

**JOISTING, JESTING, JOUSTING
A Tribute to Philip McShane**

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I first encountered Philip McShane¹ through his website series of essays in the mid-2000s. At that time, I had been reading Lonergan's works for a couple of years, partly for my own interest but also substantially and intentionally to provide a grounding and framework for work I was doing to promote the increased participation of women in science and engineering.² I had the bright idea that I could "apply" Lonergan's model of the human subject in this work. But already I was finding this a difficult and lonely undertaking, and I was looking for others to converse with who might have done something similar.

This is the context in which I happened across McShane's website sometime in 2005. I was intrigued to find a philosopher and Lonergan scholar who was actively posting essays online. I started with some of the *Cantowers* essays, and later those of other series including *Sofdaware* and *Quodlibets*. I found these essays attractive and intriguing, yet also difficult, if not incomprehensible at times. I would read them, one by one, highlighting text or references for possible follow-up, and writing questions in the margins. It was challenging work, sometimes discouraging, but I stayed with it, as with each new essay that McShane posted, I was hopeful something would jump out at me that I could definitely hold on to, understand, apply.

Joisting

My annotated reading of McShane's essays continued as a solitary endeavour until I began to read his website series *Joistings* in 2006. This series sparked my 14-year-long conversation with McShane, and his influence on my work and life. *Joistings* 1 illuminates his choice of the

¹ In this tribute essay I refer to Philip (Phil) McShane as McShane when discussing his work or contributions and I use his first name Phil when discussing my personal interactions with him.

² As the NSERC/Petro-Canada Chair for Women in Science and Engineering, Atlantic Region, a position I held at Memorial University of Newfoundland, St. John's, Canada, 2004-2009.

series name: “Joists are the beams that hold up the planks of a floor ...”³ and thus *Joistings* is a “foundational series ... to do with building, indeed with the building of collaboration.”⁴

I can date my first interactions with McShane to May 2006, as I kept a file of the *Joistings* essays I was reading that spring, along with relevant notes, emails, etc. At the time, I was preparing a workshop for women graduate students to be given at a conference in June 2006,⁵ and I was interested in grounding my workshop development in the human subject who is the scientist or engineer. My file includes three pages of handwritten notes titled “My Take on *Joistings* 1-17” and dated May 11, 2006. These notes start:

Having read the entire *Joistings* series to date, I can say I don’t really know what it is all about. I occasionally have local understanding, e.g. I appreciated the three Therasas in *Joistings* 4, and I appreciated, after reflection, the compact meaning in (about)³ [*Joistings* 1, pages 5-9]. But globally—i.e. McShane’s meaning/intention in *Joistings* as a whole eludes me. I have some glimmers, but that’s about all.⁶

My notes continue with “Here’s what I have in mind,” followed by 9 comments about the 17 *Joistings* as a whole, as they were then posted.⁷ The next day (May 12, 2006) I wrote an email to McShane with two questions from my notes. My email was written in a formal academic style with specific questions,⁸ since while the *Joistings* essays offered the

³ Philip McShane, *Joistings* 1, “Beginagain,” available at <http://www.philipmcshane.org/joistings>. Note that I am using the *Joistings* essays as key references in this tribute, since they are foundational to my interactions with McShane. Space precludes mention of his many other works that have influenced me.

⁴ McShane, *Joistings* 1, “Beginagain,” 1.

⁵ Cecilia Moloney, “The graduate student leader: A workshop for women graduate students in science and engineering,” presented at 11th Canadian National Conference for the Advancement of Women in Engineering, Science, Trades and Technology (CCWESTT 2006), Calgary, AB, June 22–25, 2006.

⁶ From Cecilia Moloney, personal notes, 2006.

⁷ In May 2006, *Joistings* 1–17 had been posted on McShane’s website, but the *Joistings* series eventually consisted of 28 essays in total, i.e. *Joistings* 0–27.

⁸ My two questions were: “1) Re. the Menu Exercise in *Joistings* 3, page 3. Is this your exercise? Can you tell me the source reference to cite? 2) Re. ‘When teaching children geometry one is teaching children children.’—cited in *Joistings* 9, page 16. I assume this is your sentence. I tracked it back to your article ‘A

possibility of collaboration,⁹ I didn't know what McShane might be like as a person. I was interested in answers to my two questions, but I was also hoping to glean from whatever response I might receive whether or not McShane might be someone I could converse with about a wider set of questions.

Phil's email response to mine arrived within hours:

Greetings Cecilia,

I'm just back from some travels, but this seems a new arrival on the e-mail, so here goes.

The menu exercise, yes, is my own. And I think this is the first occurrence of it in print. You hardly need to reference it, but that's the reference. Just make it your own, and pass it on. I think myself that it is a great way of getting people into Thomas' *Prima Secundae*, qq. 6-17. Very existential, but very slow work. Let me know if I can be of more help ... write it up and publish it as your own!!!

Yes, that Childout Principle is my own.

If you wish to chat over anything, perhaps it would be good if I knew where you are, what you are at, etc etc.

Best wishes,

Phil¹⁰

And with that, our email conversation was up and running. Within days (on May 15), Phil had sent me by post what he called "some helpful 'light' books: *Music That Is Soundless* and *Introducing Critical Thinking*."¹¹ I was amazed by Phil's generosity with his ideas, his time, his books. I realized later how sincerely he had meant what he wrote in his

reform of classroom experience' in *Divyadaan* 13/2 (2002). Would that be the best source to cite?" Extract from first email from Cecilia Moloney to Philip McShane, May 12, 2006.

⁹ See, e.g., Philip McShane, *Joistings* 1, "Beginagain," at page 11: "You too might respond to my case, to my appeal for collaboration." Also *Joistings* 9, "How might I become a better teacher?"¹, n. 1, where McShane issues an invitation "... if you are seriously bitten, by speaking back to me ..." available at <http://www.philipmcshane.org/joistings>.

¹⁰ Extract from first email from Philip McShane to Cecilia Moloney, May 12, 2006.

¹¹ Extract from email from Philip McShane to Cecilia Moloney, May 15, 2006, in which he mentioned two books, the first of which he authored, the second co-authored.

first email to me, as well as what he had written in the *Joistings* series about collaboration.

Jesting

McShane's writings in the *Joistings* series and elsewhere are about very serious ideas and notions. And certainly McShane took these ideas very seriously, notably functional collaboration and other discoveries by Lonergan, finding them "worth a life."¹² But at the same time there was a playful quality to his writing that I connected with his love of language and poetry. When I first met McShane in person in 2008 at the Halifax Lonergan Conference, I realized how much both welcoming and jesting were key to who he was. After the conference I wrote a poem that reflected my experience of attending one of McShane's Lonergan gatherings. The poem contains the lines:

Most rare encounter— here where oceans meet. // ... //
 Whole babies laugh astonishment, at such
 A circling, round, illuminated show,
 Where everything is said in every word,
 And ships are built to reach unknown shores.
 This is a wild, still-smiled and welcome place.¹³

Indeed, laughter and astonishment were my responses to the seriously jesting McShane and what he said and how he was heard by those around him.

Jousting

McShane often critiqued current culture (especially academic culture), employing at times a jousting pedagogical strategy, as is illustrated by a sentence from *Joistings* 9: "So, if your honesty allows you to admit to yourself that this culture has indeed corrupted you, then I am getting to

¹² See, e.g., Philip McShane, quoting Stephen MacKenna, *HOW* 5, "Searching for Avila, John, Jesus, Stein, Lonergan, *Moi Intime*, Etc. Etc." 44, n. 152. <http://www.philipmcshane.org/how>.

¹³ Extract from a poem by Cecilia Moloney, "Encounter," included later in a book of tributes given to McShane following the 2011 Vancouver Lonergan Conference.

you here, *even annoying you*: but perhaps also leading you on: ‘*What is this weird old Irishman at?*’¹⁴

Contributing to the difficulty of appreciating McShane’s “getting at” others was that his standard, like Lonergan’s, was very high. As McShane writes in *Joistings* 3, “I suspect that if you are honest you may be shocked to find that you were not really reading luminously about you[r] inner words when you read *Insight* for the first time—or maybe even for the tenth time!”¹⁵ Contributing also were McShane’s exceptional talent and broad background knowledge across a number of disciplines, including an almost encyclopedic knowledge of Lonergan’s works. I suspect he must have found the more pedestrian progress of others tiresome at times.

In our interactions, Phil jousted gently, but he did his best to lead me on. He understood the busyness and distractions of my academic career in engineering, and in fact, for those and other reasons, I often couldn’t keep up with him or his suggestions; indeed, sometimes I didn’t even understand his pointers. In illustration, when I reviewed my files and old emails preparatory to writing this tribute essay, I found it remarkable that Phil’s first email to me in 2006 contained almost the same suggestions as some of his last emails. In my first email to Phil in 2006, I had asked about the menu exercise in *Joistings* 3;¹⁶ Phil’s response referenced Thomas Aquinas’ *Prima Secundae* qq. 6–17.¹⁷ In 2006 I didn’t appreciate this pointer; but a decade or more later, after other similar promptings from Phil, I came to realize that the question “What to do about what to do?” is key, not only to progress via personal actions, but also to the future of professional endeavours such as engineering. Thus it was that our last meeting in person in November 2018 started with Phil remarking on the importance of properly identifying deliberating as key to moving us from the negative to the positive Anthropocene.¹⁸ Later, over winter 2019, I had

¹⁴ McShane, *Joistings* 9: “How might I become a better teacher?” 1. *Italics mine for emphasis*. Certainly “What is this weird old Irishman at?” was a question I had when I was reading McShane’s essays in 2005–2006, and a key reason why I decided I had to write to him, and later meet him in person. Was he weird, and merely weird? Or was he sanely “weird,” someone out in front, ahead of the curve?

¹⁵ McShane, *Joistings* 3, “What-to-do questions,” 3, available at <http://www.philipmcshane.org/joistings>.

¹⁶ McShane, *Joistings* 3, “What-to-do questions,” 3.

¹⁷ See section “Joisting” above and footnotes 8 and 10.

¹⁸ From personal notes by Cecilia Moloney, November 21, 2018.

an extensive email conversation with Phil about deliberation and choice as I prepared a conference paper for presentation in April 2019.¹⁹ I think Phil must have found my progress over the previous 13 years very slow indeed.

Saying Hello!

I last saw Phil in person in Vancouver in 2018, when he generously met with me on three occasions over two days to discuss ideas and work I had in progress. Taken together these meetings were a master class, given by a true master. After one of the meetings, Phil gave me an autographed copy of his book *The Allure of the Compelling Genius of History* with his handwritten inscription on the title page: “For Cecilia— the full context! Phil, Nov 2018.” I am still seeking the full context, sadly now without Phil to converse with.

While my conversation with Phil was sometimes sporadic, he would always respond quickly whenever I wrote to him, with understanding, guidance, and above all humour. I am very grateful that he took me seriously, ever since my first cold email to him in 2006. When I first spoke with Phil one-on-one in 2008 after the Halifax Lonergan Conference, he said that I didn’t so much need a philosophy as I needed to be my own philosopher. Everything Phil said or wrote to me later reinforced the same point, i.e., that what Lonergan wrote about had to become personal for me. This has made a huge difference to me ever since, in my life and in my work. As have McShane’s writings, which I often didn’t understand at first (or since), but that have kept challenging me to look at things differently, and to read Lonergan more deeply and more personally. Until, in the end, I may come to understand the full meaning of something Lonergan once said, that McShane often quoted, and that has long intrigued me:

“That’s what life is all about, saying hello!”²⁰

¹⁹ Cecilia Moloney, “Lonergan on human action: towards a theory of future engineering practice,” presented at West Coast Methods Institute (WCMI), Los Angeles, CA, April 25–27, 2019. In this presentation, I referenced Thomas Aquinas’ *Prima Secundae* in *Summa Theologiae* (Vol. 17, Psychology of Human Acts, 1a2ae. 6–17), Trans. and Ed. Thomas Gilby (Oxford: Blackfriars Press, 1970).

²⁰ Philip McShane, quoting Bernard Lonergan, see, e.g., *Cantower II*, “Sunflowers speak to us of growing,” 23, available at <http://www.philipmcschane.org/cantowers>.