

CRITIC'S PICK

television

The Vanishing Line

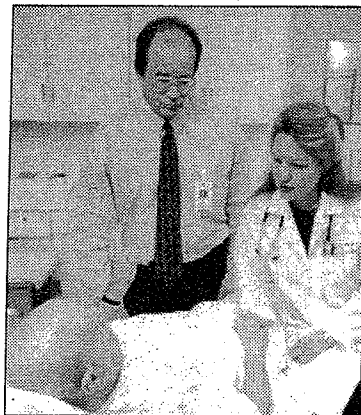
Artists often describe the creative splurge as an event triggered by a crisis.

The Vanishing Line, which recently won the award for excellence in documentary filmmaking at the Nashville Independent Film Festival, is a film born of a personal and professional crisis for physician/filmmaker Maren Monsen.

Monsen did her residency in emergency medicine at Stanford University. With this film, she marries the clear-eyed directness of science to the raw honesty and fluid visual vocabulary of the arts.

The "crisis point" for 35-year-old Monsen occurred after she intubated a man, who, as it turned out, did not want to be resuscitated. She removed the tube, and later, as she passed by his room, glimpsed him dying alone. The medical team that had fought so hard to save him did not stick around to ease his dying, as though it were not part of his life. Monsen found that she could not go back into the room. She says in the film, "I began to wonder if I could keep on practicing medicine."

So she began to explore how to best meet the needs of the dying,



in a culture where doctors are taught to declare war on disease and death at all costs. For example, she points to *Cecil's Textbook of Medicine*, a standard medical text. "The word 'death' is mentioned on 25 pages, and 'pain' on just five pages."

In the film, Monsen follows Jim Brigham, a hospice social worker, as he visits his terminally ill patients. His work and centered outlook change how she feels "about death and dying people," and allow her to see that, as Brigham puts it in the film, "This act of dying does not have to be a terrible thing."

Since completing the film, Monsen has said, "I learned that there are a lot of things physicians can do, even if they can't cure the disease. They can provide medication to ease the symptoms. They can provide compassion."

Monsen uses the Three Fates from Greek mythology throughout the film, reminding us that there are things in life we cannot control.

But the film is not a sterile study of hospital culture. "I wanted natural things, not a lot of medical equipment making it seem like a medical soap opera."

The resulting images are evocative, and the filmmaker's heartfelt exploration curiously mingles with the matter-of-fact tone of her voice.

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series on Channel 12.

Jenn Carbin

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Contact: Maren R. Monsen, MD
Stanford Center for Biomedical Ethics
701A Welch Road, Ste. 1105, Palo Alto
CA 94304, USA Phone: 650-498-5386
Email: mmonsens@leland.stanford.edu