A philosopher's life

Clinical ethicist Jessica Miller says it's important to contemplate what life's all about — and why we're here

By Margaret Nagle / Photographs by Adam Küykendall

LADY MACBETH started it.

Reading Shakespeare in high school, Jessica Miller found herself thinking deeply about the *Macbeth* character, especially her moral responsibility for her husband's, and her own, evil actions. When does persuasion become coercion? When does madness minimize free will?

Then came *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance.*

Miller was a political science major at Boston College when she took a philosophy course. What she heard — and read — got to her innate interest. *Zen* asks: What is the difference between our perception of reality and reality itself, and why do we assume there is one? She double-majored, then went on to pursue a doctorate at the University of Connecticut, focused on contemporary moral philosophy.

She came to Maine to put philosophy into practice.

"I felt like the questions being asked were important and vital," says the chair of the University of Maine Department of Philosophy of those early influences and what she still loves about philosophy. "And I wanted to contribute to the conversation."

Miller teaches philosophy courses for majors and nonmajors, where they discover the discipline — and themselves. Most nursing and pre-medical students take one of her ethics courses.

Her research focuses on ethics, bioethics and feminist theory, including the theory of trust. Recent writing has included how to break bad news to families in the pediatric intensive care unit, as well as analysis of how death is depicted in contemporary Disney films.

Miller's leadership includes serving as associate dean for faculty affairs and interdisciplinary programs in UMaine's College of Liberal Arts and Sciences.

But her widest — and, arguably, her most profound — influence is as a clinical ethicist in Maine. Since joining the UMaine community in 2000, Miller has been an active health care ethics consultant and educator. Since 2007, she has been the clinical ethicist at Northern Light Eastern Maine Medical Center in Bangor, Maine. Miller helped establish the medical center's Ethics Advisory Committee, which has been cited as a model for regional hospitals in the United States. It includes a formal ethics consultation service that Miller chairs.

She also has developed and implemented bioethics training and support for clinical ethics programs statewide in health care organizations as diverse as the Maine Department of Health and Human Services; Northern Light Home Care & Hospice; Maine Medical Center and Hanley Center for Health Leadership, both in Portland, Maine; and Northern Light A.R. Gould Hospital in Presque Isle, Maine.

> "What's most rewarding in all the work I do is **bringing the discipline I love to people who won't spend their lives studying it."** Jessica Miller

This past summer, Miller and Dr. Jonathan Wood of Northern Light Eastern Maine Medical Center presented a 10-year data analysis of the hospital's ethics consultations at an international conference at Oxford University in England. And this fall, Miller was a panelist at a Boston University forum, Humanities Approaches to the Opioid Crisis.

"An underlying thread is the importance of philosophy — taking a moment to think about what life is all about and why we're here," Miller says. "What does happiness mean to us, and how are health and happiness connected? What decisions do I need to make in terms of what I value?

"Whether talking genomics or distribution of health care resources or end-of-life decision making, your body and your health are inescapable in pursuing happiness."

MENTION PHILOSOPHY and for most people, images of the bearded philosophers of Ancient Greece pontificating in the marketplace come to mind. Today, philosophers are still in public arenas, Miller says, but now that engagement with society is in K–12 education, medicine, government, corporations, environmental issues and so much more.

Public philosophers are students of community knowledge, learning as much as they teach.

The field of clinical ethics, which helps patients, families

Miller talks biomedical ethics at The Jackson Laboratory in Bar Harbor, Maine with high school students enrolled in the summer program funded by the National Science Foundation and National Institutes of Health.

Since 2007, Miller has been the clinical ethicist at Northern Light Eastern Maine Medical Center, where she collaborates with medical staff, and patients and their families. Her work includes serving on a panel for the hospital's bioethics grand rounds.

and clinicians address ethical issues that arise in health care, emerged in recent decades as medical decisions became more complex in an increasingly technological society. Those questions can range from when to stop aggressive medical intervention to whether expressed breast milk from a patient who uses medical marijuana should be given to her baby in the neonatal intensive care unit.

As a clinical ethicist, Miller provides training and consultation for physicians, nurses and other medical personnel. She also may be called on to consult with patients and their family members. Unlike urban areas where a city hospital may have a whole department devoted to clinical ethics, rural health care settings often struggle to find such philosophy-focused resources.

That's why Miller does what she does in Maine.

Miller focuses on "building clinical ethics capacity" in the state's rural health care settings. She provides training, connects hospital personnel to readings and resources, and facilitates opportunities to maintain ongoing exploration of critical issues.

"Clinical ethics consultation provides a safe space for medical professionals, patients and families to have honest conversations about what is the right thing to do — presenting the different options, each with different virtues and moral goods, often having to do with minimizing suffering or prolonging life," Miller says.

"I like to think of it as ethics mediation," she says. "We have good people who are trying to do the right thing, and they don't agree on what it is. The focus is on the process and not the 'right' answer. It involves listening to all and coming to an agreement that reflects participatory engagement, fairness and justice. The goal is to move forward with the next right thing for that patient."

The importance of the leadership in this field by Miller and the medical center is underscored in the 10-year longitudinal study — one of the few focused on rural health care — presented at the 14th International Conference on Clinical Ethics Consultation in England. Three findings in the Maine study are particularly revealing.

While physicians were the heaviest users in the early years, over time, nurses increasingly tapped into the clinical ethics services. The decade of data also shows there were more ethics consultations related to patients in their 50s and 60s — ages when people are "collecting chronic con-

It was standing room only for Miller's public talk on the ethics of genomics at Jesup Memorial Library in Bar Harbor this summer. Topics included the popular DNA ancestry test kits on the market.

On a warm September day, Miller's new one-credit philosophy course called Character, Career and Happiness took to the Mall. The course is designed to help first-year students and undeclared majors fully engage in the UMaine experience.

ditions" — than for those at the beginning or end of life.

And among the leading dilemmas faced by the clinical ethics team: locating and working with the appropriate decision-maker when a patient lacks decision-making capacity.

"Doing clinical ethics in a rural environment is different than in an urban environment, thanks to geography, resources and culture," says Miller. "It's important that the voices of rural bioethics are heard nationally."

MILLER SAYS she enjoys engaging with diverse groups — from UMaine students in class to high school interns in a summer program at The Jackson Laboratory in Bar Harbor, Maine to older community members attending her lecture on personal genomics at a local library. And medical professionals, and patients and their family members.

"What's most rewarding in all the work I do is bringing the discipline I love to people who won't spend their lives studying it," she says. "But they can be introduced to philosophical perspectives and tools, gain an appreciation for them and bring them into their lives."

This semester, Miller introduced a new one-credit philosophy course called Character, Career and Happiness, designed for first-year students and undeclared majors. Students inventoried their skills, challenges, virtues and interests, and explored how to match their skills with their definition of happiness, or a flourishing life. They read what Aristotle and John Stuart Mill had to say about happiness, as well as some contemporary positive psychology.

The goal by semester's end was to encourage the students to fully engage in the UMaine experience and "take ownership of a coherent academic plan that honors their strengths, accommodates their challenges, and fits with their values and aspirations."

The class was overenrolled with 27.

"I teach a lot of first-year students, and a lot of majors in other disciplines," she says. "That's why I have to meet them where they are. I can't say, 'here's this grand, important tradition.' I have to start with what is of concern to them in their lives, and show them that philosophers have interesting things to say about the human condition.

"I really want philosophy to come from students, not be imposed on them."

Miller says philosophy can enhance students' capacity to think critically, communicate clearly and solve complex

Miller and Dr. Jonathan Wood prepare to present their 10-year study — one of the few focused on rural health care — at the 14th International Conference on Clinical Ethics Consultation in Oxford, England this past June.

problems. Philosophy students can focus on cognitively demanding tasks, a vanishing skill in today's age of digital distractions.

"It drives me nuts when people say philosophy is a useless discipline. The data show that philosophy students are employed, and employed well.

"I am so proud of our UMaine philosophy alumni who became lawyers, Army sergeants, Peace Corps Volunteers, journalists, librarians, teachers, entrepreneurs and, yes, philosophy professors."

Philosophy provides tools for students, health care practitioners and members of the public to question their assumptions, and to critically assess information that's presented to them.

"In today's world, people are bombarded. It's an information fire hose filled with facts, 'alternative facts' and outright falsehoods. But philosophy can help with critical awareness of what is worth grabbing," Miller says.

"What I hope is that people will have a little more thoughtfulness about where their beliefs and values come from, and more understanding of those whose beliefs differ from our own." ■

> "The other possible reason for the decline is that **larval settlement has spread out across a larger range of depths,** effectively reducing settlement densities in the routine shallow-water monitoring locations."
>
> Richard Wahle

Cool refuge

Young lobsters seeking deeper depths

MAINE FISHERMEN hauled in 110.8 million pounds of lobsters in 2017 with a value of more than $400 million. While still incredibly large, this volume represented a 16 percent decline and $100 million loss compared to previous years of record-setting landings.

Since the late 1980s, Maine's lobster landings have multiplied sixfold, while the area of highest landings has shifted Down East to Hancock and Washington counties. The U.S. lobster fishery is now the nation's most valuable single-species fishery.

But last year's decline was the largest in more than 50 years, leading the industry and scientists to wonder whether the boom has come to an end.

The patterns are consistent with forecasts based on juvenile lobster population surveys founded and overseen by professor Richard Wahle in the University of Maine School of Marine Sciences.

In 1989 with support from Maine Sea Grant, Wahle initiated data collection for the American Lobster Settlement Index, a program that monitors the number of baby lobsters that "settle" to the sea floor every year. Counts are made at some 100 sites from Rhode Island to Atlantic Canada. While the monitoring is now conducted by participating marine resource agencies in the U.S. and Canada, Wahle's lab hosts the collective database, developing and testing the index as a forecasting tool.

There are two prevailing explanations for such little settlement, he says. One is that more larval lobsters are dying before they reach the settlement stage. The other is that they are spreading to new deepwater nursery grounds not covered by current monitoring efforts.

To understand settlement in deepwater out of reach of standard diver-based sampling, Wahle received funding from Maine Sea Grant in 2016 to expand the settlement survey to deeper water. His aim is to examine links between temperature gradients and lobster settlement, both depthwise and along the coast.

Working with research partners and lobstermen, preliminary data confirm that newly settled lobsters are as deep as 80 meters and in different settlement patterns east to west. Industry partner Ready Seafood has provided funding to continue deepwater settlement monitoring through 2019. ■