

Film Title: Up in the Air

Year: 2009

Director(s): Jason Reitman. Reitman began working on this film in 2002 when the economy was stronger and ended up delaying it in order to direct Thank You for Smoking and Juno

Original release form/venue: Theatrical release in the US in December 2009.

Current availability and formats: DVD; Blu-ray; Netflix

Genre: Drama

Story elements: Ryan Bingham is a “career transition counselor,” a man who is hired by various companies to fire their workers. He spends more time flying from city to city than at home in his barely furnished apartment; in fact, at one point in the film Ryan states that he spent, “. . . 322 days on the road last year and 43 miserable days at home.” Ryan meets and becomes involved with a woman named Alex, another frequent flier who seems to be as at home traveling for business as he does. Ryan is called home by his boss who informs him that the firings which Ryan has always carried out face-to-face, will soon be done over the Internet. The young woman behind this concept is Natalie; Ryan is told to take her with him on his next trip and to serve as her mentor. After a trip to St. Louis, Natalie and Ryan are once again pulled off the road to go home. At this point, Ryan makes a side trip to his sister’s wedding, with Alex as his date.

Film Language elements:

The film’s settings include nondescript office buildings, which could be found in any city; the interchangeable interiors of Hilton hotel rooms, bars and lobbies; and airport terminals. Shades of gray and blue, as well as black and white, are the most prominent colors in the buildings, planes, cars and shuttles found in the film; these same hues, with a few exceptions such as Alex’s red coat, are used in the actors’ clothing. The rapid cuts and close-ups (of a hand on the handle of a carry-on bag; going through security and so on) allow us to see parts of Ryan, but not his face. These shots lead us to believe that it could be anyone, in any airport, going through this process of getting to the gate. Obviously, many additional camera shots are aerial and the director has chosen to superimpose the names of various cities (Kansas City, Tulsa, Des Moines, and Miami) over these views to indicate where Ryan is going.

Audience/Cultural Context elements:

In two sections of the film, near the beginning and end, we see clips of people Ryan has fired. These people are not actors, but rather are women and men who had recently lost jobs in the St. Louis and Detroit areas. They responded to ads Reitman placed in newspapers asking for people to appear in a documentary about job loss. Reitman was surprised to receive so many replies to his ads; sixty of the responders were invited to go on camera, and twenty-two of them appear in the final film. Each one of them went through a brief interview concerning what it is like to lose their job in the current economy. Following the interview, they were "fired" on camera and asked to respond in one of two ways: how they reacted when they lost their job or how they wished they had reacted.

Theology is found:

It may be brought into the conversation as we examine the concepts of separation and community and how that impacts identity.

Theological themes for conversation:

If asked, what would each of the major characters say would be his/her true identity?

Where do we notice separation in this film?

What is life like without community? With community?

How does this translate to the Christian life?

Suggested use of film:

I would recommend using this film with adults who would be able, in this economy, to relate to not only the drive of Ryan to get the job done, but also to the fears, concerns and reactions of the people whom Ryan and Natalie fire.

Recommended amount/parts of film to view, and way to view it:

I would show the entire film to an adult study group, followed by discussion.

Concluding or summary remarks:

Up in the Air is a film which allows the viewer a different perspective on the successes and losses encountered in the business world and the impact of those events on one's personal life and relationships. In this uncertain economy, it is a very topical film.

Theological Conversation with Up in the Air

Central conversation question/topic: Identity

Audience/learners: Adult study group

Amount of film used: Entire film

When film used: Film first

Goal of this conversation: connect theological concept of identity as child of God to our lives

How to focus the film: questions given prior to film

- What is Ryan's identity?
- What is his purpose?

Conversation partners: participants' concepts of identity and portions of A Brief Statement of Faith

In life and in death we belong to God.

Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God,

and the communion of the Holy Spirit,
we trust in the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel,
whom alone we worship and serve. . . .

We trust in God,

whom Jesus called Abba, Father.

In sovereign love God created the world good
and makes everyone equally in God's image
male and female, of every race and people

A Brief Statement of Faith, adopted by the PCUSA in

1990

How conversation partners brought into conversation: after viewing and discussing earlier questions and film, add other questions after:

- What would other characters say is Ryan's identity/purpose?
- Are identity and purpose ever the same?
- As a Christian, what does identity mean? Purpose?