



Touching the Void Discussion Guide

Director: Kevin Macdonald

Year: 2003

Time: 106 min

You might know this director from:

Black Sea (2014)

How I Live Now (2013)

Marley (2012)

The Eagle (2011)

Life in a Day (2011)

State of Play (2009)

My Enemy's Enemy (2007)

The Last King of Scotland (2006)

One Day in September (1999)

FILM SUMMARY

When Joe Simpson published “Touching the Void,” the wildly popular account of his near-death experience on the Siula Grande mountain in the Peruvian Andes, the film rights to the book became a hot commodity. Yet, translating this tale onto the silver screen was a difficult task, one that Academy Award-winning director Kevin Macdonald thought was best suited for the documentary format.

“I’m a purist,” Macdonald says. “I don’t like casually blurring the lines of documentary and drama.” So, he stays true to the memoir in his filmic adaptation. Using studio interviews and reenactments, Macdonald tells the thrilling story of Simpson’s climb, bringing us to the top of that treacherous mountain and down again.

There was a reason that the West Face of the Siula Grande had never been ascended. It is perilous and menacing at its best. The majority of people would laugh at the prospect, which is exactly the reason Simpson and Yates set out for its peak. Confident young men full of athletic prowess, they alined to the top, took the victorious photographs, and quickly set out to get back down, all while racing against a ticking clock.

The biggest challenge of the journey unexpectedly proved to be the descent. Due to a number of life-threatening twists and turns—a broken leg, a cliffhanging hour, and blizzard conditions—both men were faced with their own harrowing moment of truth: to live or die, to sacrifice or save oneself, to cut the rope or face certain finality. By taking us to the extreme, TOUCHING THE VOID presents a picture of life at its most real and nature at its most unadulterated.

FILM THEMES

Death is an accepted and not uncommon outcome in the field of mountaineering. Then why do it? As *TOUCHING THE VOID* explains, pushing oneself to extremes keeps some of us alive, and when injury and exterior threats bring death to our door, the will to survive steps in.

TREKKING THE UNKNOWN

What is it that convinces someone to ascend a previously unscaled mountain in treacherous conditions? Many involved in mountaineering and other extreme sports cite the very challenge of the act as a call to action. By stepping into the unknown and taking on something that offers the possibility of both failure and success, mountaineers have the opportunity to explore new grounds within the natural world and within themselves. Where others have failed, some may succeed, proving that they can overcome the impossible. A sport for the super-ambitious, mountaineering sets the personal stakes and rewards high.

PARTNERSHIP

When embarking on a life-threatening climb to the top of a perilous mountain peak, a trustworthy companion is the most valuable tool you can bring. Literally yoked together by a rope, which according to Simpson “could be something that saves your life or kills you,” climbing partners hold one another’s survival in their hands. An intense amount of trust is at stake. The physical benefits of a climbing partner are clear, but the mental ones should not be underestimated. To face a challenge alongside another individual compels us onwards and makes the impossible seem suddenly possible.

DIFFICULT DECISIONS

Unlike normal life, alpinism doesn’t allow much time and space for contemplation. Climbing in a single push, with no established camps or supplies waiting to be reached, the risks are immense. “You’ve got to keep making decisions, even if they’re wrong decisions,” Simpson declares. As the snow and ice threatened both climbers lives, Yates decided to cut the rope. In hindsight, from the comfort of a warm room with a full belly and time to consider the options, he might have chosen differently. But with his life flashing a bright warning light in front of him, he cut himself free.

THE WILL TO SURVIVE

From the bottom of that deep crevasse, Simpson’s chances of survival were thin at best. The task of pulling himself to safety was an enormous concept which coupled with his deteriorated physical state made the outlook extremely dim. Helplessness, abandonment, and anger engulfed him, yet Simpson was not prepared or willing to die at the age of 25. Rather than succumbing to the seemingly inevitable, he found a way to rationalize his survival, parceling out the monumental task he faced into manageable parts, making small-range goals that he could complete in order to bolster his strength and propel himself to accomplish the unbelievable.

“When you’re climbing well, it’s just brilliant... It’s that mixture of power and grace.”

Joe Simpson

“There isn’t a lot of risk in our lives normally now. To put an element of risk back into it takes us out of the humdrum. In that sense, it makes you feel more alive.”

Simon Yates

“As a climber, you have to always be in control.”

Joe Simpson

FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. Have you read Joe Simpson’s book, “Touching the Void”? If so, how did the film compare? If not, do you feel that reading the book would add to your experience of understanding this topic?
2. Do you have any experience in mountaineering? If so, describe the feeling of climbing and why you enjoy it? If not, do you understand the appeal of the sport?
3. Although Joe Simpson always supported his decision, Simon Yates has been the subject of much attack since cutting the rope back in 1985, which is considered the ultimate sin in mountaineering. Discuss your thoughts on his decision. What decision do you think you would have made in the same circumstances?
4. Why do people engage in extreme sports such as climbing perilous mountains? What human impulses are sparked through such activities?
5. As mentioned in the film, 80 percent of mountaineering accidents happen during descent. From both a physical and also a psychological perspective, why do you suppose this is?
6. Many of Joe Simpson’s friends encouraged him to return to Peru years after the incident for “closure” on the event, although he responded that the trip to Peru to film TOUCHING THE VOID was more hurtful than helpful. Do you believe that revisiting a place of past trauma has more positive or negative effects? Do you feel this way due to a personal experience?
7. What do you think was the key to Simpson’s survival? How was he able to manage such a brutal trip down the mountain in such a terrible physical state?
8. Are you more of an adventurous or cautious individual? Is there a part of you that longs to step into the great unknown and be challenged by life? If so, how do you satisfy this need? If not, what keeps you from embracing a more adventurous life?
9. Yates claims he has struggled with a great deal of guilt following his decision to cut the rope. Are there any positive results of experiencing guilt, or is guilt only a negative emotion? How does guilt affect you?
10. Are you more of an outdoorsy or indoorsy person? What can we learn from the wild extremes of nature and those places that few others have reached or visited? How would you describe your relationship to nature?

NOTES:

FILM FACTS:

- **TOUCHING THE VOID** premiered at the 2003 Toronto International Film Festival, and quickly went on to scoop up a number of awards, including a BAFTA for Best British Film, an International Cinephile Society Award, and a Seattle Film Critics Award. The film also received a number of award nominations, including a Golden Reel from the Motion Picture Sound Editors and a Golden Trailer Award.
- Joe Simpson published best-selling “Touching the Void,” an account of his Siula Grande near-death experience, in 1988. For the \$2 million film version, director Kevin Macdonald filmed reenactments with two British actors and a number of stuntmen at three locations in the Alps. He then convinced Simpson and Yates to return to Siula Grande with him, Simpson’s first time back since the incident, where they doubled as their younger selves in long-distance shots.
- After recovering from multiple operations, Simpson took up climbing again. He was forced to quit in 2009 due to his former injuries.
- Simpson explained, “I hadn’t been back to Peru and I didn’t really want to go back. I thought it would be OK, but when I was recreating it where it actually happened, I found it very disturbing. It was quite a weird experience.”
- Simon Yates has continued mountaineering, completing around 3 to 4 expeditions every year. He is especially drawn to remote wilderness.
- Simpson and Yates first met in Chamonix in the French Alps in the summer of 1984. Both experienced climbers, they agreed to climb the West Face of Siula Grande together the following winter, higher than either of them had previously climbed. Simpson was always supportive of Yates’s decision to cut the rope, even though the public was often quite critical of Yates after he returned home. In his words, “In mountaineering you have to make logical, cold decisions.”
- The Seven Summits is a mountaineering challenge that involves climbing to the top of the highest mountain on each of the continents. It was first achieved in 1985, the same year Simpson and Yates climbed Siula Grande.
- At 29,029 ft. (8,848 m), Mt. Everest is the highest mountain in the world.
- Siula Grande is 20,814 ft. (6,344 m) tall.
- The original DVD film release for “Touching the Void” included a 22-minute clip entitled “The Making of Touching the Void,” with director interviews and shots of the crew in the Andes, as well as a 22-minute clip entitled “Return to Siula Grande,” containing video diary footage from Simpson and Yates in which they express their contempt for the filming process. There was also a 9-minute clip entitled “What Happened Next,” which followed director Macdonald, Simpson, and Yates on their travels from Siula Grande to Lima, Peru, and then back home to London.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. **Read** one of Joe Simpson’s books. After publishing *Touching the Void*, he wrote many other books, including “Storms of Silence” and “The Sound of Gravity.”
2. **Read** one of Simon Yates books. His autobiography “Against the Wall” was published in 1997, and he has since released two additional books: “The Flame of Adventure” and “The Wild Within.”
3. **Join** the international community of [Leave No Trace Center for Outdoor Ethics](#) that works to sustain the health of our planet by teaching the best possible practices when delving into the great outdoors.
4. **Learn** more about UIAA, the [International Climbing and Mountaineering Federation](#), that aims to “promote the growth and protection of mountaineering and climbing worldwide.”

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