

After Zoey Study Guide

Prepared by Donna Hester, May 2024

THE GENESIS OF AFTER ZOEY

How does a new play begin?



A play doesn't happen overnight. It is a process like all artistic endeavors, and it takes shape over a period of time. *After Zoey* began ten years ago when Adam Hester wrote a play inspired by the life of his sister-in-law. He incorporated songs written by Martha in the 1970s and 1980s. In addition, he used songs his son Conrad and his daughter Jenavene had written in the 2000s.

In 2015 the show was workshopped in New York City using ACU alums and New York musicians. It was produced in Dodger Atelier Studio as a staged reading. Although the actors held iPads in the read and sing through, various scenes were performed off-book using only chairs for scenery.



2015 NYC Workshop of *After Zoey*

Hearing the show read and sung by actors gives the playwright new information on how to improve the script. The next year in August of 2016 the show was produced at Abilene Christian University.



2016 Abilene Christian Theatre Production of *After Zoey*

That full scale production prompted more rewrites. And now, eight years later, *After Zoey* is being produced with an entirely new cast.





The play takes place from 1974 - 1976.

Technology

- Very little technology - No microwaves - you had to cook things, very few "packaged" meals, took time to prepare a meal
- No computers or email - to correspond you wrote letters and mailed them.
- No cell phones, texts - Phones were plugged in to the wall (lucky if you had a long cord). No answering machine. You paid by the minute for long distance calls so each word was costing you money. Most families had one phone in a communal living space so private conversations were not always possible.
- No facetime or sending videos that today allows us to feel so connected to our long-distance love ones
- TVs had three channels, no way to record, can't fast forward thru commercials, you have to plan on watching a specific program. Less multitasking, more purposeful and present.

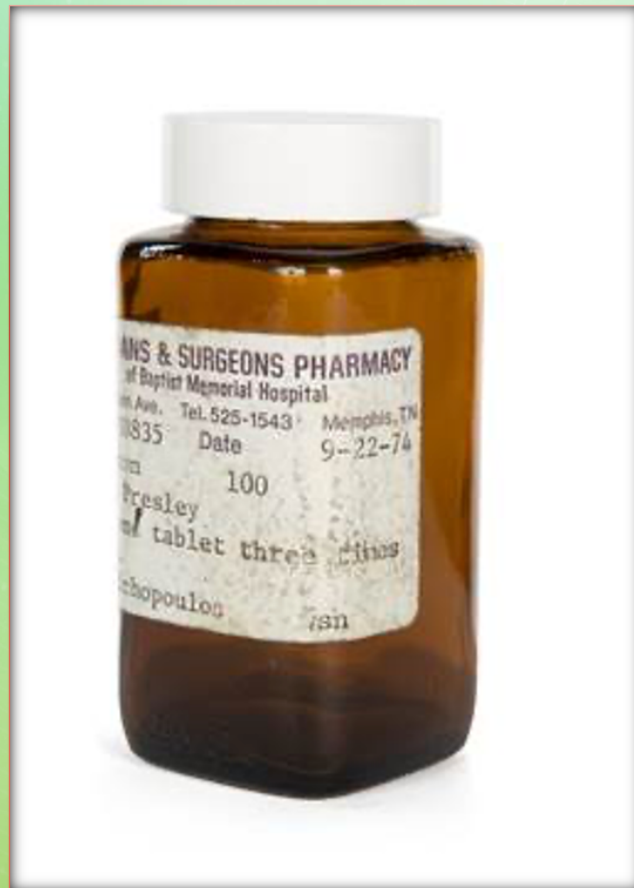
Waiting

How much of the Agnew's world was about WAITING?

Waiting for test results, waiting to get out of the hospital, waiting for the doctor to come by, waiting for a visitor, waiting to be reunited with their dad/husband, "waiting for a hero to free them", waiting for things to change, waiting for the other shoe to drop, waiting for God to do something, waiting for Zoey to die, waiting for her to live..... Time could drag. Mrs. Agnew says of her husband's death, "It took forever in the ER. Why didn't they examine him sooner?"

Zoey loses time ("big chunks of my life have been erased", "time's a thief"). But also the pressure of time "surging, coursing, always urging", "Timed Out. Time Out", "I need more time". The bizarre combination of traumatic life-death episodes and the tedium of so much waiting. Their ultimate hope is in the **forever** of eternity.

THE MEDICAL WORLD OF 1974



- Nurses (who were always female) wore white dresses, hose and nurse caps.

- Doctors were the authorities; you didn't have the doctor/patient partnership that you have today.
- No way to research on your own—no internet, no Google, no social media to poll your friends—the only way to research a new disease would be encyclopedias or going to the library and searching through microfiche film to find past articles.

Side note: the MRI (which gives us so much information in a non-invasive way) was just developed in 1974 and not widely used yet. I would say most diagnostic procedures were more involved than they are today (think about all the laparoscopic procedures we can do now instead of major surgeries).

- The working diagnosis for Zoey's illness is Aplastic Anemia. It is a rare but serious blood condition that occurs when bone marrow cannot make enough new blood cells for the body to work normally. It can develop quickly or slowly and can be mild or life-threatening.

Symptoms include:

Fatigue or tiredness

Frequent infections

Unexplained or easy bruising

Nosebleeds, bleeding gums, or any bleeding that lasts too long

Unusually pale skin

Weakness

Shortness of breath when exercising or being active.

- Transfusions - Zoey refers to them as a small procedure, but they were a bigger deal than she describes. These could involve a hospital stay.
- Zoey's illness is still quite a mystery. And she may have more than one disease—which adds to the confusion. The family is called on to defend to the medical establishment that Zoey is really sick.



After Zoey and Language

- No computers with spell check. The first word processor had been invented but was not widely in use. Still many manual typewriters. If you made an error you had to erase each letter, line up the paper as carefully as possible and retype the correct word.
- No short cuts, no texting, no abbreviation LOL, no emoji. You had to use words to describe what you were trying to communicate.
- No use of “like” and then acting it out. You had to choose specific words to describe what you were saying—a deeper and more varied vocabulary.
- The language the playwright uses for all his characters to speak is descriptive and complete. From Robbie’s cleverness to Johnny Ray’s spare but lyrical style, the characters have a ready command of vocabulary. Even Cliff waxes poetic.

- Names are chosen with care: Zoey - life, Pastor Puriel (angel of punishment, "the fire of God"), Cliff - danger at the edge of a cliff, Connie - Constance, faithful, The Paradise Dance Hall (a reference to Dante and Beatrice).

Literary Figures Referenced

Dante and Beatrice

Dante was Italy's supreme poet in the late 1200's. In his first novelette he tells of his impossible love for the beautiful Beatrice whom he met when they were both young children. He carries a torch for her the rest of his life even though she married another. And when she dies at 24, Dante is so bereft that he cannot bear life without her. Then he sees a beautiful woman who moves him and feels guilty that he might love again. In the end, he looks away and keeps his ideal love as the only person able to bring him into Paradise in the *Divine Comedy*, his ultimate poetic work.

Dicken's *Great Expectations* (even the title is indicative of Zoey's life)

A coming-of-age tale, *Great Expectations* is the story of Pip's unrequited love for Estella. It shows the moral consequences of one's actions. And is ultimately a story of redemption and faith in humanity.

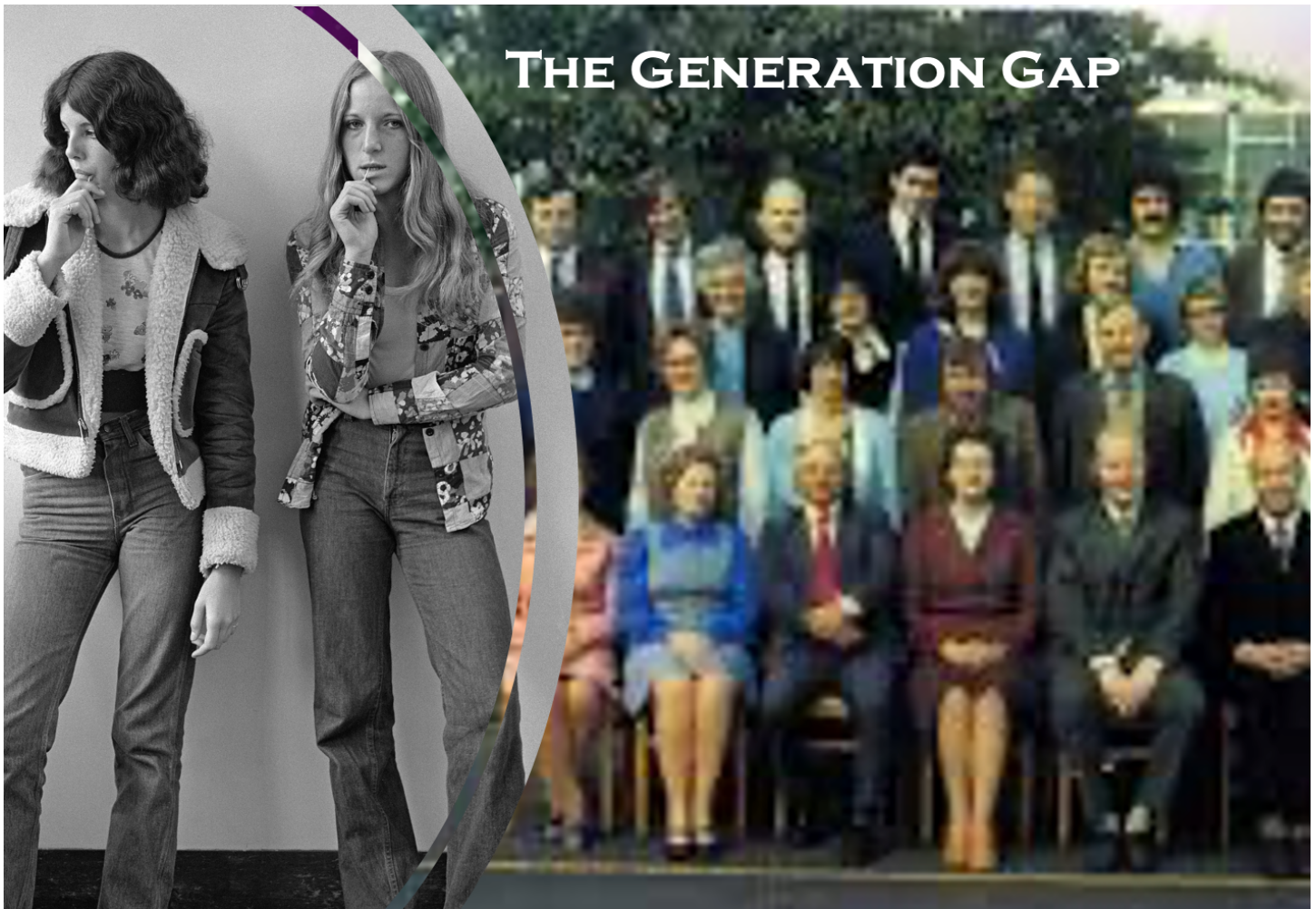
Aeschylus - Ancient Greek playwright and known as the father of tragedy. Zoey uses a quote from him: "He who learns must suffer. And even in our sleep pain that cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart, and in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom to us by the awful grace of God."

Perseus and Andromeda

In Greek Mythology Perseus is the son of Zeus and a brave hero. Perseus comes upon the beautiful Andromeda who is chained to the rocks as a sacrifice to appease Poseidon, god of the sea. Perseus immediately falls in love with her and rescues her. In *After Zoey*, Cliff points out the constellation and tells Zoey the story of the hero saving the damsel in distress.

- For Zoey the language of literature is incredibly important - a solace and escape. Dickens and Shakespeare are her companions on her island marooned. Though often confined to her bed she can travel to other places and times unencumbered by a body that often betrayed her.

- You can read even when you are sick, tired, weak, shut in. She spends more time with some of her literary characters than she does with her friends, and her vocabulary and thinking reflects this.



- A strong delineation between generations could be seen in the time period the play is set. There was a clear divide between youth and authority figures, parents and children, teachers and students.
- Music, hair, clothes were owned by the younger generation There was judgement and animosity towards the music, the clothes, etc. You still have the Sex, Drugs and Rock and Roll/long hair/hippie prejudices from “authority figures.” Length of hair was a moral issue! Quite a culture clash.
- Zoey lives in the 1974 teen generation and the generation of her Victorian and Shakespearian writers. In fact, it could be said her literary characters were more faithful to her than the friends her own age. Her book people did not leave her or disappoint her. (Where are Zoey’s girlfriends??)



CARETAKING AND ILLNESS

With a chronic and little-known disease there are aspects that add to the challenge of being ill:

- Assumptions - Zoey's disease is rare, the symptoms vary from mild to very severe, maybe confusing to others "I just saw her at the party..." Since it does not follow a known pattern, some might assume it is exaggerated or even fake.
- Alienation - The immunity part of her illness adds a special layer of "protection" from people and events—it cuts her off even more from her peers.
- Zoey feels the burden of being someone else's burden.
- With Dad's sudden death and Zoey's chronic sickness, half of the Agnew family was struck down—how does that effect Mrs. Agnew in terms of "taking care of her family"?
- Connie's survivor guilt - "I couldn't take that much pain. I feel so guilty. But sometimes I'm relieved."



FAITH

Church is an important part of the Agnew women's lives. Zoey says their small group gave a shape to their lives. Zoey and Connie are active in the youth group and there are references to their church community.

Although Connie expresses doubts "Where is God in February? Does he see her suffering?" Zoey cautions Connie not to tie her faith up in Zoey's healing. Zoey has accepted the mystery of the "awful grace of God" and that "suffering has been stronger than all the other teaching". When Connie and Mama sing, "Zoey never gives up. No, she never gives in," they recognize her indomitable spirit. "Faith is bigger than me."

The Agnew women know where their father is, and they know they will see him again. They know there is a world beyond the painful one they exist in. They each are banking everything they have that God will be true to them in the end.

Perhaps the climactic moment of complete faith and surrender for Zoey is in the song *Feeling Better*. "I'm getting worse as I'm getting better. Heal me completely. I'm feeling much better."

Therefore, we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.

2 Corinthians 4:16