

CASE WESTERN RESERVE UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES
WESTERN RESERVE STUDIES SYMPOSIUM

BUILDING A MEDICAL COMMUNITY IN THE WESTERN RESERVE

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Allen Memorial Medical Library
Ford Auditorium

Approaching Health Care Issues through Drama

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In the late 1980's, Martin Kohn, from Northeastern Ohio Universities College of Medicine, joined with me in a successful grant application to the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) for an Institute for Humanities and Medicine. The first Institute went so well that NEH funded us for a second one. At the same time we created the Center for Literature, Medicine and the Health Care Professions, a collaborative project of Hiram and NEOUCOM, which has its home in a handsome Greek revival house on Hiram's campus. The Center's mission is, through literary works, to examine questions of human values in health care contexts—within clinical settings, medical and other health professional schools, and in liberal arts colleges.

Ever since the NEH Institutes, annually for the past ten years, a special interdisciplinary summer seminar at Hiram has brought together health care professionals with humanities scholars, creative writers and actors. Warren Reich, editor of the *Encyclopedia of Bioethics*, led the first five seminars on "Narrative Bioethics," with assistance from historians, hospital chaplains, literary scholars, and physicians. While we read philosophical papers and clinical articles, the base of the seminars was always literature. One year, for instance, we concentrated on the fiction of Flannery O'Connor, with her focus on physically and psychologically disabled characters.

Gradually we began to incorporate more and more drama into the seminar, because we kept learning from our experience that using theater in the classroom was one of the most effective and memorable ways of addressing health care issues. When we adopted a complex theme for the seminar, we found that a good play could embody and demonstrate the ambiguities and difficulties, bringing the issues into our consciousness more directly and powerfully than reading articles and stories alone. For example, when we focused on narratives and caregiving at the end of life, we had all seminar participants read *Death of a Salesman*; when we focused on chronic illness and the family, we read *The Glass Menagerie*, and when we examined how to care for the caregivers, we read *Long Day's Journey into Night*. Next summer, we plan a seminar on power in health care and are going to use Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* as our common dramatic base.

But we're not simply reading the plays. We're participating in them in several ways and learning vicariously what it's like to "be"—even for a few minutes—in someone else's perspective. We have been especially fortunate to have fine actors working with us for each of these summer seminars. The first two seminars drew on the talents of Kenn McLaughlin, who was education director at Great Lakes Theater Festival until he went to Houston last summer, and Jodi Maile, who teaches drama at Laurel School and who appears in many regional theater productions. This past summer, Daniel Hahn, who has replaced Kenn McLaughlin at Great Lakes Theater Festival, worked with Jodi on preparing O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night* for our seminar. Not only did they learn and perform several key scenes for us during the week, but they also got the seminar participants engaged in the acting and in interpreting various aspects of what was happening in the scenes. We all worked together on the play as an artistic case study.

A century ago, Ezra Pound told his writer colleagues to “Show, don’t tell,” in the conviction that the experienced demonstration means much more than an explanation. In that spirit, we have asked Jodi and Daniel to show you a sample of how they use drama with us in the summer seminars at Hiram.