
Readers' Discussion Guide: An introduction to *The Healing Muse* volume 13

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The Healing Muse is a journal unique in its approach to illness, medicine, and the body. Composed of narratives of prose, short stories, and poetry, it can help those experiencing illness in any context as well as those interested in studying literature and medicine. To guide both readers and educators, we've provided a starting point for discussion for use in classrooms, book groups, or one's own exploration.

Patient-physician relationship

"A Physician's Prayer for Beginner's Mind" by Kaveri Patel

The poem portrays a dissonance between how physicians want to treat their patients and how they often actually treat them. How does this speaker attempt to keep the ideal within her reach?

Compare the patient-physician relationships portrayed in the following poems:

- "Physicians" by Phoebe Brown
- "Office Visit" by Theresa Wyatt
- "Explain *Lightheaded*, the Doc Asks" by Susan Eisenberg
- "How to Be a Wife" by Cathleen Calbert
- "The Kidney" by Cherise A. Pollard
- "On the Way to Seder, My Husband Answers" by Jen Karetnick

Do they share any similarities? What characteristics do the physicians have?

Personal bias/prejudices

"grace" by Sarah Fraser

This poem serves as a prime example of how looks can be deceiving: an old man appears to be inebriated; the narrator, a trained physician, goes through a mental checklist of factors to explain his anticipated health status. How does her shock at being so wrong affect her?

Cancer

"On and Off the Record" by Jane Blanchard

A common theme in cancer narratives is frustration. How does Blanchard express this frustration? What helps alleviate such frustration? What image is the poet evoking when she writes "each doctor, patient, pans some options?" What is she implying about treatment?

"Anything" by Judith H. Montgomery

This poem portrays an interesting dynamic between a couple faced with cancer. The husband, who has cancer, "does not want to know" anything about his diagnosis or prognosis. By writing, "Because he is not ready," the wife equates his desire not to know with being in a state of denial. How does his desire not to know impact her? What are the implications for the physician?

"Personal Questions" by Rosie Garland

Garland's epigraph indicates the poem's connection to Diane Burns's poem, "Sure, You Can Ask Me a Personal Question." Both poems use sarcasm to signify the hackneyed questions the speaker often gets.

What does the speaker in this poem want? What questions are okay to ask? Does it make a difference who's asking the questions?

“Before It Felt Safe” by Janice Repka

Throughout her poem, Repka constructs layers of meaning by repeating the phrase “before it felt safe to let go.” Contrast the meaning of the phrase's first three instances with its last use.

Power of thought/metaphor

“Thoughts on a No-Hair Day” by Sarah Gilbert

The speaker at first compares herself to a shedding cat. She then shifts her thinking and compares herself to a bare tree in the wintertime. Why does she think it's “better” to think of herself this way? How does the new metaphor redefine her?

Patient autonomy

“Why I Pulled My NG Tube at 4 am” by Sarah Gilbert

In this poem, the speaker admits to having gone against medical advice. Do you think her reasons for having “sent the young nurse out of the room” and pulling out her NG tube are fair? What should the nurse do when, upon re-entering the patient's room, s/he finds the tube pulled out?

“Circus Man” by Gaetan Sgro

Daniel, the patient, is a former circus performer at the end of his life. Despite his illiteracy and current inability to speak, he nods, indicating that he understands the repercussions of taking “the tube out.” This action leads to his death. How does the medical staff react to the decision to remove the tube? What leads the speaker to write the poem?

Care taking

“a better care” by Roger Desy

Desy thanks his wife for providing him with the opportunity to care for his aging and ailing mother. Why is he grateful? He poignantly wonders whether others, if given the same “chance,” would also care for their elderly parents. Do you think a normative role-reversal of care taking between parents and children can help adult children with their grieving over the death of their parent?

“The Proper Use of Spells” by Luisa Villani

The poem describes a carefully constructed approach to care taking. The speaker soothes her father and cajoles him to the best of her ability to ultimately commit him to a psychiatric hospital. How has her father's illness shaped their relationship?

“How to Be a Wife” by Cathleen Calbert

In her blatantly honest portrayal of being a “well spouse,” Calbert fights with herself: “One day, I don't ask if he's eaten (he must take responsibility for his well-being!); the next, I insist he drink cans of liquid protein (I must take responsibility for his well-being!).” How does a caregiver balance these opposing feelings?

“Treatment of Choice” by Deborah Gang

In communicating with her husband who has Alzheimer's, Gang goes against her natural tendencies of honesty and practices compassionate lying. Explain why you agree or disagree with her that such lies actually preserve rather than undermine her husband's dignity.

“I Hate You, Charlie. I Love You, Charlie.” By Emily Klein

Compare the attitude Klein takes towards caring for her daughter with that of Calbert in her essay, “How to Be a Wife.” Are the differences solely attributed to the fact that one cares for a child, while the other a spouse? Should the attitudes be more similar? Why or why not?

Cognitive disability

“Technical Difficulties” by Raven Heroux

After listing her diagnoses of OCD, Tourette’s syndrome, and hearing loss, Heroux appeals to the reader of her essay:

What does it take to inform the masses that disabilities aren’t always visual? That sometimes they hide in your brain and affect you in ways you can’t control? What will it take to show people that disabilities aren’t always crippling and can sometimes be hilarious? What can I do to show people I’m just a normal college student with a not-so-normal brain and an otherwise fairly normal life?

Later, she writes, “Most of the time I don’t let my broken brain define me.” Instead, she argues, it contributes to her “winning personality.” How does her perspective differ from the usual ways cognitive disabilities are perceived? Do you think Heroux has an overly optimistic perspective?

“Connections” by Lisa Baker

Compare Baker’s perspective of cognitive disability in her poem, “Connections” with that of Heroux in her essay, “Technical Difficulties.” With which perspective do you identify and why?

“Dementia” by Theresa Wyatt

Despite enduring wake-up calls in the middle of the night, the speaker is “so happy” that the subject of her poem, “Dementia” can still remember her name. How does illness redefine the caregiver?

Lessons learned from illness

“When I Was Silent” by Jane Seskin

The speaker describes her experience of having lost her voice for a week. She thinks about all her lost opportunities to communicate pleasantries with others, use her words for action, and simply enjoy the sound of her own voice. But to her surprise, she realizes she is still able to have interactions with others. What valuable lessons did she learn? Has the humbling experience of illness taught you similar lessons?

Burn-out

“Road Trip” by Karen Donley-Hayes

At the end of her essay, Donley-Hayes reflects on the dissolution of her passion for being a paramedic. She muses over whether “it gradually diluted” due to the amount of calls she answered or it “spilled out” due to her repeatedly bearing witness to horrific scenes. Is there any way for EMS workers to prevent that from happening to them, or does the nature of the profession insist on it? Do we judge their loss of feeling differently from how we judge a detached physician? Should we?

Organ donation

“Her Breath” by Andrew Schep

The speaker describes the perspective of a friend or relative of a transplant recipient. He is well aware that this gift of a lung means another family’s loss. This poem takes a relational approach to organ donation, whereby donors and recipients form a sort of “family.” Who benefits from this perspective? Is it valid to think of the donation as a way for the donor to “live on?”