

Teaching “The Volunteers: Mountain Rescue Brings Us Home”:  
Materials, Questions, and Assignments for AP-level Lesson Plans

In this packet and accompanying files (available on request), we provide reading materials, questions, and suggested assignments for teaching “The Volunteers: Mountain Rescue Brings Us Home” within four different high school AP or introductory college level courses in the humanities and social sciences: civics, English, philosophy, and politics. The film could also usefully find a place in courses in history, ethics, religion, or shop, and we encourage teachers to mix and match reading materials and assignments. The materials for each class are meant to encourage student reflection and dialogue by putting the film in conversation with one important text in the field. In addition to the reading materials specific to each class, we also provide an excerpt from an interview with one of the filmmakers (“Filmmaker Interview,” 6 pages, single-spaced), which can be used in all of them. Students and teachers who are interested in exploring the ideas behind the film further are invited to watch the 90-minute version, which will be made available on Amazon Prime, or to watch the 106-minute director’s cut, which can be obtained through the filmmakers on their website: <https://www.thevolunteersdoc.com/>.

Class 1: Civics  
“Tocqueville, volunteering, and civil society”

**Reading materials**

For students

- *Oxford English Dictionary* and *Miriam-Webster* excerpted definitions of the word “volunteer”: [https://www.oed.com/dictionary/volunteer\\_n?tab=factsheet#15470809](https://www.oed.com/dictionary/volunteer_n?tab=factsheet#15470809), [https://www.oed.com/dictionary/volunteer\\_v?tab=factsheet#15471865](https://www.oed.com/dictionary/volunteer_v?tab=factsheet#15471865), and <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/volunteer>
- Alexis de Tocqueville, “On the Use That the Americans Make of Association in Civil Life,” from *Democracy in America* (1835) (3 ½ pages, single-spaced)
- Filmmaker interview

Suggested for teachers

- Biography of Alexis de Tocqueville: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Alexis-de-Tocqueville>
- Robert D. Putnam, “Preface” (11 pages) and “Chapter 3: Civic Participation” (17 pages) *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, 20th Anniversary Edition (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020), widely available in school libraries; for the book’s website, with ordering information, see <http://bowlingalone.com/>.

This set of materials is designed to help teachers engage students in a conversation about volunteering in their own communities within the context of courses in civics and related subjects. Students should come to appreciate that volunteering is important not only for personal reasons, because it is satisfying, but also for *social* ones—because it is essential to building the social community on which democracy depends. They should also become familiar with the figure of Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-59).

In the classic excerpt from *Democracy in America* (1835) included in the materials, Tocqueville argues that volunteer organizations are essential to American democracy, and that Americans have a unique tendency to create clubs. His perspective suggests that democracy is about more than voting: it involves a wide range of participatory activities. The excerpt also highlights the fact that in a liberal democratic society, social problems of varying kinds need to be addressed outside of state institutions.

The suggested chapters from Robert Putnam’s *Bowling Alone* (2020 [2000]) provide information about the contemporary landscape of volunteering in the U.S., which may be useful in an introductory lecture.

## Questions

### General introductory questions

- Are any students in class involved in volunteering within their community? What kinds of volunteering do they do? What do they gain personally from volunteering? (Students may also have parents who are involved in volunteer fire departments or ambulance services, Rotary or Lions Clubs, or faith organizations, and they may wish to talk about their parents' experience.)
- Can students imagine a society without *any* kind of voluntary associations? What kind of society would that be? What kind of society does volunteering create?
- What strikes students about the dictionary definitions of *volunteer* and, in the OED, the history of the word? How does its association with the military suggest the larger civic and political importance of volunteering? What about its connection to gardening?
- The anthropologist Marcel Mauss was guided by the following question in his classic study of gift exchange in *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies* (1925): "What power resides in the object given that causes its recipient to pay it back?" How could this question be used to think about the social consequences of volunteering? Students could be introduced to the idea of "reciprocity" that underlies the anthropological analysis of gift exchange, as described in the entry of gift exchange from *Britannica*.

### Questions about the film

A key moment in relation to this theme in the film is the scene in which Greg Prothman of Seattle Mountain Rescue discusses his own experience with volunteering and his view of its importance (8:35-12:00), and the narrator in turns asks, about mountain rescue volunteers in particular, "what kind of country can *they* help us imagine?" (12:00-42).

- What kind of volunteering has Greg done in his life? If his life as a volunteer is compelling or admirable, why?
- What does the narrator mean when he says that "actions embody ideas" (9:25-38)?
- What answer would you give to the question posed by the narrator at the end of the sequence: what kind of country can mountain rescue volunteers help us imagine (12:36-42)?
- In the sequence from 6:30-8:34, the narrator situates the story of mountain rescue in relation to the declining sense of place in the digital age. What do you think about what he says? How does Sarah Stephan of Seattle Mountain Rescue, later in the sequence, implicitly respond to the idea the narrator advances? How does she provide an antidote to

the trends that the narrator describes? How does her perspective compare with that of Austrian rescuer leader Christian Eder at 40:00-41:05?

- Why is it significant that Greg had memorized a map of his town when he was a police officer? How is it similar to Alois Stöckl's sense of place as he describes it at 35:50-36:20?
- The film is about mountain rescue volunteers, but it shows an actual rescue only at the end. In examining *Seattle Mountain Rescue*, it tells the story especially of the group building its first physical headquarters; in traveling to Austria, it pays special attention to the Alpine lodge that houses Tyrol's rescue training center. Why might that be? Likewise, in exploring the connection between the two groups, it pays special attention to the translation of a book. Why?
- In his interview, filmmaker Mark S. Weiner asserts that volunteerism "is an essential component of a liberal political society." Why might that be? He also suggests that religion plays a role in grounding the volunteer experience for many people. Why might that be?

### Questions about Tocqueville

- What is a "democratic society"? Why did Tocqueville believe that civil associations were so important in a democratic society?
- According to Tocqueville, how do civil associations promote social cohesion and a sense of community in America?
- What did Tocqueville admire about the way Americans used voluntary clubs to advance their common goals?
- How do you think Tocqueville's views about civil associations in the 1830s compare to the role of similar groups in American society today?
- According to Tocqueville, how might voluntary associations help to prevent the growth of tyranny in an increasingly equal society?
- What are the potential challenges to civil associations in the digital age, and how might they impact civic engagement?

### **Assignments**

- Identify five different volunteer groups in your community, describe what they do, and provide information about them through their website or other materials. Share information about one of these organizations with your class.
- Interview a member of one of these volunteer organizations and ask them what motivates them to volunteer.

Class 2, English  
“Whitman, solidarity, and democracy”

## Reading materials

### For students

- Dictionary definitions of “solidarity” and “mutual aid”:  
<https://www.dictionary.com/browse/solidarity>,  
[https://www.oed.com/dictionary/solidarity\\_n](https://www.oed.com/dictionary/solidarity_n), and  
[https://www.oed.com/dictionary/mutual-aid\\_n](https://www.oed.com/dictionary/mutual-aid_n)
- Walt Whitman, “Democratic Vistas” (1871) (1 ½ pages, single-spaced)
- Whitman, “Song of Myself,” from *Leaves of Grass* (1855) sections 1, 6, 16-17 (5 pages)
- Filmmaker interview

### Suggested for teachers

- “Walt Whitman and Civil War,” *American Battlefield Trust*:  
<https://www.battlefields.org/learn/primary-sources/walt-whitman-and-civil-war-hospitals>
- Biography of Walt Whitman from the *American Association for the History of Nursing*:  
<https://www.aahn.org/whitman>
- Biography of Walt Whitman from *Britannica* online:  
<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Walt-Whitman>
- The classic discussion of mutual aid is *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* (1902), by the anarchist Peter Kropotkin (1842-1921), whose work is also important for liberal democratic theorists: [https://archive.org/details/mutualaidfactoro00krop\\_1/page/n3/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/mutualaidfactoro00krop_1/page/n3/mode/2up)

This set of materials is designed to help teachers engage students in a conversation about the principle of social solidarity in liberal democratic society and to connect that discussion with one of the greatest figures in the American literary tradition, Walt Whitman (1819-92). The dictionary definitions are included to help spark a conversation about the concept of solidarity and the related ideal of mutual aid: the practice of reciprocal social support within a community outside of the context of government.

In the excerpts from “Song of Myself” (1855) and “Democratic Vistas” (1871), Whitman writes in differing ways about the relation between individual personhood and the larger social whole. In teaching “Song of Myself,” it may be helpful for teachers to consult or even to use an edition of the poem with notes about the slang words and other aspects of the text that might be challenging for students, such as the *Norton Anthology of American Literature*.

## Questions

### General questions

- What does “solidarity” mean in your own words? Is it simply being united, or is there more to it? Can you think of a time when you have experienced or seen solidarity in your own life? What makes a community feel united? How does the dictionary definition shed light or expand your understanding of the term?
- What are some concrete examples of solidarity? How can people show solidarity with others, even when they don’t know them personally? How much can one be expected to sacrifice to support others? Does the practice of solidarity require a particular type of person?
- What are the similarities and differences between the act of solidarity embodied in serving in the armed forces and other acts of social solidarity?
- How does the concept of “mutual aid” inform the ideal of solidarity? What difference does it make, positively or negatively, if aid is provided by the government or support is provided within self-governing communities? Why might mutual aid be particularly relevant during times of crisis or disaster? Can you provide examples of mutual aid in your own community?

### Questions about the film

- The film depicts two types of solidarity. The first is the mutual aid the mountain rescue groups provide to the communities in which they live. The second is the solidarity that volunteers create among themselves, internal to their group. What is the connection between them?
- What are some of the metaphors of solidarity in the film in the sequence depicting the training at the Austria rescue center (23:55-26:05) and in the final training sequence (39:59-42:12). How are those metaphors heightened by the filmmaker’s use of music? In the first sequence, the filmmakers used a score from Austrian composer Franz Schubert; but in the second, they used a jazz score—why might they have done that?
- How much are rescuer volunteers willing to sacrifice on behalf of their community? How does Austrian rescue leader Marcus Isser discuss the issue in his lecture about Tactical Alpine Medicine (21:39-23:54), or Christian Eder in his remarks about heroism (42:50-43:30)?
- The first words spoken by the narrator in the film are about the dangers of cold (1:05-11).. In the rescue depicted at the end of the film, the first action undertaken by rescuers is to offer the lost girl a blanket (53:15-20). How does discussion of warmth in the film relate to its themes of solidarity? What is its place in Austrian rescuer Alois

Stöckl's discussion of the orange bivouac tent (37:37-39:58)? Why might the filmmakers have chosen the soundtrack that they did here?

- According to the film, what values should ground the practice of solidarity with others? What is the meaning of the phrase “to save a stranger, first love your home” (33:11-31) in the sequence at 31:07-33:32.
- How does the filmmaker describe the meaning of the film in relation to issues of solidarity in the final paragraph of his interview?
- Advanced question. The film begins with a quotation from the German romantic poet Friedrich Hölderlin: “That which rescues grows from danger.” In the context of current social and political conflict and disunity in America, what might the filmmakers have meant by beginning the film with this quotation?
- Advanced question: why would a film about mountain rescue begin by showing someone playing the piano, and also profile a rescuer volunteer who is also a painter?

### Questions about Whitman

#### In general and “Democratic Vistas”

- What is the relationship between Whitman's sense of himself and his sense of belonging? How does his strong commitment to individualism relate to his equally emphatic communal orientation?
- How does Whitman suggest that his personal experiences as a nurse during the Civil War shaped his perspective on the nature of humanity and the potential for both division and unity within a democratic society?
- How does Whitman view the importance of the sacrifice he witnessed during the war for the future of American democracy? How does this sacrifice implicate the purpose of future government that he describes in the final excerpted paragraph of “Democratic Vistas”?
- Read together the final paragraph of “Democratic Vistas” and explain its meaning. Do you agree? How does Whitman describe the relation between the individual and the social whole?

#### “Song of Myself

- What is Whitman celebrating in the first lines of the poem? Is his declaration “I celebrate myself, and sing myself” an expression of selfishness and egoism? How does it strike you? What does it mean to you that he writes, “And what I assume you shall assume”? What does “For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you” mean?

- What does the poem suggest about the relationship between the individual and the collective in a democratic society? How does Whitman's language and imagery create a sense of both individuality and universality?
- What is the significance of Whitman's focus on the natural world (e.g., the grass) in this section? How does Whitman present his relationship with nature and the environment?
- What is the central question posed by the child in section 6, and how does the child's question evolve?
- Explain Whitman's claim, "I resist any thing better than my own diversity" in your own words. What does this reveal about his view of the self and its connection to others?
- Whitman lists various groups and professions in this section, like "A farmer, mechanic, artist, gentleman...Prisoner, fancy-man, rowdy, lawyer, physician, priest." How does this "catalogue" of diverse individuals contribute to the poem's theme of inclusivity and the interconnectedness of all people? (How does it connect with Marcus Isser's words in the film at 41:10-45?)
- How does the poem's style and structure (e.g., free verse, long lines) contribute to its meaning and impact?
- What connections can you draw between the vision of "Song and Myself" and that of "Democratic Vistas"?

## **Assignments**

- Students can be asked to create a list in the poetic style of Walt Whitman of diverse members of their communities today, or to write a poem in the style of Whitman about the interaction between themselves as individuals and their communities.

Class 3, Philosophy  
“Adam Smith, sympathy, and helping others”

## Materials

### For students

- Adam Smith, excerpt from *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) (7 pages, single-spaced)
- Filmmaker interview

### Suggested for teachers

- “Adam Smith’s Moral and Political Philosophy,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/smith-moral-political/>
- “Adam Smith,” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: <https://iep.utm.edu/smith/>.

This set of materials is designed to help teachers engage students in a conversation about the origins of sympathetic identification with others, and with the work of one of the great philosophers of the Anglo-American tradition. The materials necessarily will revolve around careful reading of a philosophical argument.

In the included excerpt from *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Adam Smith (1723-90) describes the experience of feeling sympathy for a stranger. At such moments, Smith argues, we put ourselves in the stranger’s shoes and imagine how we would feel in their place. According to Smith, we do this instinctively. It is part of our humanity. Unlike accounts of charity that emphasize a rational assessment of whether those who need help deserve our goodwill, or whether our aid is likely to improve their situation, Smith’s description traces charitable deeds to our fundamental human feelings.

## Questions

### General questions

- Can you think of some instances in which you felt sympathy with others, either in your immediate surroundings or far away? What was that like? Where did that feeling come from?
- What factors might increase or decrease our capacity for sympathy?
- What social goods might the human capacity for sympathy produce?

### Questions about Smith

- What is Smith's definition of "sympathy"? How does it relate to the more common understanding of pity or compassion? How does Smith describe the experience of feeling pity or compassion? What does he mean when he says we "change places in fancy with the sufferer"? How exactly do we do so?
- Does Smith believe sympathy is a learned behavior or a natural human inclination? How does he support his view?
- How much effort is required of the person feeling sympathy? What factors determine the amount and the kind of effort, according to Smith?
- Why does Smith distinguish between the suffering and the situation of the person affected?
- How does Smith describe the process by which we imagine ourselves in another person's situation to understand their feelings? What does Smith mean when he says we can sympathize with the joy of others, even if we don't personally experience it?
- How does Smith differentiate between sympathizing with the pain of others versus their joy?
- Does Smith's explanation accord with your own experience? Do you agree with Smith's assertion that sympathy is a fundamental aspect of human nature? Why or why not?
- How does Smith suggest that judgments about one's own actions and emotions are formed? What is the role of the "impartial spectator" in this process, according to Smith?
- How does sympathy relate to self-approbation?
- How does the concept of the impartial spectator serve as an internal guide for moral conduct?
- How can one differentiate between the "man within the breast" and the external spectators of one's conduct? How does social interaction and the experience of being judged by others contribute to the development of the capacity for self-judgment?

### Questions about the film

- The first words spoken in the film are about the dangers of cold. Warmth is a theme in Austrian rescuer Alois Stöckl's discussion of the orange bivouac tent (37:37-39:58). In the rescue depicted at the end of the film, the first action undertaken by rescuers is to offer the lost girl a blanket (53:15-20). How might the theme of warmth connect to Smith's claim that sympathy is a fundamental human feeling?
- The Austrian rescuer Alois Stöckl describes the moral grounding of his rescue work in religious terms as "Love of neighbor" (39:27-57). Is this an alternative grounding for sympathy to the one Smith describes, or is it the same? What are some bases for sympathy with others from your own religious tradition?

- What is the meaning of the phrase “to save a stranger, first love your home” (33:11-31) in the sequence at 31:07-33:32. How might it resonate or contrast with Smith’s argument about sympathy?

### **Assignments**

- Students can be asked to write an essay about what Smith might say about the role of social media today in shaping our capacity for sympathy, and how a strong sense of place as described in the film—“love your home”—might provide a response to the influence of social media in ethical terms.

Class 4, Politics  
“Aristotle, friendship, and the origins of political community”

## Materials

### For students

- Aristotle, from the *Nicomachean Ethics* (4 pages, single-spaced)
- Carl Schmitt, from *The Concept of the Political* (5 pages)
- Filmmaker interview

### Background for teachers

- “Carl Schmitt,” *Britannica*: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Carl-Schmitt>
- “Carl Schmitt,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/schmitt/>.
- For teachers, or for teachers and students: excerpt from Mark S. Weiner, “Towards a Democratic Theory of Emergency Medical Services: Sovereignty, Solidarity, Temporality,” *Telos* 198 (Spring 2022), 43-66.

This set of materials is designed to help teachers engage students in a conversation about friendship, what binds people together, and the origins of political community—especially in Aristotle. The materials necessarily will revolve around careful reading of a philosophical argument. The excerpt from Aristotle would also be appropriate for philosophy or literature courses.

We include the excerpt from the highly controversial legal philosopher Carl Schmitt (1888-1985) because it offers a diametrically opposed perspective that roots politics not in friendship but in enmity. For Schmitt political community is formed through a foundational distinction that a community makes between friends and enemies.

We also include an excerpt from an essay by one of the filmmakers either as background for teachers or for discussion with students. The essay develops some questions and perspectives that informed the film in ways relevant to the topics examined here.

## Questions

### General questions

- What does it mean to be a friend? Why is friendship important for you? How does being a friend differ from other types of social relationships, such as family relationships? Why might friendship be important for society generally?

### Questions about the film

- How does the film depict the friendship between rescuers, both in America and in Austria? How is the friendship between Seattle Mountain Rescue's Sarah Stephan and Greg Prothman depicted? Is it a friendship between different types of people? What other friendships are depicted in the film?
- How is friendship and its importance depicted in the film in the sequence from 48:07-51:10? Does it contain an argument about friendship's larger social importance?

### Questions about Aristotle

- How does Aristotle characterize friendship in Book 8, Section 9? What are the key elements he identifies? What are the different types of friendship he describes, and how do they differ? Why does he argue that friendship is essential for a good life?
- What does Aristotle mean when he says that friendships of utility and pleasure are "by resemblance" to friendships of virtue? Why does he argue that incomplete friendships (utility and pleasure) are "incidental"? Why does he consider friendships based on virtue to be the highest and most enduring form of friendship? Why does he consider complete friendship the most genuine and lasting type of friendship? What qualities make it superior to friendships based on utility or pleasure?
- How does Aristotle view the relationship between friendship and justice? How does he see them as connected within a community? For him, is friendship important for more general political communities?
- Can we have true friendship with someone who is not virtuous?
- Aristotle suggests that younger people tend to form friendships of pleasure and older people friendships of utility. Do you agree with this observation? Why or why not?
- What are some examples of friendships in literature, history, or popular culture that align with or contradict Aristotle's ideas?
- Think about your own friendships. Which of Aristotle's categories do they primarily fall into? Can friendships exist solely in one category, or do they often have elements of multiple types?

### Questions about Schmitt

- Schmitt argues that the origins of a political community lie in its members making a fundamental distinction between "friend and enemy." What is a "friend" in Schmitt's view, and what is an enemy? Are they two sides of a single coin?
- Which is more important for the formation of a political community, a sense of friendship or a sense of enmity—a sense of what one holds in common, or what a community opposes?

- How could the film be read as an exploration of this question? For the film, does political community arise from friendship or from a friend/enemy distinction? How does Weiner's "Towards a Democratic Theory of Emergency Medical Services" speak to the question?

### **Assignments**

- Students could be asked to write an essay considering how modern technology (e.g., social media, video calls) might affect Aristotle's ideas about "living together" and forming friendships. Does it make complete friendships easier or harder to cultivate? Do they think complete friendships, as described by Aristotle, are possible in today's society? What challenges might prevent them?
- Students could be asked to write an essay considering which is more important for the formation of a political community: a sense of friendship or a sense of enmity—a sense of what one holds in common, or what a community opposes?