

THE OWL OF MINERVA LANDED AMONGST US:
A REFLECTION ON THE LIFE AND WORK OF
JOHN J. McDERMOTT

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*When I am dead, I hope it may be said:
“His sins were scarlet, but his books were read.”*

–Hilaire Belloc

I

McDermott is now dead. For sure, his “books” were read, and will continue to be read. For me his “books” include not only his thoroughly original, soaring and inspiring essays, published separately and collected in volumes. They also include his many edited volumes of writings and correspondence by the greatest philosophers in the American tradition. But his enduring “books” must as well include all those books he instructed us to read and all that he bequeathed to us as a teacher. The meaning, impact and legacy of McDermott, the teacher, has passed from generation to generation, will continue to pass from one to the other, and may well outlast what he put down on paper.

What to make of the line, “His sins were scarlet,” in the Belloc quote above? Anyone who came to know McDermott beyond the

classroom understood that he was not perfect; hence, a typical human in moral terms. As with all of us, he had a past, his marked by the occasional pockmark. Like other persons of brilliance, his “sins” could be as shiny and public as was his inimitable persona and endless collection of singular achievements. He was, at the least and most, a balancing act, a lovely and forever intriguing balancing act. With McDermott in mind I conjure up D. H. Lawrence’s observation about Hamlet: “for the soliloquies of Hamlet are as deep as the soul of man can go ... and as sincere as the Holy Spirit in their essence.”¹ Lawrence was ambivalent about Hamlet, puzzling over how “a creeping, unclean thing” such as the flesh could, also, be “as sincere as the Holy Spirit.”² But this seemed to capture Hamlet’s view of humankind, and I think a large part of McDermott’s as well. Throughout his long life, his joyous partaking of the manifold experience of this world, the physical world, was forever matched, indeed exceeded every step of the way, by an infinitely generous and overwhelming spirit that aspired to the heavens and only death could harness.

Considering my rather pretentious title, we know Minerva was the Roman goddess of wisdom, usually associated with the wise owl. Hegel’s claim that the owl of Minerva does not fly until the evening shadows fall was a way of saying that wisdom and understanding in the course of human history comes only at a late stage, as we look back and appreciate what came before. Our collective history, the history of ideas and theories and art, is thus crucial to present understanding, which conversely can, also, be taken to imply that we cripple comprehension as we neglect or ignore the past. Here we must be quick to acknowledge the obvious: that McDermott did more than anyone ever during his professional life to resurrect and forcefully promote sorely neglected works of the greats in American culture and philosophy, rescuing them from the scrapheap of intellectual fashion and indifference while assuring their prominence in the life blood of philosophy and American intellectual culture. This monumental and singular achievement, along with his teaching, always his teaching, is what I have in mind by the image of the wise owl that, to our good fortune, landed

amongst us. And we should never forget that McDermott lived by a creed that is effectively conveyed in a line from John Dewey, “Wisdom is knowledge operating in the direction of powers to the better living of life.”³ But enough of the laudatory and perhaps highbrow, for I can hear McDermott barking in my ear, “Enough already, Hart, get on to the concrete, the specific and practical,” or what we might otherwise call the “experience” of the man in his wholeness.

To such end, what follows is not intended as a scholarly appreciation, but rather a very personal remembrance and expression of gratitude for a life-altering debt I could never, ever repay. It consists of four parts: my early encounters with McDermott; some general and pervasive themes from his work that have most impacted my development as a philosopher and teacher; a variety of practical, in-your-face pedagogical strategies and techniques I long ago stole from him; and, lastly, an attempt, foredoomed to incompleteness, to bring it all together in a brief summary. Essentially, my task is to try my best to detail what McDermott has meant to me and why.

II

My first actual encounter with McDermott, the real guy, was in September 1973, during my first year of doctoral study in philosophy at Stony Brook University. He was a visiting professor and was tapped to offer a proseminar in the teaching of philosophy. He had won the 1970 Harbison National Award for Gifted Teaching, and was quite legendary as a teacher at his home base, Queens College (CUNY). I had done some graduate student teaching at Ohio University before arriving at Stony Brook, and much enjoyed the experience. I signed up for McDermott’s course in hopes of honing the craft of teaching and, like the other enrollees, expecting it to be an easy A when compared with the other doctoral seminars. In my case, McDermott’s reputation preceded our initial meeting. At Ohio University I met and in 1972 married a young woman from Queens. A couple of her childhood friends, who remained home and

studied at Queens College, paid us occasional visits in Athens, Ohio. Since I was a philosophy student, they were keen to tell me about this incredible philosophy teacher of theirs at Queens whose legendary Aesthetics course was standing room only, and required signing up years in advance to gain a spot. They spoke about the marvel and transformative power of his teaching. Needless to say, I was eager to meet and witness McDermott in action.

The first class night he was not there. The graduate director appeared to tell us that McDermott was stuck at an airport somewhere in central Europe (perhaps Poland) and he did not know for sure when he would be back in the U.S. As I recall, he did appear the following week. Suddenly, through the door raced this small, bearded guy dressed in a dark suit and tie covered with chalk dust. He seemed to be in a sprint in a twenty-foot-wide space. A pipe hung from his mouth and the whole room suddenly smelled of tobacco smoke. He seemed to me a tightly wound bundle of nervous energy that could possibly explode at any moment. Though my experience in New York was at that point limited, I knew this guy had to be a classic New Yorker. As I best recall, he had just finished teaching a class at Queens, and had jumped into his car for the harried trip east in rush hour traffic out to Stony Brook. He lugged a large leather bag filled to overflowing with myriad papers and books, tobacco and alternative pipes, and perhaps even left-over lunch. Once he got sorted out, which involved emptying the bag of a stack of frayed books and file folders, he proceeded to lay out for us what this seminar was going to be all about. Suddenly, things got serious. Each of us was going to have to design syllabi for undergraduate courses at the beginning, intermediate and advanced levels, and have them critiqued by him and our classmates. Each of us would then have to stand before the group and deliver simulated lectures at each of the different levels, also to be critiqued in the same manner. Each would be expected to design an undergraduate major and minor program in philosophy. This had to, of course, also be defended before the group, and subjected to the same stinging critiques. Each of us had to articulate to the group our philosophy of education. McDermott especially wanted to know what our goals

and objectives were with each course or lecture, at each level. What were we trying to accomplish as philosophy teachers? There was a lot more, but I suspect the reader gets the idea. Far from an easy A—after all, it was just to be a soft course on teaching—it turned out to be arguably the most difficult, most demanding seminar I took at Stony Brook. But I did learn something lasting about how to conceive of philosophy and just what was involved in successfully teaching it. Another thing abundantly clear to me at semester's end was that once you become a student of McDermott you will be his student for life. That's just the way he wanted it. You had no choice in the matter.

Flash ahead about three-to-four years, and I had finished drafting a proposal for my dissertation research. It was an interdisciplinary project, marrying philosophy and literature, with the aim of doing a metaphysical investigation into the philosophical foundations of literary art. McDermott had agreed to serve on the committee, and soon the committee and doctoral program director gathered for my oral presentation of the proposal. The questioning was intense, but after an hour or two the project met with the approval of the committee and I was given the green light to proceed. In the hall, as the group broke up, I recall McDermott calling me over for a word. It went something like this, and I paraphrase: "Look here, Hart, this is a lovely proposal. I love interdisciplinary work and I love literature, but this is just too damned ambitious, too big. You'll never get this thing done. You'll be writing for years." I assured him I could handle it, and that this was a real passion for me. He finally said okay and wished me luck, but I knew he still had some real concern about my efficient path to the PhD. Indeed, it ended up taking eleven years in total before I would be awarded the doctorate. As fate would have it, in 1977 McDermott headed off to Texas (I still cannot fathom him in Texas), and in the pre-internet, pre-email days it seemed difficult for us to correspond regularly about drafts of the dissertation. He was, also, going to be extremely busy as Professor and Head of the Philosophy Department at Texas A&M University, and so we agreed he would withdraw from my committee. But it was both an ending and a beginning. From there

on he maintained a keen interest in my progress, offered counsel and helped arrange interviews for me at APA conventions. Whenever I saw him at meetings and conferences, he was encouraging and always wanted to know everything going on with my teaching and family and research. I recall one occasion when he was instrumental in getting me a serious interview with a well-regarded private college in Texas. He said he knew key people in the department and that it would be perfect for a guy like me who cared so much about teaching and interdisciplinary work. I had a good interview and was assured that I was one of the finalists, though I was not particularly desperate in that I then held an administrative job at a college on Long Island. A few days later I received a call from McDermott with a message something like (again I paraphrase), "So, listen Hart, the Dean won't budge. He says there's no way that an administrator in New York is going to accept the faculty salary we can pay. He'll never come, so let's not waste our time." McDermott could not talk him down, and so that was that.

Those days of dissertation writing and searching for faculty positions was a very long time ago. In the nearly forty years since, I've enjoyed numerous conversations and interactions with McDermott. From the beginning, I've loved his energy and feistiness and attitude. I've always adored the New Yorker in him, an ever-present affect that distinguished him from so many academics I've known. With McDermott, what you see is what you get. Imagine: a New York City streetwise guy from the neighborhood in suit and tie, cowboy hat and tall leather boots. Who would have thought? One of the great honors of my own career was co-organizing, with my friend, James Campbell, a conference at Southern Illinois University honoring McDermott's 70th birthday and 50 years of teaching. The papers on his work, stemming from the conference, later became a book that critically appraised the many dimensions of McDermott's philosophy and teaching. But aside from the professional McDermott, the mover and shaker, the incredibly loquacious guy with the original turns of phrase, often in Latin, I was blessed to know him as a deeply caring human being. One prime example comes to mind. Many years ago, he and I were

on a conference program at Oxford University. He attended my paper on John Steinbeck's personalism and afterward sat me down and told me privately and definitively what changes I needed to make in the paper. Thanks, John. Then later in the night, in his dorm room, I gulped down a couple of English beers and shared with him my considerable worry over our younger daughter's serious chronic illness. He wanted to know everything, every detail, and pledged to help in any way he could. Once back in the States, I received from him a flurry of phone calls and mailings with the names of doctors, possible medications and the best research facilities to tackle the problem. He put a lot of focus and time into my family's medical problems, and I will never forget his compassion and consoling words. That was vintage McDermott the man.

III

There are a few general and central themes from McDermott's life and work, his precious essays and professional lectures, but mostly from his teaching, that have had the greatest influence on me as a philosopher and teacher. They all revolve around how he conceived the nature of philosophy and philosophical activity, what it means to really and truly teach philosophy, and to have a full, well-rounded career of service in a college or university. I cannot here go into any of them in great detail. Instead I will just serially touch on them, with a brief explanation for each regarding the effect it had on me.

For McDermott philosophy is not, at its core, about abstract concepts and dry theories. It is not about sweeping generalizations or truth claims subjected to the surgery of logic. Philosophy is about the stories, about the narrative experience of life lived to its fullest. This focus is encapsulated so simply and elegantly in his oft-expressed phrase, "the nectar is in the journey." Philosophy for him is not about a final conclusion or deliverance into some supernatural realm of insight. It is about the experience of thoughtful living—the joys and pains, the successes and the struggles, the exuberance and the sorrows, of individuals alone and in community with others. As Dewey reminded us, philosophy seeks to develop powers for the

better living of life with others. Furthermore, the way that McDermott's aesthetics places experience at its core, enhanced by the work of Dewey, has exerted the strongest influence in shaping my own ideas about art and literature. For McDermott, locality and context are of prime importance, but must be seen as going hand in glove with the global, the bigger picture. It's no coincidence that the word "experience" appears in so many of McDermott's books and essays, as well as pieces written about him. My own career-long teaching and writing about philosophy and literature would likely never have come together absent the steady presence of McDermott whispering in my ear that it's "all about the experience."

Closely related, he taught, in his person, his writing, and his teaching, that one can be a New York City street-wise philosopher and yet enjoy more universal impact. For me, McDermott will always be a wise-cracking city intellectual, a guy with smarts hewn from authentic interaction with lots of different people from every walk of life and every neighborhood. He had a story for every occasion, and most of them seemed to come from his childhood and early adult years in New York. Yet his work in philosophy reached out to both local and more universal audiences and brought him acclaim from far and yon, in areas beyond American philosophy such as education, health and social welfare, the social sciences, and political thought. He travelled the world and addressed diverse audiences wherever he went. He was the very embodiment of multiculturalism well before we had the label. Mysterious though it may have been, there was something in his experience, his fiber, his connection with others that gave him a broad appeal. Can it be any coincidence that not long ago he was recognized as one of the fifty most influential philosophers in the world, an honor I've been told that was celebrated, of all places, at a Texas A&M football game. He may be the only philosopher in world history to have been lauded at such a sporting event, yet another testament to his attractiveness beyond the ivy-covered halls of academe.

Another lesson I learned from McDermott would help occasionally to settle my anxiety over the long shot of a career in philosophy. It seemed to me that virtually every graduate student in

philosophy yearned to be the next Kant or Wittgenstein. And they were convinced that the only way of getting there was through publication, the prime measure of philosophical quality. Being a small-town country boy, with no college in the family DNA, I was never confident that I could keep pace with my more urbane and well-read fellow students. Hegel was not within my sights as I reflected honestly on my nature and capacity. But as I gradually came to digest McDermott into my philosophical bloodstream, I realized that, for him, to be a respected and successful philosopher one need not necessarily be a prolific publisher and celebrated scholar. Such was nice if you could get it (a tiny percentage ever do), but it is not the sole requirement for legitimacy or measure of quality. The bona fide condition for McDermott was that to be a philosopher one must, first and foremost, like Socrates, be a teacher of philosophy. Moreover, you had better be a damned good one, someone deadly serious about the craft and forever wrestling with how to get even better. For him, this required unbridled commitment, an appetite for really hard work, and an unqualified passion for students and their growth and well-being. In other words, if you wanted to be in the philosophy racket with McDermott you had to have a genuine love for others—all others, since everyone was his student—whomever they may be, wherever they came from. Now that I am retired from a long, hopefully legitimate career in philosophy, I can look back and see how his lessons shaped my academic values, my attitudes, as well as my activities.

As we know, there are McDermott students everywhere, in every sort of educational setting, service organization, or philanthropic enterprise. Some are well known, some not so. Some are big fish in little ponds, some little fish in big ponds, and a few big fish in big ponds. But regardless of style or endeavor, they are all McDermott students. My own journey, in a nutshell, is a relatively modest one. The meanderings of my “career” took me through academic administration, large public universities, a business school, community colleges, and eventually to a thirty-year run at a small, private, liberal arts oriented, multicultural, and multiracial college in New Jersey. Throughout it all I was always, at

base, a teacher of philosophy. I have been an active and loyal participant in the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy since the mid-1970s. I am one of a small group of students of the late Justus Buchler who believes fervently in the original nature and importance of his philosophical method and system. Like the others, I have written and spoken on his work whenever possible. Early in my career, I enjoyed some success as an adult education administrator. Over the past twenty-five or so years I have mustered a small measure of recognition as one of a handful of philosophers to do serious work on the American writer, John Steinbeck. But if I am to be honest with myself, any claim I might make to a successful career in philosophy hangs almost entirely on my work as a philosophy teacher. There was to be no latter-day Kant for me, and I suppose somewhere along the line I made my peace with the reality of my own talents and shortcomings. However, throughout the many years, my ever-present and greatest source of pride grew out of my teaching. It's what has always brought me the highest level of satisfaction and pleasure. My point here is not to toot a self-referencing horn but to represent with gusto and celebration what McDermott taught me through word and deed: there is honor, dignity, and lasting importance in being an effective teacher of philosophy. Without engaged and engaging teaching, the discipline of philosophy essentially withers on the vine. And when any teacher thinks about the span of her classroom work over a career, it's surely the teaching that impacted the lives of thousands of people over generations. Our conference lectures, articles, and books, unless we are the extremely rare and lucky person, reach at best a small group of professionals, sometimes only the handful of scholars around the world who can make any sense out of what we say. Perhaps the way to see all this, from a McDermott angle, is to highlight just how convincingly he taught us that philosophy is at base a way of life, a practice, again with Socrates, originally rooted in and always returning to teaching. To be a philosopher is to be a forever inquiring, forever experiencing person whose greatest joy and struggle is to share the journey through pedagogy. But I can once again hear McDermott admonishing me to get down from the

pedestal and dig into the weeds, because that's where the action really is.

IV

To that end, I will dwell for a bit on some very practical and concrete tricks in teaching that, as I said earlier, I “appropriated” from McDermott a long, long time ago and have all these years since been figuring out how to make my own, in other words, how to make them work in my unique context. For thirty years I taught mostly first-generation minority students from the urban school systems of New Jersey and the greater New York metropolitan area. But over the course of forty plus years I have taught at community colleges, public and private schools, a business school, in adult education programs, and presently in a non-credit program for senior, mostly retired participants at Stony Brook University. I am reasonably well convinced that the McDermott style of teaching worked most of the time in such very diverse settings. To me, it always seemed McDermott had a near infinite bag of well-conceived, wrought-from-experience, pedagogical techniques and strategies that obviously worked for him most of the time and that, while hardly consonant with my own nature and personality, I could perhaps emulate to good effect. So, here are a few of them in brief.

I've always regarded McDermott as what I will call an “in your face” teacher. This is no doubt part of a New York City style gleaned from a lot of experience in a rough and tumble, hustle and breakneck urban environment. He was always about getting down and dirty, about loads of examples, about making connections, about engaging his students. No matter where they were in their education—freshman to doctoral students—he firmly believed that you must first connect with students in an authentic human way before you can ever teach them anything. Engagement is the first order of business and begins the very first minute of any course. For him it was about establishing a human bond that naturally evolved from trust and from the student, every student, somehow knowing that McDermott really cared about them. He put it plainly in a 2003

interview for *Pathways to Discovery*, the annual magazine of the College of Liberal Arts at Texas A&M, when he contended that all students are educable: “You have to have experiential ties (to your students) ... Once these commonalities are established, a mutual respect exists.”⁴ So, what are some of the features of being a respectful “in your face” teacher?

McDermott’s classroom was a vital and dynamic place. Crucial to establishing and maintaining that sort of ambience were such things as movement, modulation of the voice, and eye contact. He always roamed his classroom—marching, sometimes skipping or jumping in the aisle ways—always insisting in an unstated manner that the students follow his every movement. He would rush to the board and frantically write something that no one could read as his way of emphasizing the importance of a point or idea or argument. He would get so enthralled in the moment that he did not realize that chalk dust was all over his suit. But the key point is that it was virtually impossible to go to sleep in his class. The flow of ideas and the movement of his body were synchronous, dramatic, and forever captivating. His board work always stood out, for it was almost a gymnastic exercise, a modern dance of writing and erasing and running out of space, breaking the chalk in a flurry of activity, and reaching for that one last bit of space on the board to render his insight for the day. I learned from him to write a bunch of stuff on the board, especially to outline on the board what was going to happen in that class period and to use the board as a focal mode of emphasis. Quotations ran rampant on a McDermott blackboard. From what may have seemed a chaos of energy, McDermott was actually well-organized and disciplined. He knew exactly what he wanted to accomplish in every period. He began every class meeting by briefly summarizing the last, and ended by anticipating how the next period would build on the one just concluded. Though I rarely got as much chalk dust on my jacket, I learned the fine art of animation and board work, and always knew it was McDermott facilitating my own version of a dynamic classroom.

A big part of the “movement” in the McDermott classroom was “calling out students” and what I term “the hallway pursuit.” Part of

being “in your face” yet respectful was the practice of calling on (or out) students by name. This practice rested on the firm foundation of McDermott’s getting to know his students, to the maximum extent possible. He truly wanted to know each one of them, their backgrounds and interests, what made them tick. His curiosity about other humans was boundless. If you signed up for his course, he assumed that you were there for a reason, and that you were prepared to enter into a relationship with him and the course material. In his course you were going to work, but you knew he would likely outwork you. When you sat in his classroom, you had to be prepared for him to call on you at any moment. “What do you think of this idea? Does this make any sense to you? Would you share this idea or argument with a friend?” One had to be forever alert in McDermott’s classroom. He did not call on students to embarrass them if they were unprepared (well, maybe occasionally he did), but because he wanted to know what they thought. Students were never simply empty repositories to be filled up with knowledge by the teacher. They were living, experiencing young people who had ideas and concerns and things to share if only the artful, experienced teacher could draw it out of them. For McDermott, “calling on students” was just another way of not holding back, not being shy or intimidated. Every student had a story to tell and loads of examples from their life experience. The stories had to be taken seriously and given appropriate respect, no matter how inchoate the telling might seem. A key aspect of this approach was never to speak down to students, but always to challenge and elevate them. I never knew of McDermott watering down anything in philosophy when he spoke to students. He had no interest in making it easy. His challenge was always how to come up with explanations or formulations that the students could relate to, and thus to engage them. Philosophy need not be dry abstractions and technicalities, which assuredly would turn away all but philosophy majors. Philosophy was integral to life as lived. As to “the hallway pursuit,” as I phrase it, McDermott was known to chase a student down the hallway after class or during a break if he felt he needed to talk with them about something. I took to the practice and often confronted

students out of class if I thought there was something wrong in their lives or that they could do better on a test or paper. Like McDermott, I would present my questions or comments to them straightaway and try to build on their responses. This was yet another way of getting to know the students better, and putting oneself in position to reach the students and facilitate their learning. McDermott's students always knew that he cared about them, and that he was not going to go easy on them. But they also knew that if they stuck with him they were going to learn more about philosophy and life than they could ever have thought possible.

Earlier I cited two additional techniques: modulation of the voice and eye contact. For McDermott a monotonic voice from the teacher was not only boring and sleep-inducing, it was akin to malpractice. He would in the course of any class hour scream and whisper, slow it down to a crawl and speed up his words to a state of virtual incomprehension, toss in every manner of street expression and wisecrack and joke, and the whole brew, the gestalt, was typically exhilarating and at times exhausting. One often left McDermott's class feeling completely worked over intellectually and emotionally, yet invigorated and eager for the next go around. And a final key strategy, terribly important, was making eye contact. McDermott would at times approach a student at their seat and directly pose a question, with not much physical space between them. As he roamed the aisles he would look into each student's eyes and often call on them by name. It's one of the lessons I took to heart. During class presentations I always looked into each student's face as they spoke or I posed a question to them. When someone looks directly into your eyes, speaks directly to you rather than hiding behind a veil of expertise, you know that person is serious about you and the work you are doing together. So, eye contact, physical movement and voice modulation—a trifecta I consider essential to my self-understanding as a teacher and instrumental to any success I hopefully enjoyed in the classroom. In simple terms, in all this McDermott was my ever-present mentor and guide. Countless times, over more than forty years of teaching, I would catch myself in class, in the thick of the moment, suddenly

thinking about how McDermott would handle this very instant of experience.

For McDermott, philosophy was like a great drama played out in books, conference speeches, conversations in the hallways, and most powerfully in classroom discussions. Teaching was, thus, largely, though not exclusively, a performance art, forever a creative activity infused by critical reason and boundless imagination. Effective teaching involves preparation and discipline, but much of it must be spontaneous, impromptu as the always unpredictable flow of question and answer and discussion evolves in the classroom. For him, the philosophy teacher must always be good “on her feet,” must fully exist in the moment, shift gears on a dime, spontaneously conjure examples from art and literature and everyday life, and always be open to the vexing questions that may emerge from left field. This is the key to effective communication that McDermott modelled and taught, and that so few of us fully understand or, with grace and confidence, bring into practice. While it may no doubt seem odd, let me hazard a grand and general impression I got from him that tends to tie all the above together. I knew something of McDermott’s religious upbringing and formal education, but we all knew of his insistent rejection of the supernatural and the salvific impulse. Strangely enough, I always thought that for him the classroom was his sanctuary. I often said to my own students over the years that our work together in our classroom was nothing short of sacred and, therefore, inviolable. If there be such a thing as a secular religious or spiritual experience, I would like to believe that for McDermott, for me, and for perhaps numerous of his students, our work in the classroom is one of the prime places where we found it. This is the sort of phenomenon that cannot be explained or theorized; it can only be experienced.

V

McDermott used the word “pedagogy” all the time. For a long while I did not understand why. To me it seemed that pedagogy simply described specific strategies that one employed in the formal

classroom. But after all these years with McDermott, I now think I understand better. For him, the whole of his life—his writing, teaching, cajoling, loving, advising—all of it was simply varieties of pedagogy, variations on what for him was the inexhaustible theme of teaching. Experiments in pedagogy were his great project, his reason for getting up in the morning and going to work. He found endless joy in being a faithful teacher, in using philosophy as a way of forging connections with others and changing lives. Now that I am older and retired from full-time teaching, I think I have an even keener appreciation for all that McDermott was and is. His impact on every dimension of my life and those of countless others—impacts both personal and professional—are quite simply immeasurable, something I suspect he may never have fully realized. For him, he was just doing his job.

In the end, there are, of course, a number of ways of taking the measure of McDermott's life and work. His writing, editing, and speaking engagements collectively represent an unparalleled achievement. On this, we are all in his debt. His founding effort in the creation of the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy is a legacy that will endure forever. His friendship and mentoring helped shape the lives and careers of so many of us. As a scholar, teacher, and person, the world would have been seriously diminished had he never resided amongst us. But it's the bonds he forged with his students through teaching that will stand the test of time, alongside his many volumes of works by William James, John Dewey, and Josiah Royce, among others. Those bonds transcend any particular classroom, course, or university. At the beginning of this essay I mentioned a couple of guys from Queens College I met back in the 1970s who had been McDermott's students. They are Mike Frenkel and Howie Kaplan. Kaplan went on to a PhD in psychology and a career in the helping professions. Frenkel taught English in New York City public high schools for some forty years. In 2013, Frenkel attended a lecture McDermott gave at Queens and afterward posted the following message to his former students:

Just attended a lecture given by a now 80 year old philosophy professor whose Aesthetics course I took over 40 years ago, and realized as he spoke today that so much of what was important to me as a teacher (creativity, learning as process, the uniqueness/importance of each student) originated in his classroom. So, if I was your teacher, so was John McDermott. Celebrate a teacher.

On the wall of my study is a small poster from the March 2009 celebration at Texas A&M of the life and work of John J. McDermott. McDermott's head is bowed and his eyes concealed by the broad brim of his hat. But I know he is looking straight at me—every day, every moment—beseeching me to never forget the title of his celebration, “The nectar is in the journey.” This is the McDermott line I will take with me to my own grave. He lived the journey and tasted the nectar in all its exquisiteness and variety. For those of us who crossed his path in this life, we are the lucky ones who got to accompany him on the journey. In closing, I offer some favorite lines of verse that I believe capture at least some of who McDermott was and what he meant to us. Robert Louis Stevenson wrote,

Bright is the ring of words
 When the right man rings them
Fair the fall of songs
 When the singer sings them
Still they are caroled and said
 On wings they are carried
After the singer is dead
 And the maker buried.⁵

And then the closing lines of Tennyson's “Ulysses,” lines recited by Henry Fonda at the 1968 funeral of another American original, John Steinbeck, at St. James Episcopal Church in Manhattan:

Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho'
We are not now the strength which in old days

Moved earth and heaven; that which we are, we are;
 One equal temper of heroic hearts,
 Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
 To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.⁶

McDermott is still speaking to me. After my retirement, I left a message on his machine describing how I was flailing around, a bit lost, but taking it easy on myself after years of commuting to campus through New York City traffic. His spirited, return message was something like, “Okay, Hart, you’ve had your much-deserved break from the grind, but now you need to get off your ass and produce that Steinbeck book we’ve been waiting for.” The book may never happen, but his words, and the spirit behind them, will resonate in my ear until my final breath.

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NOTES

- ¹ As cited in Bloom, *Hamlet*, 9.
- ² Bloom, *Hamlet*, 9.
- ³ Dewey, *How We Think*, 52.
- ⁴ McDermott, "No End in Sight," 8.
- ⁵ Stevenson, "Bright," 1038.
- ⁶ Tennyson, "Ulysses," 118.