Responses to Preparing for the Film

1. It seems likely that if an American citizen were shot in Morocco, people reading of the crime would first think “terrorism.” The news reports, which would be carried internationally, would consider extreme religious and political factions as the instigators of the shooting and all would worry about retaliation. Motives would be considered and anxieties about other tourists traveling in the country would be great. Consequences would include an American State Department investigation and a travel advisory would be issued cautioning other Americans planning a trip to the country or those already there. Political fallout would include an Embassy response and diplomatic exchanges. Televised reports of the shooting would be broadcast in every country, and there would be wide-spread speculation about the motivations for the crime.

2. As different as each culture may be, most people value a family's support and unconditional love, especially in time of crisis and uncertainty. Children count on their parents for protection, guidance, and comfort. All people typically value learning and maturing, recognizing that mistakes are a part of the process. Every culture treasures certain customs and family celebrations—sharing weddings, births, and holidays together. Most people appreciate music, art, dance, food, self-expression, entertainment, and communication. We all value life, good health, honesty, trust, mutual respect, and kindness.

3. Undocumented immigrants in the United States constantly fear deportation, whether the consequence of an alleged crime or traffic violation or an unwarranted and random act for an arbitrary reason. The realities of the undocumented person’s struggle to survive in the United States include being underpaid and not appreciated for their services and loyalty to the people who employ them. They are typically unable to get medical coverage and automobile licenses or insurance. Because undocumented immigrants lack a US Passport, their trips back to their native land are complicated so they seldom see family left behind. Their return to the United States is filled with anxiety about the border crossing, and some elect to reenter the US with a “coyote” or human smuggler at an unguarded crossing, to avoid the border patrol. Longevity in the United States is no guarantee of an easy return or eventual assimilation.

4. "Babel" means "a confused noise," especially consisting of loud unintelligible voices all talking at once. The Tower of Babel is described in the biblical Book of Genesis when people "decided to build a tower which was to reach to heaven, to make them equal to God, and at the same time, to make it possible for them to stay together. . . . God decided to destroy their arrogance by destroying their ability to understand one another" ("Tower of Babel," chabad.org). God caused them to speak many different languages, which led to the collapse of the project and ultimately to the scattering of people across the world. The Tower of Babel is often seen as a sin of pride, of people trying to be like God. Therefore, God created a multitude of languages so that this project would have to be discontinued. The Tower of Babel ultimately explains the movement from everyone...
speaking the same language and being able to work together to speaking multiple languages and being unable to communicate and stay together.

Responses to Reflecting on the Film

1. The Moroccan family in *Babel* are goat herders. In addition to the two sons, Ahmed and Yusef, the family has a daughter, Zohra, slightly older than the boys of the family. Ahmed seems to be less highly regarded than his younger brother Yusef, and he is threatened by Yusef’s immediate success with the rifle that their father has purchased for the boys to use to shoot jackals, to protect their flocks. The father seems unaware of how he has hurt Ahmed by mocking his attempt to fire the weapon and his missing the target. The boys continue to practice shooting the gun and Ahmed complains that the gun “doesn’t work,” that the bullets “are bad,” that its promised range can’t be achieved. They take turns shooting, Yusef with more success, and when the tourist bus stops, it is evident that Yusef has hit someone on the vehicle. Sibling rivalry is evident in the boys’ relationship, although after the shooting they at first work together to escape the consequences of Yusef having hit the tourist. After they confess to their father what has happened, and explain why the father must leave the family compound and they must hide the gun, Ahmed tells his father that it was his brother who shot the gun, and also that Yusef has spied on Zhora as she has undressed. Their father expresses his anger at all three children, and then flees from the police with his two sons. After Ahmed is seriously wounded, the film records Yusef’s flashback to the two of them flying a kite together, affirmation that they once enjoyed childhood moments together and that their relationship was not entirely acrimonious.

2. We find out that Richard and Susan are a married couple who are on a bus tour through Morocco, trying to heal from the unexpected death of their infant son Sam. Both parents are distraught and seem unable to share their grief with each other. Richard feels that Susan is stressed and can't relax, but she responds, "You're the reason I'm stressed. You're the reason I can't relax." He adds, "You're not ready to forgive me, are you?" Susan answers, "You know what I'm talking about." Although the specifics aren't given, she seems to resent Richard because he refuses to talk or, as he puts it, to "argue" about it. The most revealing comment is when Susan tells him, "You just let me know when you're ready to argue and aren't going to run away again." His attempt to "run away" is referred to in a later scene and seems to be at the root of her resentment towards him. The audience never learns specifically if Richard physically left the family for a time or emotionally withdrew or some combination of both. Also, it seems to be his idea to travel so she asks him, "Richard, why did we come here?" and he answers, "To be alone" even though there are clearly lots of people around them.

During their trip, they share significant moments, beginning when Susan reaches over to hold Richard's hand on the bus, and they both connect without any words shared. After Susan is shot in the neck through the bus window, we see Richard frantically trying to stop the bleeding, get her help, and comfort her. When the other tourists commandeer the driver and the bus, leaving Richard and Susan behind, Richard is constantly with Susan and helps her endure the crude and agonizing suturing of her wound. When Susan awakens, she makes Richard promise that if she dies, he will take care of the kids: "Don't you ever leave them again." He reassures her that he won't. She confides, "I peed my
pants. I couldn't hold it in any more," and he gets a pan for her and helps her so she can relieve herself. During this intimate time together, he kisses her tenderly and she kisses him back and starts crying, "I was scared. He wasn't breathing." They both admit that neither of them was at fault, and both are ready to heal together. During this entire crisis, Richard has never wavered in his support and concern for Susan, and she has been able to rely on his strength and his love for her and his family.

3. Chieko’s character is the one most developed in the film. In some ways, she personifies the problems of puberty and difficulties many teenagers experience. In other ways, she is entirely unique. On the volleyball court, where the film first shows her, the audience learns that she is a deaf mute and contentious. She protests a referee’s call, argues with him, and is expelled from the game which her team then loses. In the locker room, her friend, also deaf and mute, signs that she is the reason they lost the game and the audience infers she is a good player—when she isn’t quarrelsome.

In the car after the game, she is surly with her father and claims that he doesn't listen to her as well as her mother did. She tells him that she is planning to meet her friends rather than have lunch with him, even though it is clear that he is a businessman who has taken time off from his work to attend her game and take her to lunch. At the restaurant with her friends, the audience at first sees a giddy teenager who is part of the group, merrily flirting with a neighboring table of boys their age. When the two groups meld, we see her dismay that the boy she has been attracted to has not understood that she is deaf and mute and that he has no patience with her disability. In frustration and anger, she goes to the restroom and removes her underpants, returns to the table and flashes her exposed hairy genitals at him. Her neediness and desire for attention are apparent, as is her poor judgment in choosing this method of gaining attention. Poor judgment is also evident when she goes with friends to a playground and takes a swig of whiskey from a flask proffered by a boy and then follows the liquor with pills he provides. Scenes of her drunken dizziness are evident on the playground as well as at the disco. That her disability distances her from the crowd’s merriment is beautifully replicated by the film’s cutting the sounds of the music and dancers so that the audience can experience Chieko’s complete silence and removal from the action, her imposed isolation from others.

Her sorrow and depression are evident as she leaves the disco for her dental appointment. At the dentist’s office, she initiates with a full mouth kiss a sexual connection with the doctor who is disgusted, especially when she moves his hand toward her genitals. The dentist demands that she leaves. When she asks the concierge at her family’s apartment to ask the police detective to return to talk with her while her father is away, the audience anticipates her sexual intentions. We are unprepared for her full nudity, and are as embarrassed for her conduct as the police detective who protests that she is but a young girl as he offers her his own jacket to cover her nakedness. She tells the detective that she witnessed her mother’s suicidal jump from the balcony of her lofty apartment, and in this scene we empathize with her loneliness and depression. We feel further empathy for Chieko when her father meets the departing detective in the apartment lobby and tells him that his daughter was the first to find her mother who had killed herself with a gun. Chieko is frustrated with the conditions of her life and deeply depressed, in need of comfort and counseling. Earlier, when we see her isolation from her peer group’s conversations and fun because they don’t all know how to sign or are
unwilling to write notes to her that would include her in the conversations, we regret her isolation and empathize with her frustrations and depression. We are hopeful when we see Chieko reach for her father’s hand to grasp it that she will embrace his help and stop pushing him away. We can’t help but feel concern for her as she stands naked and vulnerable before her father. We can hope that he may realize that Chieko needs more guidance and support to heal from her mother’s shocking suicide.

4. Amelia cares deeply about Mike and Debbie as if they were her own children. She plays lovingly with them, comforts them at night, and reassures Debbie that she doesn't have to worry about dying like her baby brother Sam because "that only happens to very tiny babies." When Susan needs surgery and can't come home, Amelia tries repeatedly to get someone she knows and trusts to stay with the children so she can go to her son's wedding. Amelia is adamant when she tells her nephew Santiago that she won't leave the children with someone she doesn't know. Only when there is no one to stay with them does she decide to take them with her to her son's wedding in Mexico. The children are understandably nervous about traveling to Mexico because their mom told them it was "really dangerous" there. However, they seem fascinated by all the activity as they are crossing the border and by the souvenir stands and lively Mexican street life. At the wedding reception, the children initially want to stay near Amelia, but once they are sent off with the other children, they quickly adjust and are running around helping to catch the chickens and watching a chicken get beheaded.

On the return trip, they are sleeping when the car gets stopped at the border. When Amelia's drunk nephew Santiago speeds away from the border patrol and leaves Amelia and the kids stranded in the desert, Amelia realizes that she needs to walk to the road to flag down a car for help, if they are to survive in the heat. Mike doesn't want Amelia to leave them, but she explains that he needs to watch his sister and she will be back for them soon. When Amelia flags down a patrol car, she is appalled that the officer doesn't immediately go for the children. She is clearly worried about them and desperate to find them. When she is told that they are safe but she will be deported, she is especially saddened because she loves these children as if they are her own. She has lived in the States for 16 years, is so attached to this American family, and feels that San Diego is her home. We suspect that she has been separated from her own children for years so she could make a living and support herself and them, probably sending money to her family in Mexico, as so many undocumented immigrants do.

5. The Moroccan, American, Japanese, and Mexican families all seem to encounter hardships and traumas that threaten the family bonds. When Ahmed is shot for the second time during the police action and it appears he has been killed, we see in his father the same grief that we see in Richard as he sobs into the telephone at the hospital in Casablanca. Chieko’s father has taken time from work to attend Chieko’s volleyball game and take her to lunch, but he is accused by his daughter of not paying attention to her as her mother did. All of the fathers deeply grieve for their children in realization of how their own actions have impacted their families. Amelia, the Mexican nanny to Richard and Susan’s children, loves the children as she does her son, to whom she travels
for his wedding in Mexico. We can only speculate on how many years she has been separated from him as she has worked in the United States for sixteen years, a hardship she could not have anticipated when she accepted employment outside of her own country. Amelia also agonizes over leaving young Mike and Debbie in the desert when she goes for help and then is devastated when she is separated from them permanently by the border patrol officials. The film confirms that all cultures encounter unexpected hardships and traumas, and all share a love of family and children.

6. Throughout the film, we see kindnesses extended between people of different cultures. In fact, the gun that is used to shoot at the bus, initially, was a thank you gift from Chieko’s dad to his hunting guide from Morocco. When Susan is shot in Morocco, the local tour guide directs the entire bus to his home town to find emergency medical care for Susan. He also welcomes Susan and Richard into his home and stays with them the entire time. An elderly woman at his home goes out of her way to help stop the bleeding, to clear the curious children from the windows, and to help calm Susan. Even though the two women have no common language, the elderly one shares a pipe with Susan that probably contains hashish to help relieve Susan’s pain and let her sleep. When the helicopter arrives and Susan is taken to it on a stretcher, Richard hugs the guide and tries to offer him money, but the guide refuses any payment. Throughout this crisis, the guide was so kind and accommodating, offering help and suggestions without any complaints or self interest.

When a naked Chieko tries to seduce the police detective in her apartment, he is appalled but realizes she is troubled and the audience understands that she has been traumatized by her mother’s suicide. He treats her with compassion and lends her his jacket to cover up rather than taking advantage of her, shaming her, or reporting her. As she cries loudly against his shoulder, he comforts her. Later, he reads her note in private, as she had requested, showing that he continues to care about her.

7. Throughout the film, we see examples of good characters making flawed decisions. It seems that the Moroccan father has either encouraged his sons to compete or has ignored the tensions between them, and Susan’s being wounded on the bus may be seen as a manifestation of the brothers’ competitive rivalry. Further, the father has not cautioned the boys about the use of the rifle, that it is a dangerous weapon if misused. His being away from home shortly after the boys have their first day with the gun is additional evidence of this loving father making flawed decisions. Richard’s decision to take Susan to Morocco seems to be a flawed decision to avoid a conversation they need to have about their infant son’s death. Their lack of communication in the early scenes of the film is a sorrow for the audience to witness. Also, it seems that Richard earlier left his family for a brief time, and Susan wants him to promise “not to leave again.” Amelia is a loving mother and a loving nanny to Susan and Richard’s two children, but when she can’t find someone to take care of them at home, she foolishly decides to bring the children across the border for her son Luis’s wedding. Further, she returns to the United States after the wedding with a hot-headed and inebriated Santiago driving, and then she leaves the children under a tree in the desert when she can’t carry the sleeping Debbie as
she looks for the Border Patrol for help after Santiago leaves them. Santiago foolishly thinks that he can escape the Border Patrol by ramming his way across the border and driving off-road instead of facing arrest for drunk-driving. Santiago also abandons Amelia, an older woman with two young children in the desert, without water, shelter, or protection from so many dangers. Chieko makes the flawed decision to flaunt her sexuality to gain acceptance by the boy she finds attractive but who has ignored her, and she further drinks and accepts drugs in an attempt to join her peers in frivolity. Her kissing the family’s dentist and using nudity to attract the police detective are also flawed decisions. Perhaps her father’s not dealing with Chieko’s depression after her mother’s suicide may be viewed as a flawed decision. Chieko clearly needs counseling. His daughter perceives him as someone who does not pay attention to her as her mother always did, but the audience sees that he is trying, so Chieko’s perception is flawed. We see that the flawed decisions occur in each of the cultures represented in the film and that each flawed decision is made by a good person. We also see that even small poor decisions have international repercussions.

8. In the bible, The Tower of Babel is often seen as a sin of pride, of people trying build a tower to reach heaven and to be like God. Everyone is punished for their arrogance by God, who causes them to speak many different languages so they can no longer understand each other or work together and the unfinished tower has to be abandoned. The biblical story of Babel relates to many key scenes in this film, riddled as it is with the following misperceptions and confusions caused by flawed communication:

- When the Moroccan father Abdullah buys the rifle, he doesn't realize the potency of this weapon--and he certainly doesn't warn his sons of its danger or teach them how to use it safely. He leaves them with the rifle as he goes off for the day, expecting them to shoot jackals that prey on their goats, not anticipating that they will shoot at other targets.

- Unaware of how lethal the rifle is, the brothers Ahmed and Yussef shoot at the bus as if they are shooting at a tin can--with no sense of danger or life-and-death consequences. They treat the rifle more like a toy than a deadly weapon.

- Before Susan is shot, we see that she and Richard have serious problems communicating about the death of their infant son. Even though Susan and Richard speak the same language and have a family together, they still can't really talk to or fully understand each other.
• When Susan is shot, the tourists—and eventually journalists worldwide—mistakenly assume that it is the act of a terrorist. They have no idea that the gun was shot by children who simply want to see how far the gun will shoot.

• Even though their fellow tourists on the bus in Morocco all speak English, Richard and Susan feel distant from them especially when Susan is shot. The other travelers are understandably distressed by the violence, but they don't empathize with the American couple and they leave them stranded in the village, to wait for help alone.

• When we meet Chieko, who is deaf, we see her frustration on the volleyball court when the referee makes what she perceives is an unfair call and she signs to the ref, "I am deaf, not blind." When the referee ejects Chieko from the game for her anger, she gives him the finger as a silent act of protest.

• Frustrated communication continues to plague Chieko as she refers to the teens talking and laughing around her and signs to her friend, "They look at us like we're monsters." When she removes her underpants in the bathroom, she tells her friend, "Now they're going to meet the real hairy monster." She wants to shock them and show her anger by exposing herself, but she doesn't realize how such gestures aren't really bringing her any satisfaction.

• When Chieko is out with her friends, the film sometimes is dramatically silent so viewers can sense how isolating it must be to see people talking, laughing, and dancing to music but be unable to hear any sounds.

• Chieko's conversation in the car with her father reveals that she doesn't believe he listens to her the way her mother did. She seems to be deaf to his efforts to communicate with her and to show her love.

• Chieko's sexual advances toward her dentist repel him and prompt him to order her from his office and to treat her as perverse rather than troubled and needy.

• While the police detective is in Chieko's apartment, he is shocked that she reappears without her clothes and attempts to embrace him. He sees her as a child even though her advances are explicitly sexual. She later writes him a note but asks that he put it away to be read later, postponing communication. When he
reads the letter by himself, viewers are never privy to the contents of the letter or how he felt about what Chieko wrote.

- When we discover, near the end of the film, that Chieko's mother shot herself and that Chieko was the first one to find her, we can better understand how confused and traumatized Chieko must be.

- Living in the United States for 16 years as an undocumented immigrant, Amelia must also feel that she is often in hiding and isolated from her own family even though she seems so well-adjusted and deeply loved.

- Having had to miss many family celebrations in Mexico and to not always be a part of her children's lives, Amelia doesn't want to miss her son's wedding even if she is at risk when crossing the border.

- A drunken Santiago ignores his aunt's pleas when he abandons Amelia with two small children in the desert, as he tries to flee from the border patrol.

- Clearly, the border patrol shows Amelia no sympathy or understanding when they send her back to Mexico, as they are required to do, even though she has lived in the United States for 16 years.

9. The film masterfully connects diverse cultures with echoed images that thereby link scenes and suggest repetitive themes, often providing the transition from one scene to the next. The photo of the hunting scene, with Chieko’s father, his guide, and the rifle, seems innocuous enough when it is first introduced. But when the detective sees the photo in Chieko’s apartment, he realizes, as does the audience, that this is the gun that has been used in a shooting in Morocco. The rifle links the plot as it links Morocco and Japan and because the gun has been used to shoot an American, the United States government is connected to the rifle as well. The sound of the rifle shots used by the brothers as they practice shooting, and when Yusef shoots through the bus window, are sound images that are echoed by the noise of guns shot into the air during the village celebration of Luis and Patricia’s wedding. The gun shot sounds provide transitions from one scene to the next. Images of blood link Susan’s wound in Morocco to the bloody chickens being prepared for the wedding feast in Mexico. Again, the image of blood works as a transition from one scene and culture to another. Scenes of teenage sexual explorations link Morocco (masturbation, peeping on Zohra, Zohra’s knowing that she is observed) with Japan (Chieko’s exposing her body and sexually grasping for attention). There is also an echo of sexuality when Amelia connects with an old
boyfriend, now a widower, in their dancing after the wedding. Medical equipment links scenes in Japan and Morocco. The image of the clean office and sterile dental tools of the Japanese dentist are visually linked but are contrasted with the dusty home and crude needle and used thread that will suture Susan’s wound in Morocco. Drugs used by Chieko to either be connected to her peer group or to deaden her depression are also used by Susan who is offered a pipe, probably of hashish, to dull her pain after the crude sewing of her wound in the Moroccan village. Police officials appear in Morocco, Mexico and Japan and thereby link the three cultures.

Unexpected acts of tenderness occur in each culture and thereby thematically link them: the police detective protects Chieko by covering her and denying her misguided sexual advances; Richard provides a pot for Susan to use for urinating and this gesture provides contact, intimacy and tenderness neither would have anticipated; Chieko is indifferent to her nudity when she clasps her father’s hand and then falls into his arms crying. Parents and guardians often risk danger to save children. Indifferent to the policemen’s firing on them, the Moroccan boys’ father clasps to his chest his dying son; Amelia disregards her own safety and illegality as she searches for the Border Patrol to help her save Mike and Debbie from perishing in the desert. The visual and sound images connect the cultures and provide transitions between scenes. The film, with its time and place shifts, would not cohere without these linking devices.

10. Although the film ends with a sense of resolution--Susan gets to a hospital for surgery, Amelia is met at the border crossing by her son, Chieko and her father embrace, and young Yussef destroys the rifle and explains to the authorities that he was the one who shot at the tour bus--there are deep sorrows that the main characters in each culture will retain. While Richard and Susan seem to have strengthened their bond during this crisis and Richard has reassured Susan that he won't run from her and the children again, it is not clear that the doctors will be able to save Susan's arm or what the extent of damage will be. We suspect that she might be facing a life with some physical pain as well as their emotional scars and perhaps some resentment because it doesn't seem as if she wanted to take this trip from the beginning. Their children Mike and Debbie are bound to be traumatized by having been abandoned in the desert by Santiago and then by Amelia when she went to get help.

Amelia will always live with regrets that she took the children to Mexico without permission from their father and that she had to abandon them in the desert to search for help. Being deported from the country where she has lived for 16 years will require a huge adjustment, but she will also deeply miss the children and worry about what they went through until they were returned to their parents.

At the end of the film, Chieko's father embraces his naked daughter on the terrace, but they both will need to heal from the loss of a wife and mother. In addition, Chieko's father is now more aware of how deeply traumatized Chieko has been and how she needs professional help through her sense of isolation and loss.

Finally, the Moroccan family will never be the same. Although Yussef didn't intend to wound anyone on the bus, he did shoot, and possibly kill, the police officer, so he and his family will most likely be punished for fleeing from the authorities and for shooting the policeman. Also, it appears that the older son Ahmed may have died, so Yussef and his family will deeply mourn this tragic loss. While the film underscores the
good will, resilience, and determination of the human spirit, it also affirms the
universality of sorrow--no class or culture is immune to it or protected from it.