

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.

Preventing burnout

"Being Lucy" p 4-8

Emily Weston's "Being Lucy" shows the internal struggles healthcare providers navigate after leaving the hospital. The nurse says,

"I just wonder how we bear it. All this death. It has to happen. With some people, it's almost a blessing that they die and with others it is a tragedy. And we code them or let them go, but they all die in the end. And we send the family home and bag up the body and strip the room for the next patient. And usually I don't take it home. But this one was bad."

How do you assess her response to the death of the patient? her identification with the patient's family? with her fellow nurses? How should healthcare professionals grieve the loss of one of their patients in order to avoid "rotting" inside?

Empathy

"The Ripple Afterwards" p 14

Joyce Kessel's poem "The Ripple Afterwards" raises questions about empathy. She writes,

"Six weeks, they say
is all others can tolerate
or remember of another's diagnosis
and then it becomes too uncomfortable.
You're just expected to move on..."

Is there a time limit for empathy from those people seeking to comfort someone during their illness? Do people grow tired of "feeling sorry for someone," and move on with their own lives before the patient can move on with hers/his? Who provides the best foundation of support and empathy during times of grief and illness?

"Third Degree: A Poem in Ironic Rhyme" p 75-76

In this poem, the speaker mourns the murder of his co-worker and questions the so-called empathy he receives from others. Do you think it's possible to empathize with someone if you have not been in the same position? Is all mourning/loss experienced the same? When do our words of condolence seem trite and without meaning?

“Boxes Shaped Like Hearts” p 108-111

Despite her own experiences of dealing with her mother's manic episodes, Kathleen McClung confesses her immediate agitation with the man yelling at the supermarket parking lot. Upon reflection, she admits that depending on her own fears, her “capacity for empathy for strangers shrivels.” Is empathy usually dependent on our immediate sense of well-being? Is there a limit on our ability to empathize? Like McClung, have you ever re-assessed a situation that you've been in and wished you could have been more empathetic? What is the purpose of empathy? Despite her personal experience with mental disability, why does McClung recoil from the man, while her husband, who deals with mental disability everyday in his profession, reach out to help him?

“Getting Wisdom” p 114-116

In this essay, Timothy Vo asks himself tough questions as a student currently in medical school. Vo compares the experience of reading his peer's blog about being a patient with cancer with that of conducting his first complete unsupervised neurological exam on an unknown patient. In what ways does he connect these experiences? In what ways are they different? Vo asks himself, “What kind of doctor do you want to be?” He says that “Some would say there's no right answer, but I think there is, in a way.” Do you agree with him? What do you think about the professor's musings on cancer patients losing their hair due to chemotherapy versus what the lecturing attending once said about male doctors and mammograms?

Physician as patient

“Prime of Life Redefined” p 30-32

In her essay, Susan Huang's experience as a patient changes her perspective on life. How does Huang define “the prime of her life” at the beginning of the essay and at its conclusion? What does Huang find different between a physician's perspective and a patient's? Why are these perspectives so different? As a physician, what has Huang gained by having been a patient herself?

“We Stand as Trees” p 48-49

To whom does the “We” in the title of Kaveri Patel's piece refer? What does Patel learn from her experience of being sick? What are the “roots [that] are planted in silence—“? Do you think the metaphor Patel uses is apt?

Compare and contrast Patel's experience of being a patient to Susan Huang's in her essay “Prime of Life Redefined.”

Epiphany/change of perspective

“The Pier” p 38-42

In Edie Cottrell's short story, Carl inadvertently finds out about his best friend's medical condition. When Carl meets Lou for lunch a week later, and Lou does not bring up the subject of his medical status, Carl finds himself feeling furious. Why? His perspective changes, when he finds himself on the pier. Why? If you inadvertently found out personal medical information about someone close to you, how would you handle it? What mechanisms are in place, or do you think should be in place, to maintain patient confidentiality?

“Normal” p 79-80

This piece by Monica Nawrocki eloquently relates the reflections and feelings of the partner of a transplant patient while asking us to consider our use of the word “normal.” At what point does Nawrocki’s categorization of “normal” change? Is Nawrocki’s normalizing just a matter of desensitization, a coping mechanism, both, or something else? How does illness impact our definition of normal? Does medicine also change our notion of normal?

Identity

“74-12036” p 52

Lindsay Obermeyer divides her identity into two components of body and self by writing, “I put the body back into the cloth and the self into the chart.” Why are these two distinct? Do you agree with Obermeyer that viewing “the body as container is limiting”? Are one’s fluids an extension of the Self, regardless of whether they reside in or outside of a body? What about organs or tissue? Gametes? In holding such a view, what are the implications for medical research or donation? Who owns one’s biological material?

“Visiting Alzheimer’s” p 72-74

In the first scenario that Donna L. Emerson describes, she wonders whether someday she will be “showing some social worker I never met, who I once was. Who I still am.” This implies that our individual identities both change and remain the same. What do you think changes and what remains the same? Is this solely the case for those with Alzheimer’s or is this more a function of aging?

“Who Are You?” p 91-95

In Carole Glasser Langille’s fictitious story, Mr. Mercier tells his granddaughter “Your mommy is not herself. But she will be.” To what extent does acquiring a disability alter one’s identity? Does it depend on the type of disability? With rehabilitation can someone reacquire his/her “previous identity”? What role does a loving caregiver play in one’s ability to reclaim identity?

Family perspective

“The Good News” p 81-82

The speaker expresses her frustrations with the care her family member received from nurses and physicians. She takes solace in the fact that all those who failed the patient will also die. Is she right to feel such anger? Should healthcare professionals anticipate such a reaction? Does the poem imply that the nurses and physicians failed to provide compassionate care?

Hope

“Just OK” p 83

In her poem “Just OK,” the speaker seems to instill in herself a false sense of hope when she writes, “I wanted to believe, even when I knew it wasn’t true. Especially then because at least it gave us something.”

What does possessing a sense of hope do for patients and their loved ones? Is harboring a false sense of hope always detrimental? Do physicians and nurses need to remember that hope is often a vital part of care?

Humanity vs. technology

“Nude” p 84

How does Dawna L. Robertson's short story "Nude" reveal the relationship between art and medicine? Which seems more interested in the actual person?

Autonomy vs. collectivist culture

"Circular Argument" p 87-88

In September 2012, the American Academy of Pediatrics published the following statement on its website:

"The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) finds that circumcision has potential medical benefits and advantages, as well as risks. A recent analysis by the AAP concluded that the medical benefits of circumcision outweigh the risks. We recommend that the decision to circumcise is one best made by parents in consultation with their pediatrician."

In the story "Circular Argument," Zac Williamson portrays an argument between husband and wife over circumcising their newborn baby boy. With which person do you side in this argument – the mother who does not want to circumcise her baby because it would violate the child's autonomy or the father who wants to follow the traditions of his collectivist culture? Can any compromise be reached? With all the connotations that the word has, do you believe male circumcision to be "mutilation?"

Social model

Several of the pieces describe how health care professionals see their patients as fellow human beings, not diseases or conditions. What are the benefits and costs associated with this identification in Donna L. Emerson's "Visiting Alzheimer's," B.T.'s "Letter to a Parent," and Timothy Vo's "Getting Wisdom"?