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Caitlin O'Connell

THIRD

By Wendy Wasserstein

Directed by Wendy C. Goldberg

Sept 14 - Oct 20

The Space Theatre

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Synopsis

THIRD: "My father's name is Woodson. I'm really Woodson Bull the Third. In fact, my family nickname is just plain 'Third.' My dad went to school here when it was still a men's college. So did my grandfather.

LAURIE: Then I'm sure they didn't name you for Woody Guthrie or even Woody Allen for that matter..."

—Third

Laurie Jameson is a female professor of English literature at a small, prestigious New England college. She is noted for her brilliance and her unorthodox literary opinions, but, besides her class load, she is bearing the burdens of a father with Alzheimer's, a friend with cancer and a weight-lifting husband. But Laurie's biggest challenge comes when she meets "Third," a preppy "retro-heterosexual" who is also on the wrestling team. Laurie makes the assumption that because he is an athlete and a straight-arrow type, he is a "dumb jock." Therefore, when Third turns in an insightful, perceptive paper on *King Lear*, a Freudian take on father/daughter relationships which irks Laurie's feminist bias, she accuses him of plagiarism. Third, in turn, charges her with reverse discrimination. With these allegations charging the atmosphere, Laurie is forced to re-examine her strong liberal views—and her life.

In this provocative, witty play, Wendy Wasserstein considers the idea that the most righteous of people, in both red state and blue, who advocate tolerance and open-mindedness might still be limited, rigid and narrow.

*It is easier to live with our entrenched assumptions
rather than engaging in dialogue to reach an
understanding with the other side.*

—Design Conference Notes, Denver Center for the
Performing Arts, May 15, 2007

The Playwright

I was very influenced by the feminist movement. I don't think I would've been a playwright if I wasn't. My ideas to put women on stage did come out of being in school and reading feminist writers of the late 60s and 70s.
—Wendy Wasserstein in *In Their Company: Portraits of American Playwrights*. Wishna, Victor, ed. New York: Umbrage Editions, 2005

Wendy Wasserstein was born in Brooklyn, New York to Morris Wasserstein, a wealthy textile executive, and his wife, Lola Schleifer, an amateur dancer who moved to the United States from Poland. Wendy was one of four children, including brother Bruce, a lawyer/banker who was instrumental in the RJR Nabisco takeover. Her maternal grandfather was Simon Schleifer, a prominent Polish/Jewish playwright who moved to Paterson, New Jersey where he became a Hebrew school principal.

Wendy earned her B.A. in history from Mount Holyoke College in 1971, an M.A. in creative writing from City College of New York, and an M.F.A. in 1976 from the Yale School of Drama. In 1990 she received an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters degree from Mount Holyoke College and in 2002 an honorary Doctor of Fine Arts degree from Bates College.

Wasserstein's first production of note was *Uncommon Women and Others* (her graduate thesis at Yale), a play that reflected her experiences as a student at, and an alumna of, Mount Holyoke. A full version of the play was produced off Broadway in 1977 with a cast including Glenn Close, Jill Eikenberry and Swoosie Kurtz; the play was subsequently seen on PBS.

In 1989, Wendy won both the Tony and the Pulitzer Prize for her play *The Heidi Chronicles* which details the life of Heidi Holland and the impact of the women's movement on her. Her wry, smart and often highly comical plays, which explore topics ranging from feminism to family to ethnicity to pop culture, include *The Sisters Rosensweig*, *Isn't It Romantic*, *An American Daughter*, *Old Money*, and her last play, *Third*. In addition, she wrote the screenplay for the 1998 film *The Object of My Affection* (which starred Jennifer Aniston), the novel *Elements of Style*, and the book of essays *Shiksa Goddess: (Or, How I Spent My Forties)*.

The New York Times described Wasserstein as a “chronicler of women’s identity crises.” As the paper’s obituary of the playwright noted, “Her heroines—intelligent and successful but also riddled with self-doubt—sought enduring love a little ambivalently, but they did not always find it, and their hard-earned sense of self-worth was often shadowed by the frustrating knowledge that American women’s lives continued to be measured by their success at capturing the right man.”¹ Although appreciative of the acclaim and honors she received for her comedic streak, she thought of her work as “a political act,” where sassy dialogue and farcical situations hid deep, resonant truths about intelligent, independent women living in a world still imbued with traditional roles and expectations.

In 1999, Wasserstein gave birth to a daughter, Lucy Jane, when she was 48 years old. The birth was difficult; the baby was three months premature, weighed less than two pounds and had Infant Respiratory Distress Syndrome. Wendy, a single mother, never publicly identified the child’s father but did say the baby was named after the Beatles’ song “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds.”

In December of 2005, Wendy was hospitalized with lymphoma and died on January 30, 2006 at the age of 55. The news of her death was unexpected because few people knew of her illness. She is survived by a sister and her brother Bruce who became Lucy Jane’s guardian. The night after she died, the lights on Broadway were dimmed in her honor.

Q: What do you think of political correctness?

A: It's scary both ways, on the Left and on the Right. Either way, it's saying there's a correct way to think, and if you don't think this way, you're lacking.

—Wendy Wasserstein.

Interview on bombsite.com/Wasserstein

1. *The New York Times*, January 31, 2006. “Obituary for Wendy Wasserstein.”

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wendy_Wasserstein

Glossary

Jonathan Miller: a British physician who directs plays and operas.

The Citadel: Military college of South Carolina in Charleston.

Woody Guthrie: American folk singer who wrote “This Land is Your Land.”

Groton: a boarding prep school (grades 7-12) in Massachusetts.

Hulk Hogan: semi-retired professional wrestler who has also appeared as an actor.

Roland Barthes: French literary critic and philosopher; his *Mythologies* dismantled the myths of pop culture.

Rhodes Scholar: one of the most prestigious fellowships awarded; two years spent at Oxford University in England.

John Raitt: a star of the musical theatre who was the lead in the original production of *The Pajama Game* on Broadway and in the movies. His daughter is singer Bonnie Raitt.

Frantz Fanon: French author, essayist and psychoanalyst who wrote about decolonization. In his book *The Wretched of the Earth* he discusses the colonialism in Algeria as applied by the French.

William Kristol: a neo-conservative who founded and is editor of *The Weekly Standard*, a conservative periodical.

Lynne Cheney: wife of vice president Dick Cheney; she is a conservative scholar and writer.

Maynard Mack: Sterling Professor of English at Yale; expert on Shakespeare and Alexander Pope.

Edward Said: a Palestinian American literary theorist; author of *Orientalism*, a book about the false assumptions held by Westerners of the Middle East.

Queer Frontiers: academic publication studying gay, lesbian and transgender topics and theories.

Laura Nyro: composer and singer of the 1960s who wrote “Wedding Bell Blues.”

Bobby Vinton: pop singer of the 60s and 70s; his big hits were “Roses are Red (My Love)” and “Blue Velvet.”

Frankie Avalon: pop singer of the late 50s and 60s; also appeared in “Beach Blanket” movies with Annette Funicello.

Phil Ochs: protest singer of the 60s; known for the song “I Ain’t Marching Anymore.”

Joe Montana: quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers; led the team to four Super Bowl wins in the 1980s.

LAURIE JAMESON: A TYPICAL WASSERSTEIN WOMAN?

THIRD: "I mean, you're the gender bender.
You're the man!"

LAURIE: I'm the woman!"

—Third

Wendy Wasserstein's plays espouse the idea of "power of feminism—the liberal feminist ethic of equality between the sexes and, in particular, of achieving parity with men in the workplace and at home."¹ But her characters are not just every woman, but intelligent, college-educated and career-driven women determined to fulfill their potential. For example, Janie Blumberg has an MA and her friend Harriet Cornwall a Harvard MBA in *Isn't It Romantic*; Heidi Holland (*The Heidi Chronicles*) is a Vassar graduate with a PhD from Yale; Sara Goode in *The Sisters Rosensweig* is a Radcliff alumna with a successful career in finance. Laurie fits right in with this crowd with her doctorate from Harvard and a Fulbright to Oxford. Wasserstein's women also are self-empowered with fulfilling, even lucrative careers. Kate Quinn of *Uncommon Women and Others* becomes a lawyer; Heidi Holland is a professor of art history at Columbia University; Pfeni Rosensweig (of *The Sisters*) is a globe-trotting journalist, and Lyssa Dent Hughes (*An American Daughter*) is a public health professor at Georgetown University. Laurie belongs to the same club with her professorship at a prestigious New England college.

What Wasserstein's women lack and want is "having it all." As defined by Harriet in *Isn't It Romantic*, "having it all" means that a woman is able "to be married or live with a man, have a good relationship and children that you share equal responsibility for, build a career, and still read novels, play the piano, have women friends and swim twice a week."² Most of Wasserstein's characters do not achieve this goal, but Laurie seems to have done it. She has a career, a husband, children, friends; she may not read novels, but she watches TV news endlessly. But wait—does she really? During the play her husband Stephen lifts weights, but we do not see or hear him; friend Nancy, suffering from cancer, resents Laurie's meddling in her disease and says: "I deserve the privilege of my privacy." In addition, daughter Emily rebels against her mother's academic snobbery when

Laurie judges her boyfriend. "God, you are the most arrogant, glib, impossible woman. Daddy's right, for all your endless babbling about open perspective, you're the most limited person I know!" Laurie confides to her therapist that things have always worked out for her, but she complains of the impending Iraq war, of the regressive political climate, of Third, of hot flashes, and ends with: "God, I hate the times we're living in!"

As for times, one of Wasserstein's passions was to set plays within a historic framework or at the time of significant political events. *The Heidi Chronicles* is set in the midst of the feminist movement; *The Sisters Rosensweig* takes place in the summer of 1991 when the Soviet Union was on the brink of a revolution that would turn it back into Russia; *An American Daughter* is a reaction to the media and political focus on Zoe Baird, a nominee for Attorney General in the Clinton Administration; and *Third* is set at the beginning of the Iraq War in 2003. "In the midst of these unsettling times, the characters are 'trying to find a sense of centeredness in a world that is out of control.'"³ Laurie is like the other Wasserstein women in that her inner turmoil hurts and her outer turmoil (father, husband, daughter, career) makes her even more miserable. However, like other of the playwright's characters, she experiences "a psychological and emotional sense of kinesis (movement) generated by inner conflicts that stem directly from the changing climate associated with the women's movement."⁴ Laurie recognizes the truth of Third's statement: "If you always stay in the same category, you never grow." An ardent feminist, she has been stuck in the mentality of the 1960s and 70s for a long time. So in the end, she must confess to Third: "I was your age in 1969. Most of my ideas were crystallized at that time....My thinking has become as staid as the point of view I fought to overrule."

1. Ciociola, p.3.
2. Wasserstein, *Isn't It Romantic*, p. 66.
3. Ciociola, p. 85.
4. Ciociola, p. 14.

Ciociola, Gail. *Wendy Wasserstein: Dramatizing Women, Their Choices and Their Boundaries*. London: McFarland and Co., 2005.

Wasserstein, Wendy. *Isn't It romantic*. Garden City, NY: Nelson Doubleday, 1988.

ACADEMIC PLAGIARISM

THIRD: "Professor Jameson, I did not plagiarize.

LAURIE: No one with your verbal facility and interests would write this...."

—Third

Numerous studies show that plagiarism and other kinds of academic fraud are increasing among undergraduate students, but care must be taken whenever a teacher suspects a student of deceit. So writes Professor Irving Hexham of the University of Calgary in his paper "Academic Plagiarism Defined." He writes: "Plagiarism is the deliberate attempt to deceive the reader through the appropriation and representation as one's own the work and words of others. Academic plagiarism occurs when a writer repeatedly uses more than four words from a printed source without the use of quotation marks and a precise reference to the original source in a work presented as the author's own research and scholarship."¹ Professor Hexham goes on to provide examples of various kinds of academic theft. For example, straight plagiarism occurs when "only capitalization and sentence structure are changed and the odd word is added or deleted," but no author acknowledgement is cited and no quotation marks are used.² Another kind of plagiarism is paraphrasing "without reference to the original source."³ Academic scholarship relies on original thought, not just the reflection or repetition of the views of others.

That view may be true, writes Andrew Goodman in *English in the Digital Age*, but he opines that students have never really written original papers. "First, all teachers teach them something; second, students talk to each other; and third, students often consult other sources. In fact, the more mature they get, the more sources they are supposed to consult and acknowledge."⁴ Laurie's friend Nancy would probably agree with this opinion when she tells Third: "...If you use what you've been taught here about literature and science by people like me and Laurie Jameson solely for your personal gain and social status, then you're guilty as hell and so is every other student here." Nancy affirms that 90% of high school students admit to some form of cheating before entering college, so her attitude is one of practical reality.

Nevertheless, the Internet is producing a proliferation of "essay mills"; research suggests as many as one in ten college students has bought a paper from the Web.

Any search engine will turn up purveyors of plagiarism such as: 1sttermpaper.com, researchassistance.com, enotes.com, schoolsucks.com, etc. In their defense, Professor Deni Elliott, an ethicist at the University of Montana, says: "If teachers insist on what I call assembly-line assignments, where any student from any number of classes from anywhere in the country could answer anyway, then they're asking for a cookie-cutter response."⁵ Indeed some essay mill companies deny they are helping students commit academic fraud. A UK-based essay mill, Elizabeth Hall Associates, claims their pre-written examples provide students with guidelines and models for their own work. The same company requires students buying essays to sign a disclaimer stating that "any material provided by Elizabeth Hall Associates [is] on the understanding that it is a guidance model only."⁶

Some universities have developed several strategies for combating academic fraud. One method is to require students to submit electronic versions of their papers, so that the student's work can be compared by anti-plagiarism software. Another method allows professors to give students oral examinations on papers they have submitted; if the student doesn't know the content, obviously he/she has not written the paper.

Then what can educators do to thwart plagiarism? Tom Rocklin, professor at the University of Iowa, advises: "The best writing assignments have always included the instructor in them: to observe and coach the process of writing as well as to judge the product."⁷

EMILY: "You decided he plagiarized because you needed that to be true. Just like they decided there were weapons of mass destruction because they needed that to be true."

—Third

1. Hexham, p. 2.
2. Hesham, p. 3.
3. Hexham, p. 7.
4. Goodwin, p. 14.
5. cnn.studentnews.com, p.2.
6. answers.com, p.1.
7. Rocklin, p.3.

Goodwin, Andrew. *English in the Digital Age*. London: Cassell, 2000.

Lathrop, Ann and Foss, Kathleen. *Student Cheating and Plagiarism in the Internet Era: A Wake-Up Call for educators and Parents*. NY: Libraries Unlimited, 2000.

<http://www.ucalgary.ca/~hexham/study/plag.html>

<http://www.answers.com/topic/essaymill>

<http://cnnstudentnews.cnn.com/2001/fyi/teachers.ednews/09/04/term.papers>

<http://www.uiowa.edu/~centeach/resources/ideas/term-paper>

REVERSE DISCRIMINATION

LAURIE: "I am asking for a meeting of the Committee of Academic Standards. I want you to defend your paper in front of them.

THIRD: I think this is reverse discrimination."

—Third

According to *Barron's Dictionary*, reverse discrimination is a term "referring to the practice of excluding a classification or race of people who have not been historically discriminated against, usually whites, from positions that are made available exclusively to persons or groups that have traditionally been the subject of discrimination or who otherwise benefit from such programs."¹

The term *reverse discrimination* often appears in reference to Affirmative Action programs, which are policies intended to promote access to education or employment for minorities and women. This goal is "commonly achieved through targeted recruitment programs, by preferential treatment given to applicants from disadvantaged groups and, sometimes, by use of quotas."² Opponents of Affirmative Action argue that it is a form of reverse discrimination because it can result in qualified applicants being denied entry to college or employment.

However, in *Reverse Discrimination: Dismantling the Myth*, Fred L. Pincus claims that though reverse discrimination "is a widely used concept, it has no universal definition."³ Usually the term is applied when a white male does not get something (a job, promotion, college admission) that he might have received if there were no Affirmative Action programs. Pincus feels that the term is inflammatory, incites the negative impact of Affirmative Action on whites and produces an erroneous view of race and gender relations in the United States.

Instead, Pincus would reposition the term and replace it with three definitions to describe the white male experience. These would be:

1. Reduced opportunities: when white men experience fewer opportunities as a result of legal Affirmative Action policies.

2. True reverse discrimination: when whites or men experience fewer opportunities as a result of illegal Affirmative Action policies.

3. Intentional discrimination: when white males experience fewer opportunities as a result of intentional, arbitrary or capricious race-based or gender-based actions by supervisors or coworkers that have nothing to do with Affirmative Action."⁴

Does Third have a case...?

"The idea that men are created free and equal is both true and misleading: men are created different; they lose their social freedom and their individual autonomy in seeking to become like each other."

—David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*, (1950)

1. answers.com.p.1.
2. wikipedia.org, p.1.
3. Pincus, p. 3.
4. Pincus, p. 87.

<http://www.answers.com/topic/reverse-discrimination>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Affirmative_action

Pincus, Fred L. *Reverse Discrimination: Dismantling the Myth*. London: Lynne Rienner Publications, 2003.

JANE AUSTEN'S LETTERS

NANCY: “Everyone thinks Jane was this nice English spinster sipping tea and watching cricket from her garden window in Hampshire, but, really, she was a bitch just like the rest of us.”

—Third

Jane Austen’s letters afford a unique insight into the daily life of the novelist: intimate and gossipy, observant and informative. They offer a picture of her family and friends, her surroundings and the social events she attended in Bath and Hampshire. Most of her letters were to her sister, Cassandra Austen, someone with whom she could display her snide and snobbish side. For example, she was particularly catty about other women. On Saturday, January 9, 1796, she wrote to her sister: “Mrs. Heathcote is pretty, but not near so handsome as I expected.”¹ Four years later, after a party at Hurstbourne on Wednesday, November 19, 1800, she reflected on the female guests. “There were very few beauties and such as there were, were not very handsome. Miss Iremonder did not look well...and Mrs. Blount...appeared exactly as she did in September with the same broad face, diamond bandeau, white shoes, pink husband and fat neck.”² In November 1815, Jane wrote Cassandra that Mrs. Latouche and Miss East were coming to tea the next day. “I am heartily sorry they are coming. It will be an Event spoilt to Fanny and me.”³

Jane had strong opinions about the appearances of others and fashion in general. For example, in a letter of November 20, 1800, she comments on a Mrs. Pawlett who “was at once expensively and nakedly dressed;...we have had the satisfaction of estimating her Lace and Muslin as she said too little to afford us much other amusement.”⁴ In April, 1805 she complains of a Miss Seymer. “I have not yet seen her face, but neither her dress nor air have anything of the Dash or Stylishness which the Browns talked of; quite the contrary indeed, her dress is not even smart and her appearance very quiet.”⁵ In 1813 Jane learns from Mrs. Ticker’s maid that fashion is changing and confides to Cassandra: “The stays now are not made to force the Bosom up at all—that was a very unbecoming, unnatural fashion. I was really glad to hear they are not to be so much off the shoulders as they were.”⁶

By December 1815, Jane was complaining of many disagreeable inconveniences in her life. For example, Mr. H. “is no Apothecary; he has never been an Apothecary; there is not an Apothecary in this neighborhood.”⁷ Of a voice teacher named Mr. Meyers, she remarks, “(he) gives his three Lessons a week...altering his days and his hours however just as he chooses, never very punctual and never giving good Measure.”⁸ Even her own mother comes in for criticism: “I am sorry my Mother has been suffering and am afraid this exquisite weather is too good to agree with her.”⁹

1. LeFaye, p.1.
2. LeFaye, p. 60.
3. LeFaye, p.299.
4. LeFaye, p. 90.
5. LeFaye, p. 99.
6. LeFaye, p. 220.
7. ,8.,9. LeFaye, p. 303.

LeFaye, Deirdre, ed. *Jane Austen’s Letters*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.

A LIBERAL BIAS IN HIGHER EDUCATION?

THIRD: "I hear you guys saying all the time that you don't understand what's going on west of here, you know, in those states that show up red on Election Day in the heartland? Well, I can tell you that when someone like me, a Midwesterner and athlete, on the fence politically, comes looking to you for answers, I am dismissed even before I ask the...question."

—Third

An article by Sara Hebel in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (February 13, 2004) reports an incident from Duke University which demonstrates that conservative activists and students are campaigning against perceived liberal bias on campuses. Gerald Wilson, a history professor at Duke, says he was caught off guard when a student asked him, "Do you have prejudices?" Unsure of what the young man meant, Mr. Wilson replied with a joke, "Yeah, Republicans."¹ (He discovered later that the student was enquiring about writing styles.) Though almost everybody laughed, one student, Max Bettis, did not. A senior in the class, Bettis thought the comment was inappropriate and sent Mr. Wilson an e-mail telling him so. The professor duly apologized to Bettis, who subsequently dropped Wilson's course "American Dreams/American Realities." But that was not the end. Mr. Bettis then wrote a letter to the Students for Academic Freedom, a national group that is collecting stories about political bias on campus, detailing Professor Wilson's comments and his demeanor. When Wilson was informed of the letter, he said his remark "reflected his tendency to use humor to engage students. Everybody knows I'm very political, but...I make jokes about Democrats as well as Republicans. This is a course where we're going to talk about different viewpoints."²

For many students and legislators who hold conservative views, comments like Mr. Wilson's raise an alarm about professors who interject their political

opinions into college classrooms. Such practices lead to feelings of isolation on the part of conservative students, their lack of participation in classroom discussion, and, subsequently, low grades.

But conservatives are fighting back. "David Horowitz, president of the California-based Center for the Study of Popular Culture, is leading a national campaign to change campus climates."³ His efforts include an Academic Bill of Rights which he is urging Congress and state legislatures to adopt. Its principles advocate that colleges should foster a variety of political and religious beliefs in such areas as granting tenure, developing reading lists for courses and selecting campus speakers. Quoting Mr. Horowitz: "The university should not be a political place. It's a place where there ought to be reasoned discourse."⁴ He defends his Academic Bill of Rights by saying it protects faculty members and students who may hold views across the political spectrum. However, most of the students and politicians who back the Bill are conservatives who complain of liberal bias on campuses.

One of the states where Mr. Horowitz's ideas first gained a foothold was in Colorado in early 2004. State Senator John Andrews, then president of the Chamber, expressed concern about bias against conservative students and faculty members. Indeed, legislation was introduced to require colleges "to create a process for students to challenge any discrimination they experience because of political beliefs."⁵ But the legislation failed because Colorado state politicians didn't deem it high on their agendas. However, at the University of Colorado at Boulder, college Republicans placed a form on their web site where students could report experiences of bias based on political beliefs and used the stories to demonstrate the extent of discrimination they saw on campus.

Mr. Horowitz has conducted studies at 32 universities and supposedly found that liberal professors and administrators outnumber conservative colleagues by a ratio of more than ten to one. Indeed, Michael Berube, author of *What's Liberal about Liberal Arts?*, agrees that there are far more liberals on college faculties than there are liberals in the country as a whole, as a percentage of the general population. But he disagrees with Horowitz's data. In his own survey of more than 55,000 faculty members, he finds that "liberals outnumber conservatives by a ratio of 2.67 to 1 at over 400 institutions."⁶ This is very different from 10 to 1. He cites the fields that tend to attract the greatest percentage of liberals—and perhaps, women—as the arts and humanities. These educators make significantly less money than their colleagues in law, medicine and finance who are frequently lured out of academia by better offers from the private sector.

The liberal arts are the academic disciplines such as languages, history, philosophy, presumed to develop general intellectual ability and judgment. Berube argues that these studies promote critical pluralism and reasonable debate in every classroom. The liberal arts teach people how to think deeply and critically about the good life and a good society. They acquaint students with the history of human thought which gives them a richer and more complex language with which to speak and write. They encourage students to engage in lifelong learning because an examined life is superior to an unexamined one. Finally, "the liberal arts remind us by way of a plentitude of human examples that any one of us may be wrong or only partially right."⁷

1. Hebel, p.1.
2. Hebel, p.1.
3. Hebel, p.1.
4. Hebel, p. 2.
5. Hebel, p. 3.
6. Berube, p. 42.
7. Berube, p. 295.

Berube, Michael. *What's Liberal about the Liberal Arts? Classroom Politics and Bias in Higher Education*. New York: W.W. Norton and Col, 2006.

Hebel, Sara. "Patrolling Professors' Politics." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. February 13, 2004.

ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE

EMILY: "How's Grandpa doing?"

LAURIE: ...He can't be left alone anymore because he doesn't remember the way to the bathroom. And he refuses to wear diapers."

—Third

Grandpa is suffering from Alzheimer's Disease, a neurological disorder characterized by slow, progressive memory loss due to gradual loss of brain cells. It affects cognitive capabilities (thought) and, eventually, affects the physical capacities until the patient may become incapacitated. Alzheimer-related issues can cause emotional and financial distress for both the patient and their families/caretakers. "According to the National Institutes of Health, it is the fourth leading cause of death in adults."¹

The condition was first described in 1906 by Alois Alzheimer, a German physician, who had been treating a woman with dementia. After she died, an autopsy was done which revealed the presence of amyloid plaques and neuron-fibrillary tangles in her brain, the hallmarks of the disease. These protein deposits cause a destruction of neurons in the brain; in addition, they interfere with brain neurotransmitters, the chemical messengers through which nerve cells communicate. One of these is acetylcholine, a major neurotransmitter crucial to memory.

The diagnosis of Alzheimer's is made "primarily on the basis of history, clinical observation, memory tests and intellectual functioning over a series of weeks or months, with various physical tests (blood tests and neuroimaging) being performed to rule out alternative diagnoses."² No medical tests are currently available to diagnose the disease pre-mortem; a definitive diagnosis must wait for a microscopic examination of the brain at autopsy.

The deterioration of the patient may happen quickly, but there are usually three stages of the disease. The first stage of Alzheimer's is largely characterized by memory loss concerning recent circumstances or events. Patients

forget the names of friends or colleagues, where they put the car keys or their zip codes, for example. Times, dates and appointments become scrambled. The patients also experience language problems; even those who were fluent conversationalists in the past find they can't think of the word or phrase they wish to use. Patients frequently undergo severe mood swings from frustration to depression with some bouts of insomnia. As the stricken individual becomes more aware of his/her slipping intellectual and interpersonal skills, he or she may become increasingly withdrawn.

During the second stage, the afflicted person may display unusual eating habits and experience restlessness, hyperactivity and general feelings of frustration. At times, they may be panicky for no apparent reason or suffer from hallucinations and/or paranoia. There is frequently a sharp decline in personal hygiene; they may require assistance with everyday activities such as dressing, eating and bathroom activities. At this stage, few Alzheimer's patients are able to live alone and most need full-time supervision. This is the condition Grandpa is in when Laurie is forced to put him in a care facility.

In the final phase, the patient's learned abilities and memory skills are completely eroded. It is difficult for the individual to articulate the simplest need or desire. During this stage, most patients are unable to control bodily functions and many experience seizures. The afflicted person continues to decline mentally and physically until the body becomes susceptible to an infection or disorder that results in death.

Treatment of Alzheimer's usually begins with counseling by a psychologist or a support group experienced with the disease. After that, the physician may begin pharmacological (drug) treatment which is mainly given for comfort and to mitigate symptoms. Patients who experience depression may be given antidepressants. Since the disease is characterized by a drop in acetylcholine, doctors may prescribe cholinesterase inhibitors such as Aricept, Galantamine or Exelon which provide modest cognitive benefits. However, most affected individuals will eventually need professional care in assisted living or nursing homes; they require constant supervision as memory loss becomes incapacitating.

Researchers in the field have suggested some risk reducers for Alzheimer's. These include intellectual stimulation (doing crossword puzzles or playing chess); regular physical exercise, regular social interaction, a diet rich in fruits and vegetables and low in saturated fats, and high in B vitamins and Omega-3 fatty acids. However, advancing age is the primary risk factor for Alzheimer's disease, and since the population is living longer, an increase in the condition is predicted. "Among people aged 65, two to three percent show signs of the disease, while 25-50% of people aged 85 have symptoms of Alzheimer's....Every five years after the age of 65, the probability of having the disease doubles."³

*"You must bear with me,
Pray you now, forget and forgive;
I am old and foolish."*

— King Lear

1. answers.com, p.1.
2. wikipedia.org, p. 3.
3. wikipedia.org, p. 6

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