

## MCDERMOTT IN MEMORIAM

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If you were a serious student at Queens College in the 1960s or '70s, you probably took Philosophy 10 at some time in your academic career, regardless of your major. You almost certainly had heard of that course and the pressure of students seeking to squeeze into the classroom, even if they were unable to register for it. This was John McDermott's class on Aesthetics. It was a Queens College cultural event of the first order. Not only would all of the chairs have been occupied, but students could have been found seated on the floor in all the aisles and even a few sitting on the windowsills or standing by the door. As the class unfolded, the blackboard would increasingly take on the appearance of a Jackson Pollock painting: spirals among spirals, with lines darting in and out, and squiggles like fleeing electrons in a Feynman diagram, spurting out from who knows where, and for what reason. It was never clear what the relation was between the marks on the blackboard and the content of the presentation. But discussions of modern art were intermingled with comments drawn from Indian and Chinese philosophy, from numerous figures in the history of Western philosophy, or from observations from contemporary psychology, sociology, or sub-atomic physics. Reflections on Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle might flow into a discussion of Andy Warhol or Anton Webern and Igor Stravinsky. And never far

from the surface were moving, dramatic personal stories that brought abstract truths down to intimate affairs fraught with life-changing significance.

To experience Philosophy 10 was, in many ways, to be introduced to a self-contained college education that spanned the disciplines. And it was, as always with McDermott, an existential drama to be experienced and lived through as much as an intellectual excursion by which to be enlightened. Few left that class unchanged in their intellectual and personal self-understanding. I know that was true for me. My philosophical and personal life trajectory was fundamentally transformed by my encounter with John McDermott.

Many years later, when I organized a personalized celebration of McDermott's life and thought at CW Post College—in 2002, to be exact, celebrating his seventieth birthday and his fifty years of teaching—one of the most memorable moments was when John's oldest daughter, Marise, provided a dramatic reenactment of her father teaching that Queens College aesthetics class. Although there are not to my knowledge any videos of John teaching that class, fortunately, Marise's dramatization was captured on video and is still available to be viewed. I have a copy of that presentation, as part of the video of the entire conference, and do watch it from time to time, to keep me in touch with the excitement and philosophical vision that was therein presented.

While the experience of that class encapsulated the personal excitement, cultural dynamism, and stimulating philosophical vision that John McDermott both personally embodied and interpersonally and intellectually communicated, it offers but a snapshot both of the range of his intellectual vision and of his life-altering influence on the lives of innumerable students.

Speaking only for myself, I can honestly say that his influence was personal, intellectual, and transformative. To put it somewhat schematically, I was, over time, transformed from an emotional and intellectual Thomist, attracted to a static, quasi-absolutist conception of values and beliefs, to a processive pragmatist, focused on the theoretical and practical transformation of the concrete,

temporally unfolding personal worlds of individuals, societies, and cultures.

For years after my graduation from Queens College in 1961, through graduate school, and well into my professional teaching career, I would make regular pilgrimages back to visit John's classes, to be personally re-energized, intellectually stimulated, theoretically re-focused, and practically re-engaged in the ongoing tasks of cultural and political reconstruction. It is from these roots that emerged not only my philosophical work on Albert Camus and John Dewey, but my formulation of what I call 'Political Metaphysics' and its practical application both in creating several dialogic communities and, more consequentially, in the building of community-based progressive organizations, the most successful of which is the Long Island Progressive Coalition, founded in 1979 and continuing to grow even to the present day.

John understood, and never lost sight of the fact, that the meaning of each person's life was a unique, temporally unfolding, finite affair. Each person's journey, though pervasively social, was yet uniquely personal. And that, in the most profound way, Martin Buber had expressed life's most fundamental existential truth, that our fulfillment is to be found in the intimate relations of I and Thou. John's shared personal stories often dramatized such uniquely meaningful encounters, as did his openness and concern for his students. He never forgot that each of us was on our own personal journey, and while there was no salvific fulfillment awaiting us at the end, "the nectar was in the journey."

But none of our journeys are pure nectar, and certainly McDermott's was not. His lifelong battle with alcohol, for example, exacerbated by his emotionally shattering narrow defeat for the presidency of the APA, almost brought his life to an early and tragic end. Only the dedicated intervention of committed friends, particularly Gene Fontinelle, forced his hospitalization. And only then did his dedicated lifetime involvement with AA, and the unfailing support of his wife Patricia, sustained him from then on. As he mentioned to me, he could only take long trips if accompanied by Patricia. And wherever he went, he would seek out and attend

meetings of the local AA chapter. I will never forget, while visiting John at Texas A&M, joining him on one of his regular meetings of the local chapter. It was clear that these were serious engagements at which his friends and co-addicts were providing mutual support as they struggled on a common journey.

I am sure that such personal struggles enriched John's appreciation for, and sensitivity to, the richness and complexity of each person's journey through life. And it vitalized his growing involvement with the medical profession, focusing on the existential concerns that far too often were left unattended by the scientific professionalization and bureaucratic institutionalization of medical treatment. He often spoke of the insight and compassion brought to the medical profession by "wounded healers." But such an approach often met incomprehension, if not downright resistance, from medical professionals. I can attest to that from my experience of the reception he received upon the occasion of giving the lecture that celebrated the opening of the medical school at Hofstra University.

This effort to humanize the medical profession was but an example of the way that John sought to break down institutional barriers that impeded the human being's capacity to develop to the fullness of life's potential. His very presence at Texas A&M always seemed to me a living anachronism that, by his perseverance, openness, vision, insight, and compassion, he transformed into a remarkable adventure for himself, his students and colleagues, and for the university. That sense of anachronism of a born and bred New Yorker at home in the heart of rural Texas was encapsulated for me upon my first visit to A&M. John insisted that I join him in attending the students' traditional pre-football game nighttime bonfire. Then my wife and I joined John and Patricia at the Texas A&M football game the following day. There we were, in 90-plus degree weather, with John in his black suit, tie, and black hat, pipe in hand, and Patricia in her beautiful pink dress, all of us being well-baked by the noonday sun—but completely involved in the game, sharing the excitement of the students' celebration of the Twelfth Man ritual, and he did not feel the least out of place.

When I reflect now on his death, I feel a deep sense of profound loss. Of an irreplaceable presence whose departure leaves a gaping absence. So many who have encountered him know what he has meant to them personally and intellectually. Still others have benefited from his unflagging commitment to the rebirth and revitalization of American philosophy. He labored long and hard to re-present the works of William James, Josiah Royce, and John Dewey, to mention only the most obvious. He also engaged in pioneering work, playing a leading role in bringing the educational theory and practice of Maria Montessori to American education. Beyond that, he has spoken and written in uniquely insightful ways on the American experience, its uniqueness, and its relation to other cultures. And he endeavored to create institutions that would carry this work forward, not the least of which is the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy. But for me, however important were and remain his original personal essays, his scholarly research, his educational innovations, and his institutional constructions—and they are all significant—it was his personal engagement as a teacher and mentor to myself, and to so many others, that truly marked him as a unique and irreplaceable human being. My personal debt to him is incalculable. I miss him already.