

film

# Life's Big Questions

Neurologist Howard Weiner '66 reflects his college interest in philosophy with a thought-provoking documentary. BY LAUREN ZERANSKI '02

WHERE DO WE GO WHEN WE die? Is there such a thing as a soul? How much of one's life is predetermined? Howard Weiner confronts these questions both on a small scale, as a physician specializing in chronic neurologic disease, and on the big screen, as the director and producer of a new documentary, *What Is Life? The Movie*.

Weiner credits his college major for his interest in such a weighty topic. "Philosophy had a big impact on me," he says. "I've been thinking about these questions all my life." While holding down an equally weighty day job.

After medical school at the University of Colorado Weiner built a career as a researcher and multiple sclerosis (MS) specialist. Now the Robert L. Kroc Professor of Neurology at Harvard Medical School, he co-directs the Center for Neurologic Diseases and directs the Partners MS Center at Boston's Brigham & Women's Hospital. His book *Curing MS: How Science Is Solving the Mysteries of Multiple Sclerosis* (2004), widely praised by reviewers for its accessible language, is well known among patients and families coping with MS. He has also authored three novels, one of which, *The Children's Ward*, was also published in 2004.

Impromptu conversations with colleagues and friends prompted Weiner to write a "life questionnaire" even before the deaths of his parents inspired a more formal project. "When those things happen to you, you begin to think about these questions more and more," he says.

In 2005 he won a grant from the Massachusetts MS Society, which sent a film crew to capture his research ac-



tivities for the awards dinner. It was then that Weiner—who in medical school made a music video for a Beatles song—considered a documentary. "I talked to the guy who was shooting about the idea, and he got very caught up in it," says Weiner. He spent roughly \$25,000 of his own money to hire the same team and began filming interviews in his home, where his bookshelves are filled with the works of philosophers such as Kant and Spinoza.

His hour-and-a-half-long documentary, shot in a variety of international venues over the past three and a half years, follows a wryly good-natured Weiner as he poses a series of 19 philosophical questions to religious leaders, academics and common folk, aged 12 to 93. He talks about death while standing in a cemetery and the nature of the universe while beside the ocean. To demonstrate the action he says he'd take were he

to learn that his death was imminent, he gives dollar bills to random passers-by in a city square. It's his voice singing the lyrics to the tune *Summer Nights*, written with his son, Ron, that opens and closes the film. "I approached the film as a storyteller," says Weiner.

One of his shoots was in Hanover, where he interviewed religion professor Ehud Benor and philosophy professors Walter Sinnott-Armstrong and Adina Roskies. Attracted to the project by Weiner's questions, Roskies found it "fascinating," she says, "to see the extent to which reasonable people can differ in their opinions."

Weiner also interviewed two undergraduates, one the resident of his former Brown Hall dorm room, whom he eventually edited out, and Joe Coleman '11. "It was one of my first few days at Dartmouth and it just seemed like a cool experience," says Coleman, who was enlisted while walking across the Green. "I really thought a lot about the question about the train...I still think of it."

Coleman refers to an oft-cited ethical dilemma invoked by Weiner: Suppose a runaway trolley is barreling down a track. Five people are tied to the track, about to meet their deaths. You can pull a lever to direct the trolley to another track, but one person is tied to that track. Should you flip the switch, sacrificing one individual for five?

Despite such tough questions no one Weiner approached declined to participate. No interviewee was flustered by a question, either. "I tried to be non-threatening and nonjudgmental and I think that helped people feel comfortable," he says.

"One guy, which I think is funny,

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said his greatest fear is castration," recalls Weiner. "But then he said something that was more dramatic...that his biggest fear is that life is meaningless. And you could see that really bothered him."

*What Is Life?* was first screened publicly at Harvard Medical School in June 2008. Two hundred of Weiner's colleagues attended—along with many of those interviewed in the film—and were able to view some of their own opinions in real time after the film by way of a computer program and handheld devices. They may not have found Weiner's creative venture surprising, says Dr. Henry Wu, a research scientist and film participant. "Howard is a lateral thinker who has the extraordinary ability to focus on the 'big picture' that is often missed by most people."

The documentary is scheduled for a summer release and DVDs may be ordered at [www.whatislifethemovie.com](http://www.whatislifethemovie.com). A campus screening is scheduled for October 12. In the meantime, Weiner is submitting *What Is Life?* to film festivals and considering a similar, larger-scale documentary or a series of half-hour television segments. He'd also like to turn his two as-yet unpublished novels into films.

Weiner says the documentary has reaffirmed his commitment to his day job, telling the *Boston Globe*, "At least there I can go into a lab and get an answer." Yet it's clear he's equally committed to this other quest: stimulating thinking about life's questions, which he thinks makes people feel better. "Try to understand life," he urges on screen. "What do you believe in, and do you abide by those beliefs? And do those beliefs bring you solace?" He hopes you'll soon be able to answer those questions in a theater near you. ■

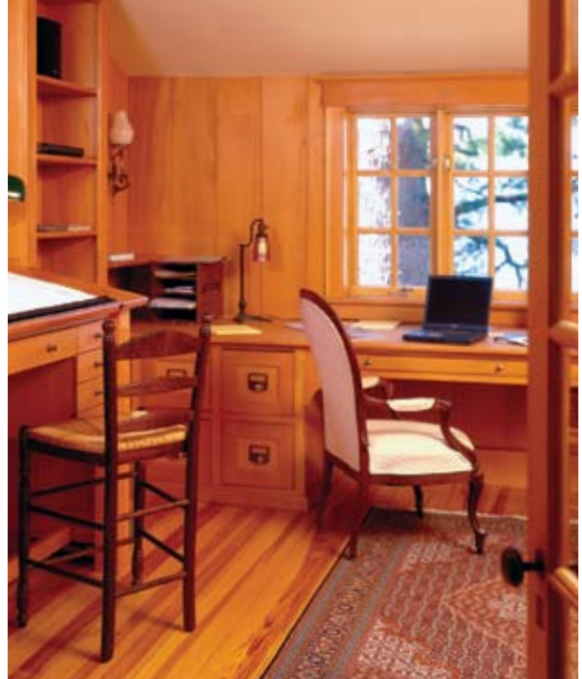
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