

SEEKING THE WEALTH OF SELF

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*Planting trees early in spring,
we make a place for birds to sing
in time to come. How do we know?
They are singing here now.
There is no other guarantee
that singing will ever be.¹*

I find beginnings difficult. Phil McShane was the person who taught me that beginnings are something to be welcomed and encouraged, and that failure, or the fear thereof, should not be a deterrent. I find that I have to continually recognize and remember this, and it happens most obviously to me when I read his book *Wealth of Self and Wealth of Nations: Self-Axis of the Great Ascent*. This book is a book for beginners, and for all those of us with aspirations for something better, for our better selves. I believe that I keep coming back to this particular book because it helps me recognize that each new beginning is from a different place, from a different me, than the previous beginning. So, it is a book that gives me hope.

Wealth of Self and Wealth of Nations was not the first book of Phil's that caught my attention. That honour would go to *Randomness, Statistics and Emergence*, which Ken Melchin brought to my attention in the mid-80's. I was in the process of starting my doctoral work in ethics with Ken, and he thought that I should have a look at it, as it would help me understand Ken's own work, *History, Ethics, and Emergent Probability*.² I recall being somewhat (quite a bit) overwhelmed by both the material and the precision and control that McShane brought to bear. However, the degree of clarity and the possibilities for coherence that the book left me with have remained. For someone like myself, who had been desperately searching for the means of making sense of (every)things, my gratitude and relief (intellectual, emotional, and

¹ Wendell Berry, *The Peace of Wild Things and other poems* (London: Penguin Books, 2018) 76.

² Kenneth Melchin, *History, Ethics, and Emergent Probability: Ethics, Society and History in the work of Bernard Lonergan* (Washington: University Press of America, 1988).

psychic) was immense.³ I met Phil shortly after this, when Ken introduced me to him at a Lonergan Workshop at Boston College. I had been intrigued by his call for attention to biology (buttercups, to be precise) during a question period on the first day of the workshop; the general response seemed to be characterized by avoidance, which I found somewhat puzzling. We had some drinks that first night, and Phil was engaging and eloquent. And the next morning, he was gone, back to Nova Scotia. So ended our first meeting.

I had started teaching at St. Thomas University in 1988, and didn't meet Phil again until the mid-90's. I had previously picked up a copy of *Wealth of Self and Wealth of Nations* in a used bookshop and started to try and engage the material (and myself). In terms of learning, I was beginning to recognize that I was a slow learner. I could (more or less) grasp the main ideas fairly well at an intellectual level, but was much less successful at incorporating the ideas as part of my way of being in the world. Beginning to teach full-time started to bring closer to home why that lack of incorporation was problematic. When I started to attend Phil's summer workshops in Halifax and farther environs, some of the structural issues related to learning, and the lack thereof, began to become clearer to me. His dictum (roughly paraphrased) that "when you teach a child a(ny) discipline, you are teaching them themselves," started to make sense to me as a way of situating myself as a teacher. Improving the probabilities of engagement as a meaningful activity makes much more sense than training people to confuse trivial pursuit skills with learning. And that necessarily required more reflection and engagement from me, in short, more new and repeated beginnings, particularly in those areas where I was assuming that my skills were sufficient to the task at hand. (They weren't.)

I continue to ponder how Phil has influenced my personal/professional growth, mainly because I sometimes can recognize my better aspirations when I do so reflect.

In fact, it is the necessary connection between my personal life and my professional life that Phil made clear to me. I believe that keeping this

³ That doctoral program was my third attempt at a doctoral program. I had previously been enrolled in Ph.D. programs at McMaster U. and the U. of Ottawa in Religious Studies, always with a focus on ethical questions. My sole conviction then was that I had not yet learned anything of sufficient profundity or helpfulness.

connection mindfully is a difficult task in our world, where active anti-intellectual biases and strong anti-historical tendencies combine to make the forgetting of our selves intrinsic to our social, political, and economic functioning (so-called). So, I owe to Phil the ongoing personal struggle to remember the longer process of history, not to be discouraged when failure and disinterest seem the normative benchmarks, and to remind myself that feeling out of place and distinctly uncomfortable in the university is more probably a good thing than not. Apart from my first few years of schooling (in a British run school in Burma Camp, Ghana), I have always disliked schools generally. I believe that my dissatisfaction with the process stemmed from my conviction that learning, for the most part, was not the primary goal of those in charge of my instruction. There were, fortunately, a few wonderful exceptions to the rule, which, unfortunately, largely tended to prove the rule. I believe that *Wealth of Self and Wealth of Nations* provides a good map of self-potentiality that puts the onus of understanding just where it should be, with the reflective subject trying to make sense of their experience, particularly when it does not make much sense.

I also have Phil to thank for learning that there are no shortcuts to being able to begin to recognize oneself. His initial idea to bring out the introduction of *Wealth of Self and Wealth of Nations* as a small newspaper that would take a year and a day to read is such a gentle reminder.⁴ The longer viewpoint is not an inconvenient fact but the beginnings of a proper perspective on what is required to be able to live fully human lives (however we might be capable of imagining such lives in our current times and conditions). For people like me, who are concerned with ethics and the attempt to teach something that is coherent and helpful about ethics, the longer viewpoint or perspective poses interesting challenges. In part, it requires the recognition and respect of each person's uniqueness, their experience, capabilities, and hopes and aspirations, all of which are situated contextually. While Phil neatly encapsulates the ethical project with the question "Is it to be done?" he goes on to provide a proper guide to perspective with the following: "If the reader suspects that we are in an unusually difficult region here, he or she is correct. Self-attentive understanding of the will is a delicate operation and the region of methodology dealing with it is in its infancy."⁵

⁴ McShane, *Wealth of Self and Wealth of Nations* (1st ed.), x-xi.

⁵ McShane, *Wealth of Self and Wealth of Nations* (1st ed.), 49.

It might be that one of Phil's greatest contributions to my own process lies in his repeated insistence that difficulty and complexity should not be considered insurmountable obstacles when pursuing an adequate understanding of oneself. He was unfailingly kind and supportive, but he maintained that growth, personal and otherwise, required seriousness and commitment. I understand this as a continual call to begin again. And again. And again. So, I have come to understand myself as a beginner, which seems to me about right given the reality of our time.

Phil once told me that he chose not to bother too much with ethics as it was. Given that a great deal of his works have to do with ethical matters, and all of his works are infused with a concern for concrete instances of the good, I initially was a bit puzzled by his remark, until I realized that his larger concern was about improving the conditions and possibilities of becoming human. Considering that perspective and having experienced some unpleasant events while engaged in some clinical ethical settings, I became increasingly interested in pursuing any project that promoted a coherent and comprehensive understanding of ethics, some sort of metaethics that would address some of the systematic dysfunctional projects that we tend to regard as normal. Eventually, my interests and some of my European colleagues' general interests coincided somewhat, or grew in tandem, when a project conceived at the University of Zagreb resulted in the creation of a Centre of Excellence for Integrative Bioethics.⁶ Having discovered a natural affinity with philosophers who explicitly focused on historical process as part of their systematic reflections in Croatia, I started attending their conferences in the late 90's, including their first national conference on the topic of bioethics. It was in this context, that I believed there was the possibility of a collaborative engagement with different levels of problems, all of which were connected to the larger issue of living in increasingly alienated conditions. I found that there was a general openness to consider the greatest range of questions, to promote such discourse in

⁶ The Centre of Excellence for Integrative Bioethics is affiliated with the University of Zagreb, and was initiated by Professor Ante Čović, who is the Centre's Director, and Professor Hrvoje Jurić. The Centre was established with funding from the European Union and Croatia in 2014 and is led by a Scientific Management Committee, led by Professor Amir Muzur, from the University of Rijeka.

public events, and to invite all those who identified topical interests and shared concerns. More significantly, I perceived the possibility of working with colleagues who shared the same sorts of deep concerns that I felt were systematically neglected at my university, and generally across North America.

I felt then, and still feel now, that the project of Integrative Bioethics was a good place to begin, and while none of my colleagues in this endeavour explicitly share the philosophical worldview generated by Lonergan, McShane, and other followers of Lonergan's thought, I find some sympathy and occasional interest in the prospect. Not surprisingly, I find the same sort of response in some of my students, which is not a small part of the reason why I tend to keep recommending *Wealth of Self and Wealth of Nations* as the most straightforward way to begin taking themselves seriously as thinkers. To be more explicit, I believe that the time and effort and appropriate level of skills required to read first *Insight* and then *Method in Theology* in a way that would yield adequate levels of understanding are quite overwhelming.⁷ On the other hand, *Wealth of Self and Wealth of Nations* is more accessible to any curious person who happens upon the book and is open to reflection, and, more importantly, self-reflection.⁸

In conclusion, and to begin again, I have learned from Phil McShane that I am a beginner. To the extent that I am starting to develop this sensibility, I believe (hope)⁹ that I am becoming a better teacher and a better person as I begin to recognize the peculiar challenges of beginning. I believe that my teaching career, which is ending soon in Canada, will most likely begin again in Croatia—something I had never considered possible or feasible until quite recently—and will present new and unexpected challenges. I hope that I have learned enough from Phil to be more honest and discerning generally, and though I miss communicating with him directly, I hear his voice and his questions in his books, and in my head, as I walk back and forth in my driveway,

⁷ Following in McShane's footsteps, I am being long-term optimistic here.

⁸ McShane often pointed out that very few people knew how to read. I always took this as his assessment of people having the ability, willingness, and discipline to seriously understand that which they were reading.

⁹ I often wonder what the gauge of a good teacher is, particularly as our students' experience is as much virtual as it is actual. Should post-literate trends continue, I think these considerations will become even more problematic.

smoking cigars. And then he laughs. “Anything worth doing, is worth doing badly.” And I laugh.