

A TRIBUTE TO PHIL MCSHANE

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Writing an adequate tribute to Phil McShane seems an impossible task. I begin with his slogan in mind, “if it’s worth doing, it’s worth doing badly.” I first met Phil in writing when I was 17. I was entering grade 12, my final year of high school, and enrolled in an afternoon philosophy class taught by John Benton. Our course text was *Introducing Critical Thinking*.

Later I began to see the course and the book as what I’d been waiting for, as the book’s introduction suggested they might be. I was taking mostly math and science courses and getting good grades, yet I was not content. In the first entry of journal writing that John had us do at the beginning of each class, I find that I was already feeling the weight of the amount of information to be covered in the chemistry and biology courses that I was taking at the same time and wondering about how, after a two-month break, I had forgotten the material that had been covered in those subjects the previous year. And I had questions about my future, post-graduation: where would I go? What would I do?

Our text began with the strange instruction: *don’t believe the teacher*. What did it mean? It meant that our teacher couldn’t tell us what it meant! We were introduced to the problem of *reading* ... Aristotle, Plato ... how could we come to agree or disagree with them? Already the course was unlike anything I had encountered in my schooling. We were invited to discover for ourselves how we think by attending to ourselves as we solved such simple problems as discovering the law governing the sequence of letters OTTFSS ... such that we might continue the sequence.

Slowly, by attending to myself as I puzzled over simple problems, I began to notice events going on in me that corresponded to basic elements of the “dynamics of knowing,”¹ and I began to appreciate that memorizing an answer, a definition, a formula is in no way the same as discovering the answer myself. The empirical exercises of the class began to reveal the presence in me of other invariant dynamics of doing, belief, and faith. Above all, I began to discover what real learning is like: slow, difficult, and joyous! The necessary slowness was something that Phil repeatedly

¹ *Introducing Critical Thinking*, 64.

emphasized in later communications, when I shared my puzzling over simple problems in various zones:

You are learning more than economics of course: you are learning about **learning properly**, very little of which actually occurs at any level of “normal” education. Isn’t that amazing? Real learning occurs, of course, when the learning is effective, like in tennis when the coach leads you from a two-handed backhand to a one-handed. [does that make sense to you?] It takes going over and over etc. The same with your “contributions” insight. Always reach for the habit of delaying, really taking the thing in: musing over it as “obvious” till, yes, your bones have got it.²

My elementary discoveries shed new light on difficulties in chemistry and biology courses, and on other difficulties encountered throughout my years of education. When I went off to university, I had a glimpse of the confusion and disorientation running through various areas of study that I was exposed to in my undergraduate courses. I had a small but perhaps better glimpse that, yes, “somehow the globe has become a big Plato’s Cave,”³ and that there is a need to “get our thinking tracking properly”⁴ in order to begin to reach solutions to our global problems. I began to better appreciate the importance of critical thinking, of *knowing what we’re doing*, not just for my own growth, but for progress in all of our collective endeavors.

Putting the adventure in critical thinking on hold in order to survive at university was more difficult than I anticipated. I often felt frustrated by the inhuman rapid pace of my university math and science courses and by the absence of real learning during my university education. Midway through my undergraduate degree I was considering dropping-out when I went to a conference in Vancouver and met Phil in person, for the first time. I was nervous about meeting him. He was warm, funny, very quick. His conference talks were mostly incomprehensible to me. He made time to meet with me one-on-one and asked a lot of questions about me.

We stayed in touch, infrequently at first. I remained nervous about talking to him, but it seemed that Phil was serious about helping me in the ways that I needed help, including getting me to loosen up! Gradually we talked more and there was more “honest blurting” from me, which Phil

² Phil McShane, “Re: production.” Email received by Meghan Allerton on March 9, 2017.

³ *Introducing Critical Thinking*, 30.

⁴ *Introducing Critical Thinking*, 4.

seemed genuinely thrilled by. I talked to him about my frustrations in university, and he encouraged me to be patient, hang in there, hour by hour, even minute by minute. I trusted Phil's advice, but following it was not easy. He gently drew my attention to the key difficulty:

[N]otice the battle when you say ... "I know, 10 minutes at a time." You really don't **know** this: you are trusting that it is true. THAT is the big challenge: going on in a blind way. Like the tennis player with the coach who says something like, "if you swing it such-and-such way" The tennis player won't KNOW this is true until it works! And it is much worse when you ask "who is she?" There: a future surprise!!! I can spy the lady bubbling but you have to go along in the dark ... Ho ho: it's no fun at all :) Can you be patient for the next ten minutes?!!⁵

Phil was a coach to me as I moved through my undergraduate and master's degrees, and into a PhD. *Don't believe the teacher*, no. I, in my own cave, met a strange man who invited me to find out for myself that there is more to the "woman in the mirror" than meets the eye, who pointed to the slow and difficult way forward, and to the need for patience and kindness in abundance. Phil, it seemed, appreciated me and what I might be better than I did. He helped in a way that helped me to grow. His friendship and guidance is a gift that I don't adequately understand or appreciate, but it will grow in meaning, in me, for the rest of my life.

⁵ Phil McShane, "Re: trying to practice rambling. oh jeez." Email received by Meghan Allerton on January 8, 2018.

