

arena  
stage

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## study guide

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## the play

**Dinah** and **Bill**, still reeling from the sudden death of their daughter **Cindy**, take a weekend trip to visit their relatives in California, **Jeannette** and **Neil**, who are also facing hard times. Neil has terminal cancer, and a wildfire has destroyed their home. Having decided not to rebuild, they are now living in an environmentally friendly **yurt** complete with solar power, an outdoor kitchen and an outhouse. Neil uses marijuana to reduce his cancer-related pain, and he and Jeannette are preparing for his death.

Over the course of two acts, the California couple's values and beliefs clash with those of their visiting cousins. Serious questions emerge.

To whom do we turn when our lives are in turmoil? What can we use to ease the pain? When is it time to give up the fight?

*"My heart is full, my life complete.  
I couldn't have asked for a better ride."*  
– Jeannette, *The Quality of Life*



# the quality of life

Now Playing in Crystal City  
September 11 – October 18, 2009  
Written by Jane Anderson  
Directed by Lisa Peterson

# meet the playwright

## Jane Anderson



"Why do we make theater? Why do we create movies or TV series? It's because people need an outlet when times are difficult or complex."

— Jane Anderson

Jane Anderson was born in Northern California in 1954. After a brief stint in college, she moved to New York City to pursue an acting career.

Anderson worked as an actor and standup comedian and, through her work in comedy, discovered her passion for writing. She moved to Los Angeles in the early 1980s and found work as a writer for film and television.

Anderson's first feature screenplay, *It Could Happen to You*, was a romantic comedy about a policeman and a waitress who receives his winning lottery ticket as a tip. In 2005, she made her feature film directorial debut with *The Prize Winner of Defiance, Ohio* about a 1950s housewife who writes advertising jingles to keep her family afloat. Many of Anderson's plays and screenplays address serious issues such as adoption, grief, and gender identity.

Anderson's plays have been produced Off-Broadway and across the country. She has won six **Emmys** and been nominated for two **Golden Globes**. Today she resides in Northern California with her partner, Tess, and their son, Raphael. She continues to write for both stage and screen.

**Golden Globe** — a prestigious award for achievement in film or television  
**Emmy** — an award for achievement in television

"There's heartbreak everywhere you look." — Bill, *The Quality of Life*

## The Grieving Process

**A**s Dinah and Bill are mourning the death of their daughter, Jeannette and Neil are preparing for Neil's death. They are all doing their best to find peace.

In her landmark book *On Death and Dying*, psychologist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross outlines the five stages of death and dying: denial (Not me!), anger (Why me?), bargaining (If I get better, I will be a better person), depression (I don't care anymore), and acceptance (It's happening, and I'm at peace).

These five stages are experienced by patients with terminal diseases, although not everyone goes through all five, and the order may vary. The patient's loved ones may experience these same stages during their grieving process, either while the patient is dying or after his or her death.

How do the characters in *The Quality of Life* cope with death? Which of the five stages do they experience? How do they express their grief? ●

"But you can't have Jesus without the Ten Commandments. Otherwise it'd be a moral free-for-all." — Bill, *The Quality of Life*

## A Difference of Interpretation

**A**s Dinah and Bill grieve their daughter's death, they find strength in religion. Bill, especially, is touched by the outpouring of support from their church family, and he rededicates himself to serving God. His literal interpretation of the Bible leads him to see all things as either right or wrong based on the Ten Commandments.

Dinah, however, struggles to believe as completely as Bill. She shares her feelings with her cousins, saying, "I love the son, I do, I love the son but I cannot stand the father." Her reference here is to the Christian God and to his son, Jesus. Christians believe that Jesus died so that God would forgive the sins of the world.

Dinah believes that Bill focuses too much on pleasing God the Father who, in the Old Testament of the Bible, often punishes evildoers and tests the faithful. In the book of Job, for instance, he allows Satan to test Job's faith by putting him through unthinkable hardships, including killing all his children and covering him with boils.

Even though God ultimately rewards Job, Dinah finds this story deeply troubling. Was the brutal death of their daughter God's way of testing them? It is hard for her to embrace a God who would inflict such pain. What other aspects of her faith might Dinah find difficult after losing a child? ●

"I'll be a lot more patient once I'm high." — Neil, *The Quality of Life*



## Medical Marijuana

**I**n the United States, marijuana, or cannabis, is an illegal drug, but physicians in certain states can legally recommend it to patients with serious diseases. In California, for example, patients may use medical marijuana, provided they possess a doctor's recommendation and demonstrate a medical need.

Marijuana may be part of the treatment plan for cancer or AIDS patients. It may also be used to stimulate the appetites of terminally ill patients who experience chronic nausea.

Although most users smoke it, some patients, such as Neil, employ a vaporizer, which releases the plant's active ingredients, called cannabinoids, without burning the leaves. Patients then breathe in the smokeless vapor and experience relief. ●

Bitterroot National Forest, MT, 2000

“It was coming up the hill so fast, I could feel this bounce of air, like the shock wave off a bomb.”

– Neil, *The Quality of Life*

# California Wildfires

The wildfire that burned down Jeannette and Neil’s house was caused by some careless campers, but people aren’t always to blame. Other causes of wildfires include lightning or faulty power lines. In California, high temperatures, dry conditions, and the powerful Santa Ana winds make for ideal fire conditions. In a matter of seconds, a few sparks can ignite a raging fire.

The largest California wildfire on record occurred in October 2003. It began in the Cleveland National Forest, 25 miles east of San Diego. A lost hunter lit a small fire to signal for help, and it quickly spread out of control. The Cedar Fire, as it was named, burned through 273,246 acres of land. (That’s about 7 times the size of Washington, D.C.!) It destroyed 2,820 buildings and killed 15 people. ●

A Burn Site in Northern California

**a!** **Activity!** As a wildfire races toward their home, Jeannette grabs two items: Neil’s reading glasses and her favorite pen. If your house were in peril, what item would you grab? Write an essay explaining its history and significance to you.

“It’s a Mongolian tent kind of thing.”  
– Dinah, *The Quality of Life*

## Yurt Living

The first yurts were crafted by the nomadic peoples of Central Asia more than 2,500 years ago. When the Mongolian armies invaded the region in the 13th century, they adopted the yurt, and its use quickly spread across Asia. A traditional Mongolian yurt is a circular dwelling made from wooden poles, felted wool, dried grass, animal hair and leather ties.

Mongolian Yurt, Xinjiang Province, China



Modern yurts, most of which are environmentally friendly, employ materials such as steel aircraft cables and architectural fabrics. ●



**a!** **Activity!** Neil and Jeannette do their best to be environmentally conscious. Their yurt helps them minimize their **carbon footprint**. Make a list of things you can do to live a greener lifestyle. Calculate your carbon footprint at [www.carbonfootprint.com](http://www.carbonfootprint.com).

**carbon footprint** – the negative impact that something, such as a person or business, has on the environment, measured in carbon monoxide emissions, which deplete the earth’s ozone and contribute to global warming

# Berkeley College



Free Speech Protest, Berkeley, around 1964



**T**he University of California, Berkeley, where Neil works, is known for its liberal politics. Located on the San Francisco Bay, Berkeley was the birthplace of the **Free Speech Movement**, and its campus has hosted countless protests. Students at Berkeley are known for their political and social activism and their liberal values. How does Neil reflect Berkeley's values? How might these clash with his cousins' beliefs?

**a!** **Activity!** Become an activist! What local, national, or global issue are you passionate about? Choose one and create a sign or poster that expresses your view. Bright colors and images are highly encouraged!

**Free Speech Movement** – a series of student protests held at Berkeley during the 1964/65 academic year demanding an end to the administration's ban on student-run political organizations

## Additional Resources

### Books/Plays:

*The Bible*

*On Death and Dying* by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, M.D.

*The Free Speech Movement: Reflections on Berkeley in the 1960s* edited by Robert Cohen and Reginald E. Zelnik

### On the Web:

The Official Site of Smokey the Bear: [www.smokeybear.com](http://www.smokeybear.com)

Drug Policy Alliance: [www.drugpolicy.org/library/cmrguide.cfm](http://www.drugpolicy.org/library/cmrguide.cfm)

Yurts: [yurtinfo.org](http://yurtinfo.org)

### On DVD:

*It Could Happen to You*, Rated PG, 1994

*The Sixties: The Years That Shaped a Generation*, PBS Home Video, 2005

## Sub/Text

For links and research related to Arena Stage productions, compiled by Arena Stage dramaturgs, please visit **Sub/Text: Your Virtual Dramaturg** at [www.arenastage.org/season/08-09/sub-text/](http://www.arenastage.org/season/08-09/sub-text/).

**dramaturg**– a theater specialist who does research for productions and represents the intentions of the playwright

## Helpful Hints for Theater Audiences

As an audience member at the theater, **YOU** are part of the show! Just as you see and hear the actors onstage, they can see and hear you in the audience. To help the performers do their best, please remember the following:

Arrive at least 30 minutes early.

Visit the restroom before the show starts.

Before the show begins, turn off your cell phone, watch alarms, pagers, and other electronic devices. If anything rings by accident, shut it off immediately.

Save food and drinks for the lobby. There is no eating or drinking inside the theater.

Walk to and from your seat - no running in the theater!

Do not talk, whisper, sing, or hum.

Do not use cell phones for calls, text messages, pictures or games.

Keep your feet on the floor, not on the seat in front of you.

Avoid getting up during a show because it distracts your neighbors and the performers. If you must leave, wait for a scene change, then exit quietly and quickly.

Performers appreciate enthusiastic applause rather than whistling or shouting.

Cameras and videotape are prohibited because they are distracting to the performers.

**Enjoy the show!**



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Visit [www.arenastage.org](http://www.arenastage.org) for more information on Arena Stage productions and educational opportunities.