

In-depth Film Guide for *Antwone Fisher*

This guide offers scene descriptions that relate to concepts in *Love Notes*. This is meant as a background guide for the teacher. It is not meant to be used in a formal manner for structured discussions on all scenes, but merely to draw from occasionally if you wish to make connections and references that relate to the program. Use entirely as you wish.

Trusted Adult Connection Activities: The entire film, really, underscores the importance of having a wise “go-to” person. If a person does not find that in his own family, it is important to find someone else in one’s community. There’s a lot to deal with in life even when you don’t have the problems Antwone had. Everyone can use a wise ear, a person to comfort, make suggestions, to offer stories of their own challenges and how they dealt with them, and advice.

With **Scene 21, *Time to Move On***, an important point is made. While a psychologist or social worker can for a time be that wise person, we ultimately have to make our own links with someone in our extended families or someone else we find who cares about us in our own community. Sometimes, for some people, it will be the relationship—and then the marriage and family—they make themselves that will satisfy their need for family and connection. Antwone Fisher (AF) is lucky. He finds a place in his long-lost extended family. But had he not, he was applying himself to learning all he could about forming a healthy relationship and future life with Cheryl and her family. For people who “cannot go home,” investing in forming healthy romantic relationships that may lead to a healthy marriage/committed union is a way to meet the basic human need for love, connection, and security.

Theme: Knowing Yourself—Lessons One to Three:

“Good relationships start with you,” is a key message of *Lesson Two*. It stresses the importance of examining one’s good or bad “baggage” from the past. AF offers a rich treatment of this theme of knowing yourself and examining your “baggage.”

Scene Three—*The Psychiatrist*: Antwone has his first mandated visit to the Navy psychiatrist Dr. Jerome Davenport, played by Denzel Washington. Denzel has three visits to determine if Antwone should be discharged from the military for his fighting. This may be the first time Antwone has ever been asked to consider what might be behind his anger and fighting. *Lesson Two* teaches that past experiences, especially our growing-up experiences, influence our behaviors, emotions, attitudes, and so much of who we are.

Scene Five—*Nothing to Say*: AF continues to be resistant to looking at his baggage. But, as stressed in *Lesson Two*, until he does he won't heal or grow or have good relationships. The point emphasized at the start of *Lesson Two* is this: The healthier you are, and the more you work on your own growth and development, the healthier the relationships you are likely to have.

In Scene Six—*From Under a Rock*: Antwone starts to open up with his psychologist and begins to examine his past. AF then begins to tell him about his parents. He flashes back to his father's murder by an ex-girlfriend. "Where was mom?" the psychologist asks. AF replies, "Behind bars." We find out he was born in prison two months later, and then the state took him and placed him in an orphanage. He says his mom never came to get him in those two years. He was ultimately placed in foster care with the Tate family.

Scene Seven—*The Tates*: AF continues to describe the abuse he was subjected to. He was tied up, beaten and then terrorized by threat of burning with fire. He was also beaten down mentally with verbal abuse. This reinforces an important point in *Lesson Two* about the legacy of abuse on children and the importance of healing childhood hurts to clear the way for healthy relationships. Note: This scene will be referred to again in *Lesson Eight* on *Sliding* and *Lesson Thirteen, Through the Eyes of a Child*, to reinforce an important message; that a huge reason to make wise relationship and sexual choices today while applying oneself to learning about healthy relationships is that a child could pay the price.

Scene Eight—*Jesse*; Scene Nine—*Feeling Powerful*: After Antwone tells about his friend Jesse, his psychologist tries to explain the Tates' abuse. He states emphatically to Antwone that the abuse was clearly WRONG. But, he explains, behavior like that is the legacy of the brutal treatment of slaves long ago that many internalized, and in

turn, passed on to their children and then passed from generation to generation. All bad behavior has a “story” behind it. It never excuses it, but it helps explain.

But the key message in Scene Nine is the psychologist saying that some behaviors are not only wrong but that people have to make choices. In Antwone’s case, the psychologist tells him he must make the choice to channel his anger and that energy positively. This message relates directly to *Lesson One*’s demonstration with the red and green beads: life is not fate. There are decisions to be made even if you’ve been handed a bowl with mostly reds in life. There are things to learn, choices to make, steps to be taken and skills to learn. These all increase our odds of success in life.

Scene 10—*Slipping Up*: This scene shows AF trying to educate himself about the history of slavery and the forces that shaped the distorted behaviors of the Tates. His reading emphasizes that self-knowledge takes effort and learning. This idea is emphasized in *Lesson Three* on the importance setting goals and setting to work on those goals. In this scene his Navy buddies harass him for reading a history book. Unfortunately, AF snaps and attacks his verbal harasser, and that lands him back in his psychologist’s office.

Scene 16 – *Nadine*; Scene 25—*I'm Still Standing*: These scenes contain some of the most painful and challenging examples of AF addressing his “baggage.” In Scene 16 he discloses his sexual abuse and how it makes him fear relationships. With Scene 25 he assertively confronts the people who terrorized and tormented him and lets them know they have no power over him anymore. He tells them that despite their efforts to destroy him, he has become a successful man, and a good man. This underscores the message of *Lesson One* on reds and greens and one’s choices. He took charge, faced his past, made choices, and worked to change his destiny.

Scene 29—*Eva*: Antwone meets his biological mother. He says what he needs to say. He tells her of his triumphs and what he always wanted from her. He states the questions he always wanted to ask. He asks, “*Why did you never come to get me?*” Behind that question is a longing that every child has to be loved and protected. Alas, with this final face-to-face he is able to put closure and move forward. In **Scene 21, *I Salute You***, AF tells his psychologist that in his heart he forgives her, but if he never sees her again it’s okay.

Theme: Relationships and Love—Lessons Four to Six

Scene Four—Cheryl: This is the first meeting between AF and Cheryl. She asks him out, but he is hesitant and a little afraid. He lies and tells her he is on restriction because he's working on a secret high-priority paper. He says he must get back to ship. This scene fits nicely with the messages in *Lesson Four* on the Relationship Pyramid/Inverted Pyramid and the point about the wisdom of going slow. An important point was made about how the word trust should probably not go in the bottom layer of "positive starters." Antwone doesn't really know her yet.

Scene 11—Meet Me at 1700; Scene 12—Dating Advice: All the themes fit so well with starting relationships and handling attractions and infatuation and going slowly while being aware of the love chemicals found in *Lesson Four*. AF sees Cheryl and asks if she's mad at him. She asks if he can hang out now. AF, reticent and nervous about a date with her, again makes an excuse and says maybe in two days he'll meet her. Meanwhile he goes to his psychologist for advice. He's fishing for a way to ask about how to handle his feelings toward Cheryl. AF says, "*I get caught up. I get all tongue-tied and nervous.*" Dr. Davenport assures him everyone feels that way—even he did. Antwone is actually talking about the effects of the "love chemicals," a topic of *Lesson Four*. He tells his psychologist they were supposed to go out earlier but he wanted to take his time and clear his head. He asks his psychologist some basics like, "*What should I do?*" Dr. Davenport actually does some role-playing with him and suggestions for what to do. He urges AF to relax and to have fun. He also cautions AF about escalation, saying, "*It can escalate you know. My wife and I, we went out and we escalated to marriage.*" The last thing he says to AF is, "*Don't escalate.*"

Scene 15—Trouble in Mexico: This scene reinforces the three sides of a realistic concept of maturing love in *Lesson Five*. Antwone and Cheryl certainly have chemistry, one side of the love triangle. And, they are developing their friendship—getting to know one another and accepting one another. They are truly building intimacy. The third side of the model of maturing love involves trust and commitment. Antwone is in love, and he is committed to Cheryl. His intention is to be faithful. Even as he is tempted and baited by his Navy buddies to be involved with a beautiful Mexican woman who asks him to dance, he has no interest. True love is about being faithful and being true to one's promise.

Scene 18—*Being Honest*; Scene 23—*Two Tickets to Cleveland*: In Scene 18, Cheryl and Antwone are sitting by the ocean. He asks if he can be honest with her and then proceeds to tell her that he is seeing a psychiatrist. She replies in an empathetic and validating way, saying that her father had gone to a psychiatrist to deal with the fallout of his war experience. Feeling validated and safe, AF continues to open up more and tell her about his difficult childhood. Toward the end he admits to her that he was afraid to even approach her. Their relationship would pass the three-question test of “How Healthy Is This Relationship” introduced in *Lesson Six*. The Seven Principles of Smart Love from *Lesson Five* are evident in their developing relationship. Antwone and Cheryl have moved slowly. They have taken time to learn more about each other. This reinforces *Lesson Eight*, which emphasizes the benefit of not sliding. A deciding approach means two people build knowledge and trust and make real decisions—rather than slide—through big relationships transitions like committing to a relationship, become more physically intimate, marriage, living together, or having a child.

Dangerous Love—Lesson Seven

Scene Two—*Busted*; Scene 10—*Slipping Up*; and Scene 15—*Trouble in Mexico*: In each of these scenes we see Antwone lose it and get into a physical fight. He was verbally harassed, but life throws that at everyone. In important relationships, including with those we love, we can and will have frustrations and arguments. And we sometimes say things we wish later we hadn’t. As *Lesson Seven* teaches, “arguments that get physical” are unhealthy. They can be dangerous, chronic and even lethal. They can harm children who witness them. Learning how to take time outs and regulate one’s emotions might be the most important skills people can learn.

Sex and Intimacy: Pacing and Planning—Lessons Nine and Ten

Scene 13—*The First Date*; Scene 18—*Being Honest*; Scene 23—*Two Tickets to Cleveland*; and Scene 24—*Antwone’s Lover*: Their slowly developing relationship underscores how the two sides of real love, friendship and commitment, can fuel the passion in a relationship. They are building genuine intimacy, which participants learn in *Lesson Nine* is much more than a physical connection. In Scene 18, they are clearly

disclosing more information about themselves. They are deepening their knowledge and trust of each other and in doing so deepening their true intimacy (verbal, social, spiritual). Their mutual and deepening emotional intimacy is apparent. At this point, the commitment and trust part of intimacy has deepened. Antwone and Cheryl chose a slow pace for physical intimacy discussed in *Lesson Nine*. They took each deepening level of physical intimacy seriously. They did not rush or slide into sex-too-soon. Their experience portrays that physical intimacy can be paced slowly and only as the other intimate connections are deepened.

Discussion:

- *Antwone certainly didn't "score" with Cheryl, but he skipped off after their first date saying, "That's my girl. I respect her." Do you think guys respect and maybe are more attracted to women who have a sense of themselves like Cheryl and who have boundaries for themselves?*
- *Can it actually be more romantic to pace things more slowly?*
- *It appears that Antwone and Cheryl are engaged or headed toward marriage at the end of the film. They are being embraced by each other's families. Do you think they chose the right pacing for physical intimacy?*

The Success Sequence—Lesson Eight

In Scene 25—*I'm Still Standing*; and Scene 29—*Eva*, AF confronts his mother and tells her that he is a good man; he is a successful man. This reinforces *Lesson Eight* on following the success sequence. He finished school, got advanced training, learned how to form a healthy relationship, and did not have a baby before marriage. Imagine if he had one or two or three children and two or three "baby mamas" along the way? How much more difficult would his life have been? Would he have been as successful? Also, how would those babies feel not having a father as a daily part of their lives raising them and loving their mama too?

These two scenes help to underscore that AF's success in life is due in part to the fact that he didn't slide into sex and unwise relationships. Had he slid into sex with Cheryl right away and had it resulted in a pregnancy—all before he had accomplished some of the important work on himself—that relationship could have unfolded quite differently. Getting hit with the responsibility to make a home and family before one has matured

and addressed problem behaviors—let alone before finishing school and forming a healthy union—is likely to spell trouble. Despite the romance surrounding the birth and first few months, most unplanned pregnancies typically result in plenty of relationship turbulence.

Through the Eyes of a Child—Lesson Thirteen

Scene 20—Who Will Cry...?; Scene Six—From Under a Rock; Scene Seven—The Tates; Scene Eight – Jesse; and Scene 16—Nadine: These scenes are truly the most powerful in terms of feeling the pain and consequences for children when parents have unaddressed problems, relationship troubles, and slide into unplanned pregnancies. Children in homes with domestic abuse and children whose parents have a series of unstable or troubled relationships are far more likely to be abused. Too often children are left feeling overburdened, unloved and abandoned emotionally or physically. We learn early on that Antwone's father and mother had a turbulent and casual connection. His father was out seeing an ex-girlfriend who shot him while his mother was pregnant. He was born from two people who slid, who had not matured and faced their issues, who had not formed a healthy relationship or marriage before having a child. We see the consequences through Antwone, who paid the biggest price. Antwone was mentally, physically, and sexually abused. He felt abandoned and unloved. His poem *Who Will Cry....?* makes everyone cry. His is perhaps a worst-case scenario, but many children today suffer from the poor choices of parents; parents who themselves may have been neglected or poorly treated as children. There's always a story behind these things, but the ultimate message of this film is that whatever one's past, one can make change and forge a new path. And one place to pay some attention to is one's love life. It truly is not neutral. The relationship and sexual choices one makes can affect not only them, but a child.

Communication—Lessons Eleven and Twelve

Scene Two—Busted; Scene 10—Slipping Up; and Scene 15—Trouble in Mexico: In each of these scenes we see Antwone lose it and get into a physical fight. Wanting to change his aggressive reactions is not enough. A person also needs skills, like Time Outs and Speaker/Listener Technique, and learning to deal with hidden issues.

Discussion:

- *You can understand Antwone's anger at being called a faggot or ridiculed for reading a book. Let's brainstorm what he could have said to back away from either of those situations in a saving-face type of way.*
- *Who has more power? The person who loses it and throws a punch or the person who cleverly backs off and keeps his or her cool?*

Scene 18—*Being Honest*: It illustrates the importance of safety for couples to be honest and open. The Speaker/Listener Technique can increase safety so couples can openly share and deal with conflicts and sensitive issues. Remember, people slowly fall out of love as these negative patterns build or they stop sharing. In Scene 18, *Being Honest*, AF asks if he can be honest with her and then proceeds to tell her that he was seeing a psychiatrist. She listens intently; doesn't interrupt. She replies in an empathetic and validating way, saying that her father had gone to a psychiatrist to deal with the fallout of his war experience. She pauses so he can go on; she doesn't take over the conversation. Feeling validated and safe, he continues by telling her about his difficult childhood. They really listen to each other and take turns talking.

Scene 14—*The Davenports' Problem*; and Scene 31—*I Salute You*: Both give examples of where a couple has a very sensitive and difficult issue to talk over, namely the inability to have a child. This issue touches on some very deep desires and sensitivities. Discussions like these can really benefit from the principles of the Speaker/Listener Technique. The Technique makes it safer to talk about hidden issues.