

Discussion Questions

The Soloist: A Lost Dream, an Unlikely Friendship, and the Redemptive Power of Music by Steve Lopez



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Source: Porchlight Inc, adapted from Penguin Book Club Questions and The Soloist Educational Resource Guide www.porchlightinc.org

1. When they first meet, Steve looks at Nathaniel as a potential news story. Why do you think Steve continues to take on responsibility for Nathaniel's wellbeing following the initial article? Has something like this ever happened to you?
2. Although Steve didn't enter into his relationship with Nathaniel looking for either a friend or a musical teacher, he winds up with both. Discuss how their relationship progressed from writer-subject to the friendship the two men now enjoy. Is there a turning point in their relationship that you can identify? Have you experienced something similar in your own life?
3. For Nathaniel his music seems at times to almost calm his illness. Do you believe that these creative kinds of therapy can ever be a replacement for anti-psychotic drugs? What about other kinds of non-chemical therapy?
4. From their first meeting, Steve and Nathaniel both have an impact on each other's lives and it touches the lives of the people around them. Discuss the ways in which their relationship becomes not only a catalyst for change in their lives but also the lives of others and the community as a whole.
5. Steve works hard to shed light on the homeless situation on Skid Row and the mental health problems that many people there suffer. How do you think families should handle a mentally ill relative? Do you think it is okay to force treatment on a person? Are there any instances that could change your mind?
6. How did Steve's attitudes towards people experiencing homelessness in Los Angeles change over the course of the book? How did his attitudes towards people suffering from mental illness change over the course of the book? What caused these changes to take place?
7. How does Nathaniel's mental illness affect his friendship with Steve? How has Nathaniel's mental illness affect his relationships in the past (family, classmates, teachers, etc.)? Why is this significant?
8. Readers begin to donate instruments and money almost immediately following Steve's first article. What do you think compels people to help a stranger? Do you believe that

people would have been as eager to help Nathaniel had Steve not written about him and his plight? Why or why not? What do you think this says about human nature in general?

9. After Steve's articles are published, the mayor of Los Angeles visits Skid Row with him to see it firsthand. Discuss whether or not you think he'd have made this visit without Nathaniel's story as a catalyst. Would a series of articles that simply focused on the homeless in Los Angeles as a group been as effective?

10. What are your personal experiences with homelessness in Madison? Do you feel like Madison needs its own Steve and Nathaniel to be catalysts for change?

11. What are your personal experiences with the mentally ill? Do you have a family member or friend who is suffering from mental illness? Do you feel like the mentally ill are portrayed fairly by the media?

12. Nathaniel's story illicit a lot of empathy from Steve's readers yet often people don't have empathy for homeless men who can seem to be a community nuisance or lazy. What made Nathaniel's story different? Has your view of the homeless in Madison changed since reading book?

13. Many people who read Steve's stories were moved to do something. Did Nathaniel's story make you want to do something?