

IN MEMORIAM: JOHN JOSEPH McDERMOTT, 1932-2018

McDermott: A Life in Philosophy

John J. McDermott was born on 5 January 1932 in Richmond Hill, Queens, New York City, and died on 30 September 2018 in College Station, Texas.

McDermott received his undergraduate education at St. Francis College in Brooklyn, graduating *cum laude* in philosophy in January 1953. His graduate study in philosophy was at Fordham University in the Bronx, from which he received his M.A. in June 1954 and his Ph.D. “with Great Distinction” in January 1959. His dissertation —“Experience Is Pedagogical: The Genesis and Essence of the American Nineteenth Century Notion of Experience”—was completed under the guidance of his Doktorvater, Robert Channon Pollock. In 1964-65, McDermott held a post-doctoral fellowship in American Studies at the Union Theological Graduate School.

McDermott’s teaching experience in higher education began in 1954 at St. Francis College. In 1956 he joined the philosophy faculty of Queens College, CUNY, where he taught until June 1977. Later that year, he moved to Texas A&M University, where he was still teaching at his death. At TAMU, McDermott was University Distinguished Professor of Philosophy and Humanities in Medicine, Regents Professor, and Presidential Professor of Teaching Excellence. Throughout his career he also served on numerous departmental, college, and university committees. He received an E. Harris Harbison National Award for Gifted Teaching from the Danforth Foundation in 1969; and an LL.D., *honoris causa*, from the University of Hartford in 1970. He held additional teaching positions at: Fordham University, Manhattanville College, the University of San Francisco, Russell Sage College, and Stony Brook University.

McDermott also worked closely with such academic associations as the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy, of which he was a co-founder, the American Montessori Society, the American Council of Learned Societies, the National Humanities Faculty, and the American Philosophical Association.

McDermott’s major publications were: *The Writings of William James: A Comprehensive Edition* (1967); *The Basic Writings of Josiah Royce*, two volumes

(1969); *The Philosophy of John Dewey*, two volumes (1973); *The Culture of Experience: Philosophical Essays in the American Grain* (1976); *A Cultural Introduction to Philosophy: Volume One - From Antiquity to Descartes* (1985); *Streams of Experience: Reflections on the History and Philosophy of American Culture* (1987); and *The Drama of Possibility: Experience as Philosophy of Culture*, ed. Douglas R. Anderson (2007). Two further volumes were planned but never completed: *A Cultural Introduction to Philosophy: Volume Two - From Descartes to the Twentieth Century*, and *A Cultural Introduction to American Philosophy*. McDermott was a co-founder and advisory editor of the nineteen volume edition of *THE WORKS OF WILLIAM JAMES* (1975-88); and the general editor of *The Correspondence of William James*, twelve volumes (1992-2004). A volume of essays exploring McDermott's ideas and importance appeared in 2006: *Experience as Philosophy: On the Work of John J. McDermott* (ed. James Campbell and Richard E. Hart). This volume also contains a complete bibliography of his writings up to that point.

Those are the cold facts of the career of John McDermott; but they tell us little of his presence, his personality, his soul. This vital information was gained most easily via his direct pedagogy—in his classrooms for the truly blessed, in occasional lecture halls for the less fortunate. Most people who have become familiar with his message have done so indirectly, although still very profitably, through his work as a prolific and wide-ranging writer. Those who will learn of his work in the future similarly must do so through his written work.

In any number of places McDermott articulated aspects of his philosophical vision for us; but I would suggest beginning with his 2006 essay “You Are Really Able” (in *Experience as Philosophy*). This essay was his response to a conference at which nine of his colleagues and students offered papers on aspects of his thought. In this essay, in addition to his direct response to those papers, McDermott lays out in careful detail four “working philosophical assumptions.” The first of these is his recognition that our existence does not come with “a canopy of ultimate explanation or . . . of ultimate intelligibility.” Rather, we must make our own meanings. “A canopy of transient explanation has to be built by each of us,” he writes, “in concert with others.” He sees this work of making and remaking our canopy as ultimately “liberating,” in large part

because it forces every individual, including himself, to “take full responsibility for what I think, what I say, and what I do.”

McDermott’s second assumption is that our existence does not represent an exile from a prior paradisaical state or a fall from prior grace: we are ultimately just as we find ourselves here and now. As he writes, “we do not belong and as such are ontologically disconnected.” That is, we represent “an androcentric intrusion on a cosmic ecosystem” that does not share “our aspirations.” What we must do in response to our situation is to try to make connections, realizing full well that no permanent resolution to our situation will ever be possible. “Being in the world is to forge, suture, loop, tie, fold, embrace,” by means of which we work to coordinate the inchoate products “that emerge from whatever we think, do, or hope.”

Third, McDermott follows the insights of William James, John Dewey, Alfred North Whitehead, and Robert Pollock, to work for “a shift in the major metaphor for philosophical inquiry, from substance to process.” As processive beings in a processive web of realities, “we have no fixed place, no fixed self, and no Archimedean point” from which to survey “an external world.” Hence we must remain “alert to every nuance in the flow” and keep ourselves “ever transforming as well.

McDermott’s fourth working philosophical assumption is that we should not fall into the trap of believing “that philosophical inquiry is exclusively a function of the mind.” Avoidance of this mentalizing trap requires that our philosophizing turn away from “the domination of the a priori,” from the general blanketing of the here and now by traditional “categorical schema and inherited assumptions” that incline us to read our experience “in terms, under labels and brackets hatched elsewhere, beyond our experiential province.” Instead, we must provide our own grounds for meaning and action, to triumph over cynicism through imagination, and to recognize that, as he often wrote, “the nectar is in the journey.”

Elsewhere in this essay, McDermott points to “two major lodestones” of his career. “The first is the sacred calling of pedagogy, namely, I am a teacher.” For an individual like him, and for us when we can achieve it, “pedagogy is a delicate, profound, and mysterious form of reaching, of helping, even though most often it is unsung.” The second lodestone to which he points is that “I carry on within the

exhilarating, frustrating, and deeply pockmarked cultural context, known to me as America,” within which he saw himself as an “urban, proletarian ethnic.” In part, this placement impelled McDermott to locate his efforts within the tradition of American Philosophy, drawing especially on the work of William James, Josiah Royce, and John Dewey. This placement also impelled him to advance philosophical themes and questions that are prominent within our contemporary American situation. Among these are: the nature and importance of American culture, our understanding of embodiment and death, our natural and social environment, the trans-generational aspects of a naturalized religion, and the ever-present need for aesthetic renewal. For McDermott, to mention just one more theme, the goal of ethics “is to enhance experiential nutrition and to avoid ways of life whose outcome is the systemic spreading of inanition.” His pedagogy aimed to help us recognize that for advancing all of these tasks, all of us are really able.

James Campbell

McDermott: A Personally Transforming Encounter

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 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 between the marks on the blackboard and the content of the presentation was. But discussions of modern art were intermingled with comments drawn from Indian and Chinese philosophy, with reflections on Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle flowing into a discussion of Andy Warhol or 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, by itself, 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 that was true for me. My philosophical and personal life trajectory was fundamentally transformed by my encounter with John McDermott.

Many years later, on the occasion of my organizing a personalized celebration of McDermott's life and thought at CW Post College—in 2002, to be exact, celebrating his 70th birthday and his 50 years of teaching—one of the most memorable moments was when John's oldest daughter, Marise, provided a dramatic re-enactment 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.

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, into 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 on-going 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 socially, 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. 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."

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 benefitted from his unflagging commitment to the re-birth and re-vitalization of American Philosophy, among numerous other initiatives. 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.

David Sprintzen

McDermott as a Colleague

Although I took one class with John McDermott at SUNY Stony Brook, I write as a colleague who came through the ranks under his mentorship at Texas A&M from 1980 to 1997, when I left College Station to assume the Joyce and Edward E. Brewer Chair in Applied Ethics at Purdue University. I came to Texas A&M during the transition from McDermott's term as the Head of the Department of Philosophy and Humanities to the leadership of Professor Hugh McCann. It was a heady time in Central Texas, and especially in philosophy. Texas A&M was itself undergoing rapid growth in both the size of its student population and in the research output of its faculty. The 1980s, in particular, was a time when a faculty member in any randomly chosen department (aside from A&M's agricultural programs, which had long attained excellence) might have presumed that his or her colleagues were performing at a level far above that of the general reputation of the university as a whole. It was not until the 1990s that we looked around and began to recognize that everyone (well, almost everyone) was doing scholarship that would not have been imagined or expected from Texas A&M faculty in the 1970s.

McDermott was very much a part of this transition, and it would be difficult to overstate his influence on the general academic climate at Texas A&M. He had come in response to a national search for a new Head for the Department of Philosophy, and had emerged, I was told, as a candidate with far more robust scholarly credentials than was typical for the mid-'70s. By the time I arrived in 1980, he had achieved something of an aura throughout A&M's College of Liberal Arts for the enthusiasm, drama and verve that he brought to all aspects of his professional life. McDermott presented himself first and foremost as a teacher of undergraduates, a man whose pedagogy was summed up by the E.M Forster aphorism "only connect." At an institution that had always been shaped by the nearly rabid enthusiasm of its former students (we were not allowed to call them alumni, let alone "former" Aggies), McDermott had in four short years established a reputation of one who would *insist* upon reaching even the most recalcitrant, laconic and disinterested undergraduates, shaking their foundations and bringing them to consciousness of a larger world. The Aggies loved him for that, and

faculty throughout the university loved him for communicating that this was what a university professor was supposed to be.

Through means to which I am not privy, McDermott facilitated the creation of a Faculty Senate at Texas A&M and served as its first Speaker. He represented the ideals of democracy within the university to an administration (seemingly, the entire State of Texas) where big men (the gendered term is used advisedly) were used to having their way. It was also a time during which McDermott was at the peak of productivity in his own scholarship, and with reputation-making and field-defining anthologies of James, Dewey and Royce already behind him. At a university where one might have expected STEM faculty to take a jaundiced view of the humanities, McDermott soared. All the disciplines carried him on their shoulders as the very model of what they personally and the university in general were aspiring to accomplish.

At the departmental level, McDermott worked from the pose of a co-conspirator. Faculty meetings and departmental events took on the aura of a clandestine rendezvous where thieves and scoundrels plotted with revolutionaries and soldiers of fortune at advancing their respective causes within a hostile environment. McDermott would speak in hushed tones as he would say sooths projecting our successes and bolstering us for the trials ahead. He was, to put it more prosaically, for you and for promoting whatever you thought philosophy might be. He was against every machine, from the university administration to the American Philosophical Association that might stand in the way of this pursuit. He did this (somewhat amazingly) without compromising the sense that what you did would have to be excellent in order for you to achieve tenure or promotion. That's how I experienced him, and I think that to some degree or another, every member of the department felt somewhat the same way.

Departmental life was, in a word, rambunctious. This was due less to McDermott than to the colorful group of philosophers that had assembled in the Wild West of A&M's department prior to John's arrival. They were bright and well-educated men (again, the gendered term is used advisedly) who may have relied a bit too heavily on each other for an intellectual and emotional outlet prior to John's arrival. They had the air of the Wild Bunch, brawling, boozing and whoring their way through the scholarly life, reconciling the image of "philosophe" with that of Jett Rink, the character portrayed by

James Dean in the film *Giant*. McDermott held his own in this atmosphere, and I do not think I ever left a departmental affair when he was not still there, holding forth and defending his turf (sometimes physically) in the melee of personalities that surrounded him. I think they loved McDermott even as he was turning the department into a place where one would actually need to do good philosophy to prosper. Several of them followed him in that turn, and no one opposed it.

One specific anecdote: When I first arrived to spend a year as a Visiting Assistant Professor, McDermott invited my wife Diane and me over to his house. No one was home but him, and he bravely cooked us dinner on the charcoal grill in his backyard. I remember him telling me that I could apply for a permanent position that was being established jointly between philosophy and A&M's College of Agriculture. He spoke of what I would accomplish, helping to establish a new professional organization, serving on the board of new journals, and becoming known as a foremost philosopher of agriculture. (And all that happened, pretty much). At the same time, I was preoccupied with the prodigious amounts of lighter fluid that he was applying to the charcoal, and then by the flames that would have cautioned any low-flying pilots who happened to be passing by. The scene was intoxicating. McDermott was always clear that you would have to do for yourself, but he was also the colleague that had everyone's back.

Not long after his term as Speaker of the Faculty Senate, Texas A&M established a new College of Medicine, and McDermott quickly turned his attention to the creation of a medical humanities program, and to the spiritual enlightenment of the medical students. This activity came to occupy a significant amount of his energy during the last decade that we shared as colleagues. The frenetic tempo of the early days slowed and the department culture stabilized. McDermott came to be less central to daily life in the department, but he always participated in decisions where personnel or matters of policy were on the table. His message was to ensure that we maintained our humanity above all else, and I don't think any of us ever doubted that he had our back.

Paul B. Thompson

McDermott as Philosopher and Friend

John McDermott will be missed personally by many of us. Even more, though, the profession of philosophy has lost a strong voice for pluralism. McDermott worked tirelessly on behalf of voices that were not being heard. He did this by getting out of print works back into the hands of scholars, but he also did this by supporting many people in our Society (and beyond), as they searched for jobs and sought tenure and promotion in a system that does not always recognize the work done in the American philosophical tradition. He reviewed articles and manuscripts and wrote countless blurbs for the back of books. He did this even when he disagreed with the particulars of other people's work. I know that when I had a department head who told me I shouldn't try to make a career out of writing on women and animals, McDermott was there to encourage me to do just that. He embodied the spirit of American philosophy through his generosity, his pluralistic commitments, and his dedication to the ongoing task of putting philosophy to work in people's lives. He clearly did this through his teaching, as his students and awards attest. He also did it through his own writing.

I hope that more people will take this opportunity to return to McDermott's published work. Reading him carefully can make us all better teachers and help us all to live lives of meaning and purpose. I think many make the mistake of reading him as a secondary source—as someone commenting on and elucidating the works of figures like Emerson, James, Dewey, Royce, and Camus. Obviously he did do that, and he did it very well. But he did more than that. McDermott has continuously addressed the very important question of how to live as a self-consciously terminal creature. Refusing to deny death, taking pleasure in the journey itself, and making relations as one goes are all part of his response to being a mortal animal. For McDermott, death isn't the problem, isolation from experience and lack of growth are what is worrisome. Without connections to our experiences growth is not possible, and that kind of living stagnation is what we should seek to avoid. As he writes in "The Inevitability of Our Own Death" (in *The Drama of Possibility*), "our impending death is not the major obstacle to our becoming truly human. The obstacle is found in our running for cover on behalf of our escape from death." McDermott contends further in "The Cultural Immortality of

Philosophy as Human Drama” (in *The Drama of Possibility*) that the “message of philosophy” is “that there are possibilities ‘not yet in our present sight.’” Philosophy helps us ask questions and avoid living second-hand lives. Well done, he tells us in “Experience Grows by Its Edges” (in *The Drama of Possibility*), philosophy helps us shake off our “ontological lethargy,” helping us to see life as an activity. This is not what most academic philosophy today does, however, and without examples like McDermott I worry that philosophy itself will continue to be a second-hand way of living rather than a creative and ameliorative endeavor.

Late in the summer of 2018, I was planning out my next book in which I hope to use a pragmatist ecofeminist perspective to discuss more respectful relationships between humans and those animals commonly referred to as “wild.” As I hit on an organizing scheme for the book I realized it was all about death: fear of death, eating and drinking death, meting out death, ... I then realized that McDermott’s work would need to play a large role in this discussion. I got on the phone to tell him. It was then that I learned from Patricia that he wasn’t doing well. I did send a note to let him know of my plans, but we didn’t get to talk about the book and that is a great loss for me. And yet, in this work, McDermott is still here supporting my thinking and writing—and sharing my love of the many animal beings with whom we share our lives. He has left us an important body of work and an important example of how to be good people as we strive to be good philosophers.

Erin McKenna

Summing Up McDermott — A Modest Attempt

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.

Richard E. Hart