



## SUPPORT GROUP FACILITATOR'S GUIDE

Thank you for choosing the poems in *Hard to Swallow*<sup>1</sup> as a jumping off point for discussion in your support group. Although these poems arose from one couple's experience – and each person brings his own story to your group – they raise universal issues.

Included in this guide are two sets of questions:

(1) **Introductory Questions** are designed to focus participants' thinking as they read the book. You may wish to distribute these questions along with the book as you begin this process and open the first session by having participants share their responses.

(2) **Post-read Discussion Questions** are based on poems you have selected to stimulate conversation, based upon the needs of the group. You may decide to select just one question to begin the group discussion and then listen as that discussion evolves, adding other questions as they fit the group. Poems are arranged based upon their area of focus, i.e., caregiver, patient, both patient and caregiver, and those grieving the loss of a loved one. This allows facilitators to hone in on a certain poem or poems based upon the composition and needs of the group. It can be adapted to a single session or series of sessions. If your group has answered the Introductory Questions, those answers may also inform your choice of a poem or poems to focus on.

I hope *Hard to Swallow* and the questions it raises will enrich the discussions of your participants, wherever they may be on this journey.

*-Pat Hurley*

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<sup>1</sup> Available online through NightBallet Press at a discounted rate for support groups

***Hard to Swallow***  
**Introductory Questions**

1. Which poem(s) spoke to you? Why?
2. Which poem(s) made you feel uncomfortable? Why?
3. Did you experience an *aha* moment from reading any of the poems?
4. What did you learn (insight) about yourself or the person you were/are caring for?
5. What would you do differently after reading these poems from the perspective of both sides?
6. What advice would you give to other caregivers?

***Hard to Swallow***  
**Post-Read Discussion Questions<sup>2</sup>**

**Caregiver Focus**

Jealous (1)/ Unsaid (6)

- How is your loved one's illness like a third party who has taken up residence in your lives?
- What gets in the way of talking about it?
- What are you leaving unsaid?
- Who can you talk with about it?

The Walk (2)

- To what extent does the person you care for give you strength? How?
- How do you feel about accepting support from someone who is ill?
- What is the most helpful support you are receiving as a caregiver?
- How have you included/excluded other family members and why?
- What do you need that you are not getting?
- How can you ask for it?

Guided Meditation (10)/ The Dream (22)

- What are your thoughts about being left behind?
- What is helpful to you when you think and maybe plan for your future?
- Who are you comfortable talking with about this?

Slasher (16)

- What does this poem suggest to you about acceptance?
- How do you resolve differences if you and the patient are moving in different directions?
- What roles have each of you evolved into?
- How are these roles serving the situation?

Whispers (18)

- How do you handle inquiries about a patient's health?
- Have you ever wished someone would also ask about you?
- What is the nicest thing someone could do for/say to a caregiver?
- What are you doing to take care of yourself?

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<sup>2</sup> In this section, as in the book, poems by Bill Hurley and related questions are italicized. Pat Hurley's poems and related questions are in non-italicized type. Page numbers corresponding to the book are in parentheses.

## Unguided Meditation (20)

- How do you feel when a patient lets out anger/frustrations?
- What do you say?
- In what way do you release your own negative emotions?
- How free do you feel to do this in front of the patient?

## A Buddhist Fable (26)

- What is romantic about being “the strawberry”?
- What is terrifying?

## Patient Focus

### *Carpe Diem (3)*

*January 11, 2016 – for Ziggy (5)*

- *How has your illness affected the way you look at life?*
- *What decisions have you made that you might otherwise not have?*
- *How have these decisions affected you?*
- *How have they affected your loved ones?*

### *Final Exit (7)*

- *What role has humor played in coping with your illness?*
- *How much (or little) do you appreciate others attempting humor?*
- *How can you let others know what to say or not say to you about your illness?*

### *Waiting On Oatmeal (9)*

- *What rituals are you relying on to get through the day?*
- *What other rituals might be worth trying?*

### *Bellyface (13)*

- *What is the hardest part of physical change during illness?*
- *How did the poet respond to his body changing?*
- *How would you like others to address your appearance changes?*
- *How can you let them know?*

### *Tell Me Now (19)*

- *What conversations do you long to have with loved ones?*
- *How can you initiate them?*
- *What’s stopping you?*

*Butterfly (21); January 14, 2016 (23); January 19, 2016 (25); March 24, 2016 (27)*

- *How has illness shaped your view of your place in the world?*
- *What part is spirituality playing in your life these days?*
- *How does this compare with your spiritual focus before you became ill?*

## **Patient/Caregiver Focus**

*Survivor (11)*

- *What's your definition of a survivor?*
- *How is that playing out now in your role as patient? Caregiver?*

*The Path (14)*

- *To what extent are you and your loved one still on the same path since illness struck?*
- *To what extent does it feel like you are on different paths?*
- *Is it possible to “stay in sync” during a bout of serious illness?*
- *If so, how?*

*Cancer: 50 Essential Things To Do (8)*

- *How have treatment regimens impacted your life?*
- *What are your biggest frustrations?*
- *How are you dealing with them?*
- *What do you say to well-meaning friends who suggest regimens and cures?*

*Cachexia (12)*

- *What can be helpful about online medical research?*
- *When is online medical research not helpful?*
- *What was the poet's quick fix to lift her mood?*
- *What are yours?*

*Poetry Reading At The Cancer Center (4)*

- *What did this poem have to say about treatment centers?*
- *How do the treatment centers you visit affect you as patient? Loved one?*
- *If you were in charge of the world, what would treatment centers be like?*

## Grief Focus

### Star-Crossed (28)

*Butterfly (21); January 14, 2016 (23); January 19, 2016 (25); March 24, 2016 (27)*

- Looking back at your loved one's life, what clues of cosmic connection do you see?
- Think about a moment when you saw their best wisdom.
- What will you keep from them always?
- What insights do you now have about what you want if you become ill or at end-of-life?
- NOW what do you view as important?
- What insight on life do you now want to pass on to others?

### Epilogue Poem (30)

- How do our loved ones, even in death, remain alive?
- How are we changed by knowing them?
- In this poem, how are the poets still together?
- Why, at the end, do you think he's amused?
- Are there ways in which you feel your own loved one might be amused?

### *Harvard Chair (17)*

- *How can memories of lost family members help us face mortality?*
- *What lessons do they offer?*
- *Can even negative memories inform our own view of what we want to be next for us?*

### *Survivor (11)*

- *What's your definition of a survivor?*
- *How does it apply to surviving when you are in grief?*