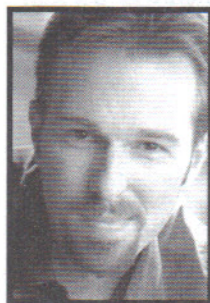


# To be truly alone—almost

**A** lone. We've all experienced some version of aloneness: the soul-sapping nature of loneliness; the fear and loss that come with isolation; even the calm of self-sought solitude. Ultimately, however, being alone isn't something we tolerate well. Christians, as with people from many other faith traditions, have a safety net against the dark side of aloneness: Where can you go where God is not? Joshua (1:9) taught that God is with us wherever we go.

And anyway, even when we feel alone, we're not *really* alone, are we? Usually, there are people in the other room, across the street, a phone call away.



RYAN HARRISON

But what if that wasn't the case?

What if you were truly alone: on your own, without friends and family, without anyone, even (seemingly) without God? That's the story of the film *Gravity*.

Academy Award winner Sandra Bullock plays Ryan Stone, an accomplished doctor turned anxious astronaut in this hold-your-breath sci-fi/drama/thriller about a human being utterly alone in the inhospitable, impersonal expanse of

space. While working on a satellite in Earth's orbit, Stone abruptly finds herself stripped of both companionship and assistance, and, at times, of hope. Within moments, her entire team is gone and she is alone in the truest sense of the word. Her life and her return to Earth suddenly depend on a cascade of hopeful (but improbable) death-defying leaps of faith.

Only, Stone doesn't seem to have faith. At least, she never reveals any hint of a personal belief in, or reliance on, God. "No one ever taught me to pray," she utters at one point. And there are no frantic deals with the Divine, or tearful supplications.

*Gravity* could be seen in several different ways: as a story of luck, or of the power of determination, of the capriciousness of fate, or even of the grace of divine Providence. As I sat in the theater, I felt something else. Later, as I stood in my yard, eyes turned spaceward to contemplate the film, what struck me as the core message was its portrayal of what it means to be really, truly, starkly alone.

Stone epitomized this. Floating in space, disconnected from all others and even from the entire planet which was her home, she

embodied aloneness. We learned that she had no one on Earth; she led a disconnected life. Even her young daughter is gone, dead before her time. Mission Control may have been trying frantically to reestablish contact with her, but they could not. Stone was staggeringly alone, to a degree that none of us has ever experienced.

(Spoiler alert)

And yet, although Stone was distinctly isolated, her survival depended on the work of others. Her solitary journey from spinning in space to standing on terra firma depended on a vast number of other people: the US personnel who trained her, the Russians who helped build the International Space Station, and the Chinese who unwittingly provided her with an escape pod from one of their own satellites. None of these fellow human beings was in space with her, but their influence was essential for her survival. Thus, Stone revealed both how alone we can be, and yet, simultaneously, how dependent on others.

One thing more. Sometimes, we need to be reminded that spiritual cinema isn't necessarily "Christian cinema," but that spiritual lessons can come in somewhat foreign attire. So, I personally appreciated that on her final, death-defying attempt to return to Earth, Stone looked up from the seat of her Chinese escape pod to see a small Buddha statuette smiling at her.

In Buddhism, aloneness is a core belief. Ultimately, we can only be responsible for ourselves, and thus must work out our own way to enlightenment. No one, not even a god, can do that for us. Buddhism recognizes this. Stone characterized it. So much so, that when she returned to Earth—through fire, ice, void, and flood—she stood on trembling legs, surveyed the view, and, although triumphant, was still alone.

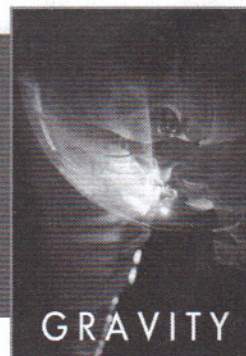
What can we learn from this? Perhaps that our individual journeys through life are at once separate and interconnected. Maybe, to recognize our need for others, even as we acknowledge our sole responsibility to ourselves. Hopefully, that no matter the gravity of our darkest hour, we are not—none of us—truly alone. **W**

Ryan Harrison attends La Verne (Calif.) Church of the Brethren where he started and led monthly Spiritual Cinema Circle gatherings for more than five years. He now works as the director of Resident Life & Wellness at Hillcrest Homes, a Church of the Brethren retirement community, and is completing his doctor of psychology degree at the University of the Rockies.

## ABOUT THE MOVIE

**Title:** *Gravity*. **Theatrical release:** October 4, 2013. **DVD release:** Feb. 25, 2014. **Running time:** 93 minutes.

**Director:** Alfonso Cuarón. **Producers:** Alfonso Cuarón and David Heyman. **MPAA rating:** PG-13. In the film, a medical engineer and an astronaut work together to survive after an accident leaves them adrift in space. "For all its stunning exteriors, it's really concerned with emotional interiors," writes Matt Zoller Seitz on RogerEbert.com. "The film is about that moment when you suffered misfortune that seemed unendurable and believed all hope was lost and that you might as well curl up and die, and then you didn't. Why did you decide to keep going? It's a mystery as great as any in physics or astronomy, and one we've all grappled with, and transcended."



GRAVITY