

Teaching Aid—Suggested Paper Topics
WRITING CLASS

Healing: When a Nurse Becomes a Patient
By Theresa Brown

1. Discuss the structure of *Healing*: short chapters that alternate between Brown's experiences as a cancer patient and memories of her work as a nurse. Do you find the structure effective for a memoir? Why or why not?
2. Pick one chapter where Brown discusses having cancer and one that is about nursing. Analyze how they play off each other and what that contrast adds to the memoir.
3. Brown makes use of literary references throughout *Healing*. Pick one and discuss what it adds to the book. Examples include: *Alice in Wonderland*, "Tony's Story" by Leslie Marmon Silko, "What we Talk About When We Talk About Love" by Raymond Carver, Audre Lorde's *The Cancer Journals*, William Shakespeare's *King Lear*.
4. Pick several of the repeat images or themes in *Healing* and discuss how they add to or detract from the book's overall effectiveness. Examples include: rabbit holes, the see-saw, turtles, spatchcock, Cancerland.
5. Explore how the idea to "reason not the need" in Chapter 9 encapsulates Brown's larger message about the need for more compassion in health care. What does bringing Shakespeare/*King Lear* into the chapter add to Brown's portrayal.
6. Consider the big-picture structure of the book—the four main sections. How do they thematically knit the book together? Use examples and be specific in your discussion.
7. Focus on incidents in *Healing* when Brown gets really angry. Virginia Woolf thought that authors who wrote in anger tended to compromise the quality of their work (*A Room of One's Own*). Do these angry moments add to the story or are they a distraction? Or both?
8. Brown takes issue with the color pink being used to symbolize breast cancer and with the word "Survivor" being applied to cancer patients who have finished active treatment, but continue to take medication and have regular scans and check-ups. Analyze her arguments and discuss either or both terms as having positive or negative value for cancer patients.

Teaching Aid—Suggested Paper Topics
HEALTH CARE MAJORS' CLASS

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Many if not all of these topics could be accompanied by a relevant literature review. Individual professors can determine the number of articles and dictate how students should pick topics.

1. Brown identifies herself as a “Difficult Patient.” Discuss the ethics of labeling assertive/demanding patients as “difficult” and consider why this label is applied by staff to certain patients. Does the use of this label seem appropriate, or not?
2. At the end of chapter 13, “Bedside Manner,” Brown wishes for a more obviously caring surgeon, after acknowledging that her surgeon did a good job talking with her before surgery and while operating on her. Explore the conflict that arises when physicians who are technically very skilled, and often work with anesthetized patients, may not be, as Brown puts it, warm and fuzzy.
3. Chapter 19, “RadOnc,” highlights the work done in the Radiation Oncology Department to make Brown, and presumably all patients, feel they are treated as human beings. Draw on your own clinical experience to identify situations where a more compassionate approach to care could easily have been used by staff in the hospital or clinic setting.
4. Throughout *Healing*, Brown highlights health disparities and the reality that non-white patients often receive lower quality care than white patients do. Explore the nature of racism in the health care system, using examples from the book and from your own experiences.
5. The overall argument of *Healing* is that compassionate care is better care. Discuss moments from the book that validate that thesis.
6. Patients who educate themselves about their illness and care are usually considered “empowered,” but Brown argues *against* patients researching their illnesses and treatment choices, especially if they plan to use the internet. Say which position you support and give examples for your argument.
7. The image of a playground see-saw repeats in Chapter 12, “Balance.” Pick episodes from *Healing* where you see Brown’s idea of balance in health care depicted, or highlight episodes where the balance is off, or both.
8. The three chapters that detail Brown’s reaction to Tamoxifen showcase a medication puzzle. Oncologists know that nearly half of women who are prescribed Tamoxifen for

five years will not take it for that long, and yet they never address this issue with her. Brown herself ends up discontinuing Tamoxifen before her five years are up. How could physicians better address “non-adherence” to Tamoxifen in order to try to get women to stay on the medication for longer? Alternatively, discuss whether the five-year expectation for Tamoxifen is unrealistic for drugs that cause some women such debilitating side-effects.

Teaching Aid—Discussion Questions
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1. A standard statistic about health care in the U.S. is that we spend more than any other industrialized country and our overall outcomes are worse. Apply these facts to what Brown says in *Healing* about greed destroying American health care.
2. Talk about holidays, when patient care slows down or stops. What ethical issues arise when clinicians and staff—in the hospital and outpatient clinics—take holidays?
3. Consider Marian Anderson’s quotation about racism: “Prejudice is like a hair across your cheek. You can’t see it, you can’t find it with your fingers, but you keep brushing at it because the feel of it is irritating.” How do you see this being enacted in *Healing* or your own clinicals?
4. Fun thought question List all the ways that a See-Saw serves as a metaphor for the current health care system in the U.S. Does any other playground equipment serve a similar purpose?
5. Focus on the Leslie Marmon Silko short story “Tony’s Story” and the conflict between Leon’s rational view of “rights” versus Tony’s culturally derived idea of evil spirits. Outline the more rational values on display in *Healing* and the more human values, and add examples from your own clinical work to the list. What can we learn about health care from comparing the two lists?
6. When Brown goes to visit a Black patient in a low-income neighborhood, she recalls that another nurse’s husband supposedly told her she was not allowed to work in that neighborhood. Beginning with this anecdote, outline all the examples given in *Healing* of how money remains a barrier to quality health care for many Americans.
7. People often call nurses angels, and hospice nurses in particular often hear themselves described that way. Talk about the “angel” label. What do people mean when they call nurses angels? Is the label positive or negative? How does it apply in *Healing*? Or does it not apply?
8. Consider the term “supererogatory.” How does or doesn’t it apply in health care? Speculate on why patients defined compassionate care as going “above and beyond.” Also try to specify, above and beyond what, exactly?

9. *Healing* portrays several different physicians. Is it possible to pull a description of the “ideal physician” from these portrayals? Or is there no such thing, in contrast to Brown’s portrayal of herself as the somewhat defeated “ideal patient”?

10. Compare Chapter 38, “Two Afternoons in Hospice,” with Chapter 39, “The Long Road.” In both chapters the outside environment is an essential part of the portrait of care given. Hospitals in the U.S. tend to be hermetically sealed, creating an impermeable barrier between the care environment and the environment outside. Would the care Brown gives be different if the weather and time of day were shut out as much as possible from the care environment? Hint: Florence Nightingale thought that open windows and fresh air were essential for good care.