
Discussion Guide: An introduction to *The Healing Muse* for readers and educators

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The Healing Muse is a journal unique in its approach to illness, medicine, and the body. It is composed of narratives of prose, short stories, and poetry. This magazine can help those experiencing illness in any context as well as to understand the healing process. To guide both readers and educators, we've provided a starting point for discussion for use in classrooms, discussion groups, or for your own exploration.

Coping with Death:

In Adults:

"I Killed a Man with My Own Two Hands" by Amy L. Friedman (p. 3)

Friedman's "I Killed a Man with My Own Two Hands" is a confession of guilt that is almost brutal in its self-condemnation. At the same time, it engages the reader's empathy and raises the question of understanding and forgiveness. How do you judge the narrator's actions from the point of view of a doctor or medical student? How about from the point of view of the patient and family? If these views are different, should they be?

Friedman makes an interesting observation, that "if I have suffered so greatly in carrying this load, can I truly be alone in such personal sorrow?" Why do you think the medical community doesn't appear to have a support system to help health care professionals deal with the deaths of patients? Does the public put too much emphasis on medical practitioners to being perfect? Is there an appropriate reaction when things go wrong and someone dies?

"A phone call after midnight" by Nina Bennett (p. 46)

"A phone call after midnight" talks about the death of a parent. How does the family deal with the news of a dying relative? What does the speaker's reaction ("drink coffee until daybreak, drive/ to my childhood home") say about the speaker's personality?

In the final stanza, what does the flower represent as it's "resting on his chest"? What is the significance in ending the poem with this image?

"Cryogenics" by Perry S. Nichols (p. 120) and "February Second" by Barbara Crooker (p. 7)

What is the significance in Nichols' poem in showing how the box looks "something like a cooler." How does the last line of this poem tie into the theme of a cooler?

Does grief follow similar patterns for every person? Is there an appropriate time length to grieving? When can someone say that he/she no longer grieves? Compare "Cryogenics" to Barbara Crooker's "February Second." What does Crooker's poem tell us about grief and those who do not cease to mourn?

“Waiting Room” by Elizabeth W. Carey (p. 11)

Thank god for the straight-shooting nurse. With her black bob motionless atop her petite, plump frame, she put it to me. The force of her words pushed me back against the fridge and I slumped to the floor. She put it to us, my mom and me, to be the ones to care for him; to help him go; to let him be; to push his ice flow into a cold, dark sea, to leave this wretched world and beautiful compassion and all the flighty antelope and sneaky cougars behind.

How is it that the narrator can be grateful for bad news told with such force? Discuss what you think the hospice nurse is communicating to the narrator and her mother. How would you want to be told bad news? How would you break it to the family if you were a hospice nurse?

In Children:**“Elegy” by Suzanne McConnell (p. 107)**

“Elegy” is a moving account constructed in four parts about the death of a child. What is the significance of telling the story from 4 different viewpoints? In all four accounts, we see a different reason why the character feels responsible for the death. Are these all legitimate?

What is the significance of the subtitles throughout the story? How do they add dimension and meaning to what is being told?

What do we assume was the cause of death in the baby? The family in this story immediately identifies themselves as Polish. Do you think the meaning of the story would change if they identified themselves as an American family? What do we assume to be the time period?

“Holding Onto Jenny” by Jenny Haust (p. 71)

“Holding Onto Jenny” is a moving account about a miscarriage. What are your initial reactions to the story?

There are a few details in the story that never become resolved, such as the autopsy of the baby. Does this lack of detail add to the story’s meaning or detract from it? In the story, you hear the doctor say that the loss of a child can put strain on a couple. The narrator says, “years later I would come to understand what that meant.” What is the narrator implying?

What do you think the author hopes to accomplish through the ending?

“Greggy” by Jack Tourin (p. 80)

Greggy is the story of a severely handicapped son who lived life to the fullest. What was your initial reaction to “Greggy?” How does our society treat those who are mentally handicapped, and is it true that most people would consider it a “burden” to have a such a challenged child? How do you think you would have tried to comfort this grieving father?

How has the medical establishment treatment of mentally handicapped patients changed over the last 100 years?

In this essay, the author says that “I’ve always suspected that he knew a lot more than we ever dreamed was possible.” How do you react to that sentiment? Do you think a teenager who only mastered “baby talk” could actually have a higher level of thinking?

The author concentrated in the end on how much Greggy taught him about life. Why do you think the author concentrates on this as his closing remarks?

Healthcare, Humanities, and Culture

“Apartment 5B” by Antara B. Mitra (p. 18)

The story describes the marriage of a young Indian couple. What connection does the story have to *The Healing Muse*'s interest in health and medicine?

The story changes when the young couple looks in each other's eyes at the wedding ceremony. How is this significant to the story? What changes the groom's feelings from panic to happiness?

What are some cultural differences that stand out to you from the story? What similarities does it share with other love stories?

Why does the mother cry “bitterly all the way to the train station?”

“Barriers in Health Care: Language, Culture, and Education” by Zin Min Tun (p. 64)

Dr. Dan was shocked. For five years, he thought he had been discussing the nature of the disease with the family through an interpreter. Now he realized that the message had never been received.

What is the job of a medical interpreter? What cultural aspects should a medical interpreter take into consideration when interpreting for a physician? What “professional code” did Physo's interpreter break?

When Physo's parents realized their son did not have long to live they also did not tell him the full extent of the diagnosis. How does this compare to the medical interpreter's decision not to fully disclose the diagnosis?

In countries such as Burma and Japan, family decision making is an integral part of healthcare decision making. How does this compare to US healthcare decision making? Is one culture's approach to healthcare superior? Is it possible to have a universal code of healthcare ethics for patient disclosure regardless of culture?

Professionalism

“Mrs. Doctor Powell” by W. Soyini Powell (p. 35)

Why do you think the narrator automatically corrected the patient when she was first referred to as “Mrs. Powell?” What does the title “Dr” signify to both patient and physician? Why when the patient rephrases the title to “Mrs. Doctor Powell,” does the physician not correct her?

What do you think of the author's epiphany concerning “calling?” Are all physicians “called” to serve? Why or why not? Does “calling” distinguish one physician from another? Can you be “called” to a profession other than medicine?

What expectations does society have of the medical profession? Should these expectations differ from health care professionals?

“Well Child Visit March 2008” by Kelley Jean White (p. 33)

Can't care. Can't let this reality hit me. I smile. I tell her baby shots save lives.

Why does the physician in this poem not allow herself to become emotionally connected to the patient? What boundaries should exist between physician and patient? Do you think that the physician has an obligation to do more for her patient and the mother?

Dealing with Treatment**“Etiquette for the Very Ill” by Johanna Shapiro (p. 8)**

This poem talks about having etiquette whether you’re “struggling to live/ or struggling to die.” Describe the tone of the poem. Why is this tone appropriate for this subject matter?

The poem is broken up into sections and has three “lessons.” How do the “lessons” add to the poem?

What do you think the author is trying to bring across to the reader in this poem, especially with the final conclusion of “On the other hand/ it will probably end very badly for you/ anyway”? Do you think that your care is dependent upon how you behave as a patient? Why does our society place “sick people” in a different social status than “healthy people?”

“Hair” by Howard F. Stein (p. 117)

“Hair” talks about the solidarity of a group in the midst of illness. Discuss their reaction to their co-worker’s illness.

What does the narrator take away from the story? Why is he so curious as to the motivation behind their head coverings?

Dementia**“Mrs. Bean Fighting Mad at Me” by Elinor Cramer (p. 94)**

How does Elinor Cramer’s poem, “Mrs. Bean Fighting Mad at Me,” raise questions about the independence, or, in ethical terms, autonomy, of those who lose cognitive function as they age? What are the ethical and emotional quandaries involved with caring for those who lose cognitive function? How can we determine when we are able to take care of someone at home or when we need the assistance of a nursing home?

What does “Lee” represent to the narrator?

Altruism and Humanity**“Reincarnation at the Kmart Intersection” by Sarah Jefferis (p. 127)**

In this poem the author is confronted with two life and death situations, the motorcycle grandpa and her unborn child. What positive and negative character human traits are we presented with as the author tries to decide what to do?

What is the definition of altruism? How does the author resolve her present dilemma in light of the hope of conceiving her future child?