

OFFICIAL 2017

I'll Push You

Disability Discussion Guide



Introduction

I'll Push You is an inspirational exploration of the true meaning of friendship, generosity, and vulnerability. It tells the story of Justin Skeesuck and Patrick Gray, two friends who embark on an epic journey when Patrick agrees to a crazy proposition, to push his lifelong best friend Justin in a wheelchair across the 500-mile pilgrimage of El Camino de Santiago in northern Spain.

The result? A one-of-a-kind documentary film that chronicles a pilgrimage touching audiences worldwide that crave stories of love, hope, hospitality, and the power of community.

The following pages are a series of conversation starters for discussions of the themes in I'll Push You.



The Antidote for Our Times

We live in fearful, angry times. Our news feeds are daily doses of anxiety and depression. Our on-line and in-person encounters are plagued by resentment and mistrust. Because of—or in spite of this—we long for a better way, for stronger communities, and sense that there must be more to life than this.

I'll Push You, and the actions of the pilgrims in it, are the antidote for our times. Through their journey, Justin, Patrick, the filmmakers, and their fellow pilgrims show how our lives depend on sacrifice not greed, vulnerability not security, community not isolation, and love not fear. While news outlets and politicians profit from making us believe that danger awaits us at every turn, *I'll Push You* reminds us that kindness and hospitality wait around every corner, if we are bold enough to seek it.

Living life with a disability is challenging and can be overwhelming. But often our ability to face life with a disability rests our willingness to accept the kindness, help, and hospitality of others.

Questions for Consideration

1. What do you do when you feel overwhelmed by the challenges of your disability or the news of the day? To whom or what do you turn for comfort?
2. How can you work to be an antidote to the suffering and despair in the world with your family, in your community?

The Two Sides of Sacrifice

I'll Push You conveys a variety of spiritual and life-changing themes, none of which is as powerful as the notion of self-sacrifice. Patrick's snap decision (born out of a lifelong friendship) to lay down his life for Justin is one of the most inspiring elements of the film. It is important to note, however, that sacrifice here is a two-way street. In being pushed and carried and supported along the journey, Justin sacrifices as well. And this is, perhaps, one of the most challenging aspects of the film.

We live in a me-centered world. The greatest threat to our local and global communities might just be selfishness and greed, from the individual to the corporate level. The pilgrims on the Camino show us that there is a better way and a brighter future. As Christy says, "We are not just here for ourselves." Patrick shows the life-changing power of self-sacrifice. Through his service to Justin, he realizes powerful truths about his own life and the state of his other

relationships. Justin shows us the power of vulnerability...of laying down our pride and desire for independence to let others (and by extension ourselves) flourish in and through love and service.

Questions for Consideration

1. Think about a time when others cared for you? What did they do? How did it shape your life?
2. Have your acts of serving others helped you realize truths about your own life and the state of your relationships? How?

Beautiful Because It's Not Forever

As *I'll Push You* progresses, we hear from various members of Justin's and Patrick's families. They reflect on their lifelong friendship, their character, and their respective families. In one scene, Justin's wife Kirstin talks about the early days of their relationship and her desire to stay with and marry Justin in spite of his diagnosis. She says, "To find someone that you're so happy with and you have so much in common with and then to say, 'But it's not going to be forever, and it's going to have an end point...'".

Kirstin's choice and her relationship with Justin are profound examples of both marital love and partnership and what it means to be human. Whether we enter into a new dating relationship or walk down the aisle with a spouse with whom we want to spend the rest of our lives, we do so knowing that, one day, that relationship will end. We are all in relationship with an eventual widow or widower. We don't dwell on it, but we *know* it.

While it might seem morbid, this is actually what makes life precious and beautiful. It will come to an end, sooner or later. At

the same time, this is essentially a defining characteristic of being human—we are aware of our (and others') mortality, at times painfully so, yet we still get out of bed, date, fall in love, marry, have children, go on pilgrimages, and simply and profoundly live.

Our disabilities affect our perspective on mortality. Whether grabbing a hold of life and living now or desperately fearing the inevitable, our perspective is shaped by our experiences.

Questions for Consideration

1. Has your disability shaped how you talk about the future? What principles do you hold to that will help you navigate the painful parts of life?
2. Where have you seen new life spring up in the face of loss? What have your own losses taught you?

Defining Challenges

I'll Push You does a masterful job of capturing the beauty and the trials of the Camino de Santiago. They seem to come in equal measure for the pilgrims who take this journey, but adding a wheelchair to the mix ups the ante. From ankle-deep mud to a broken wheel to steep terrain, the way was laborious. More than one person attempts to talk the team out of it. But Justin, Patrick, and the filmmakers press on, meeting every challenge with courage and determination.

Watching the team persevere through the journey brings to mind two truths: in life, challenges define us while we simultaneously define the challenges that we face. At the end of the film, it is clear the challenges of the Camino have re-defined Patrick, Justin, and their team. They are physically, spiritually, and emotionally stronger. They have new visions and directions for their lives, re-committing themselves to their families and taking on new vocational opportunities.

But they have not been passive in this process. They experience positive change because of the ways in which they shaped the

challenges they encountered along the way. Few of us know the rigors of pushing (and being pushed) across a 500-mile path of rough terrain. But we all know the frustrations of unmet expectations, missed opportunities, major and minor setbacks, and the struggles of disability. We've all met them with anger and cursing or laughter and joy. It takes a mixture of all these reactions to keep the challenges in life from overwhelming us.

Questions for Consideration

1. Think about moments in life when you have felt defeated. What happened? How could you have reacted in ways that would have brought about a different feeling or experience?
2. Think about moments of victory in your life or moments of victory with your disability. How did you overcome the challenges and what attitudes, actions, and emotions carried you through them?

What is Your Pilgrimage?

The concept of pilgrimage might be foreign to most of us. Even if you grew up in a religious environment, you likely never took a pilgrimage with your family or members of your faith community. In an increasingly non-religious world, the concept grows stranger every day. The Camino de Santiago is just one of many Christian pilgrimages, and other faiths have their own as well. A pilgrimage is defined as a journey to a shrine or a sacred place *or* the course of life on earth.

This suddenly universalizes and broadens our understanding of what pilgrimages can be. Whether we call them sacred or not, we all have—or long for—places that have had a profound influence on our lives. These might be a childhood home, a best friend's house, the bar where you met your spouse, a yearly vacation, a baseball stadium, a film festival, or a house of worship. We might not call these pilgrimages, but we revisit them in our minds or with our bodies. Each time we return to

them and leave them again, we are different people...older, but hopefully a little bit wiser and stronger.

Questions for Consideration

1. With a broader understanding of pilgrimage, do you see disability as a pilgrimage? How has disability made you wiser and stronger?
2. Name some of the special locations in your life. Where are they and why are they special?

The Power of Presence

The notion of presence is a major theme in *I'll Push You*. Patrick and Justin are present with one another. The filmmaking team is present to witness (and share with us) their journey. Fellow pilgrims are present to aid in the journey with their bodies and their spirits. Family members are present at the end of the pilgrimage to welcome the team to the “finish line.”

But there is a deeper understanding of presence at work in the film. Pilgrimages like the Camino force you to be present with yourself. Distanced from the distractions of daily life, pilgrims are forced to take stock of their own lives, their accompanying strengths, weaknesses, challenges, and opportunities. Over the course of the journey, Patrick and Justin are reminded of important lessons about the power of presence, whether it's being a more faithful presence to a wife and children or being faithfully present to others who long to love and serve.

Questions for Consideration

1. Think about your daily life. What are the distractions that derail you or vie for your attention?
2. In what ways do you strive to be more fully present for your family, and your friends, in spite of the struggle of your disability?

The Necessity of Friendship

Justin and Patrick's 500-mile journey across the Camino de Santiago isn't the only unique element to their story and the film. The heart of the film and the basis of their journey is their lifelong friendship. *I'll Push You* revels in something that we don't often see in pop culture, authentic adult (and specifically here adult male) friendships.

Growing up can be difficult for a variety of reasons. One of those is the tendency for us to lose touch with our oldest friends. We move away, we marry and have children, pursue careers, or friends pass away suddenly and tragically. For a variety of reasons, we grow apart, and don't have the time or freedom to be with one another as much as we would like.

As adults, there are so many demands on our time, but we can't afford to sacrifice friendships and need to take the time required to nurture them. We have companions who lift us up when we fall, share the burdens of life, and give us

opportunities to do the same in return. You might not be able to take an epic five-week trip across northern Spain with your best friend, but you can schedule time each week to connect and journey through life together.

Questions for Consideration

1. Think about the friend that you have had the longest. Are you still in touch with one another? How do you maintain that friendship?
2. Think about the concept of friendship. Has your definition of a friend changed throughout your life? Has it changed through your disability? Do you make friendships differently than you did when you were younger?

About The Camino

The history of the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela dates back to the ninth century to the discovery of the body of the apostle St. James. Scholars believe St. James was a great evangelist in Spain at the time during the reign of King Alfonso II (792-842).

Gradually, people started making their way to Santiago to pay homage to St. James at the Cathedral which was built over the site of the tomb. Between the 12th and 13th centuries, the pilgrimage became more established and more popular.

In the last 30 years, in particular, there has been a huge growth and interest in the number of pilgrims traveling on foot, by bike, on horseback, or in our case, by wheelchair!

Although originally known as a Christian pilgrimage, the Camino now attracts people of all faiths and backgrounds, from atheists to Buddhists, adventurers to mourners, and college students to retired friends. Regardless of background, all who take this pilgrimage are transformed in some way when they unplug from the world and live in community together.

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