

IDENTITY

EXPLORATION GUIDE

1

Early in the film, Andrew looks back on his 'identity' during his turbulent teen years, reflecting on a list of labels he remembers writing down that he thought applied to him: tap dancer, Lebanese, American, Canadian, Middle Eastern, Phoenician, Christian, good student, art student, bullied, loner, fat kid, only child. Andrew embraced some of these labels, rejected others, and re-interpreted some of them to fit a different view of himself. In The "W" interview, Andrew comments on how he hates labels because they come with their own baggage, but also reflect how others incorrectly perceive you.

Think back on your own adolescence. What were the labels applied to you by others or ones that you might have accepted at that time as being true? How has your own understanding about your identity changed since those years? How have you answered the question, "Who Am I?"

2

Growing up as a Lebanese immigrant, Andrew experienced some of the racism and prejudice directed toward Middle Eastern immigrants. Andrew is one of the great tap dancers of our time but inhabits a space where most of the legends of tap dancing are black (Sammy Davis, Jr, Gregory Hines, Savion Glover). As a teenager, Andrew is invited into this circle of the world's best dancers to learn from them and be mentored by them. They treated him like family. But there is also a point in the film where that relationship becomes strained when Andrew realizes he doesn't completely fit into that community either.

The film explores areas of racial tension we don't commonly see. How did this aspect of the film inform your understanding of racial identity and racism?

3

Andrew was featured in a series of TED Talks in 2013 and 2014 which have been viewed by thousands of people. His Ted Talk coach helped him see that he had previously understood his identity as a tap dancer with love in his heart. Andrew learned to flip that understanding to see that his energy was tap dancing, but that love was the embodiment of his identity. Love is at the root of all things. Even excellence in a craft like tap dancing isn't the best definition of who Andrew is as a person.

We often place what a person does above who a person is. How have you been defined by what you do or have done in your life? How have you been learning to understand that even those things that you excel at are still merely a vehicle for expressing who you are as a person?

4

The final segment of the film takes place in the Gorin Church on the Goto Islands in Japan, a sacred gathering space for Christians forced into hiding during the 16th century. This church came to be known as one of the "Hidden Christian Sites" where visitors were asked to remove their shoes and remain in silence as a sign of respect for these martyred Christians. In his "W" interview, the Director of the film, Jonathan Cipiti, describes how Andrew's decision to take off his shoes and dance barefoot in this sacred space expresses how he was finally able to discard the labels that had defined him.

Describe your understanding of the poem which concludes this segment of the film: "When deep calls to deep, we are called to answer. We lay aside worldly notions, like tap dancers needing shoes dance." Cf. Psalm 42