

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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***Fearless* (1993)**

Peter Weir

OVERVIEW

Director Peter Weir (1944-) is one of the best-known Australian filmmakers. He participated in what has been called the Australian New Wave in the 1970s, directing distinctive films like *The Cars that Ate Paris* (1974), *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975), and *The Last Wave* (1977) that made use of Australian settings. Weir's global status grew with *Gallipoli* (1981) and *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1982), the latter of which won an Oscar. Weir went on to make several Hollywood movies, including the acclaimed *Witness* (1985) and *Dead Poets Society* (1989), both also Oscar winners. Weir began making films less frequently in the 21st century but has maintained an international reputation.

Film At the beginning of *Fearless*, the protagonist, Max Klein, survives a plane crash. Previously neurotic, Max finds that he no longer feels any fear. But he struggles to return to normal life with his wife and child. Weir structures the narrative in an unusual way: the film opens with the immediate aftermath of the crash, while the lead-up to the crash and the crash itself are depicted through Max's flashbacks at various points throughout the film. The crash is thus the climax of the film even though most of the action shown takes place after it.

Background Established in Hollywood in the early 1990s, Weir was seeking studio projects that were not yet fully developed so that he could participate in the development process. He ended up working on *Fearless*, which at the time was a screenplay written by Yglesias, who had also written the novel of the same name (published in 1993). Weir's director of photography for this film was Allen Daviau, who worked with Steven Spielberg in the 1980s. Weir and Daviau used various unconventional techniques to represent Max's subjective experience, both during the crash and during more mundane scenes. Many of the crash scenes also feature music rather than naturalistic sounds. Ultimately, the film was well reviewed, and Rosie Perez received an Oscar nomination for Best Supporting Actress.

CHARACTERS

Max Klein – man who survives the plane crash
Dr. Bill Perlman – therapist hired by the airline
Carla Rodrigo – woman who survives the plane crash
Manny Rodrigo – Carla's husband
Laura Klein – Max's wife
Jonah Klein – Max's son
Brillstein – lawyer
Jeff Gordon – Max's business partner, who dies in the crash
Nan Gordon – Jeff's widow
Byron Hummel – child whom Max helps on the plane
Alison – Max's ex-girlfriend

SYNOPSIS

Max Klein survives a traumatic experience: he is on a commercial flight that ends in an emergency crash landing due to a failure of the hydraulics system. He rents a car and drives to Los Angeles, where he visits an old girlfriend. They go to a restaurant, where he orders a bowl of strawberries. Although, as the woman points out, he previously avoided strawberries because he had a near-fatal reaction to them as a child, he eats several anyway and is unharmed. Since the crash, he realizes, he no longer feels fear.

Max flies home; on the plane, he is accosted by Dr. Bill Perlman, a therapist hired by the airline to work with the crash survivors. When he arrives home, he is greeted by his wife, Laura, and son, Jonah. An attorney, Brillstein, is already there and wants to coach Max on what to say about the crash in order to get the biggest financial settlement for his family and the family of his friend and business partner, Gordon, who died in the crash. Max is upset by this.

Over the next few months, the legal wrangling continues. Max periodically revisits the crash in dreams and flashbacks, and he continues to feel an absence of fear, which leads him to engage in risky activities. Meanwhile, Dr. Perlman introduces Max to Carla Rodrigo, a woman who survived the crash but whose baby did not. Max begins spending a lot of time with Carla in an attempt to help her come out of her depression. By contrast, Max spends little time with Laura and Jonah. Laura feels increasingly worried about him and abandoned by him. Eventually, Carla—after speaking to Laura and realizing what Laura is going through—tells Max they both need to return to their normal lives. Max reluctantly accepts this. Soon after, he eats part of a strawberry in front of Laura, who prevents him from eating the rest just as he goes into anaphylactic shock. Flashing back again to the crash, he ultimately responds to Laura's call in the present moment for him to come back to life.

SCENES

Disaster – Smoke blows through a cornfield. A man appears, holding a baby and leading a boy by the hand. They walk out of the cornfield, followed by some other people, and come upon a piece of an airplane. Emergency responders greet them and take the boy away. As the man walks further, he sees more plane wreckage and various fires producing billows of black smoke. A woman is dragged out of the airplane screaming “My boy’s in there!” The man finds the mother of the baby he is holding and gives it to her. When an emergency responder asks the man whether he was in the crash, he says no.



Not dead – The man gets a taxi to take him to a hotel, where he takes a shower and discovers that he has a small wound in his side. “You’re not dead,” he says to himself in the mirror. The man sits alone next to a car in the desert. He looks at the hills and touches the dirt. He drives away, looking at a map and pointing to Los Angeles. He turns up the music and smiles, then sticks his head out the window while increasing his speed to 80 miles per hour.



Old flame – A woman answers her doorbell. She opens the door, sees the man, and says, “Max! What are you doing here? It’s been 20 years!” They go to a restaurant. Max asks for a bowl of strawberries. He asks the woman how she is, and she tells him that her life is a disaster, complete with troubled children, a cheating husband, and a stagnant career. Max suggests that she have a strawberry. She does, but she says, “Aren’t you allergic to strawberries? Didn’t you almost die as a child from eating a strawberry?” He responds that he is now “past all that.”



Found – Max, alone in a hotel bed, hears a knock at the door and opens it to find two FBI agents. They ask whether he was on a flight from San Francisco to Houston that made an emergency crash landing; he confirms that he was but disputes their assertion that he has been “missing” for a day. He leaves the room with the agents and is met by a woman who identifies herself as a representative of the airline. She offers to take him home via Amtrak, but he says he would prefer to fly. Surprised, she says that his wife told her on the phone that even before the crash he was afraid of flying. He insists nonetheless.



Homecoming – Max gets on the plane and looks at the pilots doing their safety checks. He smiles and sits in his seat. A man sits next to him and introduces himself as Bill Perlman, who specializes in post-traumatic stress disorder. Max insists that he is not scared. Max takes the flight and soon arrives home, where he is greeted by a crying woman and a young boy, as well as some other people,



including one who introduces himself as Steven Brillstein, an attorney. Brillstein and Perlman begin fighting over what should be done. Max hits Perlman and tells them both to leave.

Damages – Max goes with Brillstein to talk to Nan Gordon, the widow of his business partner, Jeff, who died in the crash. In the car on the way there, Brillstein tries to coach him on how to describe Jeff’s death, because the size of the settlement they will get from the airline or insurance company depends on what he says. Max screams and says he does not want to tell any lies just to make money off of a tragedy. A woman opens the door to Max and Brillstein and begins to cry. Max hugs her and insists, “He loved you.”

Hero – Max splashes water on his face at home. Laura appears, hugs him, and asks why he did not call. He says, “I thought I was dead.” Max leaves the house with Jonah, who is wearing a backpack. When they open the gate of their yard, they are mobbed by reporters. In addition, the boy who walked through the cornfield with Max at the beginning appears. He introduces himself as Byron and hugs Max. Jonah frowns. Byron tells the reporters that Max helped multiple people get off the plane safely. As the reporters try to ask Max questions, he runs away.

Invincible – Max walks across several lanes of fast-moving traffic. He sits down and looks at the Golden Gate Bridge. “You want to kill me, but you can’t!” he shouts. He climbs over a barrier that says “danger – keep out” and walks along a carless stretch of highway.



Media – Jonah assembles a scrapbook of newspaper clippings about his father, several of which refer to him as a “hero.” Laura watches a TV news item about the crash, which states that the plane’s hydraulics system failed, leading the pilot to attempt a landing in Bakersfield.



Dreams – Max dreams about the lead-up to the crash. In the dream, he sits next to Jeff Gordon. “You’re such a neurotic,” Jeff says in response to Max’s worries about the flight. “Something’s not right,” Max insists. Suddenly the plane jerks; the flight attendants tell everyone to tighten their seatbelts and put up their tray tables. They reveal that the hydraulics system has failed; when Max hears this, he says to Jeff, “we’re going down!” The young woman whom we saw screaming at the beginning of the film tries to tighten her very young son’s seatbelt so that he will be protected. She asks for help from the flight attendant, who is unable to fix the belt and suggests that she simply hold the baby. Flight attendants collect the passengers’ sharp objects. A bright light shines in Max’s face, and he says in voiceover, “This is it. This is the moment of your death. I’m not afraid. I have no fear.”



Carla – The woman who lost her baby lies in a bed, eyes closed and frowning. A man enters. “Do you know what time it is?” He opens the window, causing her to turn away from the sunlight. “Get up, Carla,” he says. She says she just wants to die. He tells her someone is here to see her. Max and Dr. Perlman are in the living room. Perlman tells Max that Carla has been very depressed in the three months since the crash. He thinks Max might be able to talk to her.

Religious worries – Max goes down the hallway to Carla’s bedroom to talk to her alone. He tells Carla about how his father died suddenly when he was thirteen. They talk about how hard it is to account for the death of innocent people if you believe in God. Carla tells him she has been going to church every day to pray for her baby’s soul. They go to the church together and continue the conversation. Max says it seems that life and death happen for no reason.



Not helping – Dr. Perlman organizes a gathering of crash survivors at a hotel conference room; Carla attends but Max does not. He invites them to tell their stories of what they experienced in the crash. One woman does so; she explains how Max saved her and several others by leading them out of the dense smoke. She asks Carla if she remembers how she tried to help her; Carla angrily counters



that she did not help at all. Dr. Perlman chastises Carla for blaming the flight attendant; Carla runs off. Other people complain that this exercise seems useless. Carla goes to the lobby of the hotel, where she overhears her husband, Manny, on the phone saying that a dead baby should be worth 2 million dollars. She is angry with him.

Car safety – Max asks Carla to come for a drive with him. She is hesitant to get into any kind of vehicle after the crash, but she agrees. In the car, he assures her that the car is safe and he is a good driver, but admits that an accident could still happen. Still, “we’re safe because we died already,” he says. “We died in our heads.” But Carla retorts that she was not thinking about her own death but instead about her son. She has a flashback to the immediate aftermath of the crash, in which she discovered that her baby was no longer in her arms.

Trouble at home – Max comes home to find Jonah and another boy playing a video game. Jonah tells the other boy that Byron has been coming over almost every day to hang out with Max. Max talks to Laura about his day, saying that he has “a feeling of overwhelming love” for Carla, unlike anything he has ever felt before. Laura is startled.



Laura’s worries – Laura teaches a ballet class of several little girls. Dr. Perlman appears in the doorway. After the class, she talks with him, saying that Max continues to be remote, spending more time with Carla and Byron than with her and Jonah. She asks Dr. Perlman to explain why he introduced Max to Carla. He says that Max’s apparent feeling of invulnerability worries him. At home in the evening, Max and Laura work in neighboring rooms. Laura tries to talk to Max but he does not respond. She is making a stage model; she and we cannot see what Max is working on at his desk.



Compensation – Max, Laura, and Nan Gordon are in the office of the lawyer, Brillstein. Brillstein tries to get Max to tell a story of the crash that will garner the largest financial settlement from the airline; the settlement will be bigger or smaller depending on Jeff’s manner of death and on the amount of time they knew they were going to die. Max asks Brillstein to confirm that Brillstein will get one third of whatever settlement money the Kleins and Gordons receive. Max runs up to the roof of the building, which is very tall. He stands on the edge and yells, then smiles and spins around. Laura comes to the rooftop and gasps when she sees Max.



Confrontation – Max, Laura, and Jonah eat dinner together. Jonah talks about his day at school. After dinner, Laura confronts Max about his risky behavior. She says that she loves him and that it is not fair to her and Jonah for him to behave this way. Max goes to see Carla.



Thanksgiving – Max and Laura host Thanksgiving dinner for the Gordons, Byron’s family, and several others. Max looks at Nan and flashes back to his final moments with Jeff on the plane. Jonah and some of the other kids leave the table to play video games. Max angrily unplugs the console and shouts at Jonah; he and Laura argue. Max spends the night in a hotel room.



Christmas shopping – Max and Carla drive to Oakland. They go to a crowded mall decked with Christmas decorations. Carla watches several mothers with young children. Max and Carla buy presents for his father and her son (whom she explains she called “Bubble” as a nickname) even though they cannot give the presents to them. They eat some food, including strawberries, and they dance to the live music played by a pianist.

Demonstration – Max and Carla leave the mall when it closes. “We could disappear,” Max suggests. As they drive away from the mall, Carla begins hyperventilating, sobbing that she let go of Bubble when the plane crashed and therefore blames herself for his death. Max insists that it was not her fault. He



decides to prove to her that she could not have held onto the baby during the crash. He puts her in the back seat and gives her a box to hold. He tells her to hold onto it and crashes the car into a wall.

Hospital – Carla is in the hospital with a neck brace. Manny appears; she tells him that she only has whiplash and that everything is okay because Max proved to her that she could not possibly have held on to Bubble during a crash at such high speed. Laura and Jonah sit by another hospital bed, where Max is lying down with many cuts on his face.



Struggle – Carla comes to the Kleins' house to talk to Laura. At first they argue. Then Laura says she is very sorry about the death of Carla's son. Carla tries to explain to Laura that she sees Max as a friend, or an angel from God. But Laura says that Max is only a man, not an angel, and that he cannot go on like this forever, particularly because he is a father.



Goodbye – Carla goes to the hospital to visit Max. She tries to thank him. She tells him that Manny has moved out, at her request. She says that she is feeling much better, and that it is time for Max to go back to his normal life. "You can't take care of everybody; you've got to try taking care of yourself," she says. She insists that she and Max need to part ways. He resists, but then he acquiesces. Carla walks away; once she is out of Max's sight, she sighs and leans against the wall. Then she smiles and walks off.



Disturbing art – Laura is home alone. She goes into Max's home office. On his desk, she finds a large number of paintings of fire, spirals, and holes, as well as a printout of *The Ascent into the Empyrean* by Hieronymus Bosch, featuring a caption about the soul's arrival at the end of its journey.



Back to life – Max comes home from the hospital. He apologizes to Jonah for his Thanksgiving outburst, and he discovers Jonah's scrapbook of clippings about him. Max tells Laura he wants her to save him. Brillstein appears at the house and says the settlement should be reached the next day. He offers flowers and a gift basket to celebrate. Max takes a strawberry from the gift basket and eats part of it. Before he can finish the strawberry, Laura stops him, just as he goes into anaphylactic shock. Max flashes back to the crash itself. Meanwhile, Laura gives him mouth-to-mouth and Brillstein calls 9-1-1. Max imagines himself walking through an empty plane toward a light, but Laura calls his name and he takes in a deep breath. "I'm alive," he says as he embraces Laura.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Max Klein Max is a middle-aged Caucasian man who works as an architect and lives in San Francisco. He has a wife, Laura, and a son named Jonah. His closest friend, Jeff Gordon, is also his business partner. After surviving a plane crash, he stops feeling fear.

Generous Once he knows the plane is going to make an emergency crash landing, Max walks over to sit by a boy who is traveling alone. After the crash, he carries a baby to safety and leads several other passengers out of the dense smoke. When he returns home to San Francisco, Max spends a lot of time trying to help fellow crash survivors Carla and Byron.

Fearless In the minutes before the crash, Max suddenly stops freaking out, becomes calm, and says, "I have no fear." Thereafter, he does many risky things with a smile on his face. This includes eating strawberries (to which he is allergic), driving fast, dancing on the edge of the roof of a tall building, and crashing his car into a wall.

Fearful Nevertheless, Max is plagued by fear. Before the crash, he fears flying; he nervously talks to Jeff about plane safety, prompting Jeff to say, "You're such a neurotic." Max goes to the edge of the roof precisely because he has started to breathe anxiously while discussing the crash with the lawyer and wishes to conquer that fear.

Carla Rodrigo Carla is a young Latina who lives in San Francisco with her husband, Manny, and nearly two-year-old son, Bubble, until the plane crash kills Bubble and puts a strain on her marriage. Her grief at losing Bubble clashes with Manny's focus on getting a large settlement from the airline.

Religious When we see Carla three months after the crash, she has set up a shrine for Bubble next to her bed. She tells Max that she goes to church every day to pray for Bubble's soul. Carla is unconvinced by Max's suggestion that there is no God, that life and death are meaningless.

Loving Love, especially for Bubble, is central for Carla. She tells Max that during the crash, she thought not about her own death but about trying to protect Bubble. Later, Carla cares about mourning for Bubble, not about trying to monetize his death, as Manny does. When Laura suggests that the time Carla spends with Max does not help him, she parts ways with him even though she is clearly sad to do so.

Laura Klein Laura is Max's wife and the mother of his son, Jonah. She is Caucasian and middle-aged. Professionally, she teaches ballet to children. Laura is extremely relieved that Max survives the plane crash and worries about his strange behavior when he returns home.

Determined Despite Max's frustrating behavior after the plane crash, Laura shows determination to keep trying to help him reintegrate into the family. She repeatedly questions his risky behavior and tries to get him to reconnect with their son.

Assertive When she becomes alarmed by Max's relationship with Carla, Laura sets up a meeting with Dr. Perlman in order to ask him why he got them together. She is not shy about questioning his methods. Laura also asserts herself with Carla, explicitly telling her she thinks the relationship is bad for Max. Of course, Laura is assertive with Max himself as well.

THEMES

Death The reality of death is a major theme of *Fearless*. Max has an experience few people have: he spends several minutes knowing that there is a good chance he is about to die. He characterizes this experience later by saying: "We died in our heads." Max finds this experience to be temporarily transformative. Though previously neurotic, Max suddenly becomes calm after realizing he is likely to die. He says to himself, "I have no fear." While he and the other passengers prepare for the emergency crash landing, Max is notably less agitated than almost everyone else. However, when he goes home to San Francisco after the crash, Max seems to believe that in a way he already has died; he looks in the mirror and says to himself "you're not dead," as though he needs to be convinced; and he says to Carla more than once "we're ghosts." His fearlessness apparently stems from a feeling of being dead already. It is only after his near-death experience with the strawberry at the end of the film that Max is able to say "I'm alive!" and seem convinced.

Fear The film has a complex attitude toward fear. On the one hand, Max's state of fearlessness following the plane crash seems like freedom. Max smiles and looks relaxed as he drives a car, flies in a plane again, comforts Carla, and eats strawberries to which he is allergic. On the other hand, Max's lack of fear is also associated with a lack of love and care for his family. He may not fear his death, but Laura and Jonah do. Fear can box people in, but it can also provide a realistic sense of danger. As Laura's worries indicate, fear is associated with love: most of us fear the demise of our loved ones. Max is clearly

right when he says to Carla that we could die or be injured at any time (as he says, for example, you could be killed by an earthquake while at home in bed), so it is not necessarily logical to think that avoiding more obviously risky behaviors is a guarantee of safety. Overall, the film suggests that fear is part of a normal state of being.

Trauma The entire film is about responses to severe trauma. Everyone assumes that a plane crash survivor will not want to get on a plane again soon; the airline representative who offers Max free train tickets home is shocked when he says he would prefer to fly. Carla is even anxious to ride in a moving car. Max's apparent fearlessness in the wake of the crash—which may appear to indicate that Max is *not* traumatized—deeply worries Laura and Dr. Perlman, because it is normal to be deeply disturbed by traumatic experiences. It turns out, though, that Max's unusual response is an indication of extreme traumatization, not no traumatization. Dr. Perlman says to Laura that he has seen similar reactions to trauma in Vietnam war veterans with whom he has worked: they get a “high” from overcoming fear, but they are merely deferring dealing with the trauma itself. Near the end of the film, Laura goes into Max's home office and sees a large number of paintings he has made; they are disturbing, consisting of spirals and vortices, and painted in colors like red and black. The film suggests that people respond to trauma in a variety of ways.

Grief Unlike Max, who gives no indication of grieving for his friend who died in the crash, Carla is dealing with overwhelming grief at the death of her son. Having been unable to protect him during the crash, Carla is deeply depressed for three months after the crash, remaining at home in bed except to go to church every day to pray for her son's soul. Carla's grief begins to lessen in intensity when she starts spending time with Max, but it remains significant. Carla often stares at mothers and children she sees out in public. At one point, she actually sneaks up behind a mother and baby and smells them, without their realizing it. Max talks with Carla about his own grief at the sudden death of his father when Max was thirteen. One of Max's responses to that grief was to stop believing in God; Carla, by contrast, goes to church even more after her son's death. At Max's suggestion, he and Carla buy Christmas presents for his father and her son even though they cannot give the presents to them. Meanwhile, Carla's husband, Manny, gives no indication of grieving for their son; he spends much of his energy talking with the lawyer, Brillstein, about how to get the biggest possible financial settlement from the airline.

Religion Carla is presented as a deeply religious character. She is Catholic, which is connected to her Latina culture. She makes a shrine to her son, Bubble, next to her bed. In the wake of Bubble's death, she goes to church every day to pray for his soul. For Carla, grief and trauma constitute reasons to rely on religion even more. In her conversations with Max, she learns that he has the opposite perspective. He tells her that when his father suddenly died, he lost his religion. If there were a God, he thought, why would He cause the death of an innocent, devout man? Max concludes that life and death are random. He goes to church with Carla, but he gently scoffs at the religious iconography he sees there. There is no indication that Max and Carla's conversations about religion cause any change in the beliefs of either of them. Carla gets the punch line, though, when she concludes their central conversation about religion by saying that if Max were right, then there would be no reason to love. Max has no response to this statement.

Memory Memory is important to the film in a couple of ways. First, the post-traumatic stress syndrome from which the crash survivors suffer hinges on remembering an event. Dr. Perlman organizes a gathering for them all to get together and share their memories of the event, presumably on the grounds that expressing these memories will make it easier for them to move on. One character mentions that she has been thinking about the crash a lot; another observes that his memory has been glitchy ever since the crash. Memory is affected by trauma. In addition, the film deals with memorializing and grief. Manny, Carla's husband, thinks that she is spending too much time remembering their son and not enough time getting on with her life. Max, although unable to acknowledge the trauma of the crash, speaks volubly with Carla about his memories of his father, whom he lost at age thirteen. Meanwhile, *Fearless* touches on contemporary American society's practice of quantifying and monetizing memory: Manny and Nan Gordon both focus on memorializing their loved ones by getting the maximum death settlements from the airline.

Meaning of life Max and Carla, in the wake of surviving the airplane crash, both grapple with questions about the meaning of life. The things Max says suggest that he has decided life has no particular meaning, and that therefore one should do whatever one wants. His actions, though, do not entirely bear out this idea. For example, having survived the crash and finding himself in Bakersfield, Max drives not north to his home in San Francisco but rather south to Los Angeles, to visit an ex-girlfriend whom he has not seen in twenty years. There is no indication that he is trying to renew a romantic relationship. Rather, it seems that he simply wants to see her because he almost died and she is an important part of his life. Despite Max's risky behavior and the interest he expresses in "disappearing" throughout the film, he ultimately returns emotionally to his wife and is very glad to be revived from his near-death experience with a strawberry at the end of the film. Life is ultimately not meaningless for him. Carla, meanwhile, argues that the meaning of life inheres in the existence of God and the love we bear other people in spite of the fact that they can be taken from us at any moment.

Therapy Dr. Bill Perlman is a therapist hired by the airline to work with all the survivors of the plane crash. Although he seems well-meaning, his methods are called into question throughout the film. When he organizes a gathering of crash survivors some months after the crash, confrontations ensue and multiple characters voice doubts that it is productive to have them all get together and talk about how horrible it all was. Dr. Perlman is also the means of bringing together Max and Carla; he tells Laura (when she demands an explanation) that he did so because they are the only two people he "cannot reach," and he wonders whether they might be able to help each other. But he offers no clinical basis for this experiment. It clearly does help Carla to spend time with Max and get outside herself. Max, though, seems to use the need to help Carla as an excuse for avoiding his everyday life and family. Free therapy is the airline's way of dealing with the crash survivors, but the film does not necessarily suggest that it is helpful.

Legal action In the United States in the 1990s, any disaster leads to lawyers. The film presents lawyers in a negative light; instead of having a humanist response to trauma, it suggests, they are only interested in monetizing it. The lawyer Brillstein is already at the Kleins' house when Max returns there after the plane crash, and he immediately tries to coach Max on how to describe the details of the crash in such a way as to garner the largest financial settlement for his own family and the family of his partner, Jeff Gordon, who died in the crash. Max is extremely upset by this. The first time Brillstein speaks to him this way, he simply screams at him. The second time, which is in Brillstein's office, Max runs to the roof of the building and begins dancing on the edge. Meanwhile, Manny is in frequent contact with Brillstein in an attempt to get a large settlement for the death of his baby, while Carla is furious with Manny for speaking of what their dead son is "worth."

Heroism The young boy, Byron, whom Max comforts during the crash tells reporters afterwards that Max was a hero to him and to several other people on the plane. The press latches on to this story immediately, printing headlines describing Max as a "good Samaritan" and a "hero." Max is horrified by this; he actually runs away from a cluster of reporters at one point. Max's son, Jonah, by contrast, makes a scrapbook of clippings from these articles. Both Jonah and Byron are eager to see Max as a hero. One of the other crash survivors, too, speaks during Dr. Perlman's gathering about how Max saved her and her children by leading them out of the dense smoke. The film suggests that people are desperate to have heroes, but that it may be more difficult to be seen as a hero oneself. Laura is concerned that people's elevation of Max as a hero to them has gotten in the way of his ability to take care of himself. In the end, Max asks Laura to "save" him, which she does in preventing him from continuing to eat the strawberry that is giving him an allergic reaction.

Family Family is presented in *Fearless* as a source of many things, including love, fear, support, pressure, joy, and grief. Carla is driven by love for her son, whether in the form of trying to protect him from harm or grieving for him after he has died. She is married but ultimately ends her marriage because Manny's response to the death of their son is so unacceptable to her. Max, meanwhile, is uninterested in his family in the immediate aftermath of the crash. Instead of calling Laura to tell her he is alive, he spends a day driving to Los Angeles to visit an old girlfriend. When he does return home, he speaks callously to Laura and Jonah and chafes against Laura's statements about his obligation to them. Laura sees Max's risky behaviors as unacceptably cruel to his family; he does not agree. Max and Laura

discuss divorce. Max seems to be replacing Laura and Jonah each with a similar person from the crash, namely Carla and Byron—both of whom he sees frequently. Ultimately, Carla distances herself from Max in order to encourage him to go back to his family. And he does, asking Laura to “save” him and smiling and embracing her when she does in fact save him from the near-fatal strawberry.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Do you think it was necessary for Carla to separate from Max entirely? Why or why not?
2. Do you think the film suggests that Max’s temporary fearless state is a better or worse way to live than a more normal state that includes fear? Why or why not?
3. Carla tells Max that if he is right that life and death have no meaning, then there is no reason to love. Do you think the film supports her statement? Do you agree with it? Why or why not?
4. What do you think of the character of Laura? Did the film present her as a jealous wife, a long-suffering anchor to reality, or something in between?
5. How effective did Dr. Perlman seem to you as a therapist?