



DISCUSSION GUIDE

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF SPOTLIGHT

Institutional Betrayal and the Whole Village That Looked Away

A look at institutional betrayal, the bystander problem, the diffusion of responsibility, and the psychology of the collective silence that lets communities look away.



“The opposite of courage in our society is not cowardice, it is conformity.”

— Rollo May

FILM SNAPSHOT



Spotlight follows the Boston Globe investigative team who uncovered how the Catholic Church systematically concealed child sexual abuse by priests for decades—betraying the trust of thousands of children and the entire community.



KEY THEMES



INSTITUTIONAL BETRAYAL

When an institution meant to protect us harms us or fails to protect us, it shatters trust at the deepest level.



BYSTANDER EFFECT

When responsibility is shared by many, each person feels less responsibility to act. So... no one acts.



DIFFUSION OF RESPONSIBILITY

People assume someone else—higher up, more qualified, or closer—is in charge of dealing with it.



NORMALIZATION OF DEVIANCE

Small signs and red flags are seen over time, but the problem becomes “normal” in the absence of action.



MORAL DISENGAGEMENT

People protect their beliefs and comfort by denying, minimizing, or rationalizing what they know.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



1 What moment in the film moved you most, and why?



2 How does the film show the difference between individual wrongdoing and institutional betrayal?



3 In what ways did the Church as an institution betray the people it was meant to protect?



4 How does the bystander effect show up in the film? Can you think of examples from your own life or community?



5 What are some small signs or “red flags” that were ignored or normalized in the story?



6 How did the survivors show courage in the face of betrayal and silence?



7 What helped the Spotlight team persist when facing resistance and intimidation?



8 What does this film teach us about accountability, courage, and doing the right thing?

GO DEEPER

- How does power and hierarchy make it harder to speak up or be believed?
- Why do people protect institutions even when they know harm is happening?
- How can communities create a culture where speaking up is safer and more supported?
- What does moral courage look like in everyday situations—not just in big scandals?

Silence protects the oppressor. Courage protects the vulnerable.



ACTIVITY IDEAS



CREATE A TIMELINE

Map the timeline of events in the film. At each step, note who knew, what was ignored, and who could have acted.



ROLE REVERSAL

Choose a character or institution. Write from the perspective of someone who stayed silent—then rewrite it choosing courage instead.



COMMUNITY PLAN

As a family, class, or group, create a list of ways your community can encourage honesty, accountability, and protection for the most vulnerable.

REFLECT & TAKE HEART



What small act of courage can you commit to in your own life this week?



How can you be less likely to “look away” when something is wrong?



Who are the trusted adults in your life you can turn to when you need help?



How can we build systems and communities where truth and accountability are possible?



How will you listen to, believe, and support survivors in your words and your actions?

Truth doesn't just change the story—it can change the future.



DR. MICHAEL ZAKALIK, PSY.D.
Psychologist for Parenting | Z Psychology



Understanding minds.



Strengthening connections.