

BOSTON COLLEGE
PHI BETA KAPPA OUTSTANDING TEACHER AWARD:
PROF. JOHN McDARGH
MAY 18, 2008

GIANTS, WIZARDS AND DWARFS:
REFLECTIONS ON THE TEACHING VOCATION

When the phone in my study rang at 11:30 at night a short time ago my first thought was that it was my 93 year old mother. We recently helped move her from Southern Florida to Southern California and an assisted care home near my two sisters, Eileen and Susan. Mom is thriving, but sometimes gets a bit confused about which side of the country she is on and which side I am on, and so will often call me late at night Eastern Standard Time thinking it is three hours earlier wherever I am. This time however it was not my mother but Professor Resler –

[Now lest you worry about being awakened by Professor Resler at rude hours, in fairness I should add that he had just gotten a professional email from me and so rightly surmised that I was still up working].

In any case, I also thought at first that Michael was a bit confused because he was telling me about an honor for which I had never thought I might be considered. When he informed me of this generous recognition by the Boston College chapter of Phi Beta Kappa. I was deeply moved and am very grateful. So the first thing I want to say is thank you to the present and past members of this chapter for this award. It means a great deal to me as I hope to these reflections will explain.

It was 37 years ago this month that I was a graduating senior at Emory University – those of you who remember our history will know that in the Spring of 1970 many American students were not thinking about graduation honors – in fact some of us weren't thinking about graduation at all. In a time tragically parallel to our own, we were a nation well into a war that many of us then and now feel was a moral and political mistake and a great tragedy; and that the civil rights and constitutional processes and protections of our democracy were at grave risk. ***Plus ca change, plus c'est la meme chose.***

When we probably should have been studying for final exams – most of which were cancelled – at Emory we were mourning the deaths of fellow students at Kent State and Jackson State. Then in solidarity with a great many of our professors and chaplains were protesting the bombing of Cambodia and the enlarging of the war. In my own case, with a lottery number that guaranteed I would be drafted, I was also struggling with a moral decision between two years in the army, exile in Canada, prison or the alternative of conscience I eventually chose, a four year enlistment in the U.S. Coast Guard.

And in the midst of all that high drama, I got a late night phone call in my dorm room – from Emory’s equivalent of *Herr Doktor* Resler, I was informed that I had been elected to Phi Beta Kappa. Though you might think a 60’s kid would be cynical about such traditions – I was not. In a time of upheaval and discontinuity – to be woven into a company of scholars that began in 1776, the very year of our American Revolution and whose members included some of the visionary architects of this great democratic experiment was somehow a great consolation and an affirmation of the values we were fighting for.

My grandfather McDargh gave me his old watch chain and explained that the Phi Beta Kappa “key” was originally intended to wind the pocket watch to which the chain was attached. I never acquired a pocket watch, I wear a wrist watch, but as you see I still have the chain and the key. I don’t know what your generation’s equivalent of hanging a Phi Beta Kappa key on a watch chain would be –

Maybe attaching it to your cell phone.?

No one is able to accomplish what you have done at Boston College without having the practical and moral support of your psychic pit crew – these your parent or parents, friends and family, who have stood by you for the last sixteen years of your formal education. But I also want to say that I could never have arrived at this day after twenty seven years of teaching at Boston College without my own familial support team.

How many parents or graduates here share their lives with a teacher?

Well you know what you have to put up with! I am here today with my own partner of twenty seven years, Tim, and our son Sasha, because without their love and understanding I could not be a teacher. For example, every December for three decades as we barrel down the last week of Advent to Christmas the burden of sending out Christmas cards and letters, buying gifts for both sets of relatives and decorating the house always falls on Tim’s shoulders because I am buried in final papers and exams and grading. And for Sasha too, living with a professional educator is not always a day at the beach. He often has to remind me, “*Pop, you’re my parent, not my teacher*” - ..What can I say? It is a role I fall into without thinking about it .. because it is so much more than just my day job. Thank you family.

But our children, like our students, do a lot more than just tolerate us, they also teach us. Certainly my son has, hugely, and certainly over the years my students have - So much so that as I say very early each semester is that my educational philosophy is summarized in a single sentence. **In a true university there are no teachers – only fellow learners, who take turns teaching.**

What I wanted to share with you this morning in these brief reflections is just one of the lessons I have tried to learn and keep on learning over these years at Boston College. I want to illustrate it by reference to an account I read in a book by a Unitarian minister and author, Robert Fulghum. The book is titled *All I Really*

Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten Here is the story Fulghum tells on himself - but it is the same story I might tell about my own experience though for me the principle educators have not been seven years old, but somewhere between eighteen and twenty two.

Giants, wizards, and dwarfs was the game to play.

Being left in charge of about eighty children seven to ten years old, while their parents were off doing parenty things, I mustered my troops in the social hall and explained the game. It's a large-scale version of Rock, Paper, and Scissors, and involves some intellectual decision making. But the real purpose of the game is to make a lot of noise and run around chasing people until nobody knows which side you are on or who won. Organizing a roomful of wired-up grade-schoolers into two teams, explaining the rudiments of the game, achieving consensus on group identity--all this is no mean accomplishment, but we did it with a right good will and were ready to go. The excitement of the chase had reached a critical mass. I yelled out: "You have to decide now which you are--a GIANT, a WIZARD, or a DWARF!"

While the groups huddled in frenzied, whispered consultation, a tug came at my pants leg. A small child stands there looking up, and asks in a small, concerned voice, "Where do the Mermaids stand?" A long pause. A very long pause.

"Where do the Mermaids stand?" says I.

"Yes. You see, I am a Mermaid."

"There is not such things as Mermaids."

"Oh, yes, I am one!"

She did not relate to being a Giant, a Wizard, or a Dwarf. She knew her category. Mermaid. And was not about to leave the game and go over and stand against the wall where a loser would stand. She intended to participate, wherever Mermaids fit into the scheme of things.

Without giving up dignity or identity. She took it for granted there was a place for Mermaids and that I would know just where.

Well, where DO the Mermaids stand? All the "Mermaids"--all those who are different, who do not fit the norm and who do not accept the available boxes and pigeonholes?

Answer that question and you can build a school, a university, a nation, or a world on it.

What was my answer at the moment? Every once in a while I say the right thing.

"The Mermaid stands right here by the King of the Sea!" says I. (Yes, right here by the King's Fool, I thought to myself.)

So we stood there hand in hand, reviewing the troops of Wizards and Giants and Dwarfs as they roiled by in wild disarray. It is not true, by the way, that mermaids do not exist. I know at least one personally. I have held her hand.

I share this story because I realize that much of my scholarly research and writing in the psychology of religion, and all of my teaching and service at Boston College, has in various ways been deeply guided by that question you have provoked – *who are the mermaids, and where do they stand?*

What accounts of human development, spiritual and psychological, are intricate and inclusive enough to honor the rich diversity of human life? How can that life flourish at every level? What practices in pedagogy can make room for the extraordinary range of creativity and complexity that I have discovered is present among any thirty young adults in any Boston College classroom..

It is perhaps for that reason that when I provide topics for term papers in my courses the last option is always one I call MSU – That is not Michigan State University, but rather “make something up”.. a kind of expansion joint for the Spirit that might be moving in someone’s imagination and can not, without damage, be forced into the questions I think would be worth answering.

Where do the Mermaids Stand? I offer it to you as a worthy question to guide you into the next place on your journey – whether it is medical school or law school, service placement or business position. From whatever your unique social location, how are you going to help create a society and a world in which everyone has a role in the great game of life, a place at the table of abundance – regardless of their class, circumstances of birth, citizenship, race, creed, culture, gender or sexuality?

I must give a respectful nod to my own social location in the Department of Theology but observing that this question is also the one that runs like a golden thread through the Abrahamic traditions.

- In the Hebrew scriptures we read . *You shall treat the alien who resides with you no differently than the natives born among you; have the same love for him as for yourself; for you too were once aliens in the land of Egypt. I, the Lord, am you God.”* (Lev. 19:33-34) (see also Exodus 23:9; Deuteronomy 10:9; Exodus 22:2)
- It is there as well in the generosity and non-discriminate hospitality enjoined in the Holy Qu’ran
- Finally for me it is powerfully there in the teaching and practice of Rabbi Jesus whose table fellowship with the sinner and the outcast, the ritually impure and socially marginal is a radical parable of the inclusive and

unconditional love and delight of the Creator in the whole pined beauty of creation.

So here you are , here we are ... Phi Beta Kappas, but also I believe the King's Fools - called to let the foolishness of an expansive love and an inclusive justice flow out from you wherever you go from this place.

Congratulations and grace and peace be to you all.

John McDargh, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
Boston College Department of Theology
mcdargh@bc.edu