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## Power and Pleasure of Ideas: The Maine Humanities Council and the Public Humanities in Maine

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# Power and Pleasure of Ideas:

## The Maine Humanities Council and the Public Humanities in Maine

by Hayden Anderson

*For 40 years I have been trying to find the words for what it was like coming back from Vietnam, but I could never do it. This book gives me the words.*

If you are looking for evidence that the humanities can make a real difference in the lives of real people, you need look no further than the participants in the Maine Humanities Council's Veterans Book Group (VBG). Throughout the autumn of 2014, participants in this new program met weekly to read and discuss Homer's *Odyssey*. The group was cosponsored by the Portland Vet Center and facilitated by a professor of classics from the University of Southern Maine.

Program participants—all combat veterans—worked their way through the 2,800-year-old poem, perhaps the ultimate story of a warrior returning home. The story's resonance with veterans living in Maine today was profound. Group members reported that Homer's epic told *their* story, that his words gave voice to *their* experience.

It's just one example, but surely the VBG is emblematic of what the public humanities can do. No member of the group had extensive previous experience with Homer; the facilitator wasn't there to deliver weekly lectures; there were no quizzes or papers. Rather, the group was designed to provide a context for veterans to engage directly with the text, share their thoughts and reactions with one another, and give voice to their common experience. What group members experienced was a terrific example of how a text can focus conversation, distill important aspects of human experience, and serve as a springboard to deep connection and communication.

Such is the work of the Maine Humanities Council (MHC). By providing public humanities programs and opportunities throughout the state, the MHC envisions the communities of Maine transformed by the power and pleasure of ideas. It's no small vision, and it hints at the MHC's conviction about the power of the humanities not just to bring delight and enrich individual lives,

but also to help shape the ways we interact with one another in community and to inform public dialogue on our most important policy concerns.

An independent statewide nonprofit organization with its offices in Portland, the MHC has existed in its current form for nearly 40 years. For all that time, it has provided programming and grants throughout Maine to support the state's cultural life and to encourage critical thinking and conversations across social, economic, and cultural boundaries.

As the state of Maine affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and the Library of Congress Center for the Book, the MHC is at the forefront of public humanities programming in the state. What is meant by the term *public humanities* can be difficult to delineate. As traditionally conceived, the humanities comprise disciplines such as history, philosophy, and literature, as well as the study of languages, cultures and religions, and the arts. This sort of taxonomy can be seen in the organization of university academic departments and course catalogs.

Outside the academic setting, it can be useful to think of the humanities more expansively, to understand the concept as capturing how we think about and interact with all the various ways we, as humans, create and share our stories, find meaning, and understand our place in the world. The work of the MHC can often be best understood as an effort to advance the humanities in this more expansive sense.

Though it may not be possible to enumerate the exhaustive list of necessary and sufficient conditions for an activity to be classified as part of the public humanities, there are some reliable markers for such programs as carried out by the MHC:

- These activities take place outside the traditional academic context; they are not part of any formal course of study or academic program. When public humanities programs take place on campuses, it can often be with the explicit purpose, in part, to disrupt the town/gown

divide and build relationships between the campus and the broader community.

- They are communal. The public humanities involve people coming together for shared experience. In many cases, participants in public humanities programming will be interacting with one another for the first time. Here in Maine, program participants are often from the same community but may never have met one another before.
- They are text-based. Often the text will be a novel, poem, or short story. Sometimes it will be a work of nonfiction, a film, or a theatrical performance. What's important is that there be an anchor for discussion that is shared by all participants. Having a text as the basis for discussion by a group can provide an entry point into topics that are difficult to talk about, and a wisely chosen text can focus discussion.

## The public humanities involve people coming together for shared experience.

- They are led by an experienced scholar-facilitator who has both the specialized expertise to provide guidance and insight on the topic and the facilitation skills to encourage maximum participation and mutual respect among program participants. The facilitator also plays the key role of keeping the group on topic, even while accepting and valuing everyone's input. The twinned roles of the scholar and facilitator are equally essential for the public humanities.
- They are discussion focused. Even when the text is difficult and unfamiliar, discussion among program participants weighs equally with teaching or exposition by the facilitator. Whereas academic humanities courses often emphasize the teaching of various interpretations of the text, public humanities programming is focused more

on reactions of program participants and the discussion that grows out of these reactions.

The MHC is one of 55 state and territorial humanities councils created following the establishment of the NEH in 1965. The legislation establishing the NEH articulates the rationale for public support of the humanities, and it remains an important touchstone for how to understand the current relationship between the humanities and public policy.

Indeed, the role of the citizen in a well-functioning democracy is a central notion in the establishment of NEH. As stated in the National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities Act of 1965 (P.L. 89-209): "Democracy demands wisdom and vision in its citizens." Federal funding of the public humanities is intended to foster "mutual respect for the diverse beliefs and values of all persons and groups" and to "transmit the achievement and values of civilization from the past via the present to the future," with the purpose nothing less than to "achieve an orderly continuation of free society."<sup>1</sup>

In addition to this high purpose for the public practice of the humanities—the fostering of the values and beliefs that make democracy possible—two specific parts of the 1965 legislation are particularly timely today. First, public engagement with the humanities is intended "to make people of all backgrounds and wherever located masters of their technology and not its unthinking servants." What was originally a Cold War era concern about the public's relation to arsenals of nuclear weaponry capable of destroying the planet now resonates in new ways as individuals struggle to come to grips with communication forms and information technology that can often make us feel that we are involuntarily tethered to technology, and that privacy, liberty, and freedom are somehow weakened by our dependence on these pervasive technologies. Second, the nation has an interest in promoting the public humanities because, as the 1965 legislation states, "the world leadership which has come to the United States cannot rest solely upon superior power, wealth, and technology, but must be solidly founded upon worldwide respect and admiration for the Nation's high qualities as a leader in the realm of ideas and of the spirit." It is perhaps more true now than ever that we live in a global society, where our success depends upon being citizens of the world. For individuals and governments alike, cultural competence and a historically informed worldview are essential.

To lay out the historical and philosophical underpinning of the public humanities is to sound high-flown. It should not be a surprise, however, that in Maine public engagement with the humanities almost always happens on a small scale. Ours is a state where day-to-day engagement with the humanities is woven into the fabric of life. This engagement is an important part of what constitutes the strong sense of place that makes Maine so special (see Toner 2015). Go to any city or town in the state, and you'll encounter history that's alive, arts and culture thriving in unexpected places, neighbors debating with one another about what it means to live in and create community.

What does the work of the MHC look like? In a sense, it's the most familiar thing in the world: neighbors gathering together to read and talk. But underlying this simple model are the deeply held beliefs that critical thinking and civil conversation are skills that need to be nurtured and exercised; that historical and cross-cultural perspectives are key if we are to solve our most difficult problems; that we as human beings are at our best when we are in regular contact with literature and philosophy and poetry.

It can feel paradoxical when you compare the scope of the MHC's ambitions with the typical scale of our programs and grants. MHC programs are rarely big and splashy; there's no grand gesture that will bring our vision to reality all at once. On the contrary, it's our conviction that the public humanities in Maine are most powerful when they're most intimate. A look at some of the MHC's core programs makes this clear.

## DIRECT PROGRAMS OF THE MAINE HUMANITIES COUNCIL

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### *New Books, New Readers*

New Books, New Readers is a theme-based, multi-session facilitated reading and discussion program designed for adults who are not regular readers. In many cases, participants are students in literacy or English language learner (ELL) programs. New Books, New Readers encourages participants to consider how books can play an important role in life, helping them to understand themselves in relation to their world and each other. The program uses high-quality children's literature as texts, to ensure that the books are at a reading level appropriate for participants. Although the program features children's books, the facilitated discussion is for adults.

Themes for New Books, New Readers series include *Becoming American*, *Carrying the Past*, *Courage*, and *Freedom*. By taking part in the program, participants get the experience of talking about literature and using book discussion as a lens through which to get to know their neighbors and understand their own experience. For people who never thought they could be part of a book group, New Books, New Readers offers an entry point and encouragement to make reading a lifelong activity.

Last year the MHC partnered with literacy providers (adult education, Literacy Volunteers, family literacy programs, correctional institutions, and other organizations) in 15 communities, reaching close to 700 low-literacy adults, ELL students, and inmates at the state's prisons and jails. Groups range in size from seven to twenty participants.

### *Literature & Medicine*

Literature & Medicine: Humanities at the Heart of Healthcare is a multisession reading and discussion program for healthcare professionals. It is open to anyone working in the healthcare field, and groups often include nurses, administrators, physicians, lab techs, clergy, support staff, and others. Lit & Med participants meet together five times to read and discuss literature that raises issues they face in their work caring for patients. Participants report increased empathy for patients, broadened cultural understanding, sharpened communication skills, and reduced feelings of professional burnout.

One hospital employee who has participated in Lit & Med has told us, "The reflection and conversation that take place greatly enhance the level of cooperation, collaboration, and *esprit de corps* within our hospital family and our community at large. This in turn greatly improves the quality of care we provide to our patients and their families." Lit & Med is one example of how the humanities have an important role to play even in areas seemingly far removed from the traditional humanities context. Through reading and facilitated discussions of literature and poetry portraying sickness, healing, death, and human relations, healthcare professionals are able to develop a richer understanding of their patients and colleagues.

A majority of the hospitals in the state of Maine have hosted at least one Lit & Med group. The program has also spread to 25 other states across the country. A key innovation in the program came several years ago

when a program was started at the Veterans Affairs Medical Center at Togus in Chelsea. VA hospitals face unique challenges, including facilities and personnel stretched to their limits and a growing number of patients suffering from the results of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Many physicians and staff at the VA are not themselves veterans, which makes the gap between patient and caregiver even greater. According to one VA Lit & Med participant, “I am convinced that the reading and discussion of these works has enhanced our staff’s empathy for the veterans we serve, and has reduced the potential of provider burn-out.” The program has been implemented at VA facilities in nearly a dozen states around the country.

...the humanities can play an important role in articulating the unique issues and concerns faced by veterans...

More recently, the MHC has looked beyond the healthcare setting to extend the reach and impact of Lit & Med. One significant example is an effort to bring this signature program to professionals who work in domestic violence prevention in the state of Maine. In partnership with the member agencies of the Maine Coalition to End Domestic Violence, the MHC has developed a two-part strategy to bring humanities programming to bear on this serious issue. First, the MHC worked with a social action theater group to develop a readers’ theater presentation of scenes from the Tennessee Williams classic, *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Staged with professional actors, the scenes led into a panel discussion featuring reactions to the performance by individuals who work in the domestic violence field, followed by a facilitated discussion among panel members and the audience. These public programs served to raise awareness of some of the most difficult issues around domestic violence, as well as to show how humanities programming can help provide a starting point for meaningful discussion.

The public programs on domestic violence have been followed up with Lit & Med reading and discussion

groups specially designed for professionals who work in the field. These groups bring together staff from domestic violence agencies and others who deal with domestic violence in their work—law enforcement, medicine, the courts, and others. Participants have reported increased empathy for the people they serve, deeper respect for colleagues and the work they do, and validation of the importance of their work. As one participant put it, “Having done this work for a long time, the readings and discussion helped to renew my commitment and remind me why I became interested in this work in the first place.”

Based on the long successful track record of the Lit & Med program and the positive reception it has received even outside the healthcare setting, in the spring of 2015 the MHC will introduce a version designed for hospice workers and others who work with end-of-life issues. Based on what is learned from this pilot program, the MHC hopes to expand its humanities-based hospice program across Maine.

#### *Veterans Book Group*

The Veterans Book Group (VBG) is a special nationwide pilot program developed by the MHC and funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities. Based on the MHC’s success working within the VA system, the NEH asked the MHC to develop a program to bring the humanities directly to veterans. In planning the pilot program, our hypothesis was that the humanities can play an important role in articulating the unique issues and concerns faced by veterans, fostering connection, reducing feelings of isolation, and providing a safe context in which to explore issues relating to military service. The VBG program is underway in 13 states across the United States.

Using material carefully selected with the direction of advisors from the veteran community, the VBG has three main goals: first, to provide a setting and context for veterans to connect with one another, build relationships, and share their experiences; second, to create opportunities for veterans to give voice to and reflect upon issues of particular interest or concern; and third, to provide materials that will allow veterans to see their own stories as part of a larger human experience that connects them with others across time and culture.

At the heart of the program are small groups of veterans who meet regularly over several months for facilitated reading and discussion. Other groups are underway throughout the United States, reading not

just classic texts but also the contemporary fiction and poetry coming out of recent conflicts.

### General Audience Programs

New Books, New Readers, Literature & Medicine, and the Veterans Book Group are MHC programs designed for special audiences. They are not open to the public but rather are intended to use the humanities to serve particular constituencies that share common needs or experiences. The other main type of programming provided by the MHC embraces a general audience and is offered to all. In many cases, programs are offered in partnership with local libraries throughout the state and are almost always free of charge.

The longest-standing program of the MHC is the library-based Let's Talk About It. Offered in partnership with the Maine State Library, Let's Talk About It brings facilitated reading and discussion groups free of charge to 30 libraries throughout the state each year. Community members sign up at the local library, and the group comes together for five sessions to discuss what they have read. All books are delivered to the local library for loan to program participants.

The readings—and the group discussions—can lead to unexpected connections. Just one example: not long ago a Let's Talk About It group at the Hafford Public Library in Allagash read *An Orphan in History*, by Paul Cowan. The book is the multigenerational story of a Jewish family assimilating into American culture. During its wide-ranging discussion, the group in Allagash talked in an open and personal way about what it means to be an American, what it means for immigrants to assimilate over generations, and the loss of language and cultural heritage that often comes along with that process. There, in the largely francophone St. John Valley, the topic had particular resonance.

Further discussion about the program is provided in this issue of *Maine Policy Review* by Jans (2015) who discusses the importance of this program for residents in the St. John Valley, and by Bartel (2015), who describes her experiences facilitating discussion in Lewiston-Auburn.

World in Your Library is a foreign policy program offered through local libraries in partnership with the Midcoast Forum on Foreign Relations and the Margaret Chase Smith Library in Skowhegan. The program brings foreign policy speakers to libraries for a series of three one-hour sessions on a variety of foreign policy topics. World in Your Library gives rural Mainers access to

experts in foreign policy and the opportunity to explore these issues with the speakers and with one another.

### GRANT PROGRAMS

Beyond the direct programming offered by the MHC throughout the state, the MHC has a long tradition of providing grants to Maine nonprofits in support of a wide variety of humanities programs. These grants help ensure that the public humanities are reaching even the smallest places in Maine. MHC grants particularly aim to support projects that are collaborative, stimulate meaningful community dialogue, attract diverse audiences, and invite discovery of the humanities in engaging and exciting ways. Grants are given to well-established organizations as well as organizations that have little or no experience in applying for funding. Recent illustrative examples include

- The MHC helped to fund The Hero Project, in North Berwick. Over the course of the school year, 85 high school students studied historical and literary texts about the nature of morality and heroism. They identified 21 individuals from their community who exemplify what it means to be a hero, and they wrote about these individuals. The culmination of the project was a luncheon where the community came together and the students presented their work.
- In partnership with the local Kiwanis Club, the MHC funded a seminar in Dexter for parents of prekindergarten children and provided three new children's books to every attendee to encourage local children as they begin their literary journey.
- To mark the 200th anniversary of Eastport's capture by the British during the War of 1812, the MHC supported commemorative activities there, which included a panel presentation and community discussion featuring four distinguished authors who have written about the time period.

### CONCLUSION

Through all its programming and grant making, there is a key premise underlying everything the MHC does: gathering people together to read, share, talk, and think together makes a difference. At our best,

this exchange transforms individuals and communities because engagement with the humanities is an essential part of a human life well lived.

This is not an elitist notion. On the contrary, the humanities get to the heart of what binds us together, regardless of age, reading ability, or station in life. The humanities can provide meaning and sense of purpose and can also help shape our aspirations by helping us to become more self-aware and to move beyond the strictly individual to examine our shared experiences and values. It's not simply that the humanities enrich our lives—though certainly they do. Just as important, the humanities have real-world benefits. Robust public engagement with the humanities strengthens communities and makes us better able to face the problems and challenges we must address together. Through the humanities, we can harness the power of human connection to help understand our past and shape our common future. We sharpen our ability to think and to adapt to new situations and changing contexts.

Herein lies what may be the most direct connection between the public humanities as practiced by Mainers throughout the state and the broad area of public policy. The twenty-first century presents us with a world of overwhelming complexity. There are important issues that bear directly on public life, the full comprehension of which requires highly technical specialized knowledge that is inaccessible to most of us—the intricacies of climate science, the details of the global forces that shape our economy, the engineering and environmental factors that inform transportation policy, not to mention the specialized military and geopolitical knowledge that come into play when we as a nation choose to send military forces abroad.

Citizens and policymakers are simply not in a position to become experts in all the areas where they are asked to cast votes and make decisions. But this does not obviate our need to address these issues. In the policy debates around climate change, to take just one example, it is not an option for policymakers to say, “I’m not a scientist” and leave it at that. On the contrary, what’s needed is for all of us—citizens and legislators alike—to develop and exercise the critical thinking skills that are the requisite for being intellectually and civically responsible members of society.

And this is where the humanities come in: critical thinking and philosophical analysis are core aspects of the practice of the humanities. Similarly, engaging with history, encountering foreign cultures, exercising one’s

imagination through literature and poetry, and sharing the experience of the visual and performing arts—all these experiences help sharpen our ability to deal effectively with the big issues we face.

To return to the example of climate change, it is noteworthy that while the scientific disciplines that describe these phenomena are outside the purview of the humanities, other key disciplines—such as the history of science and the philosophy of science—are clearly humanities subjects. And they are subjects that members of the public can engage with in ways that can meaningfully inform public debate. Questions such as “What is a scientific theory?” or “What is the role of certainty and doubt in science?” are questions that the layperson can wrestle with. Even if it isn’t possible for most of us to fully comprehend the complete technical findings of scientific research, we can—and must—develop the cognitive skills that allow us to determine what is a sound argument and what is not. Without these skills, we cannot develop reliably sound public policy. 🐟

#### ENDNOTE

1. The full Act is available on the NEH website, <http://www.neh.gov/about/history/national-foundation-arts-and-humanities-act-1965-pl-89-209>.

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