

McDermott: A Personally Transforming Encounter

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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 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.