

Love, Life, and Loss

The Seven Last Words of the Unarmed

University Discussion Guide



In honor of the lives of:

**Michael Brown. Trayvon Martin. Oscar Grant. Eric Garner.
Kenneth Chamberlain. Amadou Diallo. John Crawford.**

Love, Life, and Loss and “Seven Last Words of the Unarmed”

University Discussion Guide

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Discussion Guide Introduction



Michael Brown. Trayvon Martin. Oscar Grant. Eric Garner. Kenneth Chamberlain. Amadou Diallo. John Crawford.

These African-American men—each killed by police or other authority figures—are the subjects of a powerful multi-movement choral work by Atlanta-based composer Joel Thompson titled “The Seven Last Words of the Unarmed.” The piece was recently premiered by the University of Michigan Men’s Glee Club under the direction of Eugene Rogers, associate director of choirs and professor of conducting at the University of Michigan School of Music, Theatre & Dance.

The story of this collaboration and a powerful performance of the piece by the Men’s Glee Club, along with their moving rendition of John Legend’s song *Glory*, from the *Selma* motion picture soundtrack, are presented in the Michigan Media documentary film, *Love, Life, and Loss*.

This discussion guide is meant to complement this film and help educators engage with the complex and important issues of race and police violence. The guide includes tips on how to prepare for and address controversial issues in the university classroom, discussion protocols and questions to process the film, as well as a supplementary reading with guiding questions to provide important background knowledge. The guide is flexible and can be adapted to fit different schedules.

Guidelines for addressing controversial issues in group discussion

Introduction:

One of our most important roles as discussion facilitators is to help our participants engage in productive dialogue about important social issues, including those that have the potential to generate controversy. By carefully preparing for such dialogues, we can help people think critically about potentially uncomfortable issues.

The killing of unarmed people by police or other authority figures, and especially the killing of unarmed Black men, is one such issue that merits exploration. It is a complex issue rooted in the history of racism and violence that is a part of our national story. It is also an issue that generates a great deal of emotion and thus deserves thoughtful examination. Through engagement with the film and the supplementary reading, we believe that discussion participants can develop their understandings of the problem and possible solutions as they also consider the role of art and music in working for social justice.

The guidelines below should be read and considered carefully before delving into this issue (or other similar issues) in order to create dialogue that is thoughtful and productive, even if it is also uncomfortable. As Joel Thompson, composer of *Seven Last Words of the Unarmed*, states in the film, “Now more than ever do we need art to create sincere dialogue between disparate groups.”

Guidelines:

Prepare yourself:

- First know thyself! When preparing to take on an issue like this in a group setting, you need to consider if this is an issue you care deeply about. Do you have strong views? Will you be able to listen well to participants who might not agree with you? Will they feel they can speak up? If you do have strong feelings, how will you work with those who feel differently? Think about these questions ahead of time so that you are not caught off guard if someone says something with which you deeply disagree. At times, these might just be differences of opinion, but some people might also hold and voice misguided ideas you feel compelled to challenge. There will be times when you may need to stop and manage offensive speech that might harm other group members, whereas other times you may want to push a participant's thinking without shutting them down. Know your own triggers and have a plan so that you are able to stay calm and be a facilitator of learning!

- Prepare yourself academically and cognitively as well. Learn as much as you can about the topic from a range of sources. Explore divergent perspectives and consider the evidence base for different positions. At the same time, don't feel like you have to be the all-knowing expert! It is acceptable and even helpful to say to participants, "That's a great question... I don't know the answer, but I'm going to write it down and we'll see if we can address it later."
- Connect the issue to your academic discipline and course if possible.

Establish norms and a positive purpose:

- Establish group discussion norms at the beginning of the activity. In particular, work with students/participants to develop norms for the following:
 - how to disagree respectfully.
 - how to listen productively.
 - how to deal with interruptions and how not to interrupt.
 - how to ask thoughtful questions.
 - how to participate in a discussion, including how to manage equitable talk time.
 - how to choose and use appropriate language in different contexts.
- Establish the need to respect and value multiple perspectives, but help participants learn to discern when a "perspective" becomes hurtful or offensive. This is not an easy process, and different people have different standards... but this is why we need to talk about them! In this process, establish clear boundaries for language. We want participants to speak their minds, but we do not want them using racist, sexist, homophobic, or other offensive language that will make others feel unsafe or uncomfortable.
- Clarify and make visible the purpose for this discussion. What do you hope the outcome of the discussion will be? What's the point of talking about it? What is the context of this discussion? How does this connect to the goals of your course or organization, and how does it connect to larger issues on campus?
- Have discussion protocols or routines in place. Group "discussions" often aren't really discussions; many times they involve the facilitator asking questions and the same four or five participants answering them while everyone else sits back and tunes out. Disrupt this dynamic by starting small! Use the Stop and Jot routine with an interesting prompt to give individuals time to think and informally jot down some ideas before asking them to talk about them. Then have participants

Turn and Talk with one or two others, sharing what they wrote and responding to each other. Keep these moments short (30 to 60 seconds), and then have participants form larger groups of four to six and share again, and only then bring the whole group together (depending upon the size of your total group of course). Using this kind of approach gives each person time to talk in safer spaces and also gives them time to develop ideas and “practice” before speaking in front of the whole group.

Prepare for implementation around a specific topic:

- Communicate with department or school leadership, as well as with students, ahead of time if you have concerns about a particular topic. As needed, have support staff either on hand or alerted to an upcoming topic that might trigger students dealing with trauma, anger, etc.

During implementation:

- Once discussion begins, move it along by asking open-ended questions that invite dialogue, but also that can be connected to things participants have experienced or learned.
- Be an active facilitator, monitoring participation and tone, and keeping the discussion moving. Help participants confront and challenge ideas, not people, and to not take it personally when their own ideas are challenged. For example, you can ask them to support, extend, or challenge each other’s ideas.
- Invite participants to clarify statements that might set others off, giving them space to dial back something they may not have thought through.
- Build in moments to reflect and process.
- If things are not going well, address the problem! Validate the fact that these kinds of discussions are hard, and then involve group members in plotting a way forward. Also have a backup plan if you feel the need to change course. If the conversation gets too heated, it can be wise to pause and come back to it another day if possible.
- Discuss solutions and provide pathways to action! Most students are interested in complex, difficult issues, but they often want to go beyond the problem and think about solutions and even take action, and we need to encourage this!

Viewing and Discussion Guide

Duration: approximately 1 hour

- 1) Ask participants to Turn and Talk for one minute in response to the following prompt, which should be displayed on your screen or board:
 - How can music help us learn about and resolve important problems of social justice?
- 2) Ask a few people to share what they talked about, and then introduce the film by telling the group they are going to explore the connections between music and social justice by considering a musical piece and documentary film addressing the killing of unarmed Black men by the police or other authority figures.
- 3) Pass out the attached handout, *Love, Life, and Loss and "Seven Last Words of the Unarmed" Discussion Handout*. Ask the group to quickly read over the information to give them some quick background on the film.
- 4) Prepare participants to view the short documentary film by asking them to think about the different stories being represented in the film: the stories of the men killed by the police or other authority figures, and also the stories of the people who created and performed the songs.
- 5) Show the film. After the film, give students a minute or two to jot down any ideas or questions they have.
- 6) Next have group members Turn and Talk about their immediate reaction to the film. What are they thinking and feeling?
- 7) Ask students to then quickly form into groups of four to six by combining their Turn and Talk pairs. Direct their attention to the discussion questions on the back of the initial handout. Ask each group to pick two to three questions to talk about for 10 minutes (depending upon your schedule, you can extend or shorten this time). Each person in the group should quickly share their thoughts, including additional questions, on the discussion question they choose. They should then talk about what ideas about the film and song they share in common in the group. They should decide on one "big idea" they want to share with the group.
- 8) Expand the dialogue by having each group share out their big idea. If time remains, ask participants to respond to the ideas shared by other groups by supporting, extending (or adding to), or challenging (respectfully disagreeing) the ideas that were shared.
- 9) Close out the activity by asking participants to share reflections or stories about how music and art can help us move forward as we tackle these important and painful problems in our society.

Additional Reading and Discussion (*for another day or a longer block of time*):

- 1) Have students Stop and Jot about the specific “Last Word” performance that touched them the most. Ask them to reflect in writing about why they were moved by this particular part of the piece.
- 2) Without pressuring anyone, ask people to share what they wrote with the group. If no one wants to share with the large group, have them share with a Turn and Talk partner. Also invite everyone to share any general thoughts or questions they have in relation to the film and the song. If people have questions about the specific cases of the seven men, ask them to wait as they are going to learn more about the cases soon.
- 3) Pass out the handout, *Love, Life, and Loss – Case Overviews*. This text provides overview information about each of the seven men whose last words are in the song. The lyrics to *Glory* are also provided as well as an overview of certain police reform recommendations.
- 4) Have participants gather in groups of four to six and ask them to review the information on the cases. Post the following questions on your board or screen and direct the groups to discuss and answer them as they review the cases:
 - Why do you think these incidents happened?
 - What about each case makes it an issue of social justice? In other words, what about these cases suggests that things might have turned out differently if all people were treated in a fair, respectful way?
- 5) Next, ask each group to present a summary of their discussion, and then begin a whole group discussion with the following questions (project or display on board or screen):
 - What do their last words tell us about these seven men?
 - Reading over the descriptions of the killings of these men, what do the incidents all seem to have in common?
 - Given these similarities, how can music and art help us begin to solve the problem?
- 6) Then ask everyone to read the selected lyrics from the song *Glory*. You can have them do this silently, or you can have volunteers read sections out loud. Ask them to talk in their small groups about the message of this song and why they think it was included as a companion piece.

Next, share the idea that taking action and making change can take many forms, and that some organizations are working to change the way that police are trained and

monitored. Ask them to read the final page of the handout. Again, you can have them read silently or you can have volunteers read each bullet.

Have the groups talk about which of the suggested solutions seem the most important to them, and then have them share their thinking to begin a whole group discussion around solutions.

End the activity by asking group members to discuss their responses to this issue.

- What action can we take to help solve this problem?
- How does this issue relate broadly to the mission of the university, or to the culture we are trying to establish on campus? What are the take-aways for our mission and/or work?

Discussion Extensions:

- i) If you want to devote more time to discussion, below are additional questions:
 - What stories are told in this piece that get lost in the news coverage of these events, and how are these stories told?
 - How can music help people connect emotionally to stories they might otherwise dismiss because of desensitization?
 - How can music help speak for those who have been silenced by systemic violence?
 - How does the emotional nature of music help us engage with issues that might otherwise make us feel uncomfortable?
 - How can music move us to action?
 - How can music help us engage with others across lines of difference?
 - How do people with privilege recognize their privilege, hear the voices and stories of others, and work to make change in responsible ways?
 - How do people marginalized by the power structures in a society make their voices heard in a way that cuts through the defenses of the powerful?
 - How can we connect the stories of these 7 men to the larger historical narrative of race, racism, and violence in America?
 - What role should academic study of these issues play in our society? How can different academic disciplines help us better understand and resolve these issues?
 - What do the data show about police killings? What is the impact of police violence on other communities?

Love, Life, and Loss* and *The Seven Last Words of the Unarmed

Discussion Handout:

Read Before Viewing:

Michael Brown. Trayvon Martin. Oscar Grant. Eric Garner. Kenneth Chamberlain. Amadou Diallo. John Crawford. These African-American men—each killed by police or other authority figures—are the subjects of a powerful multi-movement choral work by Atlanta-based composer Joel Thompson titled “The Seven Last Words of the Unarmed.” The piece was recently premiered by the University of Michigan Men’s Glee Club under the direction of Eugene Rogers, associate director of choirs and professor of conducting at the University of Michigan School of Music, Theatre & Dance. The music was inspired by visual art created by artist Shirin Barghi. Barghi, responding to the killings of Eric Garner and Michael Brown, began to illustrate the last words of Black men killed by the police as a way to raise awareness and spark dialogue.

The story of the musical collaboration around this piece is told in the Michigan Media documentary film, *Love, Life, and Loss*. The film also includes a powerful performance of the piece by the Men’s Glee Club, along with their moving rendition of John Legend’s song *Glory* (from the soundtrack of *Selma*).

An Overview of Police Violence

The music in the film deals with the issue of police violence on a very personal, small scale, but the issue is quite large in scope. The Washington Post began tracking police violence and, specifically, shootings, in 2015 (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/national/police-shootings/>).

They tracked more than a dozen details about each killing – including the race of the deceased, the circumstances of the shooting, whether the person was armed, and whether the person was experiencing a mental-health crisis. In 2015, 991 people were shot dead by the police. Of this 991, 949 were male, 772 were carrying a deadly weapon (94 were unarmed), 495 were white, 258 were black and 172 were Hispanic, and 254 showed signs of mental illness. In 2016, 963 people were shot dead by the police. Of this 963, 519 were armed with guns (48 were unarmed), and 631 were not fleeing the scene.

Each of these incidents was unique in the circumstances and contributing factors, yet patterns do stand out in the data. Although African-Americans are approximately 13% of the population of the United States, they accounted for around 26% of all people killed

by the police in 2015. In particular, African-American men, who are only about 6% of the US population, represented 40% of the unarmed men shot and killed by police in 2015.¹ The song *the Seven Last Words of the Unarmed*, and the dialogue in the film *Love, Life, and Loss* take us into this issue on a very personal level and asks us to look beyond the numbers and consider the lives and humanity of seven of these men. The performance of *Glory* then asks to come together and take action in the face of these grave injustices.

Small group discussion:

Choose one of the questions below to discuss. Take a moment to think, and then go around your group and give each person no more than 1 minute to share their thoughts. Then, talk about important ideas that everyone brought up. Agree on one “big idea” that you want to share with the group.

- Why is this documentary titled *Love, Life, and Loss*?
- Why do you think the composer chose to use the last words of these men as the foundation of his piece? What is the point of using these specific last words in the song?
- How does the song “The Seven Last Words of the Unarmed” seek to reclaim the humanity of the seven men represented in the piece?
- What is the role of music in helping us deal with the pain of injustice? What were the goals of the artists involved in this project? Did they achieve these goals?
- How does this type of music impact its creators, performers, and audiences?
- What is the power of pairing a song like *Glory* with *The Seven Last Words of the Unarmed*? What message does putting these songs together communicate?
- What did this film and the song make you think about? How did you react to it?

¹ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/investigative/2015/12/26/a-year-of-reckoning-police-fatally-shoot->