Family Discussion Questions

Jeff Zentner’s book confronts the issues of death, guilt, anxiety, regret, depression and grief, all while providing readers with healthy options to cope with these issues. With this in mind, Trinity’s English department encourages families to connect with the book and each other by reading Goodbye Days together. As you read, you will discover that Carver, the protagonist of the book, is pushed to reach out to his parents and sister when he is struggling. The English department believes that by reading this book together, your family will make the open dialogue connections that Carver was desperately looking for after the accident.

Please use the following themes from the book to guide your discussions as you read Goodbye Days.

Emotions: As Carver is dealing with his feelings of grief, guilt, and fear, he has panic attacks, which can happen with major stress. On the first day of school, Carver experiences a panic attack. “An invisible anaconda winds around my chest, squeezing, crushing. My heart strains against the pressure. My throat clenches. A sheen of sweat forms on my forehead like an ice slick on a bridge. My mouth is parched.” (p. 112) Everyone deals with difficult emotions from time to time and it helps to have healthy ways to deal with those emotions. Carver talks honestly with people, he writes, he walks, and he listens to music.

- What are some healthy ways you deal with difficult feelings?
- You may also want to look at the calming room on Trinity.Rocks for some ideas.
- What strategies might you be willing to try?

Confrontation: Adair, Eli’s twin sister, confronts Carver by saying, “I hope you go to jail. I really do. I hope you die there.” (p. 152)

- Why would Adair say this to Carver?
- If you were Adair, how would you treat Carver?

Grief: Grief is a natural response to loss. As we see in Goodbye Days, grief is a journey that Carver is just beginning. There is no right or wrong way to grieve and the novel shows how characters respond to grief in different ways, including anger. Jesmyn comments, “Grief is weird. It seems to come in these waves out of nowhere. One minute I’m standing in the
ocean, fine. The next minute I’m drowning. . . . If you didn’t feel their loss, what kind of person would you be?” (p. 130) Anger is often an expression of people’s pain and we see that in the characters of Judge Edwards and Adair.

- Discuss a time when you dealt with grief, whether it was a death or another type of loss.
  - What helped you cope?
- Which character’s experience of grief could you relate to most?

**Relationships:** Relationships and connections with others is important to the characters throughout Goodbye Days—whether it’s with family, friends, a therapist, or others sharing a similar experience. Carver has a circle of people to talk to openly and honestly.

- In what ways do Carver’s relationships and connections with others help him?
- Who is a part of your circle—people who are sources of comfort and support and won’t judge you?
- At the end of Goodbye Days Carver opens his circle to include his parents who are trying to be let in. Are there people in your life you feel you could let in more?
- How can you open your circle to include them?

**Trust:** Carver’s sister, Georgia, offers some advice: “Then you know you need to trust other people and open up. . . . You can’t be a dumb cowboy about this.” (p. 121)

- Who should Carver trust and open up to?
- In your life, who do you trust with your thoughts and feelings?
- How did you develop trust with this person?

**Faith:** The novel portrays many characters’ struggle with belief in God, the afterlife and issues of justice. It is important to remember that individual character’s “walk with faith” is just that. Some characters, like Nana Betsy, have very dramatic expressions of crisis. Carter is undergoing one as well, and beginning to confront his own journey. “It’s several seconds before I can speak; I’m swallowing the sobs trying to claw their way out of my throat. ‘I don’t think I’ll ever laugh again.’” (p. 30)

- How has faith been a journey in your own life?
- How are our highest highs and lowest lows both opportunity for growth and challenges to belief?
**Acceptance:** The question of acceptance is at the heart of the novel. This showcases itself in many people’s lives, but might be seen in each of the four boys – for example Carter’s struggle to accept himself, Blake’s sexuality, Eli’s faith, and Mars’ passion. Catholics see human dignity at the center of this conversation. All humans are endowed with the Creator’s gift of being made in His image. “Something lifts from my chest as we talk. As if I were lying under a pile of stones, and someone is removing them one by one.” (pp. 58–59)

- How does this understanding contribute to or aggravate the character’s search for acceptance?

**What-ifs:** During the story, Carver says, “I start the what-ifs. The do-overs. The replays.” (p. 169) Several times during the story, Carver imagines what life would be like if things had played out a different way. He imagines that if he were given an opportunity to do it again, what-if he did nothing?

- Why would Carver start thinking about this?
  - Is it healthy for Carver to have these thoughts? Why or why not?
  - What are some alternatives to playing the what-if game?

**Afterlife:** An expression of what comes at death is also major theological struggle for characters in this book. Catholics call these questions the Last Things.“I open the final drawer. It brims with Mars’s drawings. I knew I’d encounter this. . . . And still I’m not ready to see it. If Mars’s clothes were his body, now I’m handling his soul.” (p. 360)

- What is your view on the afterlife?
- Which character’s view seems most like your view?
- Which character’s most unlike your view?

**Forgiveness:** Carver feels like he may not get into heaven because of the accident. During the Goodbye Day with nan Betsy, he says, "What if God holds me accountable for the Accident?" (pg. 194) Nana Betsy looks out the window for a second and responds, "My God judges a whole life and whole heart. He doesn't judge us by our worst mistakes."

- Discuss why you think Nana Betsy has chosen to forgive Carver.
- Explain how forgiving Carver has helped Nana Betsy honor the life of her grandson and say goodbye.
Discuss whether or not you believe forgiveness has a more positive impact on the person being forgiven or the person choosing to forgive.

**Hope:** With help, Carver’s journey with grief, guilt, and fear leads him to gain a feeling he never thought he would feel again—hope.

- Why is hope such a powerful emotion?
- Why is it necessary for Carver to feel this as he moves forward in his journey?