



‘WE’RE GOING TO START WITH *THE END* IN MIND’

A CONVERSATION WITH DAVID NEUMANN OF ADVANCED BEGINNER GROUP

WHAT DOES the end of life feel like? How do we experience the world through the eyes and mind of an elderly person with dementia? Actor, choreographer, and director David Neumann and UNC-Chapel Hill occupational therapy professor Sue Coppola sat down to consider these questions, and others, in anticipation of David Neumann and Advanced Beginner Group’s multidisciplinary dance-based performance, *I Understand Everything Better*. A deeply felt work inspired by the death of Neumann’s father, it blurs the lines between truth and fiction, and the personal and universal.

While Neumann is in Chapel Hill for this performance at CURRENT ArtSpace + Studio, he’ll be interacting with Coppola’s graduate-level students from Perspectives on Disability and Health in Older Adulthood as part of CPA’s initiative to create opportunities for students and others to interact with visiting artists outside of performances. The UNC course is designed to integrate the study of biomedical information (aging bodies and pathologies) with phenomenological perspectives of aging.

David Neumann’s parents fell ill at the same time, with their health rapidly deteriorating in step. His father was diagnosed with diabetes, and his legs eventually partially amputated because of effects from the disease. Within a couple of years, he was demonstrating signs of dementia, while David’s mother struggled with her own health concerns. After a precipitous change in his father’s insulin levels that resulted in hospitalization, David realized that he was not yet equipped to care for aging parents—his experience dealing with these events led him to the creation of *I Understand Everything Better*. What follows here is an edited transcript of a conversation between Neumann and Coppola, part of a larger exchange exploring the ways their interests and experiences intersect, how rapidly one’s life and health can change, and the many emotions tied to the process of death and dying.

David: My father would talk about his family, his mother, that kind of thing. In terms of the language he was using, there seemed to be a past, present, and future, even in the midst of his imaginary journey, which I perceived as his approach to dying—to his own death.



Photo by Maria Baranova

Both my parents were actors. Both were involved in the experimental theater scene in the 1970s. Both were very renowned in their work of Samuel Beckett. Being present for one's death was part of his practice, maybe, having read Beckett very deeply.

Sue: What does Beckett say about being present for one's own death?

David: Beckett talks about death in an existential, absurdist way. One of the main images he uses is a woman giving birth astride a grave. It's very dark. I got to know my father through reading Beckett's work. A lot of it has to do with memory, a sense of self, a sense that the void is always present in the self.

Sue: I'd like students to consider many themes around death from your play. This will build understanding of what people want to do, their occupations, as they approach end of life. You describe death on several levels. Clinical chart talk lacks that rich description. Yours is a different way of dealing with death, one that doesn't focus on vital signs.

David: I have a few things to say about that. At first, my father was getting night terrors and I'd stay with him at night. I'd stay on the floor and sleep with him in the room so if he were to wake up, I'd be there, and he'd recognize me and feel safer. But sometimes he would wake up and say, 'Where am I?' And I would say 'You're in your house, you're ok.' We even made a sign above his head

that said, 'Fred you're in your house, you're in the house that you built.' And he would say, 'I built this?'

I Understand Everything Better is an imagined journey of what my father went through. It's really not about my own relationship with mortality, but rather what my father's journey elicited in me. I can't really be in the mind of a dying person, but that experience opened things up for me.

Sue: It reminds me of when my mother died. It was a very beautiful death, with my siblings around her. Afterward we sat down to get coffee and my brother said 'Well, we're next.'

David: That was my first thought when my dad died! My father died after Hurricane Sandy came up to the coast, and both the hurricane and the death were very natural events. That changes the way one writes their own narrative. A hurricane does that. Witnessing someone you love die does that.

Sue: I think this is a richer way to think about end of life, with multiple narratives and improvising, as opposed to clinical terms. That way we get into the dying person's world and let them choose where they want to go.

What I'd like for my students is to experience the play in a way that builds their sense of courage to see the darkness, and also find those beautiful moments so they can give themselves permission to smile and even see humor.

I still remember seeing my mother looking like she'd taken her last breath. My sister and I cried and talked about what we were going to do next, and then mom made a loud snoring sound, still alive! We burst out laughing. She lived another week.

David: My dad did something similar. He turned to us and whispered, 'I'm not dead yet.'

Sue: I think your performance will give students a lot to think about. I've decided to flip my course to start with death. We're going to start with the end in mind.

David: I wish I took your class!

I Understand Everything Better is not really like a play, it's more of just a journey. I'm looping in elements very personal to me. We're not trying to make a pretty picture or a clean picture, just something that speaks to the context of the experience.

There are elements of Japanese theater, kabuki and noh

theater.... In Japanese theater, the art is handed down from father to son, so dramaturgically this felt like the right thing to do. My grandfather was also a theater artist as well, so it runs deep. Also, in Japanese theater there's an attention to physicality, almost dancelike. I don't like to limit theater, it can be poetic or abstract even, and so I include dance to provide a more holistic view of performance.

I was shocked at the way my father was experiencing dementia. To me, dementia had meant someone who was on their way out, someone who was only experiencing the past, but I found it to be much more complex. And it made me think about the mind, it made me think about consciousness in a way that I had never thought of before. I thought of it more as consciousness opening up, not diminishing. ■

David Neumann and Advanced Beginner Group present *I Understand Everything Better* at CURRENT ArtSpace + Studio on January 18 and 19. For more about the performance, turn to page 14.

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