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A Still Small Voice

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Abstract

This is a film review of *A Still Small Voice* (2023), directed by Luke Lorentzen.

Keywords

Death, Hospital Chaplaincy, Grief

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Author Notes

Dereck Daschke is a professor of Philosophy & Religion at Truman State University and holds a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago Divinity School. Particularly interested in the intersection among religion, psychology, and wellness, his academic work over more than two decades has analyzed the transformational breakdowns and creative buildups in the form of apocalypses, mysticism, new religious movements, psychedelics, the Bible, Bob Dylan, and, of course, film. He regularly teaches “Religion and Film” at Truman and has overseen a number of student research theses that have contributed to the conversation about just why it is that movies capture our meaning-making imaginations in the way they do.



A Still Small Voice (2023), dir. Luke Lorentzen

The phrase “a still small voice” is the King James Bible’s rendering of 1 Kings 19:12, an account of God’s reassuring appearance to the prophet Elijah, who is exhausted and despairing after fleeing for his life from Ahab and Jezebel. In the film by that name, it’s uttered by an elderly cancer patient to refer to how she has experienced a mental steeliness that quiets her anxiety in the face of difficulty. It is an inner resource that settles her, gives her direction, and lets her stick up for herself. As she awaits the results of more tests on her condition, she calmly listens for that voice to guide her in the days ahead.

She is relaying this account to Mati, who is, the opening text tells us, “completing a residency in spiritual care with a small cohort at the Mount Sinai Hospital in New York City,” and it is Mati whom director Luke Lorentzen’s film follows through the heartbreaking challenges of hospital spiritual care—and in this case, all the more difficult during the COVID-19 pandemic. Mati herself is the granddaughter of Holocaust survivors and the daughter of a mother who left an

ultra-Orthodox Jewish community, and thus has a complicated relationship with religion, especially when her cohort discusses the role of prayer in their work. One of her peers says, “I can’t do the work if I don’t pray,” but Mati struggles with not knowing “where the prayers go,” suggesting she is atheist or agnostic. Yet she seems to be driven by some need to convey a bigger and better reality—a divinity—to the patients in her care. Someone in the conversation articulates Mati’s position in a way that she herself could not: “Religion is a psychological crutch, but there’s too much here that’s nourishing” to dismiss it completely.

Later in the film, in consoling a woman who has suffered a major loss, Mati is able to express something authentic about death that comes out of her own father’s sudden passing. She says, “When a soul has finished its work in its current body, death is okay.” But even that position raises any number of uncomfortable questions, most evident during a devastating sequence where Mati, a Jewish hospital chaplain, must perform an emergency baptism for a twin who is stillborn while her sister survived. The baptism honors the life the baby had within the mother’s body, and the couple is nevertheless still bringing home a new child. Concluding the ritual, Mati acknowledges the irreconcilable difficulty of experiencing both tragedy and joy simultaneously: Grieving and celebrating together is “one of the hardest things God has given us,” she tells them.

Sadly, for Mati and her patients, much of the film documents the psychological toll the work takes on her, despite the best efforts of her supervisor, Rev. David Fleenor, who struggles with his own exhaustion and failures. As Mati and David’s professional relationship deteriorates, it starts to affect their ability to care for patients, themselves, and the other spiritual counselors. A running theme in David’s supervisory sessions is Mati’s inability—or unwillingness—to put up emotional boundaries with her patients, which Mati presents as an ethical issue early in the film. She seems clearly torn by the demands of the job, the needs of her patients, and her own

wellbeing. Mati is absolutely struggling to hear her own “still small voice” in a way that will let her take care of all three aspects of her life with integrity.

A Still Small Voice is a vital, distressing, and empathetic look at the pragmatic realities of spiritual counseling within what one of Mati’s peers refers to as a health care system that “creates a real shitty experience around end of life.” Unfortunately, even the valiant efforts to make the experience a little less shitty through spiritual care can put the caregiver in a position to be infected, as it were, by the despondency that permeates the system.