey Toward Wholeness: An anti-oppression discussion guide for popular films!* As serious as the title sounds, our goal for this series is not solely to help Unitarian Universalists see and understand racism, as important as that goal is; but also to provide groups engaged in anti-oppression work a vehicle for coming together in fellowship, sharing their ideas and perspectives and for having a little fun together.

Reflection and Discussion Groups provide an opportunity for Unitarian Universalists to gather in a meaningful and focused way. The impetus for such a group may originate from a variety of places in a congregation, the Religious Education Program, Social Justice Committee, or Anti-Racism Team, or from the minister and other religious professionals. A discussion group offers the following benefits:

- Each video discussion can stand alone - - no need for long term commitment.
- A reflective discussion group can help us get in touch with feelings and values as well as thoughts and opinions.
- It can provide an opportunity for participants to share their own stories, thus helping us to get to know and trust one another better and to build community within the congregation.
- Video discussion groups can nurture leadership skills and confidence as participants rotate group leadership.
- The video and the discussion of it can teach us a lot about realities beyond our own experience.
- A video discussion can be a non-threatening way to approach complex or difficult subjects such as racism.

This discussion guide was born from a collaboration between the Faith In Action Department and the Youth Office. Together, staff members from both departments watched numerous videos, discussed each and debated the merits of including it in a discussion series. Separately we developed age appropriate discussion guides for the videos we thought provided an engaging and stimulating view of racism in the United States. For more information on the Youth Discussion Guides, contact Jen Harrison in the UUA Youth Office. We also recommend bringing both youth and adults together for joint discussions of these and other videos. We found the generational differences in experience and perspective greatly enhanced our discussions. The experience also provided an opportunity to strengthen our relationships with one another.

Anti-Racism/Anti-Oppression Focus

The anti-racism/anti-oppression focus is a response to requests by congregations and groups engaged in the Journey Toward Wholeness who seek opportunities to educate and stimulate

themselves and their constituents on issues pertaining to racism and oppression. Therefore the discussion questions focus on the social, political and cultural themes illuminated by the film rather than the cinematic or artistic merits, though each is noteworthy in those areas as well. Your group might also choose to explore theological themes present in the films.

Some Process Suggestions

Unless you have an ongoing video discussion program in place, start small. One film is a good start. The group will meet again if it was a good experience. Keep it simple, meeting in a private home or a comfortable room in a church.

Publicize as you would any adult or youth RE program. Be sure to approach any groups or committees that would have a particular interest in the topics included in this series. Have enthusiastic participants give testimonials in your newsletter to attract interest.

Size of group can range from two to fifteen or so. Eight to twelve may be ideal. Larger groups will likely need to break into small groups for discussion. Length of meeting time can also vary. Keep in mind the length of the videos varies and you will have to accommodate that.

Decide who will lead the discussions: staff or volunteers, consistent or rotating leaders. Good facilitation skills will be important to the success of the experience. Agree to some basic group guidelines at the beginning of each meeting (sharing the floor, keeping confidences, etc.)

We suggest you open and/or close the gathering with a simple ritual such as a brief reading or chalice-lighting, just remember to keep it simple and brief.

You might choose to take turns providing refreshments. And you may need to charge a small fee to cover video rental and/or room costs as well as refreshments.

Drop us a line!

Let us know about your experience! Send us a brief description of what your group did. Tell us what worked, what did not work and what you would do differently. Also tell us a little something about your group, the name, size, etc. of you congregation, and who initiated the program.

Also, if you want to try your hand at developing a discussion guide about a video, we'd love to see that as well, and we may even include them in future editions of discussion guides. Just make sure the video and discussion questions deal with oppression issues.

Send all materials to Pam Bachman, 25 Beacon Street, Boston, MA 02108 or by email at pbachman@uua.org

American History X Study Guide

Description/Overview

American History X is a deeply disturbing and brutally violent film about the white skin head movement in contemporary United States culture. Not only does this film depict the most disturbing and flagrant aspects of racism, but also shows how close hate movements are to mainstream, middle-class, white Americans.

A fictional story told through the eyes of a youth who is being recruited in the white power movement, this film shows how racial hatred is part of American culture. It also shows the means to which white people will go to maintain their privilege, particularly when they feel their institutional and cultural dominance being encroached upon.

American History X is also an important film because, if examined closely, it shows the interconnection of oppressions. The culture that allows for racial hatred also enforces gender roles and requires violence to enforce all aspects of its hierarchy. The same worldview that allows for the devaluation based on skin color, requires a culture of dominance that permeates all aspects of life.

Caution

This film comes with a serious caution to the facilitator. It is profoundly violent and disturbing. There are a number of scenes that depict gruesome murders, in detail. There is a rape scene. The language is angry and hateful. The whole movie will feel like an assault on your senses. However, it is worth seeing. It is well done and meaningful. The violence is not gratuitous, but rather is used to make the viewer understand a disturbing piece of reality. As UU's, this film asks us to grapple with the theological concepts of hate and evil, as they are embodied in our world today. Please make sure that you provide for the pastoral resources and support necessary to deal with this kind of subject matter.

Program Format

Opening Words
Read and Discuss Caution
View Video
Take a Break
Discussion Questions
Closing

Discussion Questions

- How do you feel right now? What emotions has this film evoked in you? Where do you think those feelings have come from? What personal experiences have been recalled in you?
- What do you think this film says about racism in the United States today? How is racism different today than it was thirty years ago, before the Civil Rights movement?

- Do you think white people have access to more power and privilege than people of color in the United States? Why do you think that? What do you think of affirmative action programs and other efforts to combat institutional racism?
- What are the attitudes towards women, gay people, poor people, and people with disabilities in this movie? How are these attitudes related to attitudes toward people of color in this movie?
- Do you know people with racist views? What do you do when you hear racist remarks?
- Are there organized hate groups in your community? How does your congregation respond to these groups?
- Do you think we can end racism in America? How?

Mi Familia Study Guide

Description/Overview

Mi Familia is the story of the Sanchez family's experience of life in the United States. Spanning three generations, this film shows the various relationships that each family member has toward their cultural identities and their desire to become "Americans."

This film also deals with the systemic oppression that people of color, specifically Mexican Americans, face in the United States. Set in East Los Angeles from 1920 to the present, Mi Familia traces the immigration policies, police brutality, and cultural ostracism that mark the experiences of the Sanchez family.

In Mi Familia, we find a complex understanding of how identity and systemic oppression shape individual and community life. The first generation of the Sanchez family, who immigrate from Mexico, desire both to hold on to their cultural traditions and values, as well as succeed in the American Dream. The second generation, the children of the Sanchez family, find that this ideal is impossible. They are faced with the choice of becoming either Mexican or American (which means Anglo) in their identities, while the outside institutions continue to define them.

Program Format

Opening Words

Watch Video

Discussion

Closing Words

Discussion Questions:

- What are some examples of institutional racism in this movie? What are some examples of cultural racism in this movie? How do these examples impact the Sanchez family?
- What do you think are the defining characteristics of Anglo American culture? What part of the Sanchez's family's culture does not fit with American Anglo culture?
- What makes it difficult for the Sanchez family to assimilate into American Anglo culture? Why do some of the children resist assimilating? What is the experience like for those who do assimilate?
- What is your cultural heritage? What does that mean to you? Have you, or any of your family members, faced institutional oppression to your culture here in the United States? How did your family deal with that oppression? What was their means of survival? What did you gain and what did you lose through that means of survival?

SLAM Study Guide

Description/Overview

SLAM portrays the experience of a young African American man caught in the Washington, DC correctional system. Set in a real prison, using real convicts as supporting cast, SLAM explores the institutional, cultural and internalized aspects of racism in a current urban African American community. SLAM also explores the use of poetry as a way towards liberation through consciousness and community building.

Program Format

Opening Words

Watch Video

Discussion

Closing Words

Discussion Questions:

- What are some examples of institutional racism in this movie? What are some examples of cultural racism in this movie? What are some examples of internalized racism in this movie? How do these examples impact Ray, Lauren, and the communities that they live in?
- In the Civil Rights Movement, white people and African Americans often worked together on systemic issues such as segregation and voting rights. In the Black Power Movement, however, African Americans often asked for a separate space, so that they could work on issues that dealt with internalized racism and rebuilding their communities. How do you feel about this need for people of color to have a separate space to work on internalized issues? How can white people support people of color in their community building? Do white people need to get together and talk about their own issues around racism?
- What implications does this movie have for white anti-racists? Where are the places in this film in which white people who want to make change have the most power to do so? What things could your congregation do to support Ray, Lauren and their community? How would you go about doing this?

Smoke Signals Study Guide

Description/Overview

Smoke Signals, written by Coeur D'Alene Sherman Alexie, directed by Cheyenne/Arapaho Chris Eyre and starring American Indians, is structured as a picturesque "road movie." Based on Alexie's short story collection "The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven," Smoke Signals depicts a journey from the Coeur D'Alene reservation in Idaho to Phoenix by two teen-aged Indians, Victor Joseph (Adam Beach) and Thomas Builds-the-Fire (Evan Adams). Victor's father, Arnold (Gary Farmer) has just died and Victor is sent to return his ashes to the reservation. Thomas, whom Victor regards as something of a pest, pleads to be taken along. Their relation to each other and to Victor's dead father supplies the central dramatic impulse for the film.

Much of the film's power has to do with its honesty, both in the way the characters are depicted and also in its use of on-location filming at the Coeur D'Alene reservation which, like most reservations, is literally in the middle of nowhere. It is a mixture of rugged mountainous landscape with meager ramshackle housing and tacky general stores run by whites. Director Chris Eyre has found a way to capture both aspects of the reservation, so the audience understands both the lingering attraction of the reservation and what drives its inhabitants to desperation.

Program Format

Opening Words
Watch Video
Discussion
Closing Words

Discussion Questions:

- Smoke Signals is the first commercially successful film in which the writer, director, actors and crew are almost exclusively Native American persons. Why do you think this is important to the Native American community? Discuss how the representations of Indian people in Smoke Signals differs from "Hollywood" style movies, include the old "Cowboys and Indians" western genre as well as more contemporary films such as "Dances with Wolves" and "Geronimo" in your analysis.
- Arnold (Victor's dad) goes through a process of "disappearing" in which he slowly disappears from his family, his community, and eventually from the world. Discuss this "disappearing" and how it relates to the invisibility of Indian people in contemporary society.
- Storytelling plays an important role in Native American communities, also to the film's plot. What is the importance of story telling in Smoke Signals? Discuss the relationship between Victor and Thomas as it relates to Thomas's role as the films primary storyteller. How

does their relationship illustrate the tension between Native American traditional cultural values and contemporary realities?

- The reality of Indian people in contemporary U.S. society is part of the consciousness of the characters in *Smoke Signals*. For example, Victor and Thomas refer to the U.S. as a foreign country, Arnold and Victor's basketball game against the Jesuits is described as the first time the Indians won since Columbus, etc. Discuss the interactions Victor and Thomas have with members of the dominant society (the White couple in the car accident, and the police officer). What stereotypes are operating? What expectations do the various characters have based on the way Indian people are stereotyped?
- What do you make of the soliloquy at the end of the movie? What are the sins of our fathers which must be forgiven?

Higher Learning Study Guide

Description/Overview

This 1995 film by John Singleton (*Boyz n the Hood*) paints an illuminating portrait of racial and sexual tensions on college campuses in the '90's. Singleton has a knack for presenting campus events that, at first glance, seem overstated - a caricature of real life. Yet, upon reflection, the struggles of students of color to find their niche in the predominantly white student body of Columbus University, the attraction of a lonely white male student to the comradeship of a local Neo-Nazi gang, the terror of date rape, the experimentation with same-sex relationships, and the influence of alcohol, all bear a striking resemblance to the lived experience of many students on campuses across the nation.

The film depicts a multiplicity of African American responses to campus life: the anti-institutional revolutionary concerned with reading for reading's sake; the struggling athlete trying not to lose a scholarship yet not wanting to be a tool of the institution; the Afro-centric feminist who is willing to befriend her troubled white roommate; the Caribbean political science professor who tries to treat everyone equally regardless of race or gender. White characters have a range as well, though none of them truly grasps the difference between their experience and the experience of their peers of color. For example, the most progressive white students claim they are not white supremacists and attempt to organize a peace festival to bring racial healing to campus. The festival is oblivious to the real concerns of students of color on campus.

As the movie progresses, conflict between a group of African American students and the local Neo-Nazis begin to eclipse the other story lines, leading to a violent and bloody conclusion. Nevertheless, the film provides much material for discussion about campus race relations in the United States today.

Caution

This film comes with a moderate caution to the facilitator. Singleton is well known for the violence in his films. Although there is arguable less violence than *Boyz n the Hood*, a series of fistfights, a date rape, and a brutal murder make the film difficult to watch at times. However, none of the violence is unrealistic. All of it has happened before in the real world. Please make sure that you provide for the pastoral resources and support necessary to deal with this kind of subject matter.

Program format

Opening Words

Read and Discuss Caution

View Video

Take a Break

Discussion Questions

Closing

Discussion Questions

- How do you feel right now? What emotions has this film evoked in you? Where do you think those feelings have come from? What personal experiences have been recalled in you?
- What do you think this film says about racism in the United States today? How is racism different today than it was thirty years ago, before the Civil Rights movement?
- Do you think the struggles of African American students depicted in the film are realistic? Can you imagine these kinds of experiences happening? Do you think the way white students are portrayed-as generally unaware of the struggles of their peers of color-is realistic?
- Do you think white people have access to more power and privilege than people of color in the United States? Why do you think that? What do you think of affirmative action programs and other efforts to combat institutional racism?
- What are the attitudes towards women, gay people, poor people, and people with disabilities in this movie? How are these attitudes related to attitudes toward people of color in this movie?
- Do you know people with racist views? What do you do when you hear racist remarks?
- Are there organized hate groups in your community? How does your congregation respond to these groups?
- Do you think we can end racism in America? How?

Come See the Paradise Study Guide

Description/Overview

Come See the Paradise is a story of Japanese immigrants and Japanese Americans just before and during World War II. This tragic and controversial period of American history is dramatized by the experience of the Kawamura family. It follows the romance and eventual marriage of Japanese-American, Lily Kawamura (Tamlyn Tomita) and Jack McGurn (Dennis Quaid), an Irish-American union organizer, at the outset of World War II.

From the start, the clash of cultures is painful for Lily and Jack, is compounded by Jack's union activity and becomes insurmountable after the Japanese bomb Pearl Harbor. Lily and the Kawamuras are relocated to a bleak internment camp in California. Jack is drafted into the Army and is powerless to help Lily and her family. Though members of the family survive the camp and are released at the close of the war, the family and their culture are forever transformed by the ordeal.

The film is brought faithfully to the screen by Alan Parker, the director of *Mississippi Burning*, and *Midnight Express* and is rich in historic detail as well as human emotion.

Approx: 135 minutes, color, 1990

Rated R for language, some nudity and sexual content

Program Format

Opening Words

Watch Video

Discussion

Closing Words

Discussion Questions

- Were you familiar with this chapter of U.S. history? If yes, how did you learn about it? If not, why do you think you were never taught about this?
- In recent years the United States via former president Clinton, finally apologized to the Japanese Americans who were interred and paid financial reparations to survivors and their families. Was this an appropriate move on the behalf of the United States? Why do you think the decision was made to do it? What implications does it have for other racially oppressed groups in the United States?
- With who was the United States at war, in World War II? Compare the treatment of Japanese Americans with the treatment of Italian-Americans and German-Americans during this period. Why were these groups treated differently?
- Discuss the two different choices made by the older Kawamura brothers, one to join the U.S. Army, one to repatriate to Japan. What influenced their different choices? Which would you have chosen?

Kandahar

Description/Overview

Kandahar, written and directed by Mohsen Makhmalbaf is structured like a travel guide. Based on a real life struggle, it depicts the journey of Nafas, a young Afghan woman who had taken refuge in Canada after the Taliban came into power. Nafas, an Afghan name meaning respiration, having received a desperate suicidal letter from her sister, seeks to reach the city of Kandahar to save her sibling. While she risks her life to pass the border, recording her observations in a hand-held tape recorder, Nafas discovers the extent of her former country's poverty and destruction. The film's finale emphasizes the country's social enslavement of women, as light trickling through Nafas' burka creates a prison pattern on her face.

Program Format

Opening Words

Watch Video

Discussion

Closing Words

Discussion Questions

- What does the main character, Nafas, represent for you? How is the burka (the gown worn by Afghan women that covers the entire body) symbolizing oppression? Are there similarities in clothing that has or is now worn by women in the United States?
- Discuss the various characters in the film that Nafas encounters: Khak, her young opportunistic guide; the African-American doctor; the limbless men at the Red Cross station; the tyrannic teacher instructing boys on the Koran; the girls learning about land mines. What do they teach us about the role of religion and culture in this film?
- Under the Taliban Afghanistan was a country without images – no cinema, no TV, newspapers without print pictures; music was forbidden; girls could not be educated; books were burnt. Are these signs of oppression, if so how? Is there any evidence of this type of oppression in the US currently or historically?
- Two lines in the film “They don’t need a doctor here, they need a baker” and “For women, hope is the day she (the women) will be seen” depict the plight of Afghanistan. Relate these to the plight of oppressed people in the United States.
- Has this film changed your view(s) of Afghanistan? the people? How? Why?

Nanook of the North

Description/Overview

Made in 1922 by Robert Flaherty, considered by many to be the “father of documentary film,” *Nanook of the North* is about an Inuit man who lived a traditional hunter’s life in far northern Quebec. Flaherty lived with the indigenous people, filming their humanity and their battles against the elements. In this portrait Flaherty captures the terror and grandeur of Arctic landscapes and seascapes as he imparts vitality to scenes of Eskimo hunting excursions and quiet family life.

However, throughout the film Flaherty consistently misrepresents various aspects of Inuit life by having his subjects revive their former methods of hunting and living thus making the film conform to his ideal vision of a majestic humanity confronting the power of nature. As you view the film be aware of racial stereotypes and the fact that there is no indication of the treat posed to Inuit culture by the encroaching expansion of Anglo-Saxon influence.

Caution

This film comes with a caution to the facilitator. There are scenes where the family eats their “kill” raw. It might also be helpful to become somewhat familiar with this culture so the discussion can be led with some historical accuracy.

Program Format

Opening Words
Read and Discuss Caution
View Video
Take a Break
Discussion Questions
Closing

Discussion Questions

- How do you feel about the portrayal of the Inuit culture? Do you think it was accurate?
- Were there any racial stereotypes? How did they compare to the stereotypes produced on current films or TV? What is the harm of the stereotypes?
- Were elements of reality excluded from the film? If so, what were they?
- Discuss how indigenous people are often romanticized in the media by white people? How are the images manipulated to achieve that “romantic” image?
- Examine why is it important to not take for granted what the media expresses?

Harlan County, USA

Description/Overview

Directed by Barbara Kopple

US 1976, 35mm, color, 103 min.

Portraying the classic struggle by labor to gain respect and dignity from management, HARLAN COUNTY, USA focuses on the heroic efforts of 180 coal mining families to win a union contract in Harlan County, Ky. During the 14 month struggle, Harlan County was not only fighting within her own borders for improvement of working conditions, housing, and medical benefits, but was assisting the nation's coal miner's fight to rid itself of the United Mine Worker's President, Tony Boyle. Documentation begins in the summer of 1973 when miners' wages were less than \$6/hour and men were hopeful of settling their disputes quickly and concludes with the violent murder of Lawrence Jones by scabbing miners

The narrative leaves many questions unanswered, but having lived among the mining families and shared their terror at management's thug tactics, Kopple is able to convey their heroism and humanity with conviction -- this is an authentic, affecting portrait of working-class nobility.

Caution: This film comes with a moderate caution to the facilitator. There is some violence and would be rated R for language. It is a documentary and is probably less violent than some current news programs.

Program format

Watch Video

Discussion

Closing Words

Discussion Questions

- How do you feel right now? What emotions has this documentary evoked in you? Were you aware of the plight of the people from this area when this film took place?
- What do you think this film says about classism in the United States? Is it any different than it was when this film was made?
- How might this film relate to the problems of today's economic globalization? What are the similarities? The differences?
- How are class issues apparent in your community? Do they cross racial lines?

Seven Songs From The Tundra

Description/Overview

Directed by Anastasia Lapsui and Markku Lehmuskallio

Finland 2000, 35mm, color, 90 min.

Russian, Nenets, and Finnish with English subtitles

Dazzling contrasts between snowy, horizonless expanses and the lush, seasonal vegetation of the tundra form the backdrop to this unusual film, which focuses on the nomadic Nenets people of Siberia. Director and screenwriter Anastasia Lapsui, a native Nenets, weaves legends together with her own experiences to create stories that describe the life of her people in seven “songs.” The first and last are documents of the ritual sacrifice of a reindeer and a woman singing to her child, while the five central vignettes include dramatic depictions of the harsh effects Soviet communism had on the group’s age-old social order. The world’s first feature film in the Nenets language, *Seven Songs from the Tundra* was produced almost entirely by ordinary Nenets people--teachers, hunters, and fishermen--who shared the desire to bring their stories to life.

Program Format

Opening Words

Watch Video

Discussion

Closing Words

Discussion Questions

- Why do you think it is important that this film was made in the Nenets language, as well as produced and directed by a Nenets? Is this important to other indigenous peoples? Why?
- What were some of the effects that Soviet communism had on the Nenets? There are similarities between what the Nenets encountered and what Native Americans encounter(ed)? What are they and why?
- Why do you think this film was included in this discussion guide? How does it relate to racism? Oppression?