

ONE WILD AND PRECIOUS LIFE
Remembering Phil McShane[†]

James Duffy

*He had the knack of making men feel
As small as they really were
Which meant as great as God had made them.¹*

I met Phil McShane at Boston College in June of 1983, at the Annual Lonergan Workshop. Over the years we were in contact through email and the occasional phone call. In addition, we coincided at conferences in Halifax, Puebla (Mexico), Vancouver, and Los Angeles.

My earliest memories from the 1983 workshop are hearing Phil speak about “the primacy of the three p’s: poetry, physics, and prayer” and referring to himself as “a second-rate fiddler.” I also vividly remember him standing up to invite people to attend his afternoon workshop in an unusual way—to the effect that if we had something better to do, such as take in a Red Sox game, visit the Boston Commons, or stroll along the Charles River, he would understand. His invitation was puzzling and a bit unnerving, as I had driven close to 3,000 miles from one coast to another to participate in the weeklong conference, and he was suggesting I might have better things to do than participate in his afternoon workshop.

After completing the M.A. in the spring of 1985, I drove back to southern California and took a job teaching geometry, ethics, and Hebrew Scriptures at St. Bernard High School. The school is located a couple of stone throws from Playa del Rey beach, which was visible from the classrooms on the second floor of the school. Needless to say, my efforts to bring the book of Ruth and the Pythagorean Theorem to life had stiff competition.

While teaching high school students, I enrolled in a two-semester “Math Analysis” course at California State University Long Beach. At the end of each chapter of the book there were a dozen or more proofs on relations, functions, axioms for set theory, ordered fields, limit theorems,

[†] A version of this essay was delivered at the online Lonergan Workshop, June 24, 2021.

¹ Paddy Kavanagh, “If you ever go to Dublin town,” *Collected Poems*, 143–44.

and continuous functions. I remember sitting poolside on Saturdays taking my best shot at the homework exercises. In the classroom on Mondays we would compare our weekend efforts. Many years later I shared these memories with Phil, who replied that doing such exercises “is a wonderful introduction to your humanity.”

Instead of pursuing a master’s degree in mathematics, I decided to pursue a PhD in philosophy. From 1989 to 1996 I studied at Fordham University in the Bronx. During those years I corresponded with Phil, who was kind and wise enough to highlight the importance of having a diagram or two to orient the circular labor of reading, thinking, writing, re-reading, re-thinking, and re-writing. In particular, he pointed me to the diagrams from *Wealth of Self and Wealth of Nations*,² and versions of the two diagrams that would later be published in Appendix A of *Phenomenology and Logic*.³

After completing doctoral studies at Fordham, and thanks to a recommendation by Professor Patrick Byrne, with whom I had read *Insight* for a third time⁴ while doing the M.A. at Boston College 1983–1985, I was offered a tenure-track position to teach at Saint Mary’s University of Minnesota, where I was asked to teach philosophy of the person to undergraduates and moral theory to seminarians. Because of my background in mathematics, I was also asked to teach “Great Ideas in Math and Science” to students in an interdisciplinary studies program. That course included a lab component, e.g., swinging pendulums with timing devices in hand.

At the time I was slowly reading Phil’s book *Lonergan’s Challenge to the University and the Economy* while also writing two essays on interdisciplinary studies for volumes published by the university. Eventually it dawned on me that if interdisciplinary studies were to be something more than a nominal enterprise, we in the interdisciplinary studies program at SMU, as well as those in similar programs at other universities, would need to adopt “a strategy that clearheadedly appreciates

² See pages 15 and 48 in the 1st edition, pages 14 and 43 in the 2nd edition.

³ *Phenomenology and Logic*, CWL 18, 322–23.

⁴ See note #24 below. I expressed my position on the readability of *Insight* in “Refining Foundations,” *Divyadaan* 28/2 (2017) 233–234.

the linkages of anatomy, neurology, physiology, biochemistry, with the upper levels of human consciousness.”⁵

In the spring of 2001, three months before tenure review, I decided to take an early sabbatical. I drove from Winona, Minnesota to Guadalajara, Mexico to take an intensive course and get certified to teach English as a second language (ESL). One thing led to another and my sabbatical was extended from one year to the next.

For the first five years of my early sabbatical, I focused on becoming a decent ESL teacher and a relatively fluent Spanish speaker. Soon I learned that teaching English to teenagers and young adults and learning Spanish are not simple matters. Young children are like sponges when learning a second, third, or fourth language. For young adult and adult language learners, humility is required to let down one’s guard: “a context develops in which you must be willing to make a fool of yourself in the trial-and-error struggle of speaking and understanding a foreign language.”⁶

In the early 2000s, I read and reread Phil’s *A Brief History of Tongue*. For months I wondered: What happened to Helen Keller when she experienced the joyous breakthrough to signing *w-a-t-e-r*? Did something similar happen to me years ago? What was happening in and to my five-year-old nephew as he labored to speak in complete sentences? What happens to me, not in general but in particular circumstances, when I utter the word *water*, exclaim “¡Aguas!”⁷ or sing ‘come to the water all you who thirst’ integrally, with toes and butt muscles?⁸

⁵ Lonergan’s *Challenge*, 87. Phil had written about biochemical development in his doctoral dissertation and years later wrote a 300-hundred page commentary on a single paragraph in *Insight* (CWL 3, 489) in the *Field Nocturne* essays, which are available at: <http://www.philipmcshane.org/website-series>.

⁶ H. Douglas Brown, *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching* (White Plains: Pearson Education, 2007) 70. I have made a fool of myself on numerous occasions while trying to converse in Spanish.

⁷ *Agua* is Spanish for water. When expressed with emphasis it means “Be careful!”

⁸ In “English as My Second Language,” an essay I wrote for the 2011 West Coast Methods Institute, I quoted Kathleen Norris, who writes about the possibility of reading with your “whole self, and praying, as St. Benedict says, ‘in such a way that your minds are in harmony with our voices.’” *The Cloister Walk* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996) 91–92. See also what Lonergan writes concerning a “transformation of sensitivity and intersubjectivity [that] penetrates to the physiological level” in the Epilogue to *Insight*, CWL 3, 763.

To answer these questions I would need a ‘clearheaded strategy’ for linking anatomy, physiology, and biochemistry with signing, singing, or otherwise noising the word *water*. In addition, one could be teeming with any number of other water-interests. These could range from allusions to rivers and oceans in the Bible or *Finnegans Wake*,⁹ to the emergence of the symbol “H₂O”, the origins and development of the study of hydrodynamics, the whole realm of water and dreams,¹⁰ or the variety of concepts and relations of a systematics of water, not to mention childhood memories of dancing waters at Disneyland in Anaheim, California.

In so far as you are living a larger life, the meaning of ‘water’ can resonate through all ten genera of arts and a range of sciences, not to mention particular memories, enchantments, symbolisms, phobias. Water can be tongued out with a me-ning recognized by others to be elusive: it is a Ning of the poet’s ownzone layer.¹¹

In 2006 the director of the university where I have taught off and on since 2004 asked me to teach English to a student whose level was too advanced to enroll in *Lengua Extranjera*, the most advanced course offered at that time. I agreed, and after learning that the student was interested in economics, I proposed we read together *Economics for Everyone: Das Jus Kapital*, and he agreed. That was the beginning of my adventure identifying the basic terms and relations of sane economics, as well as some common oversights that lead to the insanity being taught and practiced around the globe.¹²

⁹ What did Joyce mean by the word *water* after he had spent 1200 hours on the first 17-page draft of the water-themed “Anna Livia Plurabelle” section of *Finnegans Wake*, a section which eventually included almost a thousand river names? John Bishop, *Joyce’s Book of the Dark* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986) 336.

¹⁰ Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams*, trans. Edith Farrell (Ann Arbor: The Pegasus Foundation, 1983).

¹¹ McShane, *A Brief History of Tongue*, 37.

¹² I wrote about the basic terms and relations in terms of tortilla production and consumption in “Minding the Economy of *Campo Real*,” *Divyadaan* 29/1 (2018): 1–24. My most recent attempt to communicate the needed “turn to the idea” (*die Wendung zur Idee*), the empirically verifiable set of terms and relations, is “*Fratelli Tutti* and Colorful Fruit to Be Borne,” *Divyadaan* 32/3 (2021): 203–222. A letter I wrote to Pope Francis is appended to the article. The kind reply from the Vatican was to address the relevant authorities, which I have begun to do.

In 2013, Francisco “Paco” Galán invited me to write an article for *Revista de Filosofía* about a single sentence in *Insight*.¹³ I mentioned this to Phil in an email, and a few days later, knowing that I did not have a copy of *Randomness, Statistics and Emergence*, he sent me three photo copies of the entire book. Three months later I was in a position to write an article on the single sentence in *Insight*.

It was around that time that I began to help Phil out by formatting and proofreading his essays and book manuscripts. Patrick Brown also had a hand in various projects. As an editor it was nearly impossible to keep up with Phil, and more so as a reader, as he was climbing at a much higher altitude, accelerating as he fiddled and tip-toed through the tulips.¹⁴ To this

¹³ “El azar, la probabilidad emergente y la cosmópolis,” *Revista de Filosofía* (Universidad Iberoamericana) 135 (2013) 313–337. The sentence reads: “When the prior conditions for the functioning of a scheme of recurrence are satisfied, then the probability of the combination of events constitutive of the scheme leaps from a product of fractions to a sum of fractions” (CWL 3, 144). Terrance Quinn treats the problem of probabilities leaping in the editor’s introduction. For a pedagogical introduction, see John Benton and Terrance Quinn, *Journeyism: A Handbook for Future Academics* (Toronto: Island House Press, 2022), Appendix A. See also the last paragraph of “Riverrun to God,” the preface to the 2nd edition (2021) of *Randomness, Statistics, and Emergence*, which Phil wrote in 2012.

¹⁴ Was Phil in some way a first-rate fiddler? The question will be neatly and precisely answered by future wise guys and gals who are first-rate fiddlers. All I can do is offer a few conjectures. In *Method in Theology 101 AD 9011: The Road to Religious Reality* (Vancouver: Axial Publishing, 2012), Phil proposed a solution to a specific problem found on pages 763–64 of *Insight*. A motely group of five of us assembled his proposal in “Effective Dialectical Analysis,” *Journal of Macrodynamical Analysis* 13 (2020): 21–44. A second possible advance is the emergence, after years of contemplation on a single paragraph (beginning on the bottom of CWL 12, 471), of an existential context for the meaning of the words *Clasping, Cherishing, Calling, Craving, and Christing*. (See *Posthumous* 12, “Clasping, Cherishing, Calling, Craving, Christing,” which is available at: <http://www.philipmshane.org/posthumous>.) A third possible advance, one related to Phil’s use of the word “engineering” in the last two years of his life, is his identification of an error that both Lonergan and he had made in the 1970s while teaching or presenting economics: “Looking back now with wonderful hindsight, we [Lonergan and he] were making the wrong moves. We should have put his request of 1968 in the context of the eighth functional specialty’s follow-through that I call **C₉**. The mood of statistically-effective outreach should have dominated both my two 1977 presentations and his six years of teaching.” “Finding an Effective Economist: A Central Theological Challenge” *Divyadaan* 30/1 (2019) 104.

day it baffles me how he could have written so prolifically while corresponding with people around the globe, advising, and encouraging fellow searchers via emails and long distance phone calls, taking walks and going on excursions with Sally, shopping and cooking, and enjoying family gatherings with his two sons, daughter-in-law, and grandsons.

Besides being strangely brilliant, Phil had a wicked sense of humor. Although he did not read or speak Spanish, except for a few phrases, a couple of times he wrote in emails “much grassy ass” which sounds like “*muchas gracias*” (“many thanks”). He invented words and phrases—“streetwise systematics,” “skin-surfing,” and “Tower of Able” come to mind—not to annoy, but to wake us up from monotone, doctrinaire, shortsighted, and unadventurous thinking, writing, living.¹⁵ He was a visionary, someone who dared to ponder the distant future, as he did in “Arriving in Cosmopolis.”¹⁶ As Charles Hefling quipped: “Phil was assuredly a phenomenon. He could see farther than almost anyone else.”

In the last years of Phil’s life, I joked with him about Kenya calling my name, about packing up a few books and moving to Nairobi.¹⁷ As we say in Spanish, “*Entre broma y broma la verdad se asoma*.” (“Between joke and joke the truth appears;” or “Many a true word is spoken in jest.”)

Now I wonder in astonishment and immense gratitude: How many conditions had to be fulfilled for me to joke thusly? How many conditions had to be fulfilled for me to have somehow survived the what- and why-smothering academic industrial complex?¹⁸ How many conditions had to

¹⁵ Some colleagues and publishers were annoyed by Phil’s neologisms and his seeming inability or deliberate refusal to “write clearly.” This reaction is, I believe, a sign of the times, a sign of the never-never land in which we live: “Never has adequately differentiated consciousness been more difficult to achieve. Never has the need to speak effectively to undifferentiated consciousness been greater.” *Method in Theology*, 99; CWL 14, 95. See also the discussion of levels and sequences of expressions in *Insight*, CWL 3, 592–595.

¹⁶ The keynote address at the First Latin American Lonergan Workshop in Puebla, Mexico, June 16, 2011, available in both English and Spanish at: <http://www.philipmcshane.org/website-articles>.

¹⁷ My joking was prompted in part by reading Paula McLain’s *Circling the Sun* (Penguin Random House, 2015).

¹⁸ One of the conditions was a part-time job I had, from the fall of 2016 to the fall of 2020, editing kindergarten and primary school lesson plans. The well-

be fulfilled for me, a third-rate fiddler, to have an inkling of how small and great I am, an inkling of a “moral personality emerging from the flux of birth and death and change,”¹⁹ binding myself with the many, over 7.7 billion other lonelines wanting to hear a decent joke and craving a decent conversation?

Were Phil’s endeavors “in vain”?²⁰ Is his life’s work a joke that began in 1961,²¹ the year I breathed my first breath and pooped my first poop? Well, it is too soon to tell, way too soon.²² The pressing question now is, What might or should we do in the next 5, 10, or 20 years, not to bestow honors on Phil, but to address such problems as education reform and climate change?

intentioned authors of the plans—all of them women—focused on defining learning objectives, identifying measurable skills and competencies, and determining student evidence used by the teacher (“coach” is the popular term) to quantitatively measure specific skills and competencies. So much for meeting and greeting the incessant what’s? and whys? of wonder-boned five-year-olds. That distressing experience has helped me to properly read, to soak up into my battered wonder bones, “the social situation deteriorates cumulatively” (CWL 3, 254) and “the messy situation headed for disaster ... becomes still messier ... and [provokes] an ever deeper crisis in the situation.” CWL 14, 330.

¹⁹ “We discover a moral personality emerging from the flux of birth and death and change, the moral personality of humanity, of the human race, the ‘one and many’ ... This orientation of all men [and women] to all men [and women] is a moral personality.” Lonergan, *Pantôn Anakephalaiôsis (The Restoration of All Things)*. Frederick E. Crowe (ed.), *Method: Journal of Lonergan Studies* 9/2 (1991) 152; CWL 25, 53.

²⁰ Phil repeats and boldfaces the phrase *in vain* 16 times in “Finding an Effective Economist: A Central Theological Challenge,” *Divyadaan* 30/1 (2019): 97–128.

²¹ See *Æconomics* 6, “I Started a Joke” in *Æconomics* series, available at: <http://www.philipmcsane.org/economics>.

²² See footnote 14 above. See also the last four lines, bolded and capitalized, in “‘What-To-Do?’: The Heart of Lonergan’s Ethics,” 92.

One basic thing you might do is identify your horizon and then share what results from this identification with others.²³ A humble turn to the subject involves autobiography,²⁴ reading and writing, re-reading and re-writing “the book of myself.”²⁵ In part that is what I have attempted to do in this tribute to Phil. “Tell me, what else should I have done? / Doesn’t everything die at last, and too soon?”²⁶

²³ Encounter is essential for doing dialectic—as difficult and uncomfortable as it may be. “Do not comfort yourself by thinking that dialectic is an encounter merely with figures out of the past, people who are no longer around. ... We must make ourselves vulnerable in the most sensitive areas of our lives, sharing our interiority in the same way religious novices are encouraged to do.” Frederick E. Crowe, *The Lonergan Enterprise* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1980) 92–93.

²⁴ Thanks to the wisdom of Mark Morelli, my first reading of *Insight* in the spring of 1981 at Loyola Marymount University was a journaling adventure. Two years later, in my last semester before graduating, I took another seminar with Mark “Methods of Inquiry,” hoping to read *Insight* a little better the second time around.

²⁵ In *Ulysses*, James Joyce translates *il se promène, pas plus, lisant au livre de lui-même*: “he strolls, reading the book of himself.” *Ulysses*, ed. Jeri Johnson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) 179. Joyce is quoting Stéphane Mallarmé, “Hamlet et Fortinbras.” See *Oeuvres Complètes*, ed. H. Mondor and G. Jean-Aubry (Paris: Gallimard, 1945) 1564.

²⁶ The penultimate lines of Mary Oliver’s “The Summer Day,” a poem I used in undergraduate ethics courses. The last lines: “Tell me, what is it you plan to do / With your one wild and precious life?”