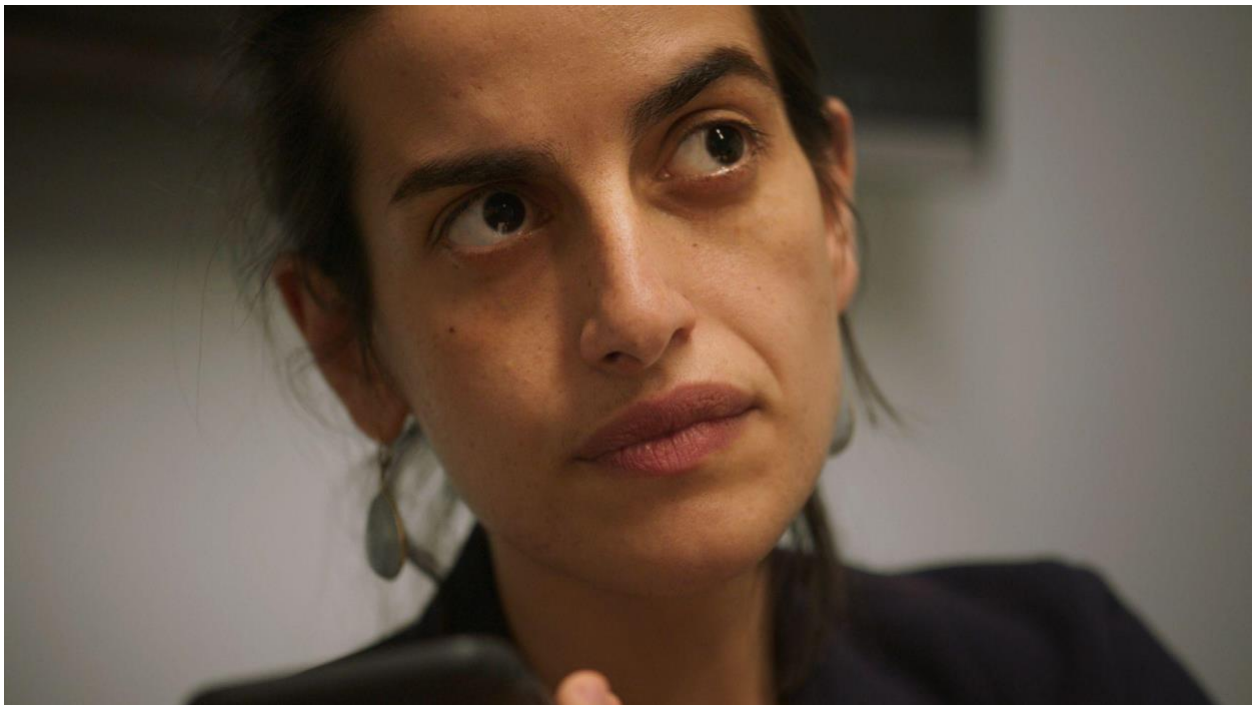




# A STILL SMALL VOICE

Directed by Luke Lorentzen

Produced by Kellen Quinn



2022 / USA / 93 minutes / English

**PRESS**

Layla Hancock-Piper,  
layla@cineticmedia.com  
917.963.2448

**SALES**

Ben Schwartz, [schwartz@submarine.com](mailto:schwartz@submarine.com)  
Josh Braun, [josh@submarine.com](mailto:josh@submarine.com)  
Amanda Lebow, [amanda@caa.com](mailto:amanda@caa.com)

## **SHORT SYNOPSIS**

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Director Luke Lorentzen's *A STILL SMALL VOICE* follows Mati, a chaplain completing a year-long hospital residency, as she learns to provide spiritual care to people confronting profound life changes. Through Mati's experiences with her patients, her struggle with professional burnout, and her own spiritual questioning, we gain new perspectives on how meaningful connection can be and how painful its absence is.

## **SYNOPSIS**

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In most US hospitals, alongside medical responses to illness and injury, lesser-known interventions take place every day. Responding to patients, family members and hospital staff who are experiencing spiritual and emotional distress, chaplains sit at bedsides, helping people to deepen connections with themselves, one another and a world beyond this one.

*A STILL SMALL VOICE* follows Mati, a chaplain completing a year-long residency at New York City's Mount Sinai Hospital, as she learns to provide spiritual care to people confronting profound life changes. Following his acclaimed 2019 film *MIDNIGHT FAMILY*, director Luke Lorentzen digs into Mati's spiritual work as an entry point to explore how we seek meaning in suffering, uncertainty, and grief.

Through Mati's experiences with her patients, her struggle with professional burnout, and her own spiritual questioning, we gain new perspectives on how meaningful connection can be and how painful its absence is. As Mati and her patients take stock of their lives and experiences, space opens up to reflect on our own.

## **Q&A WITH DIRECTOR LUKE LORENTZEN**

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### **How did you conceive of A Still Small Voice?**

In 2019, my sister Claire was working as a hospital chaplain and planning to begin her residency in Clinical Pastoral Education. Hearing about how she provided emotional and spiritual care to patients was so fascinating to me. And on top of that, the structured group exercises that she would do with her cohort to process everything that she was seeing was like nothing I'd ever heard of. It was in conversations with my sister that I thought of a verite documentary about action and reflection. And it was an idea that my producing partner Kellen was very excited about and supportive of. But it wasn't until the start of the pandemic that the idea began to really take shape, and I started filming in September of 2020.

### **How did you gain access to the hospital?**

I was living in San Francisco at the time that I started developing the project and I just started reaching out to spiritual care departments, first in the Bay Area, and then all around the country. And I spoke with dozens of spiritual care workers. Things really clicked when I spoke with Amy Strano who is the Director of Spiritual Care and Education at The Mount Sinai Hospital. She was interested in the project and immediately enthusiastic about its potential. She invited me to come for what was just going to be a one-week scout shoot to spend a day with different chaplains in the department. And then, towards the end of the week, I spent a day with the cohort of four residents under the supervision of David Fleenor. The first day with them, I filmed one of their verbatim presentations – patient cases that they workshop as a group – and was just blown away. Focusing on the residents felt like a way to explore spiritual care alongside a group of peers – all four women are roughly the same age as I am – and David also offered enthusiasm, wisdom and support from the outset.

### **How did you identify and then build trust with Mati?**

The short answer is she was one of the four residents in the cohort. And the longer answer is that I felt a real connection with her from the beginning, and really admired her work. I remember from the first day just being captivated by how she approached all aspects of the residency. The questions she asked, the way that she spoke about the things that she was thinking through.

But there were serious barriers. It wasn't obvious that she was interested in the film at the beginning. Because she approaches the work with such rigor and intention, there

were big questions for her around the ethics of filming with patients and how that would impact her ability to work properly.

Mati asked really challenging, important questions about what a filmmaker-participant relationship should look like. She didn't accept general or incomplete answers to what the process of making this film would be, but really wanted it to be full – in terms of how we were going to approach filming, what that meant for her, and what that meant for me as a filmmaker.

It was a very slow, long process over the course of nearly a year where the two of us took baby steps. It first started with filming some of the group sessions, and then evolved to filming only her side of the phone conversation that she was doing with patients. And then finally we built up the trust to film with a patient. We just continued having these experiences together, that felt collaborative, and let the project continue to grow.

**While you were filming, the pandemic was still at its peak, but paradoxically it didn't end up playing a large role in the film.**

For a long time I was really trying to avoid the pandemic. I didn't want to make something that was responding to the news. But as the project rounded out, it became clear that it is, in part, a response to this moment. But hopefully with a story that's timeless.

None of the patients in the film are COVID patients, but the toll and the weight of the work that Mati and David express in the film are no doubt partly due to COVID. The exhaustion and overwhelm were so present. But the feelings at the heart of the film are not just related to COVID, they're far more fundamental than that.

**What are the feelings at the heart of your film?**

The work of a chaplain is multifaceted but often circles back to attentiveness. It's about giving loving attention in a space where things are moving so quickly and chaotically. And that attention, despite seeming simple, is overwhelmingly powerful and meaningful. It's also incredibly challenging to offer and raises big questions for us, but especially spiritual care practitioners. When are you explaining? When are you exploring? When are you listening versus when are you telling? There are these sort of core relational dynamics that I think chaplaincy centers on, and watching the residents learn this craft really drew me in as a filmmaker.

The other core piece of the film is about the power of vulnerability. I really wanted to push the limits of what feels possible, in terms of how much can appear in a documentary like this, and how much people are willing to share. Over the course of the residency, I came to believe that this type of deep sharing, when done with the proper amount of support and thoughtfulness, can be incredibly meaningful or even healing. I saw this not only for the patients that I was filming with but also David and Mati, who I was learning to care for through the process of making this film, by witnessing their work and how much it asked of each of them. Mati would joke that I was the chaplains' chaplain, and I believe what she meant was that I was there – with my camera and full attention – to see and hear their successes and struggles.

### **Can you talk about the tension of needing to take care of patients and needing to be taken care of as a provider of care?**

That is a core tension and question at the heart of the film. Both Mati and David are fighting to offer care and take care of themselves. Although, as spiritual care practitioners, they have tools that many other people lack, they still don't always find what they need in the structures around them to do this work sustainably.

What I came to appreciate in making the film – in accidentally becoming “the chaplains' chaplain” – was that these challenges around sustainability and balance, which are especially heightened and urgent for caregivers, resonate deeply for me in my own work and life. I suspect that many, if not most, people could really benefit from having tools to work through this tension and could fairly say that the structures around them don't offer much support to facilitate finding a balance.

What made these questions especially difficult was how rewarding chaplaincy could be when done sustainably. And I hope the film also gets at the value of striving for this balance and offers a sense of possibility, even hopefulness, that doing the work yields moments of beauty and grace – that it can be worth it. I felt that as a filmmaker. There is a lot of pain, a lot of suffering, but then there are these bright moments that truly cracked me open – experiences and learnings I will carry with me forever.

### **Did you absorb other people's pain?**

I definitely absorbed other people's pain and experienced depletion. I was pushed as far as I would ever want to be pushed for a film. The filmmaking process really felt in conversation with my quest as a filmmaker in finding balance as a central part of developing my craft.

## **How did you come to the decisions you made about how to depict religion in the film?**

I don't come from a particularly spiritual or religious background. And I came into the film much more interested in these questions of emotional support, emotional intelligence. It's worth noting that in US hospitals, most spiritual care departments are interfaith and chaplains are trained to work with patients who hold varied beliefs and views on religion and spirituality, including atheists. Still, the spiritual and religious side of chaplaincy was something that I was uncomfortable with and uncertain about at the start. But over the course of the year, time and time again, I saw myself experiencing these moments where certain religious beliefs were extremely nourishing (to borrow the word Mati uses in the film) and important to people finding their way through life.

I'm still left wondering about it. There were tons of moments where seeing the way in which a prayer shifted the temperature of the room, or changed somebody's posture, or demeanor. Experiencing these very material effects of certain belief systems was really powerful.

## **What was it like to be in the room when Mati was at work with patients?**

It's really powerful to watch and I feel very privileged to be invited to be there for it. It connects to a bigger idea in observational filmmaking that I feel like I've experienced time and time again in making this film: when people are really working hard on something, there are moments where we witness a natural and unfiltered state. Because of the focus that Mati delivers in patient visits, the camera felt less intrusive, and the space felt very natural.

## **Is the job of chaplain as much of a journey in self exploration as it is helping people come to terms with their situations?**

David would say to the residents that you can only go as far with patients as you have with yourself. That was an asset and challenge for Mati as someone who has accumulated a series of life experiences that have made it possible for her to really empathize and know what it feels like to experience suffering. At the same time, those life experiences can also pose challenges. Mati talks about the idea of being a 'wounded healer' – specifically how the loss of her father has given her an unusual ability to connect with her patients while that same sensitivity can also bring challenges around boundaries or knowing and caring too much.

## **How did you decide on how to structure the film?**

I took a little time off after the shoot finished in July and started editing full time in September of 2021. Big picture, I always saw this as a film about learning to do chaplaincy, and the starting point for the edit was to focus on the growth and learning that I documented throughout the year – that would be the basic narrative backbone. The original concept for the film was also to follow all four residents in the cohort that David was supervising, but it became clear during the edit that the material with Mati offered something unusually special.

Her clinical work was at an extremely high level but she also had big hurdles that she was working on throughout the year. So the scenes I shot with her could simultaneously show how beautiful and how challenging the work of chaplaincy is. Additionally, she had a way of asking big questions through a very personal and emotional lens, which let the film weave in many layers of thought without feeling informational or didactic. For example, when Mati wonders about the existence of God, she's telling an incredibly personal story about the history of her grandparents surviving the Holocaust.

### **What was it like to shoot in such intimate spaces?**

In patient visits, Mati and I weren't trying to ignore the camera or pretend it wasn't in the room. We were fully embracing its presence, which – on a very practical level – enabled a physical closeness and togetherness as I was filming.

Mati's sessions with David would happen every week but she kept them very private. She only invited me to participate in about five of them over the course of the whole year. Two of those five are in the film. Filming these conversations was a less collaborative process than filming Mati's clinical work, and I felt it was my job to stay neutral and out of the way. I care deeply for both David and Mati and I worked to maintain balanced and close relationships with them both even when they started to see things differently.

On a more technical level, I shot the entire film with just one camera and needed to be hyper aware of when I could and could not change angles and what those movements would feel like to the people I was filming. The closer I could get, the more intimate the material would feel. But if too close, I would risk being a distraction. This was a tightrope that I would feel out in each scene, and over the course of the year I got better and better at understanding and navigating these limits.

### **What do you want people to walk away with after seeing this film?**

What I'm excited about is how the vastness of life experiences that people bring to their viewing will intersect with the moments in the film itself. In conversations with the few people who've already seen the film, I've been struck by the variety of meanings and ideas that come up for each person.

I also want people to see how much energy and bandwidth it takes to really see, hear, and care about another person. How much energy it takes to really empathize, and how painful it can be when it doesn't work, and how beautiful and powerful it can be when it does.



## A CONVERSATION BETWEEN LUKE LORENTZEN AND MATI ENGEL

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### **Luke Lorentzen**

What was on your mind as we began to think about filming this project together?

### **Mati Engel**

It was crucial to acknowledge that gaze and attention are potent psychological forces. I was concerned that having a camera in the room would potentially disrupt the authentic flow of exchanges between me and patients, that one or the other of us would end up performing, and there might be a risk that something was withheld.

It's impossible to pretend the camera's not there. So, I realized we would have to shift our thinking to how this might actually be used as a purposeful spiritual intervention.

### **Luke**

We came to see the camera as a tool that could be used to further see, hear, and care about people, and it was a really powerful shift that you initiated.

There's a really practical layer to this as well – being in the hospital is very repetitive, very boring, and for some people the filming was something new and different from their everyday routine. We realized that there was a potential for the camera to make people feel like they were experiencing an important moment in their lives.

### **Mati**

The camera is perhaps an extension of chaplaincy, which is the act and art of seeing and being seen, and of being witnessed, which is a spiritual and healing tool.

There is another quality to chaplaincy that almost feels like you're bringing God into the room. Divine providence is God as a transcendent being apart from one's day-to-day life and affairs. Divine immanence, on the other hand, are the little interactions and exchanges, the day-to-day moments that God sees. What was happening creatively, artistically and psychologically through the filmmaking was almost like that. It answers a need to be seen or recognized, to call attention to the little thing you're doing. It says your little life has weight, that you can exist beyond this particular moment in time.

### **Luke**

An important piece of the filmmaking process for me was going through the residency alongside you. By the end of the residency we had a shared language and ability to collaborate that felt really exciting to me. Looking back now, I know that I needed to have gone through the program in order to make the film the thing it is today.

**Mati**

It's funny, you went through the residency and it didn't occur to me but, wouldn't you be able to add to your CV that you did it? You completed a chaplaincy residency!

**Luke**

David gave me an honorary certificate, I almost want to put up in my studio.

**Mati**

I don't know how this project could really be done without having gone through all of that learning and reflecting. That's where it also feels connected to chaplaincy, the experience of action and reflection, and to do that while filming seems appropriate for this kind of work.

**Luke**

We filmed for about 150 days, but most of that time we were just talking and spending time together. Being on the unit and not having any expectations was a really important part of the process. Then, when circumstances lined up, you would make the call. If it was a patient you had spent time with, and you thought they'd be interested in this, you would begin the conversation with them. If it felt right, and they agreed, you'd invite me in.

**Mati**

Everybody had to fully consent to the physical, emotional, and mental vulnerability of the collaboration for it to work. They had to understand what they were doing, and when they said yes they knew that they could revoke consent at any time.

As humans, we say things in the moment and then we might go back and say, I didn't actually mean it in that way. But when you have a camera in the room, you could lose that opportunity to go back and revise or revoke. I was afraid of a finality that didn't feel fair. So I wanted it to be a shared, consenting process where going back or revising would be possible, and for the patient to know they're giving full, active and informed consent.

I think that part of this was looking at the patient as a collaborator in this exchange. I'm doing some of the work, but it's really a co-created, collaborative conversation. So then bringing in the camera was also a way to give folks a platform to show that creative exchange, that it's not me entering the room with a certain magic, it's a shared magic.

**Luke**

The patients were also some of the first people to see the film before the edit was finished.

It was important to confirm this feeling of attention being powerful and healing, and the reactions that I've gotten from them have been very, very special to me.

**Mati**

I want to say thank you, for capturing me at one of the most valuable and vulnerable times in my life. A chaplain who sees many has a need to be seen as well. The thing that we're giving is also the thing that we need.

## BIOS

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### **LUKE LORENTZEN - DIRECTOR**

**Luke Lorentzen** is an Emmy Award-winning documentary filmmaker and a graduate of Stanford University's department of Art and Art History. His most recent film, *Midnight Family*, tells the story of a family-run ambulance business in Mexico City. The film has won over 35 awards from film festivals and organizations around the world including a Special Jury Award for Cinematography at the Sundance Film Festival, Best Editing from the International Documentary Association, and the Golden Frog for Best Documentary from Camerimage. *Midnight Family* was shortlisted for the 2020 Best Documentary Oscar and was a New York Times 'Critics' Pick'. Luke's other work as a director and cinematographer includes the Netflix original series, *Last Chance U*, which won an Emmy for Outstanding Serialized Sports Documentary in 2020. With Kellen Quinn, Luke is a co-founder of the independent production company Hedgehog Films.

### **KELLEN QUINN - PRODUCER**

**Kellen Quinn** is an Oscar-nominated producer whose credits include Garrett Bradley's *Time* (Oscar nominated; Sundance 2020 winner of Best Director, US Documentary Competition), Luke Lorentzen's *Midnight Family* (shortlisted for Documentary Feature Oscar; Sundance 2019 winner of Special Jury Award for Cinematography, US Documentary Competition), Noah Hutton's *In Silico* (DOC NYC 2020), Daniel Hymanson's *So Late So Soon* (True/False 2020) and Viktor Jakovleski's *Brimstone & Glory* (True/False 2017; aired on POV). Kellen was selected for DOC NYC's 40 Under 40 class in 2020. In 2017 and 2018, he participated in the Sundance Documentary Creative Producing Lab and Fellowship. In 2016, he was among six producers selected for Impact Partners' Documentary Producers Fellowship. With Luke Lorentzen, Kellen is a co-founder of the independent production company Hedgehog Films.

### **ASHLEIGH MCARTHUR - CO-PRODUCER/EDITOR**

**Ashleigh McArthur** is an Australian film director and editor currently based in San Francisco. She spent her early career working as a diplomat in Solomon Islands, Mexico and New York, before undertaking an MFA in Documentary Film at Stanford University. She was co-producer and additional editor on *A Still Small Voice*, premiering in the US Documentary Competition at the 2023 Sundance Film Festival.

### **MARY LAMPSON - CONSULTING EDITOR**

**Mary Lampson** is an independent documentary filmmaker and editor. Lampson co-edited the Academy Award-winning documentary *Harlan County, USA*. She has worked with Emile de Antonio, Ricky Leacock, D.A. Pennebaker, Naomi Kline, Nicole Newnham and Jim LeBrecht. She also produced and directed *Until She Talks*, a 40-minute dramatic film that aired on the PBS series *American Playhouse*, and 25 short live-action films for *Sesame Street*. Mary has been both a Fellow and Advisor at the Sundance Institute's Documentary Editing and Story Lab (2005-2017) and an Artist in Residence at the Sundance Nonfiction Director's Residency (2018). She has been a

member of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences since 2012. She was a Consulting Editor on three films premiering at the 2023 Sundance Film Festival: *The Disappearance of Shere Hite* (directed by Nicole Newnham, edited by Eileen Myer), *Joonam* (directed by Sierra Ulrich, edited by Sierra Ulrich and Maya Daisy Hawke) and *A Still Small Voice* (directed and edited by Luke Lorentzen).

**Hedgehog Films** is a production company dedicated to making creatively adventurous, ambitious cinema, works that are as enduring as they are inventive. The company is a collaboration between Kellen Quinn and Luke Lorentzen.

### CREDITS

DIRECTED BY  
Luke Lorentzen

PRODUCED BY  
Kellen Quinn  
Luke Lorentzen

CINEMATOGRAPHY AND EDITING BY  
Luke Lorentzen

EXECUTIVE PRODUCER  
Robina Riccitiello

CO-EXECUTIVE PRODUCER  
Josh Peters

CO-PRODUCER  
Ashleigh McArthur

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Screen Australia's Enterprise People Program  
Jewish Film Institute/Jewish Story Partners Momentum Award

SUPERVISING SOUND EDITORS

César González Cortés  
Javier Quesada MPSE, CAS

ADDITIONAL EDITOR

Ashleigh McArthur

CONSULTING EDITOR

Mary Lampson

ASSISTANT EDITORS

Grace Mendenhall  
Chloe Abrahams

TITLE DESIGN

Thea Lorentzen

ORIGINAL MUSIC BY

Ziki Hexum

MUSIC SUPERVISOR

Andrew Gross

VISUAL EFFECTS

Bernard Myburgh

POST PRODUCTION ASSISTANT

Marina Dewinara Luccioni

COLORIST

Phaedra Robledo

D.I. PRODUCER

Claudia Pacheco

D.I. COORDINATOR

Jaco Valencia

CONFORM AND ONLINE

Silvia Cabral  
Raymundo Calderón  
Gustavo Santos  
Iván Pérez Paul

QC AND DEAD PIXEL CLEANING  
Roberto Zertuche

ONLINE ASSISTANTS  
Samantha Márquez Torcuato  
Federico Galindo Cataño  
Pía Álvarez de la Cadena

IMAGE POST PRODUCTION  
Cinema Máquina

CEO  
Ariel Gordon

COO  
Andrés Jiménez Cascella

CFO  
Juan José Braham Gallegos

PUBLIC RELATIONS  
Marah Hernández

POST PRODUCTION DEPUTY DIRECTOR  
Jessica Sánchez Gómez

PLANNING DIRECTOR  
Bulmaro Osornio

PLANNING COORDINATOR  
Antonio Ruiz

DATA MANAGER AND TRAFFIC COORDINATOR  
Fernie Álvarez

TECHNICAL COORDINATION

Israel Hernández

Edgar Galicia

Yahir Gaspar Castillo

Jorge Eufrazio Reyes

Carlos Rojas Herrera

RE-RECORDING MIXER

Jesús Arteaga

POST PRODUCTION SOUND SERVICES

Hasan Estudio

DIALOGUE EDITORS

César González Cortés

Javier Quesada MPSE, CAS

FOLEY EDITORS

Mauricio Pérez

Ricardo Sinco

SOUND EFFECTS EDITOR

Alejandro Díaz

MIXED AT

Labodigital

CEO

Charles Barthe

DIRECTOR OF OPERATIONS

Jimena Gómez Vadillo

POST PRODUCTION MANAGER

Lorena Ramírez G.

AUDIO DESCRIPTION

International Digital Centre

FAIR USE CONSULTANTS

Jaszi Butler PLLC



Peter Jaszi  
Brandon Butler

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