

Summing Up McDermott — A Modest Attempt

Richard E. Hart

Anyone who has read or studied with McDermott knows he used the word “pedagogy” all the time. For a long while I did not quite understand why. To me it seemed that pedagogy simply described various specific strategies and techniques 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 in the broadest sense. Experiments in pedagogy were one of his great projects—largely his motivation for getting up in the morning and heading off to the classroom. 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, regarding pedagogy and beyond. 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 efforts in the creation of the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy and the pluralist movement within the American Philosophical Association is a legacy that will endure forever, affecting the lives and careers of newer generations of American philosophers who never knew him. His encouragement, friendship and mentoring helped shape the lives and careers of so many of us who did know him. As a scholar, teacher and person, the world would have been seriously diminished had he never resided and labored amongst us. But it’s the bonds he forged with his students through teaching that, to my mind, will stand the test of time, alongside his many volumes of works by William James, John Dewey and Josiah Royce among others. Those bonds and collected works transcend any particular classroom, course or university.

I have often spoken of a couple of guys I met back in the early 1970s who had been McDermott’s students at Queens College. They are Mike Frenkel and Howie Kaplan. Kaplan went on to a Ph.D. in psychology and a career in the helping professions. Frenkel taught

English in New York City public high schools for some 40 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.”

On the wall of my study at home 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 take with me forever. 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 familiar 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 carolled and said
On wings they are carried
After the singer is dead
And the maker buried.”

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

“Though much is taken, much abides; and though
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.”

McDermott is still speaking to me—rousing me, encouraging me. After my retirement, I left a message on his machine describing how I was sort of flailing around, a bit lost, but taking it easy on myself after 30 years of commuting to campus from Long Island to New Jersey through New York City traffic. His spirited, return message was something like, “Okay, Hart, you’ve had your much-deserved break from that ridiculous grind, but now you need to get off your ass and get back to work on your guy, Steinbeck.” Whatever becomes of that work, John’s words, and the loving spirit behind them, will resonate in my ear until my final breath. May you dwell forever among the greats, McD, and thank you.