

THE SENIOR PAGE



Staff photo by BOB STERN

Jeanine Young-Mason, a nursing professor at University of Massachusetts, Amherst, uses art to help develop a sense of compassion in nursing students.

Compassion and healing

Nursing professor uses art to teach students to help elderly patients

By MARISA GIANNETTI

Through the arts, literature, film and nature, University of Massachusetts nursing Professor Jeanine Young-Mason teaches young nurses how to be compassionate and healing when it comes to their elderly patients.

Using artists such as Russian writer Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Japanese filmmaker Akira Kurosawa, and 19th-century French sculptor Rene-Francois-Auguste Rodin, Young-Mason demonstrates how an understanding of the human condition, through the arts, can create better health professionals. Compassionate nurses and other health-care workers can, in turn, help their patients cope with chronic illness, pain and death, according to Young-Mason.

The author of three books that explain the details of her educational philosophy, Young-Mason teaches about 75 undergraduate and graduate nursing students annually at the UMass Amherst campus. Her theory of compassionate nursing through the arts is one she has pioneered during her decades as a clinician, author and educator.

"The great question to me has always been how to truly help people. At the center of my teaching is the question of compassion: How can nurses and other health-care professionals

Young-Mason explained in an interview in her office at the Amherst campus, where she has taught since 1985.

Although her research has taken her to France, England, Ireland, Scotland, Iraq, Morocco and Japan, Young-Mason's introduction to the study of compassion and care-giving came at a very early age. When she was 4 years old, she went with her mother to visit a favorite aunt who was set to deliver her first child that very day. When the 4-year-old arrived at her aunt's house, the door to her bedroom was closed, the house was hushed and Young-Mason was not allowed to see her aunt.

"I asked my mother what was wrong and I learned the baby had been stillborn. I couldn't comprehend the full implication of that, but what I did realize was that my aunt was overcome; when I actually did see her, she looked dispirited and very pale. I also learned that the death was not to be talked about. It was apparent to me that there was no little baby, and that there wasn't going to be," Young-Mason writes in the afterword to her book "The Patient's Voice: Experiences of Illness."

Several years later, Young-Mason was again confronted by grief. Another aunt lost her 5-month-old baby suddenly while he was sleeping. This baby was well-known to the now 8-year-old Young-Mason, since she had spent most of the previous summer baby-sitting for the infant. But her family's reaction was to keep the news from her, as was traditional in those days, she said.

"No one told me directly that he had died but I heard my mother scream it to my father early that morning when she received the phone call. The young children were kept away from the funeral and not included in any of the discussions. However, I did receive a measure of comfort from a conversation I overheard in my grandmother's kitchen, where all the adults had gathered to drink coffee. The conso-

“How can nurses and other health-care professionals understand the condition of their patients, understand the spiritual turmoil of the sick and dying, and somehow respond to those needs?”

Jeanine Young-Mason

helped take care of him all summer," Young-Mason writes.

These two incidents indelibly etched the feelings of sadness and grief in Young-Mason, she says, and made her want to understand how to cope with those feelings and help others who were suffering with them due to illness or death.

As an adult, Young-Mason enrolled in the University of Michigan School of Nursing. After graduation, she earned a master's degree in psychiatric-mental health nursing from Boston University's School of Nursing and then a doctoral degree from BU. She joined the UMass School of Nursing faculty after serving as a clinical nurse specialist at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston.

However, her advanced nursing education and her post-graduate studies failed to adequately address her questions about how nurses can really help their elderly patients to cope with illness and death. She embarked on her own journey of discovery, and found answers in art and literature.

Perhaps her single greatest source of inspiration is a sculpture by Rodin called "The

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The sculpture depicts six men who had offered their lives as a sacrifice in 1347 to end the 11-month siege of Calais, France, by King Edward III of England during the Hundred Years War. The men were ordered to strip to their underwear, place a rope for hanging around their necks, and walk barefoot to the English king's camp, bearing the keys to the city. With their deaths, the English king allowed food to reach the people of Calais, ending a war-imposed famine.

Each man's face, gestures, posture and position show a different reaction to the tragedy. As a group, they exemplify the profound depths of human emotion that occur when faced with imminent death, Young-Mason said.

By studying the sculpture, which is a requisite in all Young-Mason's classes, young health care professionals can come to understand the complex range of human emotions that their patients might experience. This is particularly true in the case of the elderly, since they face their own mortality on a daily basis, she said.

Young-Mason uses black-and-white photographs she has taken of the statue in her classes. She is currently at work on a video about the sculpture, that will incorporate her nursing students' writings and some patients' reactions to the Rodin sculpture.

But lessons are not only to be found in the classics of art and literature. In her regular column, "Nursing and the Arts," for the professional journal "Clinical Nursing Specialist," Young-Mason describes the search for communication between a young nurse and a non-communicative, difficult patient who was suffering the effects of multiple sclerosis. It wasn't until the nurse thought to interview the 75-year-old patient's son and learn that the woman used to read murder mysteries, that she was able to help.

"Mrs. Hammond Speaks," the title of the column, relates how the young nurse was able to bring the elderly MS patient back to life by reading aloud the



"The Burghers of Calais" by Rodin is used by University of Massachusetts nursing Professor Jeanine Mason-Young in her classes to study the range of emotions people experience when facing death.

murder mysteries that were such a part of her pre-illness existence. With patience, understanding and compassion, the nurse was able to make a connection with this patient, and help her to heal some of the emotional wounds that were holding her back, Young-Mason said.

Delving into the arts and literature as a nursing or medical student, can also counterbalance the scientific and technological aspects of a medical education, Young-Mason believes. "It can humanize what is often not a very humanistic process," she said.

According to Young-Mason, elderly patients can also take a hand in their own recovery by studying arts, literature and music. "The arts are crucial to the aging process. Not only can we seek answers to our own illness or impending death, but we can find distraction from these questions when we need a respite," she said.

Whether it is listening to a Beethoven concerto or having someone read a favorite poem aloud, the ill and elderly can gain strength, hope and healing through the arts, she said.

"Studies have shown that el-

derly people with Alzheimer's disease are less agitated when they can be in nature, tending a garden, for example. Music can also soothe a distressed, chronically ill patient or someone confined to a nursing home. Through the arts we can also learn to understand and appreciate the process of aging, help the ill to heal and accompany each other on a journey to human understanding," Young-Mason said.

She offers this definition of compassion as the central theme to her work with the elderly and the chronically ill: "It should be clear that compassion is not

mere sentimental emotion, nor is it an attempt to merely pity another. The compassionate act, thus defined, becomes the living basis for assisting those who are suffering. The complimentary ethics of compassion and advocacy may well be the most powerful, rewarding, and necessary acts of the nursing profession. Compassion, however, encompasses all those involved — physician, nurse, administrator and clinician — in the care of the person, and no one exists above or beneath its power to make understanding possible and to heal."

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