

The Visitor

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Film length: 1hr, 44 minutes

Film rating: PG-13

Director: Tom McCarthy

Genre: Drama

In a world of six billion people, it only takes one to change your life.

Synopsis & Central Plot:

The Visitor follows Walter Vale, a middle-aged, spiritless economics professor, who is shocked to discover a couple living illegally in his Greenwich Village apartment. His hostility gradually turns to hospitality as this couple, who first occupy his home, take up residence in his heart. Tarek Khalil and Zainab, his “visitors,” two undocumented immigrants are the victims of a rental scam, it turns out. The plot develops as the three struggle to trust each other and build community. Vale’s listless spirit is revived by the relationship that forms as Tarek’s zest for life rekindles Vale’s own. When Tarek is pick up by Homeland Security, detained, and in danger of being deported Vale tries to come to his rescue. Vale’s hospitality extends to Tarek’s mother, Mouna as they try to prevent Tarek’s deportation to Syria, and romance ensues. A refreshing and humorous sub-plot tracks Vale as he acquires his dream of developing his musical skill, a parallel to his journey to greater spiritual health and human wholeness.

Beneath the story line, the film addresses the plight of immigrants in a post 9/11 America. The Statue of Liberty welcomed visitors in Pre-9/11 America in the spirit of Emma Lazarus’s words: “Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.” The Pre 9/11 America as the film depicts it embraced cultural diversity and was enriched and enlivened itself by the hopes and dreams of immigrants. On the other hand, post 9/11 America appears antagonistic, hostile and suspicious of visitors, condemning them to walk in fear. The film explores some of the key issues surrounding the immigration debate today and raises new questions in the process.

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Main Themes to Engage through the Film:

- Crisis in hospitality in America in the post 9/11 era.
- The right to immigrate
- Racial profiling as a result of 9/11
- Hostility vs. Hospitality
- Effects on persons and society of a failed immigration system
- Effects on the person of engaging in with work of justice.



“We must never forget that many immigrants come to this country in desperate circumstances. Some have fled political persecution, war, and economic devastation . . . Others have wagered on finding a better life in this country in the face of economic desperation at home. As Pope John Paul II has noted, ‘In many regions of the world today people live in tragic situations of instability and uncertainty. It does not come as a surprise that in such contexts the poor and the destitute make plans to escape, to seek a new land that can offer them bread, dignity and peace. This is the migration of the desperate.’”

-U.S. Catholic Bishops, *Welcoming the Stranger Among Us: Unity in Diversity*, Nov. 15, 2000

Catholic Social Teaching Themes and Connections:

The Visitor, as the title suggests, focuses on the crisis in hospitality in America in the post 9/11 era. In its scriptural sense “hospitality” is a fundamental value for individual and societal human development; practicing hospitality fleshes out the implications of the Catholic Social Teaching principles

- The **dignity of the human person** as threatened by rigid, impersonal bureaucracies, in particular, the current immigration enforcement procedures employed in the USA after 9/11.
- The **call to family and community** for genuine human development as Walter Vale struggles to escape the isolation and meaningless state he has fallen into after his wife’s death and enter into the familial relationships among Tarek, his mother Mouna and their deceased father.
- The **option for the poor and vulnerable** that Walter chooses as he personally encounters and supports Tarek, Zainab and Mouna who are homeless and vulnerable immigrants in New York City.
- The **human solidarity** which Walter and the filmgoers experience with the tens of thousands of immigrants warehoused in detention centers as criminals, because they simply tried to find work or to flee economic and political oppression in their own countries.

Questions for Reflection & Discussion

- In the opening scene, Walter meets his new piano teacher, Mrs. Watson. From the perspective of the dignity of persons, discuss the qualities missing from this teacher-student encounter that characterize it as inhospitable.
- Which other scenes in the film reveal the problems of inequality, exclusion and distrust in relationships as opposed to relationships distinguished by equality, inclusion, and hospitality?
- When Walter Vale’s apologetic student visits his office to drop off a late term paper, Walter refuses to listen or accept the late paper and the student reminds Walter that he himself is still late giving out the course syllabus. How does Walter do the very thing he criticized in his own encounter with the piano teacher? How does the exchange violate a respect for human dignity in this encounter? How he abuses his authority as an instructor.
- Discuss three of the events in the film that show Walter changing from a cold, impersonal person to a more alive, welcoming, hospitable one.
- Which relationships with other characters in the film significantly affect Walter’s change to a fuller and more alive human being?
- Discuss the role of Tarek as Walter’s teacher; is the film making a statement about how Post 9/11 America can benefit from welcoming and treating immigrants with dignity and respect? What are the dangers or consequences if we don’t?

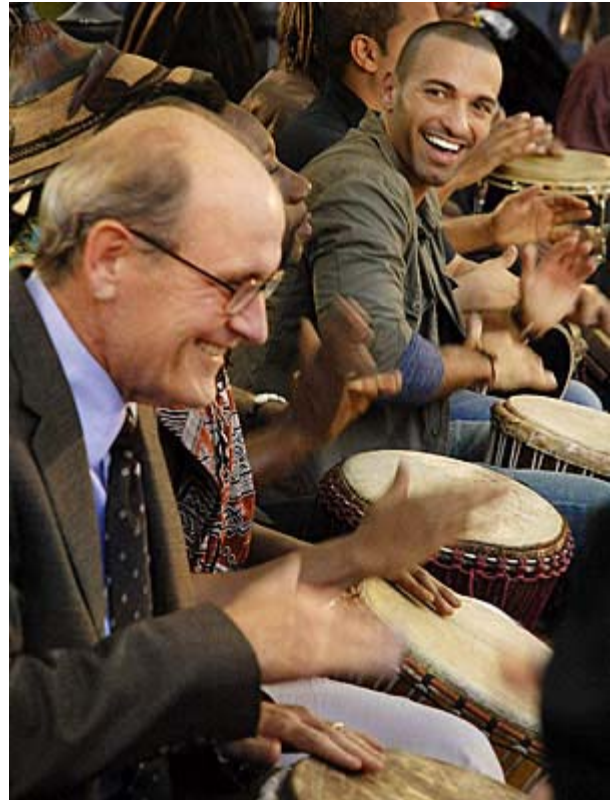


Questions for Reflection & Discussion, cont'd

- What does “music” symbolize in the film?
- Discuss how this system of detention developed by Immigration Control conforms or violates the basic social justice principle of the dignity of the person.
- Walter, Zainab and Mouna ride on the Staten Island ferry-boat and discuss coming to America before the Twin Towers were destroyed on 9/11 by terrorist attacks. What is the significance to Walter’s statement that he had never visited the Statue of Liberty?
- Walter visits the detention center, finds that Tarek has been deported to Syria and confronts the correctional officers saying: “You can’t just take people away like that! Do you hear me? He was a good man! A good person! It is not fair! We are not just helpless children! He had a life! Do you hear me? Do you hear me? What’s the matter with you? “Then Mouna appears and tells Walter, “Let’s go. Let’s go. There is nothing we can do.” Then in the cab a few seconds later she says, “He did nothing wrong.” Was Walter’s condemnation of Tarek’s treatment justified or not? Explain. Do you agree or disagree with Mouna that “There is nothing we can do”? Why or why not?
- How does this film show some of the ways in which our immigration system is flawed today? How should we balance freedom with security?
- Catholic Social Teaching recognizes that all peoples have a right to migrate and that sovereign countries also have a right to control their borders. From the perspective of the film, is the American post 9/11 immigration control process honoring or violating immigrants’ rights? Are such policies true to our own understanding of ourselves as a nation of immigrants?
- Which scene or two from the film impressed you as showing hope and justice for immigration? Explain.
- What has been your personal experience with immigrants? How does Walter’s experience with immigrants compare or contrast with yours?

Further Resources for Study and Reflection:

The full text of the U.S. Catholic Bishops, *Welcoming the Stranger Among Us: Unity in Diversity*; may be found at: <http://www.usccb.org/mrs/unity.shtml>



Education for Justice Resources:

Immigration: The Origins of the Church’s Position

<http://www.educationforjustice.org/node/3261>

Immigration and the Question of Security

<http://www.educationforjustice.org/system/files/ImmigrationSecurity08.pdf>

The Bishops’ Five Principles to Guide Immigration Policy

<http://www.educationforjustice.org/node/2919>

CST and Immigration

<http://www.educationforjustice.org/node/2404>

Backgrounder: Human Dignity:

<http://www.educationforjustice.org/node/500>