

Not a Still Life
A Film by Roberta Cantow

Discussion Guide
For Use in Non-Profit Settings

This guide is designed for non-profit settings. These might include synagogues, community based centers, Senior Men's Groups, Jewish Groups, welcoming synagogues, and other organizations related to aging, sexual identity, faith or spiritual connection, among others.

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Synopsis

Not a Still Life is a documentary portrait of Steve Stone, a spirited, older, gay, Jewish man who shares the naked truth of his unconventional life. His stories are of childhood ridicule in the 1950's and coming out in the early 60's. He has lived openly gay for 50 years, found true love, experienced tragic loss and subsequent loneliness and aging. His gradual evolution includes embracing sobriety, connecting with a long lost relative and discovering his spirituality—only to find that he is in danger of losing his home and business. His humorous and engaging personality provoke reflections about our own identities, emotions, and cultural experiences.

Facilitator Instructions

This guide includes pre-viewing and post-viewing questions. Beyond the *general* post-viewing questions, which should facilitate a lively discussion, there are additional questions for particular groups for additional reference and discussion. Facilitators are encouraged to review this guide in its entirety in advance of a film showing, as some questions may be more appropriate for certain audiences than others. These are suggestions only, meant to help the facilitator with discussion and critical thought.

Introduction

The synopsis (above) references Steve Stone, the film's subject or "character" as older, gay, Jewish and spirited. None of these are absolute. *Not a Still Life* challenges many stereotypes and assumptions we may carry regarding others and our individual sense of self. As such, these are themes present throughout the discussion questions and in the suggestions for reflection about the film.

- **Pre-Viewing Questions:**

What do you imagine might be the difference between characterizing Steve as an older gay man as opposed to an aging man or a “gay elder?”

What are your assumptions about a gay man in his 60’s today? For those who identify as “young adults,” what are aspects of gay cultural history to know or understand?

What are your criteria for feeling inspired by another person’s story?

What does “inclusion” in religious institutions mean to you and what might it suggest to you about the importance of a supportive one?

- **Quick Post Viewing Questions**

The film’s tag line refers to “the evolution and naked truth” of a gay Jewish man. Discuss your understanding of Steve’s evolution. Which part of his story is the “naked” truth?

Has your understanding of the person you were introduced to in the synopsis and with the pre-viewing questions shifted? If so, how?

Steve’s struggles are, in some ways, particular to him, and in some ways not. In what ways does his story resonate the most for you personally?

What is the importance to Steve of his bar mitzvah at that point in his life? Do you relate to his experience?

What do you most appreciate or admire about Steve? Do you consider him to be a nice person, a troubled person, a survivor? Do you find inspiration in his story?

- **In-Depth Post Viewing Questions**

Discuss your first impression of Steve and whether it changed as the film progressed. Did you become more or less open to his story? Discuss which aspects of Steve’s life allow you to feel connected or compassionate towards him. Consider what causes you to feel critical. How might this reveal aspects of our own tolerance for difference or the unconventional?

Steve approaches some of his issues with humor and a need to entertain. Yet he has been mourning the death of his lover for over 20 years. Do you think of these coping mechanisms? Do you consider them to be viable?

Some people are inclined to perceive Steve as living the good life or of his situation having no relationship to other men of his age who might be facing more dire circumstances, such as being uninsured, living on a fixed income, etc. Do you agree or disagree? How might this be both true and not true?

Discuss your feelings about the place of religion in Steve's life. How would you describe the importance, if any, of finding a place of belonging within a spiritual community or religious tradition? Does your own religious affiliation provide that for you? What do you feel is the role of faith in Steve's life?

At Steve's bar mitzvah, Cousin Roman announces that Steve can "now take care of himself." Discuss this statement in relation to how Steve's life plays out.

Steve identifies as gay, Jewish, and aging, but also as "recovering," "entrepreneur," and "Jungian." He seems to imply that his complexity drives potential partners away. What is your opinion?

There is something intensely personal in Steve's story, but there are also things about it that are universal. In what ways is it personal and in what ways, universal?

What do you think will happen in Steve's life from this point forward?

Discuss in what ways you find Steve's story either empowering or disempowering.

- **Questions for Specific Groups**

- 1. Gay Men's Groups or Other Types of Support Groups**

Some consider Steve to be "emblematic" of the gay men of his generation. Discuss how this might be so.

What are the similarities and differences among gay men of different generations?

Discuss the parallels and disparities between your experiences and Steve's regarding issues of acceptance and non-acceptance.

At age 64, Steve is vibrant and virile. Discuss what Steve's story reveals about the experience of aging for gay men.

In many ways, Steve's life reveals his capacity for resilience. Discuss the different ways that Steve has attempted to survive emotionally in his life. Which of these responses seem to be most productive?

Steve acknowledges a struggle with addictive behaviors throughout his life. Discuss your understanding of the role they play for him.

Discuss Steve's search for a companion and the difficulty he encounters. He declares that "the meaning of life is to love and be loved," yet he has not been successful in finding a new partner. What might be the reasons for this? How does it relate to your own search for companionship?

How do you see Steve attempting to negotiate his varying layers of identity? How do these various identities seem to benefit and challenge him?

2. Jewish Groups, LGBT Groups in Synagogues, LGBT Synagogues

Discuss the issue of "inclusion" in religious institutions and what it might suggest to you about the importance of a supportive community. Discuss how you see the importance of Steve's bar mitzvah and how it relates to his "evolution" in general.

What do you think of Steve's response to the filmmaker's question about how he reconciles his sexual and spiritual (Jewish) identities?

In what ways do you believe Steve's Jewish identity helps him with his struggles?

In what ways does Steve both have and lack spiritual wisdom?

Discuss the values that Steve describes as Jewish. Do you also see them as Jewish values. How do you think he would contribute to your congregation?

Discuss Steve's search for a companion and the difficulty he encounters.

How comfortable or uncomfortable do you imagine you would feel with Steve?

At the end of the film, Steve refers to the Biblical story of Job and how he identifies with Job regarding his faith. Discuss to what extent you believe Steve's faith is genuine.

Summary

The story of Steve portrayed through *Not a Still Life* is one person's story. Yet it shares threads common to each of us, regardless of our identities. Consider which threads of his experience are similar to your own. Which, through their contrast, reveal a deeper understanding of yourself, and your own issues/struggles?

