

Movie discussion resource **Joe Bell**
Engage with culture without disengaging your faith.

Genre: Bio-drama

Rating: M

Length: 94 minutes

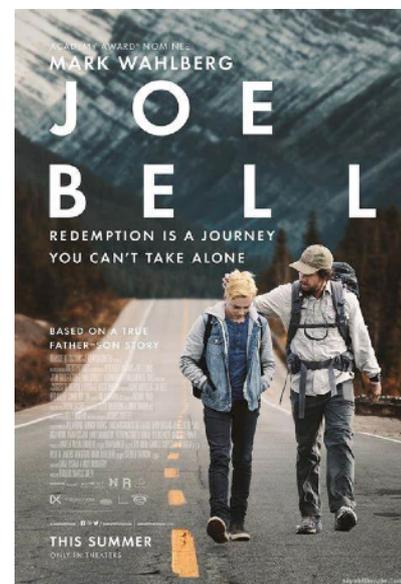
Starring Mark Wahlberg, Reid Miller, Connie Britton

Director: Reinaldo Marcus Green

Writers: Academy Award-winning writing team Diana Ossana and Larry McMurtry (Brokeback Mountain)

Website: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joe_Bell_\(film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joe_Bell_(film))

Australian release: September 2021



Brief synopsis

Joe Bell is a 2020 American biographical drama road film starring Mark Wahlberg, Reid Miller and Connie Britton. Based on a true story, the movie follows Joe after his son Jadin takes his life. Joe goes on a “forgiveness walk” from Oregon to New York City, to raise awareness about bullying. Joe spent six months on the road, stopping at school assemblies along the way to remind teens that picking on others who are different is not cool. He hopes to find redemption by raising awareness of bullying after his son is tormented in high school for being gay, and takes his own life because he wants the pain of living to be over. A full synopsis is on the Wikipedia link above.

Questions for discussion

The film may be a catalyst for conversation leading into deep sharing and mutual support. Some general questions might provide enough framework for you to discuss the movie, such as:

- ❖ What stood out as the main points/highlights in the movie?
- ❖ What themes are explored?
- ❖ What assumptions were embedded in the story?
- ❖ What challenged you? What questions did it raise for you?
- ❖ Are there aspects of the story that resonated with your own experience?
- ❖ Are there biblical or theological themes or characters that come to mind?

Speaking up

Home town wisdom: 'Let nature take its course - it'll work itself out'
(Joe Bell, the working-class man who lives a rather simple life in the country).

No, it won't. Bullying is not ok. It's hurtful and can negatively impact a person's well-being. Bullying is more than a fight or disliking someone. It's being mean to someone over and over again. Bullying is an ongoing or repeated misuse of power in relationships, with the intention to cause deliberate (on purpose) psychological harm. Bullying behaviours can be verbal, physical or social. Bullying can happen anywhere – at home, online, with friends, in a group, on the bus or at school. People who are being bullied need advocates and supporters. Workplace practices need to be implemented to change the culture of bullying. Raising awareness and changing behaviours need to happen in schools (unlike the response of the school principal in the movie). People need to be empowered to intervene when they see someone being bullied.

Three Australians a week are taking their lives as a result of bullying. Every 15 minutes a child is being bullied. A study reported 1 in 4 Australian students experience bullying. Every day 100,000 children stay at home because they feel unsafe at school. Social media is spawning a brutal cruelty online. Kids as young as 12 are being bullied to death.

'My name is Joe Bell and I'm going to walk for change. I'm walking across America to speak out against bullying'. (Joe Bell, the grieving Dad, seeking redemption)

=> Bullying is nothing new but technology has exacerbated its reach. Discuss.

'I'm gay'

Joe speaks at many school assemblies on the issue of bullying. But he doesn't mention that his son was gay. The omission is significant. In recent years a tragic number of gay teens have ended their own lives after enduring homophobic bullying, cruelty, threats and violence, and often involves a violation of their online privacy. Suicide is the third leading cause of death among adolescents, and gay teens are 4 times more likely than straight teens to attempt suicide. Research shows that in schools where children are explicitly taught that homophobic bullying is wrong, rates of such bullying are dramatically reduced, and pupils feel safer. Discuss.

Unconditional love

Joe Bell: 'Hold on to the ones you love and you love them for who they are for you may not get that chance again'. Joe and his son Jadin sing 'Born this way' (Lady Gaga) with an important message of love, acceptance and respect.

Whether life's disabilities
Left you outcast, bullied, or teased
Rejoice and love yourself today
'Cause baby you were born this way
No matter gay, straight, or bi,
Lesbian, transgendered life,
I'm on the right track baby,
I was born to survive.
No matter black, white or beige
Chola or orient made,
I'm on the right track baby,
I was born to be brave.
I'm beautiful in my way
'Cause God makes no mistakes
I'm on the right track, baby
I was born this way

=> There has been great progress in the way people understand and accept each other that transcends culture, capacity, (dis)ability, etc. But so many challenges clearly remain. Discuss.

'Forgiveness Walk'

Joe goes on a long forgiveness walk - a time of solitude and soul searching as he wrestles with what he sees as his own complicity in his son's death. How do you come to terms with regrets and missed opportunities where you have lost the opportunity to gain forgiveness from the person? How do you make peace, and find peace?

This could be a more general conversation. (Note: the conversation needs monitoring if it goes deep - people with profound issues of grief should be encouraged to find a safe place and a wise person/counsellor to speak with outside of the group discussion. Be mindful of each other's well-being).

Predictable?

Steve Pond of TheWrap called the film "An open-hearted, unapologetically emotional story of a man struggling to come to terms with what happened to his son and with his own complicity in it" and said "[t]here are shocks along the way, handled gently or dropped as a gut punch".

Some critics have suggested the movie is a bit 'preachy', with 'a noble social conscience message'. Others have commented that it doesn't go deep enough. Given this is based on a true story, are there aspects of the narrative you would like to have seen developed more? For whom do you think the movie is intended? Discuss.