

Reader's Guide "A Crossing"
by Dr. Lois Nixon

Just recently I used "A Crossing" in a class of 165 medical students during a school-wide unit on breast cancer. All students had read the story and were prepared to discuss it with a panel comprised of clinicians and class members. Because the story involves a doctor who has discovered a lump and her husband, also a physician, and the kind of rational and irrational thoughts that such a discovery might evoke, the class was extremely engaged and responsive. This story was a cancer story, but it was, moreover, their story, their future patient's story, and, of course, the anecdotal story relating to their neighbor or their mother.

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1. The perspective of "A Crossing" is that of a doctor who unexpectedly becomes a patient. How does being a breast cancer patient change Alice's view of herself, of being a doctor, and the world? What does she give up during the course of the story? What does she gain?
2. Does Barry, her husband, who is also a doctor, change from this experience?
3. What does the story say about medicine's power to heal?
4. How is the story relevant to doctors and medical students? What are the limitations of medical procedures and of the doctor/patient relationship? Can doctors competently save the physical lives of patients who have a serious illness but in the process wound their patients' spirit? Should a doctor tend to both an illness and a patient's emotions? Are doctors trained to do this?
5. Do religion, faith, hope, or alternative medicine have a role in the life of a patient who has cancer or a potentially terminal illness?
6. Does illness change not only the patient in this story, but family relationships, too?
7. What is the role that emotions play in Alice's life as she struggles to come to terms with her illness?
8. Does this story tell you anything about your own life? Are there characteristics you think are important for doctors to have in their professional lives? In their personal lives?
9. What the title suggest?
10. Comment on the emotional and psychological strain on her, on her family.
11. How quickly did she get an appointment to see a physician.

12. How is this story relevant to the presentations made in class and to the materials discussed in POM. What does this story add to what you have learned thus far?

13. Note on page 55: “But Alice couldn’t concentrate on what he (doctor) was saying.” Later, she says, “the earth spinning farther and farther from the sun, slipping out of orbit into blackness.” Is this how many patients feel?

14. Page 57 and 58. Where is she and what is she doing when she starts to cry.

15. What’s going on on page 58 (bottom) when Barry and Alice talk? What about the word, Cancer? “The terrible not knowing.” Look at page 62: “This is happening to all of us. I don’t know what gives you the right to think it’s only you. It’s me and the children, your mother. Isn’t that what you tell patient?” (Barry) What does she say next?