

McDermott as Philosopher and Friend

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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.