

DOCTOR, PATIENT, FAMILY AND DISABILITY

SUMMARY: “Space” – Maura Stanton. This is a poem written about the famous young Irish novelist and poet, Christopher Nolan, who grew up poor and with severe cerebral palsy in Dublin. His mother in particular, as well as his sister and father, played a supportive, encouraging, and challenging role in his development. The poem is written from the point of view of possibly a physician, but more likely a physical/occupational therapist, or teacher. The poem implies the devotion of the mother, the courage of the son, and how the professional learns to see both his vision and his loneliness.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What do you learn about the relationship between mother and son?
2. What is the role of the mother toward her son? Toward the therapist?
3. How might the professional feel toward the mother? The son?
4. What kind of therapeutic triangle has been formed?
5. How does this story end? Where might it go from here?

TRIANGULATION ISSUES:

1. Therapeutic alliance – the strong mother-child bond expands to include, elucidate doctor/therapist

SUMMARY: “Irene” and “Eleven Steps” Jack Coulehan, internist, epidemiologist, and medical ethicist on the faculty at SUNY, Stony Brook. In “Irene,” the family physician enters into the experience of his long-time patient who is recovering from a stroke. He pays close attention to her and struggles mightily to comprehend her efforts at communication. By contrast, her husband is dismissive of her speaking and cannot see into his wife’s depths. In “Eleven Steps,” the doctor is present only as a command to “take 12 steps.” This poem portrays the husband George in a more sympathetic light, guiding and supporting his wife, organizing her pills, chatting to his wife, and in a clumsy way, loving her. The wife struggles determinedly to follow her physician’s instructions. Before she can succeed, however, in a misguided effort to assist her, undermines her efforts.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS: “Irene”

1. Contrast the relationship between the doctor-patient and husband-wife.
2. What might the patient be experiencing? The doctor? The husband?
3. How does this story end? (in temporary frustration for the physician; in dismissal by the husband) Where might the story go from here? What are some risks the doctor runs? (forming too close an alliance with the patient; being judgmental toward the husband); What can the doctor do to help ensure “a happy ending”? (be a bridge between husband and wife)

TRIANGULATION ISSUES:

1. Illicit coalition – the physician’s concern for his patient becomes an enmeshment that excludes the husband

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS: “Eleven Steps”

1. What is the doctor’s role in this poem?
2. What is the picture we form of the husband? The wife? Of their relationship?
3. Why is the wife so angry at her husband at the end?
4. How might the physician intervene to help create a better “story” for both husband and wife?

TRIANGULATION ISSUES:

1. Illicit coalition – although the physician is not actually present, the coalition between him and his patient results in the family member becoming the “enemy” and saboteur

SUMMARY: “Going to Alaska” Johanna Shapiro, psychologist and professor in the Department of Family Medicine at the University of California Irvine. In this poem, a family learns of their son’s diagnosis of ankylosing spondylitis, a rheumatoid-like chronic disease that destroys his ability to play basketball, which he loves. The poem examines the disease’s effect on family relationships, as well as the contrasting roles assumed by specialist and family doctor as the son attempts to come to terms with his condition.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How is this family affected by the diagnosis of a chronic, irreversible disease?
2. What are their initial expectations from modern medicine?
3. What position does the family physician assume vis-à-vis the family and illness?
4. Why does the family seek a specialist?
5. How does the son attempt to take charge of his illness?
6. What is the reaction of the specialist? How does the reaction of the family physician contrast with this?
7. How does the family doctor help heal this family system?
8. What are the risks involved in making such a decision?

TRIANGULATION ISSUES:

1. Therapeutic alliance
 - a. Family doctor interrupts enmeshment of parents/child
 - b. Doctor has independent relationships with both parents and child