

# THE YEAR OF MAGICAL THINKING

## PRE-EVENT READING

Thursday, March 21, 2013

Mercy St. Charles Hospital Auditorium  
2600 Navarre Avenue | Oregon, OH 43616

6:30pm Light Reception

7:00 pm Performance

Followed by guided discussion

\*PROFESSIONALS SEEKING CONTINUING EDUCATION CREDIT MUST REGISTER IN ADVANCE, DOWNLOAD A PRE-EVENT READING TO READ PRIOR TO THE PRODUCTION, PARTICIPATE IN GUIDED DISCUSSION, AND COMPLETE EVALUATION.



## SYNOPSIS

The Year of Magical Thinking is an adaptation of Joan Didion's award-winning, bestselling memoir by the same name (which Michiko Kakutani of The New York Times called "an indelible portrait of loss and grief . . . a haunting portrait of a four-decade-long marriage"). It tells the true story of the year in which Didion unexpectedly lost both her husband, John Gregory Dunne, and daughter, Quintana Roo Dunne, and includes information (mostly related to Quintana's death) not discussed in the original memoir. The play is performed by one actress.

In December, 2003, in the midst of dealing with their only daughter's life-threatening illness, Dunne suffered a fatal heart attack one night while at the dinner table. At the time of her father's sudden death, Quintana Dunne was in the ICU with pneumonia, which subsequently put her into septic shock and a coma. Didion put off Dunne's funeral arrangements for approximately a month until her daughter was well enough to attend the service.

She began writing *The Year of Magical Thinking* on October 4, 2004 and finished 88 days later on New Year's Eve. She went on a book tour following the release of this memoir that she has described as "therapeutic" during her period of intense mourning. Unfortunately, it was not long before tragedy struck Joan Didion once again; while her daughter exited a plane at LAX, she collapsed from a massive hematoma that required six hours of brain surgery at UCLA Medical Center. While Didion was in the middle of her New York promotion for her memoir, *The Year if Magical Thinking*, Quintana died on August 26, 2005 at the age of 39.

In 2007, Didion began working on a one-woman adaptation of *The Year of Magical Thinking*. Produced by Scott Rudin, the Broadway play featured Vanessa Redgrave. Although at first she was hesitant about the idea of writing a play, she has since been quoted as finding this new genre to be quite exciting.

## PREPARATION ASSIGNMENT 1

- Listen to the interview of author/playwright Joan Didion by Diane Rehm at the following link:

<http://thedianerehmshow.org/shows/2005-10-27>

## PREPARATION ASSIGNMENT 2

- Read the article on Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's "Five Stages of Grief" model at the following website:

<http://dying.lovetoknow.com/coping-grief/stages-mourning>

- View the 13-minute video "After a Child Dies" at the following link:

[http://www.compassionatefriends.org/Other\\_Pages/after\\_a\\_child\\_dies.aspx](http://www.compassionatefriends.org/Other_Pages/after_a_child_dies.aspx)

As you view this video, write down phrases and keywords in the interviews that you find particularly compelling. Some examples:

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"There is no timetable for this grief."

"Others don't understand the longevity, the intensity."

"If you've never experienced the death of a child, you have no clue."

"I think it's not that people don't understand that the grief of parent is devastating- it's that they're afraid...and because of that fear, they pull back"

"Sometimes folks say things that appear to be thoughtless ... You learn to listen to what people *mean* and not what they say."

"I think the most helpful aspect is that people are willing to listen to you tell your story over and over again, as many times as you need to."

Bring your list of phrases from the video to the performance of *The Year of Magical Thinking* and note how the phrases are reflected in the lines and actions of the narrative as the story progresses.

### PREPARATION ASSIGNMENT 3

Viewing *The Year of Magical Thinking* as a Caregiving Professional:  
Narrative, Plot, Character, and Time

Lee Krähenbühl, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor of Communication, Speech and Theatre, Mercy College of Ohio

Jennifer Discher, Ph.D.

Director of Mission/Values Integration and Pastoral Care, Mercy Health Care Systems

#### 1. Narrative: "We Live By Stories"

Storytelling, or "narrative," is increasingly recognized as a valuable learning tool for caregiving professionals. Narrative is a different *epistemology*- another way of knowing- distinct from scientific inquiry. "Whatever specialized job you do, " says psychologist Jerome Bruner of narrative knowledge's place in medicine, "there's some kind of underlying thing that gives a kind of unity and sympathy and possibility for the human condition continuing. You're constantly in the process of making narratives ... We live by stories, and they're what give sense to our lives."

Anne Hunsaker Hawkins uses literature and drama as part of her work at the Pennsylvania State University College of Medicine. She maintains that plays from classical Greece give guidance for medical ethics and practice. "The moral life cannot be conceived apart from one's relationships with others – a claim that contrasts to modern notions of the self as an isolated unit . . . An individual's 'character' in Greek tragedy is a function of relationships with immediate others."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bruner "Narratives " 3

<sup>2</sup> Hawkins, "Character," 73

*The Year of Magical Thinking* is the story of author Joan Didion, whose husband and daughter both died within the same year. Her story reveals to an audience much about the human experience of life, death, and bereavement as she attempts to understand and express her experience, sometimes successfully, sometimes not. The audience participates in *meta-narrative* or “grand narrative”: watching a story unfold on the stage and coming to conclusions about that story according to shared experience. The meta-narrative of *The Year of Magical Thinking* is the over-arching theme of grief and loss.

In preparation for the performance, consider the following elements: Plot, Character, and Time. Each element below is introduced by a passage which will offer a "lens" through which to view the play.

## 2. Plot: Resolving rather than Solving

Tod Chambers and Kathryn Montgomery teach humanities at Northwestern University Medical School. When writing of storytelling in a caregiving context, they make a distinction between *narrative* and *plot*. *Narrative* is the story itself, "this inextricable tangle of necessity and freedom in human life." *Plot*, on the other hand, is the way the story is told, the arrangement of the incidents. "Story is the actual set of events, while plot is the teller's particular arrangement of those events."

The story of *The Year of Magical Thinking* is very straightforward: the narrator's husband and only daughter both die in the space of a year, and she is left to cope with the sudden loss of her family. However, the same story can be told in a multitude of ways - a great variety of plots are possible. The plot of the play is very much concerned with what Maria Montello (University of Kansas Medical School) identifies as the tension between solving and resolving a crisis. When we are confronted with a problem, our first instinct is to fix it, to make it go away- in other words, to solve it. If something is broken, we repair it; if we are in pain, we want it relieved.

However, there are many situations which cannot be repaired, fixed, or solved, and for which relief comes only over a long period of time. In these cases, the healthiest response is to work not for *solution* but for *resolution*. The plot of *The Year of Magical Thinking* deals with such a situation. There is no *solution* to the problem of the death of one's life partner and daughter. Grieving is, rather, a process that leads toward *resolution* through five stages identified by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance. There are no quick fixes, no instant answers; it is something that must be *gone through* rather than *solved*, as the narrator discovers from moment to moment.

## 3. Character: Changing Identities, Changing Relationships

"An individual's 'character' in Greek tragedy," writes Anne Hunsaker Hawkins (see above), "is a function of relationships with immediate others."<sup>5</sup> Character is closely aligned with *identity*- who we

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<sup>3</sup> Chambers and Montgomery, "Plot," 38

<sup>4</sup> Remarks at the conference "An Ethics Colloquium," Catholic Healthcare Partners, September 18, 2008, Cincinnati, Ohio

<sup>5</sup> Hawkins, "Character," 73

believe ourselves to be. Characters in plays are confronted by changes in the course of the story's events, and find their identities changed as a result. Communication scholar Paige Toller interviewed bereaved parents like Didion and found the following points in her study:<sup>6</sup>

- a. "The death of a child shatters parents' worldview and assails their parental identity. When a child dies, parents experience a profound change in status as they are stripped of their role as a care-giver and nurturer. A child's death 'leaves parents with an identity that has internalized the patterns of parenthood but with the object of their relationship no longer there.'"
- b. "Bereaved parents must grieve their old identity and create a new sense of self in order to acknowledge the reality of the child's death... [they go] from seeing themselves as parents of a living child to seeing themselves as the parents of a deceased child. This radical change in identity means that parents must also find new ways of being and interacting with the world around them."
- c. "One father commented that bereaved parents inadvertently place friends and family members in a double-bind when it comes to communicating. He acknowledged that grieving parents want members of their social network to recognize and to honor how changed a parent is by their child's death. At the same time, bereaved parents are often angry or hurt if others acknowledge these changes too much by treating parents differently. In essence, this father suggested it was sometimes unfair of grieving parents to say to their friends and family members 'treat me differently, but don't treat me too differently.'"
- d. "This certainly creates a perplexing situation for individuals in bereaved parents' social networks. While individuals may want to support grieving parents they may not know how to do so in a way that honors the changes in the bereaved parent and at the same time doesn't draw too much attention to these changes."

This experience of identity and role confusion is common to anyone suffering a profound loss. Indeed, while Elisabeth Kübler-Ross first described her five-stage process in her book *On Death and Dying*, she found over nearly forty years of subsequent study that the experience of grief was universal and not limited to losses associated with death. Her last book, published posthumously bore the title *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss*.

#### **4. Time: "Personal, not Clock Time"**

We have defined "plot" as the arrangement of the story's incidents in a play. Often, this involves a creative use of time to tell the story. Rita Charon, M.D., is director of the Program of Narrative Medicine at the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Columbia University. She writes about the crucial role of *time* in storytelling between caregivers and clients: "the teller or listener of a medical or bioethical story is poised to enter the intersubjective space, that space where present meets the future. Whether I listen to an intern presenting at morning report or interview a relative stranger on visiting professor rounds, I am entering a relationship with another, and it is. . . within the intersubjective space created between us that meaning occurs... And so, with whatever preparation

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<sup>6</sup> Toller, "Bereaved Parents," *passim*

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we have made for entering the life space of another, we open ourselves again and forever for the first time, to the experience of time."

Time is also significant in viewing a narrative work such as *The Year of Magical Thinking*: for members of the audience, who are entering the time frame of the onstage story, and for the narrator, whose experiences may shift backward or forward in time, either in real-time action or in recollected events. Paige Toller finds that telling the story of a personal loss over and over allows grieving people, like the narrator Joan Didion, to incorporate their loss into their own personal narratives and life histories – but that they are frequently denied opportunities to talk about their loss. Toller also found that grieving people tend to limit the time they spend interacting with those who are unable or unwilling to try to understand their grief experience<sup>9</sup>

Time spent in the caregiver-client relationship is crucial. Howard Pollio and Sandra Thomas, authors of *Listening to Patients: A Phenomenological Approach to Nursing Research and Practice*, are emphatic about how important this relationship is, and that it is based in narrative: "there is a moral imperative for each individual practicing nurse to attempt to humanize inhumane treatment settings, clear the debris of his or her own personal and professional life turmoil and pain, and prepare to meet the patient- unencumbered, ready to engage in dialogue."<sup>10</sup> Narrativetime between caregiver and client cannot be assessed by a time sheet.

By the same token, people in crisis experience time differently. There is "a clear contrast between lived and metric time," which in times of caregiving crisis "is always experienced in terms of personal, not clock time."<sup>11</sup> The narrator of *The Year of Magical Thinking* has an altered view of personal time distinct from how long it has been since the year of her great losses.

### POST-PERFORMANCE STUDY QUESTIONS

- How does the narrative of *The Year of Magical Thinking* relate to your specific experience as a professional healthcare provider (nurse, chaplain, social worker, physician, counselor, etc.)?
- How does the shape of the plot – the playwright's arrangement of the plays' incidents – reveal the grieving process? Did the plot ever get in the way? What questions are we left with at the end of the play?
- How did the narrator confront her changing identity as she sought to come to grips with the loss of her husband and daughter?
- To what does the tide refer? What is the relationship between the play's tide and the grieving process? How does it reflect the nature of "personal time" vs. "clock time"?

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<sup>7</sup> Charon, "Time and Ethics," 64

<sup>8</sup> Toller, "Bereaved Parents," 307

<sup>9</sup> Toller, "Bereaved Parents," 315

<sup>10</sup> Pollio and Thomas, *Listening to Patients*. 254

<sup>11</sup> Pollio and Thomas, *Listening to Patients*, 256

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- Didion spends a lot of time in the play addressing "the question of self-pity". Does Didion pity herself? In what ways does she indulge that impulse, and in what ways does she deny it?
- Discuss the notion of "magical thinking." How do you think it helps (or hinders) healing? Have you ever experienced anything like this, after a loss or some other life-changing occurrence?
- How does Didion use humor? To express her grief, to deflect it, or for another purpose entirely?
- After John's death, Didion comes to understand the degree to which her identity was shaped by her relationship with John. How does John's death force Didion to re-evaluate her identity?
- To Didion, there is a clear distinction between grief and mourning. What differences do you see between the two?
- Is Didion's message ultimately uplifting or depressing? Why?
- Is there a significant turning point in the play? If so, where would you place it and why?
- Didion emphasizes that "information is control." Do you think her beliefs change over the course of her year of magical thinking? If so, how?

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### ELECTRONIC RESOURCES

Alive Alone

<http://www.alivealone.org>

Designed to benefit bereaved parents whose only child or all children have died by providing a self-help network and newsletter to promote communication and healing.

Bereaved Parents of the USA

<http://www.bereavedparentsusa.org>

Bereaved Parents of the USA offers support, care, and compassion for bereaved parents, siblings, and grandparents.

Compassion Connection

<http://www.compassionconnection.org/index.cfrn>

Contains articles and readings for all who have suffered a loss.

The Compassionate Friends

<http://www.compassionatefriends.org>

Assists families toward the positive resolution of grief following the death of a child of any age and to provide information to help others be supportive.