

Neurologist Dr. Howard Weiner | Meeting the Minds

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In his film, he asks the big questions



Dr. Howard Weiner searches for vaccines against brain diseases in his lab and life's meaning in his movie. Dr. Howard Weiner searches for vaccines against brain diseases in his lab and life's meaning in his movie. (Jonathan Wiggs/Globe Staff)

By Billy Baker

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Sometimes, when he is at a dinner party, Dr. Howard Weiner will turn to his wife and tell her it's time to liven things up. That's when he reaches into his pocket and pulls out the list - the 20 or so questions that are now the backbone of his new film, "What is Life? The Movie."

FACT SHEET

What happens when you die? Is there a soul? Is there a God? Why is there evil? If you had one day to live, what would you do? (And its antagonistic cousin: Then why aren't you doing that right now?)

Weiner is not trying to ruin dinner with his "Life Questionnaire." And he isn't looking for his own answers to these questions (at least not, he says, consciously).

He is, he says, doing research on them, confronting them, exposing the thought processes of others as a way to learn about his own.

By day, the 63-year-old Weiner is an award-winning doctor, the director of the Partners MS Center at Brigham and Women's Hospital and a professor of neurology at Harvard Medical School. In his lab, he is trying to find vaccines for neurological diseases such as Parkinson's, Alzheimer's, and multiple sclerosis.

But that is just one side of his personality. He is also an artist, a published novelist, and a philosophy major who, with the death of his father a decade ago, found himself returning to the big life questions that he had studied as an undergraduate at Dartmouth.

When his mother passed away three years ago, he decided to turn the questions into a larger project and began shooting the movie, which had its rough-cut premiere a week ago at Harvard Medical School. The film is a reflective inventory of people representing all walks of life - from physicists to clergy to secretaries - and all corners of the world - from Israel to Brazil to East Boston - taking Weiner's questionnaire. Weiner makes the unanswerable unavoidable, but he does so with a charming comic levity that removes the threat of feeling like you're locked in a smoky undergraduate dorm room.

"The film could have been sophomoric - he's essentially asking questions that many of us stopped asking in college - but it's not, and it's because you sense these childlike qualities in Howard," said Leslie Epstein, an old friend who is the director of the creative writing program at Boston University (and the father of Red Sox General Manager Theo Epstein). "Every really great scientist has something of a childlike innocence and wonder at the world. You have to be enchanted by the world around you to thoroughly investigate its mysteries."

While it's not quite lab work, Weiner thinks of "What is Life" as something of an experiment. "Philosophy - the word means 'getting at the truth.' That's what we do as scientists. But in science, I can test a hypothesis. A lot of the bigger questions are not so easy. I study the brain, and a lot our thinking and uniqueness relates to the brain. But I know from dealing with terminally ill patients that when someone gets sick, they have very different reactions. Some think it's chance. Some think they're being punished. Some think it's God's will. Some think life is just transitory."

While the film remains a work in progress - he says he still has much more shooting and editing to do before he enters it into film festivals - Weiner said the experience of interviewing people was emotional for him as well as for his subjects. "Very few people ever go through that kind of intense interaction in their lives," he said.

Did the process cause him to change any of his own answers? He thinks for a moment.

"I am certainly a changed person for having asked these questions. I understand better the strong faith people have. But I don't think it's changed my own thinking as much as it has refocused it on my own life, on my commitment to medicine and helping people.

"In a way," he said, "it's a relief to go back to the concrete world of science and medicine. At least there I can go into a lab and get an answer."

Fact sheet

Hometown: Denver; lives in Brookline.

Education: Earned his bachelor's degree in philosophy from Dartmouth in 1960, and his M.D. from the University of Colorado-Denver in 1969.

Family: Wife, Mira, works with her husband at the Partners MS Center. They'll celebrate their 40th anniversary in July. Both of their sons went to Harvard: Dan, 38, works for an Internet marketing firm in New York; Ron, 35, is a writer for the NBC comedy "30 Rock."

Hobbies: Enjoys golf, tennis, skiing, and swimming, and has a passion for writing; he's written a novel called "The Children's Ward" and a book called "Curing MS."

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