

The Soloist

“No one changes anything by playing it safe.”

The Soloist

Film length: 1 hr., 49 min.

Film rating: PG-13

Director: Joe Wright

Synopsis & Central Plot:

The Soloist is the true story of Los Angeles Times Journalist Steve Lopez and his friendship with Nathaniel Anthony Ayers, Jr. When Lopez first meets Ayers, he is playing a violin with only two strings and expounding on the beauty of Beethoven. A regular columnist in the struggling newspaper industry, Lopez smells a story, and begins to tell the homeless man's tale.

At first glance, Ayers seems to be a mentally ill man, dressed flamboyantly and playing with a violin. But when Lopez discovers that Ayers attended Juilliard, one of the most prestigious performing arts schools in the world, his fall from cellist prodigy to street dweller becomes much more fascinating. As Lopez follows Ayers and begins publishing the story in segments, an unexpected relationship develops between the two men. Lopez struggles with the conflict between his role as passive observer and engaged philanthropist, and must decide how far he is willing to go to change the life of Ayers.

The Soloist provides insight into the life of a paranoid schizophrenic, a musical genius afraid of the voices inside his head. In doing so, it shines a light on the homeless epidemic ravaging Los Angeles and the comorbidity of homelessness and mental illness. Journalistic ethics are also questioned, as a writer must strike a balance between exposition and exploitation. .

Main Themes to Engage through the Film:

- The connection between mind, body and spirit
- Challenging and confronting stereotypes
- The nature and power of friendship
- Segregation of the poor and homeless
- The interaction between journalism, social justice and action
- The role of charity AND justice
- The “keys” that are necessary for society’s acceptance
- The commitment and demands of relationships
- Dreams and aspirations



“I used to sleep on Wall Street but it’s too dirty now.”
- Nathaniel Ayres, Jr.

“Wouldn’t a little arm twisting be more humane than leaving him on the streets?”
- Steve Lopez

“Stop trying to “fix” him. Just be his friend and show up.” - Lamp Counselor

Catholic Social Teaching Themes and Connections:

The Soloist's title suggests a dream that never truly became a reality for Nathaniel Ayers. Once Ayers is "discovered" by Lopez, we witness his journey out of isolation and the struggles that ensue. Along the journey, we see the dignity of all humanity and can reflect on our own opportunities to care for the poor and vulnerable.

- The **dignity of the human person** and the way that segregating our poor and homeless defies that dignity.
- The call to be **fully human in community** and the failures of societal structures to address the needs of our poorest citizens.
- The **option for the poor and vulnerable** that Steve Lopez struggles with in his relationship with Nathaniel Ayers.

Questions for Reflection & Discussion

- Steve Lopez's ex-wife and editor of the LA Times accuses him of exploiting Ayers. Does Lopez take advantage of Nathaniel? If so, how?
- How does Lopez's relationship with Ayers change over time? Why does Lopez call Nathaniel "Mr. Ayers" at the end of the movie?
- The mayor announces that he is dedicating \$50 million dollars to the poorest area of Los Angeles. How are the funds used? Are they contributing to the dignity of the human person or answering the call to community?
- The image of keys is present throughout the film. What are some "keys", both literal and figurative, that our society deems necessary? What keys do you have? What keys does Ayers have at the beginning vs. the end?
- Lopez struggles to "fix" Ayers. How does he try to address the physical, mental, and spiritual needs of Nathaniel? Is he successful? Why or why not?
- What are the effects of life in a "ghetto" like Skid Row in Los Angeles? How does this segregation affect the development of the person? What impact does social isolation have on someone's humanity?
- How does the city of LA turn its back on its poorest citizens? In what ways are they considered "lesser" members of society?
- How does Ayers' mental illness impact his physical and spiritual well being? Why do you think he does not want to be medicated? How much control should he have over these choices, given that he is mentally ill?
- How does our healthcare system fail the mentally ill? In the film, we see many homeless individuals who are mentally ill, and the immediate response seems to be to medicate them. What are alternative solutions to medication? Why is medication a good idea or a bad idea?
- What was your favorite scene in the movie?
- What was the most important message or insight that you took away from the film?



Photo credit: G.P. Putnam's Sons
Nathaniel Ayers and cellist Yo-Yo Ma, 2007.

Spotlight on Skid Row, Los Angeles

The area known as “Skid Row” in downtown Los Angeles is a neighborhood with one of the highest population of homeless people in the nation. Counts of people suffering from homelessness are difficult, but there are probably at least 7,000 homeless individuals in the six square blocks. More than 40% of the residents there are living below the poverty line. Drug trafficking and prostitution are common, and newspaper exposés revealed that city hospitals were dumping discharged residents back on the streets.

In 2006, the mayor’s office teamed with the Los Angeles Police Department to begin the Safer Cities Initiative, a model aimed at cracking down on petty crimes to reduce violent offenses. Another aspect of the model would have criminalized sleeping on the streets between 9 P.M. and 6:30 A.M., but the American Civil Liberties Union won a lawsuit to strike down the law.

Greater numbers of police have been assigned to patrol the area, and drug arrests in the past two years number in the thousands. Proponents of the approach point to the gentrification and economic benefits that will come to the neighborhood as new businesses and developments move in and create jobs. However, others argue that the initiative is another way to criminalize the poor and drive them away, despite the fact that one third of the city’s beds for homeless individuals are located in Skid Row.

Questions for Discussion:

- Do you think that the Safer Cities initiative criminalizes poverty and/or homelessness? Why or why not?
- Why are the majority of services for the poor and homeless concentrated in one area? What are some benefits to this concentration? What are some detriments? Who has the most to gain/lose?
- Gentrification is “the process of renewal and rebuilding accompanying the influx of middle-class or affluent people into deteriorating areas that often displaces poorer residents”. Who benefits the most from gentrification? Find examples of other cities or neighborhoods that have undergone gentrification and compare them to Skid Row. What do you think will happen in L.A.?



Photo credit: Richard Hartog / Los Angeles Times
Senior lead officer Jack Richter checks in on a homeless man at the corner of San Julian St. and 6th Street during a look at Skid Row in downtown Los Angeles, Wednesday, April 09, 2008. Crime has risen in the neighborhood.

Learn More:

The Lamp Community - Learn more about the Lamp Community and their outreach to the homeless of L.A.
<http://lampcommunity.org/>

Read the columns of Steve Lopez:
<http://www.latimes.com/news/columnists/la-columnist-slopez,0,7768178.columnist>

DVD: Humble Beauty
This hour-long documentary tells the story of a group of homeless and formerly homeless artists living in Skid Row. The film features several Lamp Community artists.
<http://www.humblebeauty.com/>

Resources from Education for Justice:

Homelessness Unit
For more information on homelessness, see our Homelessness Unit for a variety of resources: <http://www.educationforjustice.org/node/3473>