

**Study Guide for Faith Communities for the film**  
***The Collector of Bedford Street***  
*Academy Award® nominated short documentary film*

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With generous support from the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation

WHAT "THE COLLECTOR OF BEDFORD STREET" OFFERS YOUR COMMUNITY OF FAITH

It can stimulate discussion of broad issues important to congregational life:

Caregiving  
Individuals' vocation or call  
Community building  
Everyone's duties and responsibilities towards others  
Physical and spiritual accessibility

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON DISABILITIES

More than 58 million \* Americans live with some form of physical, developmental, or emotional disability. [\*Statistics cited in "The Demographics of Disability," *The Priest* (July 2003) 20-22.]

In every community, potentially one-fifth to one-fourth of one's neighbors lead challenged lives

WHY SHOW THE FILM TO A FAITH BASED COMMUNITY?

Communities of faith have increasingly recognized their responsibilities toward people with disabilities, especially since the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. Yet, with so many other responsibilities facing believers and their leaders, too often the real lives and needs of the Larry's of their own communities do not receive adequate attention. The showing of this documentary can provide the stimulus for faith communities that want to address these needs.

Shown in small groups, *The Collector* can trigger rich discussion about the degree to which their own members, their activities, their worship, and the buildings of their own churches, synagogues, mosques, and other places of worship are hospitable and open to all.

THE FILM

This 34-minute film is an Academy Award®-nominated documentary short and winner of 17 other awards. Director Alice Elliot subtitles this story, "Living and Giving in the Big City", but it's not just for city dwellers. *The Collector of Bedford Street* has screened in over 50 film festivals and been used by synagogues, churches, and mosques. It offers one person's story in relationship to his neighborhood community.

When viewed in the light of faith, this story challenges all viewers to ask serious questions about the nature of being a neighbor, and about the importance of building inclusive faith communities.

Ultimately, it may help viewers to better understand those people in their communities living with disabilities, may elicit participants willing to share their own life stories, and may lead people of faith to take action.

### THE STORY

Larry Selman, a man living with disabilities associated with mild mental retardation, is the main character of this movie. Despite living a poverty-level life, he tirelessly collects donations for more than a score of local, regional, and national charities. As the “Collector of Bedford Street” in New York’s Greenwich Village, he literally reaches out to everyone who passes by and invites them to give. But this story is not just about Larry’s canvassing for others’s needs.

It tells the tale of how Larry has become the “glue” for those living on his street, and a person about whom his neighbors come to care deeply. They worry about him. What will happen to Larry when his care-giving uncle in his 80s can no longer cook for him everyday, help him with housecleaning, and tell him what day it is? They decide to take action and to accept responsibility for providing for some of Larry’s future needs. They become the first neighborhood association in the U.S. to create an Adult Special Needs Trust.

### HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This Study Guide presents some ways faith communities can present *The Collector of Bedford Street*. This is a powerful film, one which will trigger many questions and stir emotions. Consequently, group leaders need to be prepared to facilitate genuine, compassionate, honest reflection.

Questions provided in this guide will suggest ways leaders can use this video in their particular contexts, in the light of their own theologies and beliefs, to stimulate prayerful reflection.

Additional suggestions for group facilitation and questions for “Assessing Your Community and Taking Action” are available on *The Collector of Bedford Street*- related website: [http://www.welcomechange.org/collector/outside/discussion\\_guides.shtml](http://www.welcomechange.org/collector/outside/discussion_guides.shtml) .

There is also a Study Guide for students in grades 6-12.

### WHEN MIGHT THE COLLECTOR BE SHOWN?

In general, the month of March offers an appropriate time to present it, since this month is set aside in the U.S. as National Mental Retardation Awareness Month (See the calendar for the Arc of the United States at [www.thearc.org](http://www.thearc.org))

At a time when members are reflecting on their own stewardship responsibilities. Larry, as Director Alice Elliott describes him, is someone “who defies the notion of a philanthropist.” He offers an example of a person dedicated to helping others to the best of his abilities and means.

For members of the Abrahamic tradition, *The Collector of Bedford Street* presents a modern-day metaphor of the biblical Widow of Zarephath who gave all she had to the prophet Elijah and was much blessed (1 Kings 17). Larry gives all he collects, without regard to his own needs.

#### Jewish communities,

The viewing of *The Collector* might well lead to discussions about the Jewish understanding of *tzedakah*: that people have an obligation to give charitably and to assist others. As a Jew, Larry exemplifies Maimonides' highest level of charity in "The Ladder of Giving." He gives without knowing who will benefit, and those to whom he gives have no way of knowing of his efforts. This is the highest form of charity. Larry's collecting for those in need models the Jewish ideal of and obligation to perform "deeds of loving kindness," *gemilut chasidim*.

This film might contribute greatly to curriculums in religious schools whenever *tzedakah* (the belief that people have an obligation to give charitably and assist others) or *gemilut chasidim* (deeds of loving kindness) are studied in congregational or day schools, in preparation for bar or bat mitvah or for confirmation classes, in community Hebrew high schools, in Jewish day schools, at Jewish day and summer camps, and in adult education classes.

Special education classes and support groups could view *The Collector* as a way to prompt the telling of their own stories and to encourage discussion on the process of setting up Special Needs Trusts.

During the High Holidays season, the showing of this film might remind congregants that they may have failed in their obligation to treat others as they would like to be treated themselves and to recite the blessing when they encounter those persons who are "differently formed." As it is written in the *Pirke Avot* (Sayings of the Fathers), you are to "look not at the vessel, but what is within it."

Local Jewish Federations may use this film during their annual "Super Sunday" fund raising period to motivate the community volunteers who solicit donations to provide support systems for persons like Larry.

#### Muslim Communities

To set the stage for viewing *The Collector*, Imams in Muslim communities could use the story of the Prophet Muhammad's interaction with a blind man as narrated in chapter 80 verses 1-10 within the Qur'an as the basis for a Friday sermon, *Jumma Khutabah*. This would be especially appropriate during the fasting month of Ramadan, a period also of intense Qur'anic study, self-reflection, prayer and charity. The Imams could point to the lessons to be learned from these verses—all life has meaning and purpose, we have much to learn from those that approach God in earnest humbleness, and God is accessible to all.

The lessons of the Friday sermons could be extended by showing *The Collector* to members of Qur'anic study groups, in Islamic school classrooms, and in place of weekend guest lecturers.

Discussion leaders might also ask participants to draw parallels between the charitable acts of the Prophet Muhammad, those of Larry and the opportunities in our own lives.

### Christian communities

This documentary is appropriate not only at stewardship time, but also in the season of Lent when many Christians reflect on how they might more deeply follow the gospel.

Throughout the liturgical year, churches using the Revised Common Lectionary or the Roman Catholic Lectionary in their worship might want to feature this video during weeks when the Sunday readings speak of how Jesus responded to those with disabilities and illnesses and of when he offered parables about true wealth and giving and about the true nature of God's reign. When scripture proclaimed presents examples Jesus' attitude toward people shunned by society, these Sunday readings can prompt comments about local treatment of those living with disabilities and invitations to view this documentary after a service or at some other point in the week.

Obviously, when the scripture proclaimed includes the question, "Who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:29) *The Collector* poses a real-life parable as complex and potentially as challenging as that of the Good Samaritan.

### WHERE MIGHT THIS DOCUMENTARY BE SHOWN?

Groups of local leaders of faith communities or area interfaith organizations might together purchase and share this video. With its being shown to multiple groups in a concentrated local area, discussion in multiple groups might increase community wide awareness and might lead to a call for local action. Some additional groups to partner with might include: non-profits like The Arc or Special Olympics, or local public libraries

During worship in churches capable of projecting video as part of their service, a small video clip from *The Collector* – such as Larry's faith statement -- might be shown within the context of a sermon or before a proclamation of faith. His testimony might encourage worshipers to reflect upon their own beliefs. When shown during announcements, other short clips might stimulate interest and promote a sponsored viewing of the program in the coming weeks.

In synagogues, where the laws of Shabbat prohibit using electrical equipment on the Sabbath, the film might be shown as part of a Sunday or weekday evening educational program.

Faith communities that already have advocates for people living with disabilities might use this program to increase members' awareness of current activities, to communicate their work more broadly so that those needing advocacy might know of their existence, to recruit volunteers, or to lead a discussion group of people with disabilities about what local needs they themselves feel have yet to be met.

Many other kinds of gatherings of people of faith and of their leaders would offer appropriate settings for a group viewing of this video. Here are some examples:

- Gatherings of local or regional ministers, rabbis, priests, imans and other faith leaders
- Gatherings of religious educators
- Gatherings of men's and women's organizations and associations dedicated to outreach in the community
- Gatherings of parents and family members of those living with disabilities
- Adult religious education classes
- Youth ministry, bar and bas mitzvah classes, and confirmation classes
- Young adult or couples faith-sharing or Bible-study groups
- Social justice and social action groups
- Worship committees, ministers, and teams
- Training programs for ushers and other hospitality ministers
- Inquiry and initiation programs for new members
- Teaching institutions and seminaries

### HOW BEST MIGHT THIS VIDEO BE SHOWN?

#### *Your choice of Equipment*

People respond best to any video presentation when they can hear and see it clearly. Consequently, those presenting this program must take great care in planning any viewing.

A large TV monitor (25" or more) and VHS video cassette recorder or DVD might suffice for a home or small group viewing.

For larger groups, however, a video projector connected to a VCR or DVD will work better because it can cast a much larger image visible to all. The video can be projected on a media screen, a white sheet, or a white or light-colored wall. For this occasion, members of a community might be able to borrow a video projector from their employers, local high schools, or their public libraries.

#### *Provide Accessibility*

Since this documentary runs 34 minutes, those who sponsor its showing need to provide for the comfort of all who are participating.

The viewing space ideally should be handicapped accessible.

Arrange to have a sign language interpreter if requested by any participants. An area with a light focused on the interpreter's body from the waist to above the head should be selected and the appropriate number of seats in that viewing area arranged for

persons who are Deaf.

Members of the community who live with disabilities could potentially be partners or co-sponsors in presenting this program and, afterward, in offering their own story. Community non-profit organization like the Arc, a national organization on disability, Special Olympics, or a Kiwanis Aktion Club would make appropriate partners for a screening.

### Arranging Your Space

Position chairs for easy viewing by all.

Provide spaces for wheelchairs.

Note where the sound might be strongest for those who need greater amplification.

Offer comfortable seating, if at all possible.

Avoid creating audience seating that becomes so wide that people seated at the edges of the group see a distorted or fainter image. This is especially true for projection onto a media screen. Some screens require seating in a V-shape. Too acute a viewing angle in relationship to the screen can mean people do not properly see the video or hear the audio. Many people, especially those whose hearing is gradually diminishing, lip-read more than even they realize.

### 1,2,3, Testing

After arranging the viewing space and before participants arrive, test your equipment and view the tape.

If flesh tones or other colors are not life-like, adjust the monitor or projector until the people on screen have appropriate skin colors, the images appear sharp, the contrast is adequate and the brightness acceptable for maximal viewing.

Walk around the space, looking and listening all the while to the program, to make sure in advance that no participant will have a “bad seat.”

Re-wind and cue the tape to the beginning.

### How To Frame the Viewing

Having a limited, set time for the viewing and discussion is wise and is respectful of participants’ time. Discussion otherwise might go on for hours (or seem to), or at least last longer than some might prefer.

Facilitators need to ensure that within the set time, though, everyone who wishes to speak can do so.

In larger group showings, perhaps breaking into small groups for discussion would work best. Then, everyone would feel they would have a chance to contribute if they wish. A more intimate discussion might also free some participants to speak who would be hesitant to address a larger group. The Facilitator might, after a designated discussion time period, request that a member of each group report key insights or concerns expressed within her or his discussion group.

Suggestions for action might be offered and recorded during the discussion, as well. A second session might be needed to address these suggestions. In that way, the conversation can continue with those interested in reflecting even more deeply on areas in which their faith community needs to pay further attention or take action.

Before showing *The Collector*, encourage participants to be conscious of the viewing needs of others around them – specifically, to resist making unnecessary side comments to their neighbors. But, of course, upon engaging with this story fully, many will find themselves laughing at various points. As the director notes, "Laughter is okay. After all, Larry can be a funny fellow!"

### PRAYER AND REFLECTION

Faith communities, watching a program like *The Collector*, may want to frame the viewing with a prayer. Of course a group can do otherwise. It could be viewed as simply an interesting documentary film that deserves discussion. However, for a group of believers to enter deeply into this story and to be open to possible insights and inspiration, it helps participants to view this program as not just as another TV show. A prayer or time of meditation provides a context and a break from the secular world to create an openness through which Our Creator might communicate to our hearts, minds, and imaginations.

Every faith tradition has prayers that, whether formally or informally constructed, invoke the Spirit of the Divine One to be present and call for the blessing of understanding. Use such prayers or patterns of prayer after your welcome and introductions, but before showing the documentary.

Perhaps a passage of scripture, a commentary on Torah, or a verse from the Qur'an might be apt. While some general audiences might view this film as a nice story, even a noble story, people of faith can be called to view this documentary as more than that.

This occasion may be an opportunity for spiritual reflection and for communal self-examination that may lead to social action within their own particular faith community and within the larger community.

After an opening prayer, a passage of scripture, a commentary on Torah, or a verse from the Qur'an, or even a brief refrain or verse of an appropriate song that participants know by heart, allow people to recollect themselves and to ready themselves before a presenter presses the "Play" button.

### After the screening...

Permit some time for silence before and after the viewing, at least 30 seconds to a minute. Invite participants, in their own ways, to pray that they may be open to the fruits of their joint viewing of *The Collector*.

After showing the documentary, again, a brief period of silence can help some viewers to compose themselves. “Before we speak together, let us give ourselves a few moments in silence to hold this story in our hearts and to be open to what may echo back,” a leader might say.

Frequently, people find themselves deeply moved by what they have just seen. They might be embarrassed by their own tears. In whatever ways possible, in other words, discussion leaders need to create a safe, respectful, prayer-filled space for such emotions and reactions to be honored and expressed.

Not everyone participating in a viewing will immediately be ready to speak and to engage in vigorous discussion. In order to help introverts, in particular, to give voice to what is in their hearts, consider offering everyone some general opening questions that are printed on a single sheet of paper. After the silence, distribute these questions. Make sure to provide writing implements and some surface upon which to write. Allow everyone time to reflect on the questions and, if they are able and wish to do so, to write or to draw something that begins to express their thoughts and reactions.

Those participants whose loved ones live with disabilities may find their own worries rush to the surface. This quiet time may help them to quiet their hearts enough so that they can speak and can eventually contribute to the discussion.

Those who themselves live with disabilities may experience powerful emotions of empathy with Larry or may find his story raises to the surface their own worries about their future and their relationships. Sensitivity is a key quality required of a discussion leader and, in general, of any facilitator. People in pain do not always show their pain in public.

At the end of your time together, close with prayer, song and refreshments. Some people who may have found it difficult to speak during the discussion might find this less formal time more suitable to their sharing.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Typically, people need open-ended questions to which they can respond. Below are many questions regarding multiple topics that the viewing of *The Collector of Bedford Street* might legitimately trigger in a faith community.

No group can possibly discuss them all in one session, nor are all relevant to every group. In advance of the viewing, discussion leaders will need to select, based on the group and the circumstances, those questions that would be most fruitful for their occasion.

Leaders may well want to craft questions of particular pertinence to their own community situation. Should the viewing of this film lead to further discussion sessions, other questions listed below that are not used in the first session might prove helpful in any follow-up session.

### IN GENERAL: 7 open ended questions

1. What moments in the documentary remain with you? What spoke to your heart?
2. What disturbed or upset you as you experienced *The Collector*?
3. Did anything surprise you?
4. Were you inspired by any events or moments?
5. Will you take away from your viewing this film any change in your own way of thinking about people like Larry?
6. Does it change your view of New York City?
7. Why is the film called *The Collector of Bedford Street*?

### God “put us here for a reason.”

Larry believes God “put us here for a reason.” What might that reason be in regard to people living with disabilities? How are we part of that “reason”?

A Jewish prayer to be said upon encountering a person who is differently formed is: “Blessed are you, O Lord Our G-d, King of the Universe, Creator of a variety of creations” (Mishne Torah, Hilchot Brachot 10:12) or “...who makes people different.” (Berachot 58b) How do we value those whom God has created “differently”? How are we called to value them in our tradition? How might people living with disabilities be a blessing for others? In what ways might you already have experienced that blessing?

### “I want to live on Bedford Street. I don’t want to move.”

How does Larry serve as the “glue” for his neighborhood? How does he create community?

How many people do you know who live with visible or hidden physical, sensory, developmental, emotional or multiple disabilities? Who serves as their circle of support? If they have none, who might form that circle

of supporters? To what degree has our faith community or any faith community been involved in that person's life in improving the quality of their life?

*"When I'm lonely I deal with the wrong people."*

Larry's loneliness is deeply human and is not exclusively a reflection of his situation. What makes Larry distinctive is that he does not know *not* to talk about his loneliness. What contributes to loneliness in his and others' lives?

What might cause any individual's isolation from their faith community? How can we break through that isolation for those living with disabilities?

How does our faith community answer the question, "Who is my neighbor?" Given our faith traditions and convictions, what obligations do we have to those in need in our communities?

*"I could become homeless"*

To what degree and at what stages should people with disabilities be included in discussions about their lives, such as those regarding the creation of a Special Needs Trust for Larry?

In such discussions, what are the rights of people like Larry?

The meeting of Larry's neighbors to discuss the possibility of the Trust did not include Larry, because the organizers wanted participants to be honest about whether they would or would not commit to this effort. Larry's presence might have affected that candor.

How might the basic principle of respect for the rights of a person like Larry to be present at such a meeting be mitigated by the need for open discussion among those considering creating a Trust?

Or should such people like Larry be present regardless?

How might these conflicting goods be balanced?

What factors might be involved in determining this balance?

## Regarding **OUR OWN ATTITUDES**

Sometimes people are ashamed of or embarrassed by having to live with disabilities. What do other people do that might cause that reaction? How many people here have experienced first hand this kind of shame or embarrassment in relationship to themselves or to loved ones who live with disabilities?

Larry has little by way of "productive work," as measured by conventional US norms, but he does significant work, both as a collector for various programs and as a collector of people in his neighborhood. What does Larry's life suggest about what it means to be productive? How does Larry help us to think more creatively about our own contributions?

In what ways does Larry alter our own stereotypes of people living with disabilities?

Throughout his life, people have given Larry the impression that a low IQ would degrade him in the eyes of others. "People are ashamed" of people who have mild mental retardation, he explains. "They won't want to bother with me." In what ways might we – unknowingly – be contributing to that impression? In what ways are we complicit in institutional systems and practices that demean people like Larry?

How do we define "intelligence"?

To have to be dependent on others makes some people feel like a burden and leads them to be hesitant to ask for help. Larry literally calls for help daily, as his neighbors attest at their planning meeting. How did Larry's neighbors handle Larry's daily calls for help? What were their attitudes? How would we react to daily calls from a neighbor in need?

In what ways might we, as a faith community or as individuals, be contributing to the diminishment of the dignity of people living with disabilities? In what ways might we support the enhancement of their sense of dignity?

## Regarding **CHARITY**

What is your concept of charity?

In what ways does Larry model the true philanthropist?

How does "feeling good" play a role both in Larry's being The Collector and in his neighbors collecting for him? What causes that feeling? Does "feeling good" diminish in any way the giver or the gifts given?

Who typically is called upon to seek donations for our community projects? How might people living with disabilities be called upon to participate in these efforts, to be our Collector?

## Regarding **OUR RITUAL LIVES**

For those communities who consider themselves “People of the Book,” how is holy scripture made accessible to those who cannot see, read, hear, speak, or fully comprehend rituals?

For worship and information aids, do we make available large-print versions or audiotapes? How might we have some visual elements of worship and religious programs audio-described? How might we offer some form of sub-titling, real-time captioning, or enhanced hearing systems? How can we simplify the message for persons with cognitive impairments?

How might we be open to new ways of ritual performance for members who may need assistance reading, seeing, speaking, hearing, and singing as required in order to complete or participate in communal rites? How might we welcome computer-aided solutions, such as speech synthesizers, to help members participate in religious practices, read scripture for their congregation, or testify to their experience of God’s grace in their lives?

People like Larry have their limits (as do all people), but they also still have gifts to offer others in their worship community. How does (or might) our community identify, welcome, and train people with disabilities to take ministerial and other responsible positions in our faith community and worship? How might our community help maximize these individuals' God-given potential and increase their sense of self-worth as full members of our faith community?

In what ways are we inattentive to the very presence of people living with disabilities in our midst? In what ways are we already actively reaching out to them and to their care-givers? In what ways are we ignoring the very existence of people like Larry in our community? How might we become more attentive?

In what ways might we, as a faith community, be putting obstacles in the way of people living with disabilities, obstacles that prevent them from joining us in worship and from being fully part of our community’s life?

How might we as a community fare in this kind of examination of conscience?

What stereotypes keep us from reaching out to people like Larry during fellowship before or after worship or other community events? What are our own fears or discomforts associated with dealing with “The Other” who seems so unlike us? What causes us to hold back from being hospitable?

How may we have made people living with disabilities feel unwelcome at our doors? Can they even cross the thresholds of our buildings? What architectural obstacles restrict access and hinder the mobility of those using wheelchairs or other mobility supports in our worship and meeting places?

What might make seeing or hearing in our spaces even more difficult for those already limited in these ways? What are the possible solutions to these problems? Who would need to be involved?

What training have we given our hospitality ministers and all of our staff, paid and volunteer, about the variety of disabilities with which people live and in what way they might be of assistance? How have we educated them and ourselves to be more sensitive to their needs, as well as their gifts?

How might people living with disabilities become hospitality ministers who welcome and assist others?

To what degree have we been attentive to the implications, to the legal requirements, and to the moral imperatives related to the Americans with Disabilities Act in all aspects of our faith community life?

## Regarding **SUPPORT IN OUR FAITH COMMUNITIES**

Could a community response like that of the neighbors on Bedford Street happen in our community, neighborhood, or congregation? If so, how would it happen? If not, why not?

How does our community support the creation of housing for people like Larry who live on a limited income? How might the availability of supported housing be increase or such housing be improved? How does our community support transportation options that help people living with disabilities travel to work, school, social events, family and friends, and appointments? With whom might we partner in such efforts?

How might our community support family members -- like Uncle Murray -- in our community who are quietly caring for loved ones in need? How might we sensitively approach them to ask what support they might need?

Larry speaks of the despair that can lead people with disabilities – and their care-givers -- to consider suicide. How might our community offer

hope and support to minimize this deep despair?

People like Larry are vulnerable to exploitation by others. Out of sympathy and loneliness, Larry invites men who are homeless into his apartment. In what ways might our community break the pattern of loneliness that can result in people living with disabilities taking such risks that may actually put themselves in potential danger?

All people yearn to be in loving relationships. In what ways might our community facilitate opportunities for people living with disabilities to have a social life filled with love and concern, such as Ellie's and Larry's lives?

### Regarding **EDUCATION & AWARENESS**

Disabilities are not always visible. Multiple disabilities – sensory, cognitive, developmental, and emotional – do not openly mark the people who live with them. In what ways might our whole community become more aware of and sensitive to those living with “hidden” disabilities?

Recognizing that there are a range of abilities and needs within each diagnostic label, how might we educate our whole community to become a welcoming community to all? How can we become a community that treats people living with disabilities as individuals, not as categories or labels?

Multiple, diverse organizations at the national and regional level exist to support faith communities in their outreach to people living with disabilities. For further information, go to the websites of the following organizations (who will often provide links to other organizations):

AAMR [www.aamr.org](http://www.aamr.org)

Christian Council on Persons with Disabilities [www.wwpd.org](http://www.wwpd.org)

Council for Jews with Special Needs [www.cjsn.org](http://www.cjsn.org)

National Organization on Disabilities [www.nod.org](http://www.nod.org)

This study guide was prepared with the generous funding of the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation

Thank you to our consultants who contributed their wisdom and guidance.

Becca Hornstein, Council For Jews With Special Needs

Beverly and Bill Gaventa, AAMR Committee on Spirituality

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