This update from the Maine Humanities Council shares an inside look at two programs: our Veterans Book Group, through the eyes of the scholar who helped us create this initiative; and a recent public event on immigration: Seeking Refuge. These programs are but two examples of the humanities in action, showing what pleasure we can take in learning and what power we can find in understanding the world around us. The humanities are always relevant.

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THE ZANY, MAJESTIC BARD

Care to join the MHC’s celebration of Shakespeare this year? Performances of our “The Zany, Majestic Bard” end this fall; each is a one-hour lively performance-lecture created and performed by David Greenham. Appropriate for all ages, this program includes history, a brief guide on how to read and understand Shakespeare, and plenty of good Shakespearean jokes.

Chandos portrait, 1610, oil on canvas; National Portrait Gallery, London, England. Long thought to be the only portrait of Shakespeare to have been painted from life.
HOW I LEARNED TO READ

THE ODYSSEY

BY JEANNINE DIDDLE UZZI

Veterans Book Group is a statewide program serving Maine Veterans: combat Veterans, women Veterans, and all service members.

A colleague of mine once claimed that an epic poem is best understood as an extended meditation on a theme. I liked the idea and immediately tried to identify the themes of my favorites. Homer’s *Iliad* was easy: it’s an extended meditation on war. Virgil’s *Aeneid* can be read as an extended meditation on empire. The theme of Homer’s *Odyssey*, however, never revealed itself quite so clearly, and until I began reading the *Odyssey* with combat Veterans, I had never settled on a theme. In fact, my inability to identify a central meditative theme for Homer’s *Odyssey* had always come between me and the text. I never loved the *Odyssey* as I did the *Iliad*, despite having taught it every year for more than sixteen years. The best I could do was claim that the *Odyssey* is about identity: what it means to be male, Greek, and human. It’s well accepted that the *Odyssey* is at least in part about gender. In the epic, our hero is plagued by a parade of terrifying monsters, deities, and disasters—Calypso, Scylla, Charybdis, Circe, the Sirens—all gendered female. Scholars find in the *Odyssey* a misogynistic tendency to present the female as obstructionist, false, and downright deadly. Even Odysseus’ trusty protectress, Athena, frustrates Odysseus by appearing before him in disguise. Against this female Other, Odysseus stands as the sturdy male, tricky, perhaps, and deadly when necessary, but also faithful to his brothers-in-arms and steadfast in his mission to get home.

In addition to gender, the *Odyssey* explores with some thoughtfulness what it means to be Greek. Homer’s description of the land of the infamous Cyclopes highlights their waste of natural resources and their lack of trade, sailing, craftsmanship, or cultivation: “It pastures no flocks, has no tilled fields—unplowed, unsown…” The Cyclopes do not sail and have no craftsmen…[it] would bear everything in season…vines would thrive…it has deep, rich soil that would produce bumper crops…the harbor’s good, too…” (65).

We learn in addition that the Cyclopes are not political creatures: “They have no assemblies or laws but live in high mountain caves ruling their own children and wives and ignoring each other” (ibid.). Nothing could be further from civilization as the Greeks understood it. In this
episode Homer shows us what it is to be Greek—and what it is not to be!

Finally, in the *Odyssey*, Odysseus flirts not with death—as does Achilles in the *Iliad*—but with life, eternal life. The goddess Calypso offers Odysseus as much, but he refuses: “Goddess and mistress,” he says, “…I know very well that Penelope, for all her virtues, would pale beside you. She’s only human, and you are a goddess…Still I want to go back” (35). Likewise, when Odysseus leaves the Phaeacians in Book 13, finally Ithaca bound, it is clear that he has left their uncanny utopia and its other-worldly promise behind forever.

I made myself content with these observations until I was asked to facilitate a reading group for combat Veterans through the Maine Humanities Council. I took my lead from a similar group that had found Homer’s *Odyssey* a particularly fruitful text. Many consider the *Odyssey* an epic of homecoming, and thus we settled on a theme for the first group: “Coming Home.”

In Homeric Greek thought, a hero wants two things, *kleos* and *nostos*. He wants immortal fame (*kleos*) so his name will survive him, but he also wants homecoming (*nostos*) so that he can enjoy that fame with his loved ones while still alive. In all of Greek mythology, only Odysseus gets both *kleos* and *nostos*. In the word *nostos* you may recognize half the English word “nostalgia,” which comes from two Greek roots, *nostos* meaning “homecoming” and *algos* meaning “pain.” And with this nostalgia we finally begin to approach what I have come to understand as the organizing meditative theme of the *Odyssey*. In leading the Veterans group, I learned that the *Odyssey* is not just a story of identity or homecoming or even of homecoming pain. It is the story of a combat Veteran coming home from war. With this realization, myriad mysteries of the epic were revealed, and the text whose theme had escaped me for so long finally came into focus.

I had never fully understood, for example, why the epic named for Odysseus did not introduce its title character until the fifth book. The Veterans, most first-time readers of the *Odyssey*, saw immediately that the epic begins with a picture of the home front and the suffering endured when a loved one is missing in action, which is, in modern terms, Odysseus’ status when the epic opens. Similarly, I was never able to suspend my disbelief long enough to find a ten-year journey from Turkey to Greece credible, but reading the text with combat Veterans completely changed my mind. I realized that the length of the journey had to do not with geography but with psychology. Many Veterans struggle to feel truly at home in civilian life, and the process can indeed take years to accomplish.

Many other aspects of the text also made sense to me for the first time in the context of the group. Odysseus’ strained relationship with his wife and the delicate tests of faith each executes on the other resonated with the Veterans’ own experiences of returning to marriage after a long absence. Group members recognized in Odysseus their own feelings of invisibility upon return to civilian life, their desire, once home, to return to combat, and their tendency to seek ways to escape the enduring pain of what they had experienced in war.

There are plenty more examples I could offer, all of which would only lead you to ask more insistently, “How could you not have seen this?” “How could you, trained in the classics, not have understood the *Odyssey’s* core theme?” The answer is that I got as close as I could without proximity to the Veteran experience. The *Odyssey* is about how one returns to civilian life after combat. Only through the Veteran experience, so generously shared with me, could I fully understand the poem, and I will be forever grateful to the group for helping me in that regard. In his *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming*, Jonathan Shay asserts that “Odysseus has shown us how not to return home from war” (149). I could not disagree more. The *Odyssey* is not a prescription; it is a work of art, a poem built on the deep wisdom of oral tradition that speaks to Veterans—ancient and modern—of certain visceral, timeless truths about returning to civilian life after combat.

Jeannine Diddle Uzzi, PhD, is Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs, USM. She served as the lead scholar as the MHC created Veterans Book Group.

**REFERENCES**

*Stanley Lombardo’s The Essential Odyssey* (Hackett 2007)

*Jonathan Shay’s Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming* (Scriber 2002)
Topics of conversation surrounding immigration, refugees, and asylum seekers seem to be routinely in the spotlight these days. They are also topics that have been a persistent aspect of the American story. Despite this, misconceptions surrounding these topics seem to be growing, and confusions are just as persistent as the topics themselves. In February 2016, the Maine Humanities Council held Seeking Refuge: Understanding the Refugee and Asylum Process, a free, public, panel discussion that broke down the process here in Maine. Discussion touched on the screening that determines who can come to the U.S., the policies and laws supporting the process, and the everyday logistics of refugees and asylum seekers arriving in Portland as they begin new lives.

Offered in partnership with the Maine Historical Society and Portland Public Library, Seeking Refuge included panelists Sally Blauvelt (Portland Field Office Director, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services), Barbara Taylor, Esq. (Senior Staff Attorney, Immigrant Legal Advocacy Project), and Tarlan Ahmadov (Program Director, Catholic Charities Maine, Refugee & Immigration Services & Language Partners). The Rines Auditorium of Portland Public Library was full of audience members, including immigrants themselves, trying to understand this complicated process.

Sally Blauvelt described the legal definition of a refugee as “a human being who has been uprooted from their home and compelled to flee their national borders as a result of events that cause them to be at fear for their safety.” “Home,” she noted, can be many places and include many people.

According to the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR), there are currently 20 million people forced out of their country of origin, not including internally displaced populations, which include 20 million additional people. Of the roughly 40 million refugees, a mere 1% is resettled. This 1% of the world refugee population finds resettlement all over the world, and in consultation with the U.S. State Department, the UNHCR determines the number of refugees who can be resettled in the United States. In 2016, the number of refugees determined to enter the U.S. was 85,000. All of them undergo an exhaustive screening process. According to Blauvelt, “the scrutiny with which we look at refugees is greater than any other immigrant population by a long shot.”

Tarlan Ahmadov (Catholic Charities Maine) provides support systems for all refugee populations entering Maine. He described how, after the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services approve refugees, the U.S.
State Department then works with nine national entities to determine how refugees enter each state. Research is conducted state by state and includes a focus on housing availability, current refugee populations in the particular state, employment, and other economic factors. According to Ahmadov, 425 refugees will enter Maine in 2016, many of whom are joining family members who have already resettled to the state.

Ahmadov shared the demographic face of refugees in Maine: the largest populations are Iraqi and Somali, followed by people from Myanmar (Burma), Russia, South Sudan, Sudan, Iran, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Maine currently has a refugee population of over 18,500, most of whom having entered the state in the last 40 years.

Catholic Charities Maine assigns case managers for all entering refugees, conducts research on their families, assists in finding employment, and helps find schools for children, all of which are core provisions required by the U.S. State Department. But the end goal, according to Ahmadov, is “self-sufficient, self-reliant members of our society.” Individuals receive a modest $925 reception placement fund, but many are thousands of dollars in debt after entering the state.

Ahmadov stressed the lasting difficulties undertaken by refugees; only after one year can refugees apply for a Green Card, and after five additional years can they apply for citizenship.

Entering the U.S. as a refugee requires many steps and many screenings. But refugees aren’t the only ones entering the U.S. Unlike refugees, asylum seekers ask for safety and protections upon arrival in the country. Many asylum seekers enter legally with a visa they have received from a U.S. Embassy, while others enter EWI (Entered Without Inspection), usually over a land border. The asylum seeking community in Maine is distinct, including populations from Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, and Sierra Leone.

Being granted asylum is a painstakingly long process, and it can sometimes take years to have a case heard. According to Barbara Taylor (ILAP), applications are often rushed in an effort to receive a work authorization, hurting the chances of approval. Many asylum seekers fall out of legal status during their long wait for asylum. According to Taylor, “of the 11–13 million people in the U.S. without legal status, a large chunk of them had legal status and then lost it because it expired or their circumstance changed. People move in and out of status all the time.” In the words of an asylum seeker attending Seeking Refuge, “We can feel that we have become useless.” Other attending refugees and asylum seekers offered similar sentiments, asking what more they could do themselves to aid in the process of their resettlement.

New populations of Mainers will be an important topic for some time to come. Their experiences deserve respect, their culture appreciation, and their determination admiration. Seeking Refuge created space for the kind of conversation communities need to be having these days—and provided an example for the importance of the humanities in addressing contemporary topics. Immigrants to this country bring with them an enormous breadth of history, depth, and experience, all of which can be embraced and celebrated as valuable assets to Maine communities. As stated by Sally Blauvelt, we should all “shine a light on misconceptions and name them through education.”

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9/11 and the Creation of Collective Memory
SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 5, 2016
1:00 – 5:00 PM, ONE LONGFELLOW SQUARE

How, exactly, do our brains process information and create memories? If one of our memories is an event shared by an entire society, does that change our relationship to it? 9/11 has become a touchstone moment for our culture generally and for those individuals who were alive at the time. After 15 years of talking about it, our personal remembrances have been shaped by the discourse with friends and colleagues, in classrooms, and in the media—whether we’re aware of it or not. In this year’s Dorothy Schwartz Forum on Art, Science, and the Humanities, we’ll explore the formation of collective memory, using 9/11 as a case study for how a society remembers—or forgets—together.

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