

THE McDERMOTT WALK

John M. Kainer
The University of Texas at San Antonio
john.kainer@utsa.edu

For the past forty-one years, Texas A&M students who wandered across the beautifully landscaped and tree-studded campus passed a short man seated on a bench, clad in a fedora, puffing profusely on his pipe. John J. McDermott died this past fall, leaving a void in Aggieland that no single person could ever fill. Yet even in this great sadness, McDermott managed to teach us something about ourselves and left us a gift whose significance which will take time to be fully understood and appreciated—the “McDermott Walk.” This paper is about my dear friend and teacher, the life-changing assignment he gave me, and the remarkable difference he has made and continues to make in my life and the lives of my students.

I was a doctoral student in the Sociology Department at Texas A&M from August of 2012 to May of 2017. Halfway through my training, my friends and mentors recommended I take a class with the famous philosophy professor, John J. McDermott. I enrolled in his American Philosophy class in the spring of 2015, and over the course of the semester, proceeded to be more confused, confounded, understood, and cared about than at any prior point in my education. The following semester, I and several of my friends signed up for his class on the philosophy of John Dewey. McDermott and I were talking after class, and I told him that my studies had brought me to

the brink of an existential crises and I didn't know if I could keep going, if I should give up, and what difference either decision made in the grand scheme of things. He recommended that I take a "McDermott Walk" and that such a walk would entail leaving my phone at home and wandering someplace for an hour alone with my thoughts. I thought this sounded naïve and it showed on my face, but McDermott was undeterred, and he told me that my thoughts should center on two questions. The first question was, how are you doing? The second was, what, if anything, could I do to make it better?

I was, to put in bluntly, less than pleased with this existential assignment. I had always spent a lot of time in my head examining my thoughts and my feelings, so I saw little reason to dedicate time to doing it while walking and, perhaps more important to me at the time, I felt like naming a walk after oneself was pretentious. Still, my teacher told me to do it, and I was nothing if not a dedicated student, so I went for my walk as I was told. I cannot recall clearly the thoughts which arose from the questions that I had on that first walk, but I recall the end result of that walk: hope.

I wanted to run to McDermott and thank him for his advice and for his assignment, but I didn't. I could not face him and admit that I had thought he was clueless and naïve prior to my walk and, to my lasting horror, I had found the shoe was on the other foot. Several weeks later, I was walking him to his car after class. We made our way from bench to bench with McDermott smoking like a chimney and me carrying his worn leather bag. He asked me if I did the walk; I told him that I did. He asked if I got any answers to my questions; I told him that I had. He didn't press me or gloat that he was right, but something tells me that he could see it in my eyes that he had helped, and that was enough for him. He told me that he had taken those walks often and they had really helped him over the years, and that was it. It was but another example of how McDermott genuinely cared what happened to me, what happened to every student who walked through his classroom door. It was an ethos I would never forget and, after graduating and landing a teaching position at The

University of Texas at San Antonio, it was an ethos that I was given a chance to practice and preach.

McDermott read widely and found as many insights in philosophy as he did in literature, art, and everyday experiences. Among the treasured insights he shared was his echo of Plato, “philosophy is *therapeia*”—a healing. I had always thought it strange that the PhD conferred the title of “doctor,” but my experiences have proved such a title to be insightful rather than misplaced. Augustine famously noted that the church is like a hospital for sinners, but what of the classroom? The classroom, McDermott noted, was a place where the wounded put on a brave face and where teachers had more in common with battlefield nurses than generals—it is little wonder that he made such a contribution in the philosophy of medicine.

The metaphor of the battlefield nurse is appropriate, for teachers are a part of many battles in the lives of their students, but we are also needed when the battle is over and the wounded need to be tended. McDermott cared for us, his students, and he cared about doing things the right way and helping us even when it was difficult and personally costly to him. There were many success stories about students he helped and who were grateful for the kindness and patience he showed them. McDermott received multiple emails and letters every week from former students who wanted to touch base with him and to thank him for a kindness he bestowed on them in times of need. On one occasion, I was with him when he read a letter from a student at Queens College. Her father had died right before finals week and she was in no condition to take final exams. As a token of good will, McDermott excused her from her remaining work and gave her the grade she had earned up until that point in the semester. Decades later, she wrote to him thanking him for his exceptional kindness and understanding in an impossibly difficult and confusing time in her life and, noting proudly, she had finished reading the books he had recommended all the students read. I was touched by the letter and confused by the reading list comment. McDermott then shared that his reading list was meant for a lifetime,

not a semester, and I understood that my teacher taught us for a semester and hoped to help us the rest of our lives.

Equally brilliant and insightful, McDermott awakened Heraclitus' dictum, "to know thyself," in every student who listened to him lecture—which was also to listen to him tell stories. It was McDermott's stories that taught me, and tens of thousands of students just like me, that philosophy was more than rhetoric, logic, and concepts—it was a way of being. But being is more than just existence, it requires a person be awake. McDermott's gift as an educator was that he knew we were aesthetically and spiritually asleep, that we were not aware of this, and that he would never ask us to face up to this on our own. I use the phrase "spiritually asleep" not to denote a condition without religion, but rather, a state of being where the deepest part of the soul lies dormant before the towering expectations of external circumstance. In such a state, one's being is infected with an abominable loneliness and hopelessness. This state McDermott knew all too well, and he explored it in his essay, "A Jamesian Personscape: The Fringe as Messaging to the Sick Soul." When one surveys the breadth of McDermott's work on the American experience, one notes that the surprising thing is not that some people are miserable and depressed, but that everyone is not miserable and depressed. Still, such an analysis has proved deeply insightful about the American experience, not just because it raises important questions about our history but because it recognizes how widespread suffering—whether physical, emotional, spiritual, relational, etc.—is in the American story and the many attempts by people high and low to alleviate it. In short, McDermott's work reminds us that we do not suffer alone, if only we care to reflect on our heritage and tradition.

McDermott, echoing Dewey, taught us that humans are born with a desire to understand, but it takes some preparation to check in oneself as well as one's "self." Reflection may be native and constant, as Dewey cautioned us, but it can also be uncomfortable, confusing, and disorienting—like being shackled in Plato's cave. McDermott offered an existential take on the aforementioned allegory, noting life was but a series of caves where each escape was

foiled by the temptation and resignation to walk into another. Not everyone agreed, of course, but the more we thought about it and talked about it, the more troubling the lesson became. After all, who among us has not returned to a bad habit or poor coping strategy precisely at the moment we most need to inculcate new habits? Perhaps because of such struggles, McDermott emphasized the importance of relationships, hope, and service as core tenants of his pedagogy. He emphasized the importance of teachers getting to know their students and, more importantly, he emphasized that great teachers know themselves.

When I graduated with my PhD in sociology in August of 2017, I felt I knew a great deal about myself and my teaching philosophy. I had attended McDermott's philosophical pedagogy class twice, I had three years of teaching experience, and I was named one of Texas A&M's Outstanding Graduate Students for Excellence in Teaching. When I started my new job at UTSA, I missed meeting with my grad school friends, I missed meeting with my faculty mentors, and I missed feeling like part of a community. As a new faculty member, I had occasion to talk to students from all walks of life who were experiencing existential hardship brought on by living lives their parents, relatives, teachers, and coaches had wanted for them. The students would recount their troubles to me, and in my mind, I would hear McDermott telling us, "The most perilous threat to human life is second-handedness."

In an effort to help my students live a life on their own terms, I instituted the assignment that my teacher, mentor, and friend had given me three years prior. I knew the McDermott Walk required a student to be willing to listen to their inner voice, a voice they have usually stopped listening to by the time they get in the college classroom, and I was worried that the assignment would be a failure. My students did struggle with this, but I explained that the inner voice speaks when the mind stops churning, which requires students to be free of the distractions of technology, including their cell phones. This inner voice speaks in a different tone, it uses short sentences, and its messages are never ambiguous. It is similar in many ways to one's conscience, but conscience mandates what one

should do and should not do. Some students are skeptical about the existence of the inner voice; they think that I am crazy and the assignment is a trick. Furthermore, some find all talk of deeper longings and spiritual needs to be devoid of meaning and “too religious.” But an hour alone with one’s inner voice is an eternity when one has not been keeping tabs on their inner life, and the realizations struck are decisive. The inner voice speaks of the deepest needs of an individual; it whispers of “*sehnsucht*,” of a longing impossible to satisfy within one’s immediate experiences.

Since I am intent on students discovering this longing, I send them out on their walks with explicit instructions to ask themselves how they are doing and to not answer reflexively. I tell them that the papers of previous McDermott Walkers are filled with self-loathing, despair, loneliness, and the smoldering embers of hope. I tell them the most important part of the walk is to make a promise *before* one sets out that one will be honest with oneself. Students know that keeping one’s promises is important, but they are surprised when I note that they break promises to themselves each and every day. They say, “I will study for two hours today,” and then they study for five hours. They say, “I will only watch one episode of TV and then go exercise,” and they watch a whole season. In each case, they have taught themselves that they cannot trust themselves. Thus, another part of the walk is to develop the habit of keeping one’s promises, both to oneself, and then to others.

More often than not, students include their skepticisms as asides in their papers, noting with astonishment, that so much could be going on inside of them that they had so little knowledge of. This is usually manifest in the most common realization, “I’m not okay.” The reasons for this realization vary widely, but a common theme runs through many of them and that is the hopelessness and pointlessness they feel in the face of their suffering.

Confronted by their suffering, existential angst sets in and the student struggles to make sense of their world. It is at this decisive moment when the pulse of the McDermott Walk—the desire to understand—roars to life like a pile of dead leaves ignited by a lightning strike. The questions come pouring out:

“Who am I?”
“What do I want?”
“What do I believe?”
“Does my life even matter?”
“Will I ever be happy?”
“Why him?”
“Why her?”
“Why me???”

An eighteen-year-old male student writes that he seeks a PhD in aerospace engineering to one-up his father, who has a PhD in mechanical engineering and whose approval he longs for daily but never receives. An eighteen-year-old female student records her resentment towards her special needs sister who has viciously beaten her during her autistic episodes, and her shame that she cannot be more understanding and loving towards her sister. A seventeen-year-old male student writes about the guilt he feels that he is attending a university when his older sister, who is a much better student than him, was denied the opportunity to attend college because his family didn't think it was important for her to do so. An eighteen-year-old female student opens up about being physically assaulted for years by her stepfather and how her mother has recently started physically assaulting her as well. A twenty-five-year-old male student talks about being in and out of jail from the time he was seventeen and his sense of accomplishment at cleaning up his life and finally being able to enlist in the military.

To read a student's McDermott Walk is to stumble into their “cave,” to shackle oneself next to them on the floor, and to see the shadows on the inside of their cave as they do. It is to feel their helplessness, their hatred, their fear, their anger, their love, their rejection, their disappointment, and their hope. It is a humbling, painful, and often messy assignment, but the students, having faced themselves beyond the veil of illusion, walk away pleased with the assignment even when the discoveries are painful. They talk of taking more walks like this one and sharing the assignment with

their families and friends whose mental and spiritual health they are concerned about.

Perhaps most encouraging of all, they learn to validate the suffering of others as well as their own suffering. Such changes are not merely intellectual, they are more noble, harkening back to the Jewish concept of “*teshuvah*”—to a turn of the heart. The language of conversion falls short here, for the students find both a new version of themselves as well as new eyes through which to see themselves. It is impossible to say which precedes the other, as the walk facilitates an interpenetrating dialogue between the self as it is and the self as it longs to be.

But it is this sense of longing, described earlier as “*sehnsucht*,” which students find most shocking about the whole assignment, since what they find they long for is rarely what they have been pursuing. It is this problem of the incompatibility between what they really need and what they have thought they have been needing which requires the greatest care. I spend close to thirty minutes writing comments for each paper, tailoring my message to specific problems discussed by the student and often recommending counseling services. After the grading is done, I tell them as a class that I worry about them, that their problems are important, and that they will forever be my students even after they finish my class and graduate. This final validation officially ends the McDermott Walk assignment, but all endings are also beginnings—as McDermott reminded me so many times.

For weeks after, students come pouring into office hours wanting to know if I read their paper or if it was my teaching assistant who graded it. They sit, searching my body language and tone for signs of disapproval, wondering if they have forever shattered my view of them with what they have shared. It is in these vulnerable moments that my discussions with McDermott come rushing back to me. Their problems are different. Their strengths are different. Their hopes are different. So, I do for them what McDermott did for me so many times—I listen. It’s not much, but McDermott taught me that small things are often enough when done with the right disposition. He taught me this every time he listened

to me complain about my dissertation, every time he told me about his time teaching in New York City, every time he was excited for me when something went well in my class. He was the greatest of teachers and I was proud to be his student.

McDermott was a philosophical giant with a servant's heart, and I know that he is proud of all of his students every time we teach a person to live by living the life we teach. The McDermott Walk assignment is part of my journey of philosophizing, my mode of being in the world. I offer it to my students not for the mere promise of points but for the possibility of understanding and healing. It is an invitation to enter into an "I" and "thou" relationship with all the parts of your person and, in doing so, to join the community of McDermott Walkers that stretches over the decades in an unbroken continuity back to McDermott himself. There is a mystery or drama that is native to possibility and which raises one final question. Where will you walk with McDermott and me?

BIBLIOGRAPHY

McDermott, John J. "A Jamesean Personscape: The Fringe as Messaging to the 'Sick Soul'" *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 39 (Summer/Autumn 2011).

NOTES

A version of this paper was read at McDermott's graveside funeral.