

**ONE DREAM  
CAN CHANGE THE WORLD**

# **SELMA**

**D I S C U S S I O N   G U I D E**



HARPOFILMS

INGENIOUS



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# SELMA

DISCUSSION GUIDE



## LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR

Dear Comrade,

How a girl from Compton ended up directing the first studio feature film about Dr. King - I can't tell you. The fact that it happened has changed my life. Making and sharing SELMA has been a dream beyond any that I imagined.

A couple months ago, I visited the White House upon the invitation of the President and the First Lady. It was a stunningly, beautiful experience. The first film to ever screen at the White House was entitled "Birth of a Nation," also known as "The Klansman." The film's plot and characterizations glamorize racism and oppression. That was in 1915. In 2015, exactly 100 years later, we screened SELMA, a film about justice and dignity, in that same building with great pride. It was a moment heavy with history and light with pure joy all at once.

President Obama's introduction of SELMA in the Presidential Screening Room, the quality time he and the First Lady took with us before and after, the stories he shared with my cast and crew, the handshake POTUS gave my father, the hug FLOTUS gave my mother, the laughter, the smiles, the extra time they gave us all long beyond when we were scheduled to go, the warmth, the respect, it was just beyond exquisite. "I'm proud of you," she said to me. "We're proud of you," he added. I'm proud too - of them, of us, of the film, of this moment in all our lives. A moment ripe with new energy for change and progress. Who knows what lies ahead. But what has already occurred is food and fuel and fire and freedom. We hope our film serves as a reminder of that fact.

From the White House to your house, I'm grateful to you for creating a space for this story to live and breathe and be seen and discussed. I'm grateful to every single person who made it so, most especially the many good people who worked hard in 1965 for the equal rights of us all.

Onward,

**Ava DuVernay**

Director/Executive Producer

**SELMA**

## ABOUT THE FILM

In spring of 1965, a series of dramatic events changed the course of America and the modern concept of civil rights forever -- as courageous marchers, led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., attempted three times to carry out a peaceful procession from Selma, Alabama to Montgomery, Alabama on a quest for the basic human right to vote. The shocking confrontations, the triumphant final march, and the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act that followed are now an indelible part of history. But the vitally relevant, vitally human story of Selma – from the political battles in the halls of power, to the grit and faith of people on the street, to the private, inner struggles Dr. King faced – has never been seen on the movie screen.

Ava DuVernay's Selma brings the power of all that went into creating that hard-won moment of long awaited justice to cinema with an uncompromising immediacy. The film is constructed out of a string of astonishing historical details, large and small -- including the relationship between Dr. King and President Lyndon Johnson, the troubling involvement of the FBI, and the unbreakable spirit of ordinary men and women who sacrificed and united around voting rights. But what emerged from these stark details are a vivid tapestry of an American turning point in the stirring journey of a man finding his way through doubts and daunting obstacles towards not just leadership, but the togetherness required to make real change in the world.

This guide was created for young people and adults alike, with the purpose of generating thoughtful discussions around the film Selma. Sit down with your family or friends and talk about the issues the film raises. For this kind of honest and open dialogue is truly the first step towards continuing Dr. King's important work.



## HOST A SELMA SALON

*Dr. King's movement for equal rights continues, and Selma is part of that effort. Start a meaningful dialogue by hosting an intimate Selma Salon at your home, and bringing your friends and neighbors together to view the film. Below is a step-by-step guide to help you plan your very own Selma Salon.*

### PICK THE TONE

Your Salon can be anything you wish – from brunch-and-a-movie on a Sunday, to a family movie night. It can be a call to action for your neighbors, or an educational opportunity that can start a meaningful conversation. Be creative, and don't be afraid to customize your approach to fit your group of friends, neighbors, or colleagues.

### CONSIDER TIMING AND AGENDA

This film can be used in a variety of small settings, depending on your own needs and restrictions. Time is one of the most important considerations. The film itself is 2 hours, 7 minutes, and for an effective event, you need to add at least 15 minutes before the film to set the tone, and 30 to 45 minutes after the film for a follow-up discussion and dialogue. To assist with the post-film discussion, you might consider inviting a moderator, or assembling a local expert or stakeholder, such as an elected official, religious leader, or educator at your home. You might also consider a series of two or three evenings, which would allow more time for an in-depth follow-up, or for the group to develop their own action plan. As you begin to envision your evening, you should set the agenda and format depending on your desired outcomes.

### CHOOSE A DATE

When picking the date and time for your Selma Salon, consider holidays and local events, as well as the general preferences of your invitees. A weeknight evening is often a good time to host an adults-only event, as it allows your friends and neighbors to come straight from work and does not conflict with major weekend plans. But if you are considering a family-friendly event, a weekend evening or afternoon might be best. If you are choosing between days, do not hesitate to ask a friend or colleague who has planned their own events about when they've had the most success with attendance.

*...and now that the basics are decided, you can get to planning your event!*

## HOST A SELMA SALON CONTINUED

### 2-4 WEEKS PRIOR

- Put together your invitation list.
- Design and mail or email your invitation. Make sure your invitation outlines all the details of your event: including the name of the film, and a description of the activities you have planned (panel discussion, moderated Q&A, open group dialogue, small group activities, etc.) as well as your address and email. If you are planning a potluck or bring-your-own-picnic event, make sure you detail this expectation in your invitation as well.

### 2 WEEKS PRIOR

- Plan the food and drinks you will serve. Will you serve drinks and light snacks? A full buffet meal? Do you have all the plates, utensils and cups you need?
- Prepare an agenda for your event. This can be as formal or as informal as you wish, but you should decide on the timing for arrivals, introductions, starting the film, and starting the post-film discussion or supplemental activities. Be sure to allow time for a bathroom and refreshment break after the film ends. This guide provides questions and discussion prompts for creating a unique, dynamic dialogue.

### 1 WEEK PRIOR

- Send out a reminder to those guests who have RSVP'd yes, or not RSVP'd at all.
- Consider providing RSVP'd guests with links to the film's website ([www.selmamovie.com](http://www.selmamovie.com)) the film's official Facebook ([www.facebook.com/SelmaMovie](http://www.facebook.com/SelmaMovie)) or Twitter (@SelmaMovie) to garner involvement in the issues, and get your guests excited about your event.

### 3 DAYS PRIOR

- Purchase the necessary food, drinks, and other event supplies.
- Confirm with your invited guests one more time, and consider resending links to any late RSVPs.
- Prepare and practice an introduction to the film and a welcome to your event.

### HOST A SELMA SALON CONTINUED

#### THE DAY OF THE EVENT

- Test your equipment before guests arrive. Give yourself ample time to test the DVD player and/or sound equipment to make sure everything will run smoothly.
- Arrange your space to accommodate your guests, and to create a welcoming environment for a meaningful event and discussion.
- Don't forget your agenda. Make the most out of your time by following the agenda you created. Welcome your guests to your home. Introduce the film and explain why you wanted to share it with the group. Before the film starts, let your guests know that there will be a short discussion, panel discussion, or activities in small breakout groups afterwards.

#### THE DAY AFTER

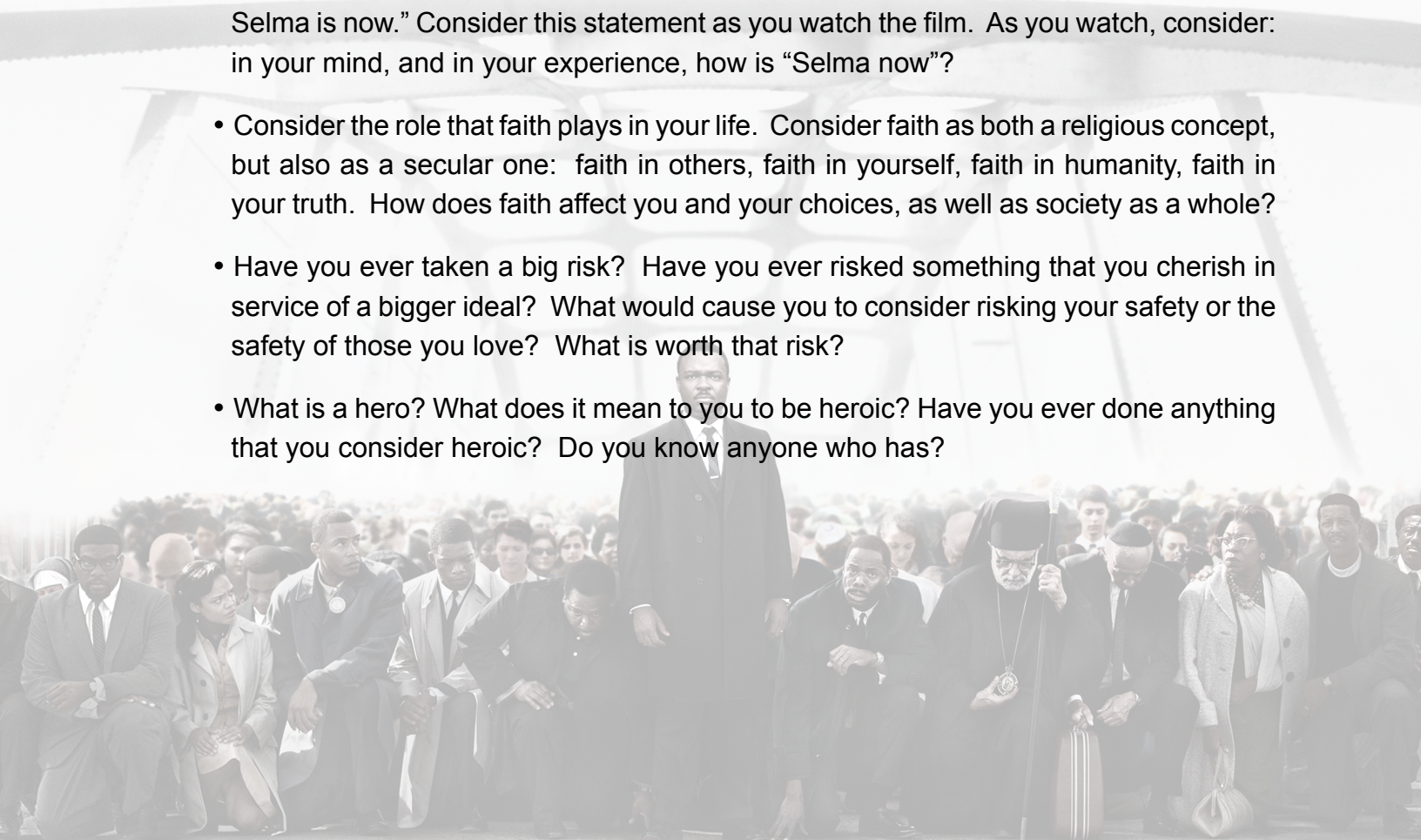
- Send a thank-you to all your guests and encourage them to continue the discussion and/or the action plan that was started at your Selma Salon.
- Think about the ways that you will continue to work towards the ideals and goals that Dr. King lived and died for – even after the movie ends.



### THINGS TO CONSIDER BEFORE WATCHING SELMA

*The film Selma depicts historical events and actual people, but it can be viewed and appreciated through more lenses than just an historical one. Take a moment to consider one or all of these themes to enhance both your appreciation of the history, the film, and your movie-viewing experience:*

- What do you know about Martin Luther King, Jr. and his friends, family, and colleagues as historical figures? What do you know about them as actual people?
- Why might some consider the right to vote one of the most important rights for a citizen of a democracy? Why is voting such a powerful social tool? What is lost if a person is denied the right to vote?
- The rapper Common, in his acceptance speech for his Golden Globe® for Best Original Song, said “I am the hopeful black woman who was denied her right to vote. I am the caring white supporter killed on the front lines of freedom. I am the unarmed black kid who maybe needed a hand, but was instead given a bullet. I am the two fallen police officers slain in the line of duty. ... Selma has awakened my humanity. Selma is now.” Consider this statement as you watch the film. As you watch, consider: in your mind, and in your experience, how is “Selma now”?
- Consider the role that faith plays in your life. Consider faith as both a religious concept, but also as a secular one: faith in others, faith in yourself, faith in humanity, faith in your truth. How does faith affect you and your choices, as well as society as a whole?
- Have you ever taken a big risk? Have you ever risked something that you cherish in service of a bigger ideal? What would cause you to consider risking your safety or the safety of those you love? What is worth that risk?
- What is a hero? What does it mean to you to be heroic? Have you ever done anything that you consider heroic? Do you know anyone who has?



## THINGS TO CONSIDER AFTER WATCHING SELMA

*Selma can be appreciated on many levels: as a work of art, as a dramatization of history, and as a timeless statement about civil responsibility. Use the following discussion starters to broaden your thinking about the film and the issues it depicts.*

### MEDIA LITERACY/ FILM STUDIES

- The scenes that open the film - Dr. King preparing for, and being awarded, the Nobel Peace Prize; the murder of four young girls in a church bombing; and Annie Lee Cooper being denied the right to vote by a white clerk – are not presented chronologically in relation to the rest of the film. Why do you think the filmmakers chose to start the film with these scenes, in this particular order?
- The history of the four young girls killed in the bombing at the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham is well-known. And yet, the depiction of this event shocks and startles the audience. Why is this so? What artistic devices does the filmmaker use in her depiction of this event to deepen its impact on the audience?
- How is watching this film a different experience of the history than reading about it in a book? How does this film create an immediacy and an emotional response that reading about the same events might not?
- How might seeing this film allow for a deeper understanding of the history, and perhaps even a new level of empathy in the viewer? In turn, how can this deeper understanding be used to make a difference in contemporary society?
- This film is not a historical document, but a narrative film based on historical events. Ava DuVernay, the director of the film, says she wasn't trying to capture all the facts of the matter, but rather she focused on representing the truth of it all. Discuss the difference between fact and truth in historical fiction, and the usefulness of both in the study of history.
- What surprised you about this film? What would you have liked to see more of? What questions remained for you after the film ended?
- Discuss the filmmaker's use of archival footage at the end of the film. How did this affect you as a viewer? What was the artistic value, and the artistic intent, of using this footage? What was the historical value? What was the filmmaker saying by using archival footage when she did?



## THINGS TO CONSIDER AFTER WATCHING SELMA CONTINUED

### DR. KING

- After Dr. King receives the Nobel Peace Prize, he returns to the United States where he continues to be treated like a second-class citizen. Discuss the brutality of this experience.
- Martin Luther King was a young man in 1965, only 36 years old. What are the pressures that are weighing on Dr. King during the period surrounding the Selma marches? What must he consider as he decides whether or not to go through with the marches?
- In the film, Dr. King says “As long as I am unable to exercise my constitutional right to vote, I do not have command of my own life. I cannot determine my own destiny. For it is determined for me by people who would rather see me suffer than succeed.” Does this represent your feelings about your constitutional right to vote, or does this represent a new perspective? Explain.
- This film presents Dr. King in all of his humanity – his fears, his failures, his strengths, and his weaknesses. In this light, do you think he still qualifies as a hero? Explain.
- What makes a good leader? What made Dr. King a good leader?

### THE MOVEMENT THEN AND NOW

- There are a number of women depicted in this film: Annie Lee Cooper, who continuously tried to register to vote in Selma and was continuously turned away; Coretta Scott King, Dr. King’s wife; Diane Nash, one of the leaders of the Selma movement; Amelia Boyton, who was one of the first activists in voter’s rights in Alabama; Richie Jean Jackson, who let Dr. King and his colleagues stay in her home; and Viola Liuzzo, a white woman from Michigan who traveled to Alabama to march. What did you know about the role of women in the civil rights movement before seeing this film? What did you learn, and what surprised you, about the central role that women played?
- The bridge that the protesters marched over is the Edmund Pettus Bridge, named after a man who served as a confederate general in the Civil War and a founding member and Grand Dragon in the Ku Klux Klan. Today, the bridge still bears his name. Should the bridge be renamed? For whom might the bridge be renamed? Explain.

### THINGS TO CONSIDER AFTER WATCHING SELMA CONTINUED

#### THE MOVEMENT THEN AND NOW

- Consider the following lyrics from the song “Glory” which closed the film. Discuss how the events in the film relate to the other events mentioned in the song.

*THE MOVEMENT IS A RHYTHM TO US*

*FREEDOM IS LIKE RELIGION TO US*

*JUSTICE IS JUXTAPOSITION IN US*

*JUSTICE FOR ALL JUST AIN'T SPECIFIC ENOUGH*

*ONE SON DIED, HIS SPIRIT IS REVISITIN' US*

*TRUANT LIVIN' LIVIN' IN US, RESISTANCE IS US*

*THAT'S WHY ROSA SAT ON THE BUS*

*THAT'S WHY WE WALK THROUGH FERGUSON WITH OUR HANDS UP*

*WHEN IT GO DOWN WE WOMAN AND MAN UP*

*THEY SAY, "STAY DOWN" AND WE STAND UP*

*SHOTS, WE ON THE GROUND, THE CAMERA PANNED UP*

*KING POINTED TO THE MOUNTAIN TOP AND WE RAN UP*

**SELMA** will be available on Digital HD April 21<sup>st</sup> and on Blu-ray & DVD May 5<sup>th</sup>

"Glory" is now on **iTunes**

