

# BayStateNurse

NEWS

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## What's Inside

Activities of Daily Living

3

Education News

5

NewsNotes

10

Calendar

11

Continuing Education

12

Classifieds

15

Achievements

20

## Nurses

Listening

Thinking

Caring

## Teaching the Art of NURSING



Burghers of Calais, bronze 1554. This sculptural masterpiece by Rodin is central to Dr. Jeanine Young-Mason's research, writing, and teaching on correspondences between art and literature and nursing phenomena. (Photograph by Jeanine Young-Mason)

by Judith Surveyor Miltguy, M.S., R.N.

Final exam time, and you're a graduate student studying psychiatric-mental health nursing at UMass Amherst School of Nursing. Jeanine Young-Mason, an associate professor in the School of Nursing at the university, is your teacher for an advanced concepts of nursing course in your specialty area. With her as your guide, you've gained new understandings and journeyed beyond the borders of inner territories you'd explored only from a distance before. From your assignments and in-class experiences with Young-Mason, you know to expect the unexpected for the final and she doesn't disappoint you. On the day of the exam, you meet her and your fellow classmates at the Museum of Fine Arts (MFA) in Boston and another journey into the heart and soul and mind of the human condition begins.

Linda Trott, who graduated from the master's program at UMass Amherst in 1992, is one of the students who wrote her final in advanced concepts of psychiatric nursing at the MFA. She came to the program as a seasoned clinician with experience in several areas. Today, as the clinical director of a multidisciplinary team of mental health professionals in a managed care organization, she still speaks of the courses she took with Young-Mason with deep appreciation. "They made the whole program for me. They made it come alive," says Trott.

For the exam, titled "Developing the Aesthetic Perception of the Psychiatric Nurse," Trott and her

classmates were directed to look for a visual representation in a work of art of one or more of several concepts they had studied during the semester. The concepts included loss, grief, hope, soul, transcendence, anguish, sacrifice, anger, and many others. Trott says that Young-Mason asked each student to contemplate the work of art he or she selected and then write in some detail about how it exemplified the concept(s). For example, Trott says she chose a sculpture and spent time considering how the facial expression, position of the body, and muscle tension expressed a specific concept.

Young-Mason, who began teaching at UMass Amherst in 1985, uses art, literature, drama, and film to help undergraduate and graduate nursing students better understand the human condition, especially as it relates to illness; to learn more about the people they care for, work and study with, and relate to; and to get in touch with their own beliefs and values. In her column, which regularly appears in the journal *Clinical Nurse Specialist*, Young-Mason writes, "The link between nursing and the arts lies in the fact that both are concerned with the human condition and both have a profound appreciation for the suffering of others." ("Kurosawa's 'Red Beard': Teacher of Compassion," Vol. 5, No. 1, 1991) Readings in her courses include plays by Sophocles and novels by Leo Tolstoy, Joseph Conrad, and Georges Bernanos, to name a very few. "I think that any time you read something that's a classic, that has values and wisdom in it, you grow and learn from it," says

Continued on Page 6

## Art

Continued from Page 1

### Young-Mason.

In her years of practice as a clinician, educator, and consultant, Young-Mason found herself seeking to better understand the suffering of others and phenomenon of compassion, which she sees as central to nursing. As an avid reader since childhood, she realized that literature and works of art mirror human life in a way no textbook or case study can and began to link the two together in scholarly work as a graduate student. In the article mentioned above Young-Mason writes "No textbook can express, for example, the simple unself-conscious, monosyllabic cry of pain or joy found in life and echoed in literature, which goes deeper than can any theory about humanity. Thus, literature is a crucial primary source for those concerned with human care, especially those needing to deepen their understanding of how humans both seek and are aroused to give care."

### The Burghers of Calais

One of the works of art that Young-Mason uses to teach undergraduate and graduate students is Pierre-Auguste Rodin's sculpture the "Burghers of Calais." Young-Mason spent time researching the story of the Burghers and Rodin's method of capturing the states of soul they depict. (See "Visual Clues to Emotional States: Rodin's 'Burghers of Calais'" by J. Young-Mason in the *Journal of Professional Nursing*, Sept.-Oct. 1990, pp. 289-99 for more detail.)

Young-Mason explains that Rodin was commissioned in 1884 by the Municipal Council of Calais, France, to design a monument to honor the six men, known as the Burghers of Calais. In 1347 these men offered their lives to end the 11-month siege of Calais by King Edward III of England during the Hundred Years' War. The men were to strip to their chemises, place a rope for hanging around their neck, and walk barefoot to the English king's camp, bearing the keys to the city. Each man's face, gestures, and position show a different reaction to this tragedy. According to Young-Mason, one of the Burghers appears lost in reflection, whereas another seems to be weeping and to have turned inward in an attempt to gain composure. Others show resignation, anger, all-consuming grief, and incredulity and fear.

Full-size castings are displayed in many countries throughout the world, and Young-Mason has obtained permission to photograph the sculpture at several sites. She now uses the photographs in slide presentations for students. With funding from Sigma Theta Tau and the Kittredge Foundation, she has traveled to Rodin's last home and studio in Meudon, France, to photograph and film the original sculpture and to the Musée Rodin in Paris. She is in the process of editing the film for a video that incorporates students' responses with her description of the sculpture and the story behind it.

The distant events portrayed in the "Burghers of Calais," according to Young-Mason, can be linked to health

care in contemporary times. For example, the themes of sacrifice and suffering are apparent in patients with cancer, Alzheimer's disease, acquired immunodeficiency syndrome, and other long-term illness, and also in their caregivers. For their patients' and their own sakes, Young-Mason says that it is important for nurses who witness loss and death in their daily practice to study sacrifice and suffering in as much depth as possible.

Kerri O'Malley agrees. She is a senior nursing student who learned about the "Burghers of Calais" in a required writing course for juniors taught by Young-Mason. O'Malley says that she came to better appreciate the many

position in a corner of the funeral home after her mother had died. Thinking he was alone, he muttered out loud, wondering what he would do and how he would care for his children. The student, who was 9 years old at the time, remembered feeling a deep compassion for her father and of somehow transcending her own sadness at the loss of her mother for that moment.

After writing their responses students are asked to volunteer to read them aloud, and a class discussion follows. In a paper they hand in later, they further develop their perceptions. O'Malley says that in this and other assignments she was always struck by how much she learned about her own

someone talks about a client or a case study is considered," says Young-Mason. For example, *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, a novel by Tolstoy, presents the despair and isolation of a middle-class 19th century Russian man who is dying. Ilych must face a situation not much unlike that of a modern day bureaucrat in a society that values self-interest and material gain. According to Young-Mason, this story illustrates that loss can be a devastating experience but can also strengthen in a mysterious way, with the act of compassion shedding light on the mystery. She asks students to come to class having read and annotated each work. Her goals in all she teaches is to help students recognize the individuality of each person — to avoid labels and generalization; to help them develop compassion and value others' suffering, a key aspect of which is honoring other people's points of view.

Toward the end of the writing course students write a vignette of an experience with a patient as if it were a piece of fiction, including dialogue and description. The assignment gives them a sense of the patient as a distinct individual with his or her own story and point of view. Young-Mason then has them write the vignette from the point of view of another person in the story.

Likewise, to deepen their understanding, students are assigned to read contemporary non-fiction accounts of illness written in the first person. One example is Mark Nepo's *Acre of Light*, a collection of poems and essays about the author's and his wife's experience with cancer. Both were diagnosed with the disease around the same time. Students are often asked to compare the contemporary person with a character from a classic, such as *The Death of Ivan Ilych*.

For one of her course assignments O'Malley read and wrote about a contemporary account of illness by William Styron that influenced her clinical practice. In his book *Darkness Visible* Styron describes his own encounter with profound clinical depression. O'Malley recalled the book later when she cared for patients with psychiatric illness at a Veterans Administration hospital, some of whom were very depressed. "Getting that perspective from William Styron's experience of depression helped me not to be so frustrated," she says. As a result of reading the book, she felt she better understood depression as an illness.

In another experience in caring for a patient on a medical-surgical unit, O'Malley says she paid more attention to the "small things," such as a concerned word, a touch, her physical presence — things she had become more aware of through readings in Young-Mason's course and elsewhere. "Literature helps me look at so many more aspects of ways that you can impact someone," she says.

O'Malley came to Young-Mason's writing course as someone who loved to read and write, and the course reinforced and deepened her commitment to both. She says that before and after the course she has used writing to help her sort through clinical and personal experiences. "I think [the

"I think that I'd like to continue to read [about other people's experiences]...I think I'd like to do that just to keep my heart soft."

different ways people express their grief and handle a tragic situation through the slide presentation of the sculpture and the writing assignment and class discussions that followed. After her presentation Young-Mason asks the students to write a response by choosing one of the Burghers that reminds them of a patient, family member, or friend. They can also draw on their own life. She asks them to describe the parallels through a particular situation. "I use art, film, literature, and drama not only to deepen the student's perception, but also to give them an understanding of the difficult things that mystify them — to deepen and fortify them," says Young-Mason.

She recalls one student who wrote about the Burgher who is seated with his head bowed and his hand clasped over his head in a gesture of profound grief. The student remembered seeing her own father sitting in that very same

values and beliefs and of how divergent other classmates' responses could be to the same situation.

### Learning from Literature

In the course O'Malley refers to, which Young-Mason calls a writing, reading, and reasoning course, she also uses plays, novels, short stories, and modern first-person accounts of illness to introduce undergraduate students to the inner lives and valuational reasoning of people who may closely resemble the patients and families they have met or are yet to meet in their career. They experience these characters as unique individuals with their very own story. Themes of illness, suffering, loss, death, healing, and compassion are present throughout the works. "When you have a story that everybody in the room shares, that's already written in such detail and depth, you can get more accuracy than when

course] creates more thoughtful nurses," says O'Malley. "I think that it really inspires empathy, and I think that's such an important quality for a nurse to have." She hopes to practice on an adult medical-surgical unit in a large teaching hospital after graduation. "One thing that's important to me," says O'Malley, "is that I don't ever want to lose the compassion I have for people because that's what has drawn me into nursing in the first place.... I think that I'd like to continue to read [about other people's experiences]," she says, "I think I'd like to do that just to keep my heart soft."

#### Graduate Studies

In graduate courses in psychiatric-mental health nursing, Young-Mason uses character studies from fiction to help students understand nursing concepts and then incorporate that understanding into their practice. She has devised seven research questions to help the student understand and write about characters and later has them apply these same questions to an actual patient. "From my point of view I'm trying to help [students] understand the human condition and emotional disorder from really good literature," says Young-Mason. The characters give meaning to the concepts of loss, loneliness, alienation, isolation, madness — conditions of the human mind and soul students are encountering with their patients. Trott says that in-depth discussion of the concepts as they relate to the inner lives of the characters helped bring the concepts to life for her.

Young-Mason says she often uses the book *The Secret Sharer* by Joseph Conrad to illustrate the problem of overidentification with another individual, and thus unwittingly thinking you can understand a person well enough to know what he or she wants. Trott recalls classroom discussions, possibly related to Conrad's book or others, that focused on the differences between friendship and a therapeutic relationship — a central issue in mental health disciplines.

"One of her greatest gifts is that she helps you to recognize every individual as an individual and to accept what they bring to the therapeutic relationship — to accept them from where they come," says Trott. She remembers reading Franz Kafka's powerful story *Metamorphosis* about a man who feels himself being transformed from a person into an insect. Her understanding of mental illness was deepened through reading this book, and the character has stayed with her. Using another book about progressive mental illness, Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, Trott studied and wrote about the concept madness. In addition, as part of an in-class presentation, she showed the film *Madame Butterfly*, concentrating on the concept passivity.

"Ultimately, what I'm trying to do is help people understand what [compassion] means to them through these characters' lives that we study," says Young-Mason. She remembers a graduate student in psychiatric nursing who found the main character in the short story "The Underground Man" by Fyodor Dostoyevsky particularly dif-

ficult. The man was always provoking people. Then one day, the student told Young-Mason, the "underground man," or more precisely a patient with strikingly similar characteristics, walked into her office. The student told Young-Mason that Dostoyevsky's story helped her understand the patient's situation and feel more compassion toward him. "Because of the story," says Young-Mason, "she said she didn't fall into the usual traps of responding to him in the way she might have if she hadn't gone through the story."

For both undergraduate and graduate courses O'Malley and Trott say that students' initial reactions are mixed as they try to understand how art and literature relate to the study of nursing, but that they quickly become involved and enthusiastic. Young-Mason says she enjoys the "skeptics" in the group, that through their questioning they stimulate discussion and make important contributions to class.

#### Making the Connection

Young-Mason calls herself a vocational nurse. From the tender age of 8 or younger she knew she wanted to be a nurse. As a junior high student, she volunteered as one of the candy strippers who brought the library cart filled with books to patients in the hospital. As a high school student, she worked as a nurse's aide and then attended the University of Michigan School of Nursing, a four-year program with three full summers of courses. In this program, rich in liberal arts courses, Young-Mason studied art appreciation, anthropology, history, music appreciation, and literature in required and elective courses. Even then, she was drawing parallels between the world of nursing and the arts. Right after graduation, she found a position as a psychiatric nurse. Later, she received a master of science degree in psychiatric-mental health nursing from Boston University (BU) and a doctorate in education in humanistic and behavioral studies from BU School of Education. In graduate school she wrote some of her papers on themes in literature and nursing, and concentrated solely on the interrelationship between nursing and the arts and literature in her doctoral research.

Young-Mason has held several positions in psychiatric-mental health nursing. Before she joined the faculty at UMass Amherst in 1985, she practiced for several years in a consultant-liaison role at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston and also taught at Tufts Medical School. In 1994 she was inducted as a fellow into the American Academy of Nursing. For many years she has focused her attention on art and literature and its connection to nursing. "My research since 1980 has been on art and literature and nursing phenomena," says Young-Mason. In 1989 she presented a paper on the "Burghers of Calais" at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C., which displays a full-size casting of the sculpture. Her presentation was part of a national conference of the Society for Health and Human Values, a multidisciplinary organization. Her

research, funded by grants from UMass, foundations, and organizations has often taken her abroad. Most recently, she traveled to France to film, study, and photograph the "Burghers of Calais." She has also traveled to Iraq, Japan, Ireland, and England to meet with nurses and study nursing education. She speaks with appreciation and gratitude for the support and encouragement she has received from colleagues and administrators at UMass Amherst School of Nursing.

Besides her regular column in the journal *Clinical Nurse Specialist* and other articles for professional journals, Young-Mason has written the book *States of Exile: Correspondences Between Art and Literature and Nursing Phenomena* published by the National League for Nursing and due for release this spring. The book is based on her writing courses for nurses and presents discussions of literature, film, and art, along with selected student responses. A second book *21 Words for Nurses* published by Diamond Press in South Bend Indiana is also in the final stages of the publication process. This book

is a meditation on words relevant to nurses, such as compassion, understanding, and sorrow. Young-Mason is currently working on her next book *Chronicles of the Ill* to be published by F.A. Davis next spring. It will contain first-person accounts of the experience of illness.

Trott and O'Malley, and most certainly class after class of Young-Mason's students, are grateful that she has chosen to share her research, her insight, and her passion for the arts and literature with them. "You get much more than you initially expected from a course of hers, and you use the insights you gain in all kinds of ways, not just professionally in your clinical practice, but personally as well," says Trott. "Who would think as a nursing student, you could experience so much through the arts and literature?"

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## Massachusetts Nurses Association

# Career Center

## Upcoming Programs

Wednesday, June 15, 1995

### Interviewing Skills Workshop

Rosemary Houlihan, Chief Clinical Officer, Preastar  
(1.8 contact hours awarded)

Tuesday, June 20, 1995

### Career Development Seminar

Donna Mae Donahue, Director, MNA Career Center  
(contact hours have been submitted)

Thursday, June 22, 1995

### Resume Writing Workshop

Donna White, MSN, RN, CADAC, CARN  
(1.8 contact hours awarded)

All programs will be held at the Massachusetts Nurses Association, 340 Turnpike Street, Canton, MA.

Fees: MNA Members: \$20 + 1 MNA C.E. Voucher; Non-Members: \$50

Registration: For registration information, contact the MNA Career Center at 617-821-4625 x728; or toll free in MA at 1-800-882-2056 x728.