

Book Group Discussion Questions

Healing: When a Nurse Becomes a Patient

By Theresa Brown

1. The overall argument of *Healing* is that compassionate care is better care. Consider the term “supererogatory.” How does or doesn’t it apply in health care and why do patients define compassionate care as going “above and beyond”? Also, above and beyond what, exactly?
2. Theresa says that becoming a patient made her forget most of what she had learned about breast cancer as a nurse. Have you ever had a similar experience—a time when you really needed your professional expertise to help with a personal issue, but your knowledge and experience were suddenly unavailable to you?
3. An oft-quoted statistic about health care in the U.S. is that we spend more money than any other industrialized country and our overall outcomes are worse. Discuss the idea that greed is ruining American health care.
4. *Healing’s* many short chapters alternate between Theresa’s experiences as a cancer patient and as a nurse. In the acknowledgements she says she hoped that each chapter would be “gemlike.” What might that mean for readers? What was reading one short chapter after another like?
5. Throughout *Healing*, Brown highlights health disparities and the reality that non-white patients often receive lower quality care than white patients do. Talk about racism in the health care system, using examples from the book and your own experiences. Keep in mind 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.”
6. Consider some of the repeat images in *Healing* and talk about how they add to (or detract from) the book overall: rabbit holes, a see-saw, turtles, spatchcock, the color pink.
7. The end of chapter 13, “Bedside Manner,” includes a wish for a more obviously caring surgeon, while acknowledging that the surgeon did a very good job talking before surgery and while operating. Talk about the conflicts that can arise when physicians who are technically skilled and quite knowledgeable are not “warm and fuzzy.”
8. Theresa identifies herself as a “Difficult Patient” and there are several moments in *Healing* when she gets pretty angry (without taking it out on staff). Some readers found the anger refreshing, in contrast to cancer diagnosis and treatment being described as

“positive” or “a gift.” The anger surprised other readers, but not in a bad way. What was your reaction?

9. Chapter 19, “RadOnc,” highlights what the Radiation Oncology Department did to make patients feel like human beings. Theresa describes their work as, “This was not rocket science.” Talk about why the ordinary kindnesses in RadOnc made such a difference.

10. Did you like this book? Why or why not? This may seem basic, but comparing answers is usually very interesting!