

inside every moment
is a lifetime

TAKE

TAKE Time to Talk
Discussion Guide
TAKE Briefing
Restorative Justice Briefing

Presented by



Liberation Entertainment and Crux Entertainment
present a Telos film *TAKE*

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TAKE Time to Talk Discussion Guide

Introduction

The film *TAKE* addresses profound issues about justice, forgiveness, and God's role in human events. Wouldn't it be wonderful to converse with friends about these themes after the movie? This discussion guide will help you reflect together, encouraging positive change in your perspective, and perhaps your life.

The suggestions below assume that you are hosting an evening of entertainment and discussion. The whole event will take three to four hours, although it could certainly go longer if you wish. In fact, you might begin a conversation that will extend over days and weeks.

FAQs

- *Why host an evening discussion?* Because it is fun to sit down with friends for a lively evening of conversation. This will not be a typical dinner party, and that's part of the attraction. Your friends will leave with a deeper appreciation of key questions with which all humans struggle. They will most likely remember the evening for a long time.
- *What preparation is involved?* It will not require much more preparation than a simple dinner party. Think about whom to invite—articulate, friendly people with different perspectives on life. Arrange for everyone to watch *TAKE* together in a theater or on DVD. Give them the **TAKE Briefing** (attached) in advance. Organize a meal, which can be done as a pot luck, in a space that is conducive to eating and talking in the large group. Introduce one or more of the discussion topics, using this guide. Conclude by giving your guests the **Restorative Justice Briefing** (attached) as they leave.
- *How do I keep the conversation friendly?* The issues raised by *TAKE* are controversial, and people may start to get hot under the collar. Remind your guests at the outset that the opinions they will take away at the end of the evening will be affected by the ones they have heard from others. The one rule for the night is to show respect to everyone, especially by listening to each person carefully.
- *What is the movie about?* *TAKE* moves between two days in the lives of Ana and Saul. The first is the day of a terrible crime that changes both of their lives. The second day, many years later, is the day of Saul's execution and of the fateful meeting between Ana and Saul that takes place before he is put to death.

Preparing for the Evening

Since a big part of the evening will be conversation, you should limit the number of guests to 10 or 12. When you invite them, tell them that everyone will be watching an award-winning movie starring Minnie Driver and Jeremy Renner that raises some pretty fundamental issues. After the movie, you will be leading a conversation on some of those issues as you share a meal together. Send a copy of the **TAKE Briefing** and invite them to look it over before they come. You might have extra copies available for those who have misplaced theirs.

After the Movie

Three major issues are raised by *TAKE*. One has to do with forgiveness, the second with justice, and the third with human freedom. Decide which one(s) you would like to offer for discussion. If you limit the time devoted to each topic to 30 or 45 minutes, you could conceivably cover all three. But you and your guests may prefer to focus on only one of the topics.

Discussion Topic One: Why Forgive?

Read the following three paragraphs to the group to launch this part of the discussion:

Forgiveness is an important and difficult topic. It is a controversial one among people who work with crime victims because forgiveness is too often presented to victims as something they must do, whether they are ready or not.

Forgiveness is not something any of us finds easy to do, particularly if the offense against us was serious. But it can be difficult even when the wrong is relatively insignificant. In the book *The Secret Life of Bees*, Sue Monk Kidd's protagonist reflects that "[p]eople in general would rather die than forgive. It's that hard. If God said in plain language, 'I'm giving you a choice: forgive or die,' a lot of people would go ahead and order their coffin."

Ana's forgiveness of Saul near the end of the movie comes as a surprise. After all, she has devoted years of her life to ensuring that he receives the punishment imposed by the courts. Why, then, does she forgive? And what are some of the consequences of that decision?

People may suggest some of the following:

- *She does it for herself, not for Saul.* Saul may not deserve forgiveness, but in the end that doesn't matter to Ana. She extends forgiveness because of how it will benefit her, not Saul.
- *Both have come to see the other as a human.* Saul is no longer an animal, or a monster, as he had seemed to Ana just hours before. He is a human being. "I've tried so hard not to give you a face—trying to deny your humanity," she says. But on the ride to the prison, as she replays the events of seven years ago, she realizes that it was a person who did this to her, not an animal. Saul assumes that she is angry with him; in fact, he has made her into an accuser who justifies the self-hatred he feels. But then he comes to see her as a mother whose child is dead.
- *Ana feels a burden falling from her shoulders.* She does not expect to forgive Saul when she enters the room. But while she is there, even as she speaks the words, she realizes that she needs to forgive so that the rest of her life is no longer consumed by Saul and the pain he has caused. She leaves behind the trailer full of Jesse's things, symbolizing the freedom she has now found. She no longer needs to watch Saul's execution, and she leaves the building as he is being prepared.
- *Saul finds the measure of peace he has longed for.* Near the end of their conversation, Steven asks Saul, "You said you wanted peace. Why are you so adamant that it's not possible?" Saul replies, "I don't think it should be." In other words, he cannot gain peace because he himself believes it should not be possible for someone like him to have peace. But when the person he hurt most forgives him, and does so in spite of the fact that he does not deserve it, the barrier is broken, and he goes to his death in peace.

- *Her forgiveness does not mean Saul avoids execution.* Her forgiveness is not the same as the forgiveness (pardon) that could be extended by the governor of their state. It does not mean that he avoids the legal judgment imposed by the sentencing judge.

Discussion Topic Two: What Is Justice?

Read the following five paragraphs to the group to launch this part of the discussion:

TAKE shows us a kind of justice carried out in court, prison, and, ultimately, the execution chamber. Justice is legal and impersonal. It answers certain questions: Did someone break the law? Who did it? How will we punish that person?

But we discover that Ana and Saul have other questions as well. Who is this person whose life has crossed mine so violently? What can be done to bind the wounds left by the crime? Studies of programs that bring victims and offenders together to talk consistently find that those who participate in the meetings are more satisfied that **justice** was done than are victims and offenders who only go through the court process.

So there is legal justice, which is impersonal and carried out by the justice system. There is also a more personal kind of justice, one that is best done by the parties themselves with the help of a trained facilitator. It involves conversation, deep apology, efforts to make amends, and, sometimes, forgiveness.

This personal form of justice has been called “restorative justice.” Its practitioners help willing victims and offenders to meet. The meetings are carefully planned and facilitated; they do not happen spontaneously, as happens in the movie for dramatic purposes. I will give you more information on restorative justice before you leave. [*This is the Restorative Justice Briefing at the end of this guide.*]

Based on the movie or on your own experiences, why would victims and offenders who meet together be more likely to say that justice was done than those who only go through the criminal justice process?

People may suggest some of the following:

- *It gives victims and offenders a chance to participate directly.* Victims and offenders generally play very limited roles in the justice system. Justice there is something that happens to them, not something in which they participate. Restorative justice meetings give them an opportunity to actively take part in deciding on a just resolution.
- *It offers a space for emotion to be expressed.* Emotion is generally suppressed in courtrooms as an impediment to a rational judgment. But crime and victimization bring high emotion in their wake, and restorative justice programs allow that emotion to be expressed in a safe, respectful manner.
- *It offers a different kind of resolution.* The justice system determines whether a law was broken and who did it, but does little to help victims and offenders deal with the other issues they face. Restorative justice programs allow for that personal and relational resolution.
- *It offers offenders a chance to deeply apologize.* Saul’s conversation with Steven (the chaplain) covers a number of subjects, but one repeated refrain is that Saul feels very guilty. He is unwilling to alleviate it by blaming God, his past, or anything/anyone else. He believes that he will go to his death with this incredible burden. Yet, when Ana suddenly appears in his holding cell, he stumblingly offers an apology we can

recognize as heartfelt. Finally, the person who needs to hear his expression of regret and guilt is there to listen.

- *It offers victims the opportunity to get answers and to respond.* In *TAKE*, both Ana and Saul say that they have pieced together each other's life story. This is a dramatic device that allows them to move to resolution (repentance and forgiveness) very quickly in their short meeting, since the viewer has already pieced together what happened as the movie unfolds. In real life, neither party has a very complete understanding of the other. In fact, one of the key motivations for wanting to meet is to gain information that is available only from the other person. It takes significant preparation and careful facilitation to make it possible for victims and offenders to move to the sort of resolution we see in the movie.

Discussion Topic Three: Is God in Control?

Read the following five paragraphs to the group to launch this part of the discussion:

Among other things, crime can lead to a spiritual crisis for the victim and the offender. For people of faith, victimization raises questions about the power of God to protect, why evil happens to those who do not deserve it, and where God is in the painful aftermath of crime. Offenders can have a deep sense of guilt and a belief that they are beyond forgiveness by God, or that such forgiveness is too cheap to be meaningful.

There are clues that Ana may be dealing with questions of faith. Seven years after Jesse's death, she drives a car with a rosary hanging from the rear view mirror. But it is in the interactions between Saul and Steven, a rookie chaplain, that issues of faith are explicitly explored. Saul tosses aside Steven's glib answers and challenges his neat formulas. Nevertheless, Steven hangs on tenaciously to a belief in a loving God. In the end it appears that Saul may be persuaded, if not by the arguments, then by the unexpected meeting with Ana.

They discuss whether God is in control. Saul believes that God is not, that Saul made choices and is master of his destiny. He argues that if God is in control, God must bear some of the responsibility for what happened at that moment in the grocery store, but he is unwilling to let himself off the hook with that easy explanation. "I was born alone and I'm going to die alone. O.K.? Everything in-between is not God's plan. It's my choice. Don't tell me about God's plan."

If God is in control, Saul reasons, then it means that God wanted Jesse to die and for Ana to suffer as she has. "You think God wanted that to happen to him?" Saul asks. "To his mother?"

These are the challenges that Saul issues to Steven and to God. What do you think? How is it possible to reconcile the idea of an all-powerful, loving God with the evil we experience (and that we sometimes commit)?

People may suggest some of the following:

- *Perhaps God has some power, but it is limited and used only sparingly.* This is as much as Saul is willing to concede early in his conversation with Steven. "Maybe [God] can nudge people to do something good for themselves. But I don't believe He's that involved . . . Ultimately, you are at the mercy of other people."
- *Perhaps there is no God.* Although this is not a position Saul argues, it might as well be from a practical perspective, since he believes that God does not become involved in human affairs.

- *Perhaps God is not fully in control, but God is at least available to people.* Once Steven finds his initial answers rejected, he raises this possibility. “For the sake of argument,” he asks Saul, “let’s say you do, to some degree, control your own destiny. Do you really believe that God is unavailable in that world?” When Saul replies, “Yes,” Steven points out the contradiction. “You can’t want peace, be powerless to achieve it, and be the sole owner of your actions. For God’s sake, Saul, for your sake, if you’re going to claim all the power, then do something with it.”
- *Perhaps God is in control, but in a different way than Saul expects.* Saul believes that God would have protected Jesse from death if He were in control. Steven points out that God may be exercising that control by placing deep guilt in Saul so that Saul is forced to deal personally with his actions. Steven asks him, “If God doesn’t want to bother with you, then why is this heart so heavy? Where do you think guilt comes from?” Saul has no answer to this question. His deep sense of guilt has been the foundation for his belief that there is no God. Now he must consider the possibility that the guilt is a gift from God. If so, then God is able to enter his life, lift the guilt, and give him peace.
- *It matters whether there is a God or not.* Steven’s position is that however confused Saul is about God, he needs peace that only God can offer. “[A]llow yourself to believe for just a moment that even though no one in this world gives a shit about whether you live or die, someone [God] loves you.” This silences Saul, who is thinking this over as he prepares for his execution. Then Ana appears in his holding cell, giving Saul a chance to apologize and Ana the opportunity to offer her extraordinary and undeserved forgiveness.

Discussion Topic Four: What Did the Writer/Director Mean?

There are at least three ways in which Charles Oliver, the writer/director, suggests deeper possibilities through symbolism, allusion, and hypothesis. Your guests may be interested in discussing one or more of these ideas. *Read the paragraphs for the questions you choose in order to launch this part of the discussion.*

1. Shoes. Shoes keep appearing throughout the movie. Can you recall times that they become part of the plotline? What do you think they represent?

People may suggest some of the following:

- *The school.* At the beginning we see Jesse waiting in a chair in his school’s hallway. While Ana is getting bad news from his principal and teacher, Jesse ties his left shoe to the chair. In her hurry to leave the building, Ana pulls the shoe off of Jesse’s foot and leaves it behind.
- *The shoe store.* This leads to the scene in the shoe store when Jesse falls in love with his impractical red boots. At first he wears them, demonstrating that they are great for moving through puddles. Later he carries them around, wanting to keep them in pristine condition to show his friends at school.
- *The grocery store.* As he and Ana walk into the grocery store, Jesse carries his new boots. He entrusts them to Ana when he goes to the men’s room.
- *The get-away.* After the shooting, as Jesse struggles to get free from Saul, his slipper falls off and remains lying there in the parking lot as Saul speeds away.

- *The prison.* When Ana arrives at the prison, she changes out of her driving shoes, which were open-toed, into shoes that meet prison regulations.
- *The execution.* After Saul has been strapped to the gurney and as he awaits the injection of lethal substances into his body, he kicks off his left slipper.

2. *Names.* Charles Oliver's choice of names point to a story from the New Testament about the conversion of the apostle Paul (formerly named Saul) on the road between Jerusalem and Damascus.

Here is a synopsis of the story, which appears in the seventh and ninth chapters of Acts: Within months of Jesus' death and resurrection, His followers are given divine power, and their community grows by thousands of people in a short time. The religious establishment is concerned because the community's leaders say that Jesus is actually God. Threats and beatings do not discourage the leaders from continuing to preach this new message.

A brilliant and zealous young member of the religious establishment named Saul receives permission to arrest and imprison members of this new community, which became the early Church. One of the first ones arrested is a man named Stephen, who has a vision during his trial in which he sees Jesus standing at God's right hand. The leaders understand this to mean that Jesus is considered God, and they drag Stephen outside and stone him to death for blasphemy. Saul approves of this and holds the cloaks of the men who execute Stephen.

Because of Saul's determination to suppress this new movement (he is described as "breathing threats and murder"), many of the members of the early Church flee to other cities. So Saul receives permission to travel to Damascus, roughly 135 miles north of Jerusalem, to make more arrests and bring the suspects back to Jerusalem for trial.

As Saul and his companions approach Damascus, a light from heaven flashes around him and he falls to the ground. The voice of Jesus calls out, "Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" and Saul is blinded.

His companions lead him into the city, and in a vision Jesus appears to a man named Ananias, telling him to go pray for Saul. In spite of misgivings and fear, Ananias obeys. Saul receives his sight back and is baptized into the new Church. He immediately begins to publicly proclaim that Jesus is God, but in spite of this, he is not initially trusted by the church in Jerusalem. It is not until another church leader, Barnabas, vouches for him that they are willing to accept him as one of them.

TAKE is not an allegory in which we can neatly compare characters in the movie with those in this biblical story. Instead, the names are a clue that this biblical story is important in understanding the movie: The name Ana is an abbreviation of Ananias; the name Jesse is similar to Jesus; the chaplain's name, Steven, is the same as the prophet Stephen; the prison's name, Ascus, is the last two syllables of Damascus. Saul not only has the same name as the persecutor, but he is also blinded in one eye for much of the film.

The story in Acts is most commonly understood to be a conversion story. What does this story add to your understanding of *TAKE*? Saul appears to reject all of Steven's arguments that God is loving and powerful. Do you think that there is a conversion before his execution? If so, what leads to that?

The biblical story can also be seen as a story about forgiveness—divine forgiveness as well as forgiveness by Saul’s victims in Jerusalem. Viewed in this light, what, if anything, does the movie add to our understanding of the meaning of and occasions for forgiveness?

3. *Reality*. When they meet, both Ana and Saul say that they have pieced together each other’s story from a few clues they picked up at the grocery store. One way of interpreting the movie, then, is that everything we see from the day of the crime onward is not what actually happened, but rather is the story each has constructed about the other.

How would this interpretation influence your understanding of justice and forgiveness as presented in *TAKE*?

At the Conclusion

Before your guests leave, challenge them to think about ways to put what they have learned into action:

- Is there someone you need to forgive? Do you need to confess something to someone?
- Should victims and offenders who want to participate in a restorative meeting have the right to do so? Do you want to help?

Let them know about excellent online resources on these issues. Good places to start are www.takejustice.org and www.giveforgiveness.org.

As they leave give them a copy of the *Restorative Justice Briefing*.

TAKE Briefing

Introduction

Crime makes us afraid. We change our behavior, invest in security systems, install multiple locks, all in an attempt to avoid danger. Politicians understand our insecurity and campaign for tougher laws. Who, after all, could be *for* crime?

But crime and justice also serve as a form of public drama. We are captivated by high-profile criminal cases, police shows on TV, and murder mysteries. Some national cable networks pounce every time a crime can be televised—hostage situations, police manhunts, and the like bring out helicopters and onsite satellite transmission equipment.

The *injustice* of the criminal justice system is a great way to get the phones ringing on a radio talk show. Depending on the political orientation of the host, the discussion might focus on how police are handcuffed by court-mandated technicalities, or perhaps on the obvious racism of a system that locks up so many minorities.

The Human Side of Crime

What can get lost in all of this is the human side of crime. For victims and offenders, crime is not primarily about lawbreaking and due process protections. It is about a moment in time when one person preyed upon another. It is about the days, months, and sometimes years afterward spent coming to terms with what happened.

TAKE occurs over two days—one day in the present and one day in the past. Ana (Minnie Driver) drives through the desert to witness the execution of Saul (Jeremy Renner), the stranger who destroyed her life so many years ago. Saul waits out the final hours of his life. Both are caught in the memory of the day when their lives crossed paths and changed forever. Years earlier, Saul is out of a job, out of money, and out of time to pay his debts. Ana, with her young son, tries to work out her uncertain future. It takes only a moment for their lives to collide and become permanently intertwined.

It is clear that much has changed in the intervening time. This is apparent in their faces. As you watch the movie, it might be useful to keep some things in mind.

Victims

According to the National Organization for Victim Assistance, crime victims suffer four kinds of injuries: physical, financial, emotional, and social. Survivors (close relatives of murder victims, like Ana) will experience these as well.

Emotional injuries are the “feeling level” reactions to the crisis caused by crime. Immediate responses may include shock, disbelief, and denial. But as the shock wears off, other emotions may surface. These include:

- anger or rage directed at the offender, God, oneself, family members, friends, the justice system, and so forth;
- fear or terror, which can lead to curtailed behavior and panic attacks;



Ana, day one.



Ana, day two.

- frustration arising from the feelings of helplessness and powerlessness experienced while the crime is taking place;
- confusion caused by victims' inability to understand why the crime happened to them;
- guilt or self-blame caused by a sense that the victims did something that made them susceptible ("I shouldn't have been there") or because they survived when someone else was injured or died;
- shame and humiliation, a sense of being dirty because of the crime or of having deserved to be hurt;
- grief or sorrow, a time of intense sadness that may last a long time.

Social injuries are those that are caused by the people around the victim. These injuries lead victims to feel that no one cares, that they cannot get the help they need, or that they are being treated insensitively. Anyone can cause such injuries: family members, law enforcement personnel, friends, clergy, etc.

Offenders

There are many theories about why people commit crimes. Some begin with the offenders themselves and point to biological or psychological causes, such as head injuries, hormonal imbalances, low intelligence, and psychopathologies. Others consider the social environments of offenders, such as abusive or dysfunctional family relationships, disorganized neighborhoods,



Saul, day one.



Saul, day two.

stigmatization, and conflict. A third group of theories looks for economic explanations, such as the lack of legitimate means of achieving economic goals, the implicit cost-benefit analysis made by would-be criminals, or the influence of sudden opportunity to commit a crime. A fourth group of theories is more political in nature, considering class, gender, or racial inequalities.

Whatever explanations may apply in particular cases, in virtually all criminal acts there is a point in time during which the offender chooses to commit the crime or embarks on a course of action that leads to the crime.

However, it must be noted that there is a higher crime rate in communities made up of people who are members of racial or ethnic minorities or who are poor. For some reason, they seem to be more likely than others to make that choice.

As you watch the movie, consider these questions:

- *What evidence of emotional or social injuries do you notice with Ana?*
- *What contributed to Saul's decisions to hold up the store and to take Jesse hostage? Do these influence his sense of responsibility?*

Restorative Justice Briefing

The meeting between Ana and Saul is the climax of the movie; the victim and the offender stand face-to-face for the first time since the burglary and kidnapping. They were both undoubtedly present for Saul's trial, but trials are conducted by legal professionals to determine whether particular laws have been broken and, if so, what punishment to impose on the offender.* Ana may have testified about what took place during the robbery.

Thanks to the victim rights movement, she would have been able to observe the rest of the trial with other spectators; after Saul was found guilty, she would have been given the opportunity to make a victim impact statement. Saul would also have had an opportunity to make a statement before he was sentenced.

This is not enough for some victims and offenders. Because of that, some states have established programs that allow victims of serious crimes to ask to speak with the offender while the offender is in prison. Facilitators are assigned to determine whether the offenders and victims wish to meet, are psychologically and emotionally able to do so, are prepared for what might take place, and are able to agree on a setting for the meeting that is suitable for both.

The meeting or meetings (sometimes more than one takes place) are conducted with the assistance of the facilitator, who has been trained to do this sensitive work. In these programs, the victim and offender would never meet alone and unprepared, as did Ana and Saul in the movie.

The hallmark of restorative justice is that it offers a way for the parties to a crime—victims, offenders, family members, friends, and sometimes others—to meet to discuss the crime and the harm that resulted. The meetings typically begin by reviewing how both the offenders and the victims remember the crime. This gives victims the opportunity to ask questions that may have been troubling them since the crime (“Why me?” is a common question). It allows offenders to explain why they did what they did, not as an excuse but as a way of helping the victim understand what happened.

At some point in the meeting the conversation turns to the harm that resulted from the crime. This can include financial and material loss, emotional distress, the loss of a sense of safety, and so forth. Some harm can be repaired with information offered by the offender or by the offender's heartfelt apology. Some harm can be repaired by returning property or making restitution payments. Some harm can be repaired only in a symbolic way.

Restorative meetings take place only after the offender has accepted responsibility for the crime and when all the parties agree to participate. Most restorative meetings involve crimes that are much less serious than murder. Frequently they take place before the judge has imposed a sentence. In those instances, when the parties have come to an agreement, it is presented to the judge, who may incorporate it in the sentence.

Research on how victims and offenders respond to these kinds of meetings is very positive. Victims' post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms are reduced, as is their desire for violent revenge. Offenders' attitudes about crime and victims change significantly. Those who are eventually released are less likely to commit new crimes than those who do not participate in restorative meetings. Victims and offenders who meet together are more satisfied that justice has been done.

Restorative justice processes are used in more than 100 countries around the world. They have been made key components of the criminal justice systems in a number of countries. They are frequently used first with juvenile offenders and then extended to adult offenders.

A great deal of information on restorative justice is available on the web. A good place to start is www.takejustice.org or www.restorativejustice.org.

* Although 95 percent of criminal cases are settled with a guilty plea, it is likely that there was a trial in this case. That is because it was a death penalty case.