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James McGrath

IN A CLASS BY HIMSELF

The Life and Times of an
Extraordinary American Teacher,
Mentor, Cultural Ambassador,
and Pedagogical Pilgrim



Jonah Raskin



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Contents

PREFACE BY BILL AYERS
School Haiku: Take Out the “Sh” and It’s Cool
i

INTRODUCTION
Enter James McGrath
1

CHAPTER ONE
Stutter Steps: A Boy Becomes an Artist
7

CHAPTER TWO
The Bomb and the River: High School Art
23

CHAPTER THREE
Breaking Down and Building Up
39

CHAPTER FOUR
Speaking the International Language of Art
47

CHAPTER FIVE
Birth Pains: The Institute of American Indian Arts
58

CHAPTER SIX

White House and Red Power: Art in a Time of Upheaval

98

CHAPTER SEVEN

Asia: On the Cutting Edge of Multicultural Art

121

CHAPTER EIGHT

Risks and Rewards of Teaching Art

139

CHAPTER NINE

L'Homme de Santa Fe: Art at Home and Far Away

158

CHAPTER TEN

To Teach is to Love Again: Art Old and New

169

Acknowledgements

00

Bibliography

185

*To all the students
in all my classes
and to all my
colleagues, too.*



A PREFACE

School Haiku: Take Out the “Sh” and It’s Cool

BILL AYERS



W

atching James McGrath teach, listening to McGrath and his collaborators and students reflect on the power of art and education, and then reading this loving portrait woven so beautifully together by Jonah Raskin is to hear the music that both soothes and energizes. McGrath’s teaching is by turns disruptive and unruly, wild and straightforward, always powered by love and joy and a yearning for justice, forever overflowing with life. I want to see more and to hear more. I want to sing backup to that voice.

I’m reminded of Gwendolyn Brooks, winner of the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in the early 1950s and poet laureate of Illinois for many years, who asks in the first line of her poem, “Dedication to Picasso,” “Does man love art?” She is standing in a large crowd of people gathered in the plaza in downtown Chicago for the unveiling of a giant sculpted bird/woman figure given as a gift to the city by the iconic Pablo Picasso. She hur-



ries to answer her own question: “Man visits art,” she writes, “but cringes / Art hurts / Art urges voyages.”

Exactly! Art often begins in pain, horror, and uncertainty, but it inevitably opens to the immense territory of the possible. Art expands the horizons of the imaginable, standing beyond the world as such—the given or the received world—waving a colorful flag gesturing toward a world that should be or could be, but is not yet. If everything is perfect, if there is no need of repair or improvement, or if the world we have is none of our business, then we are inclined to banish the arts, cuff and gag the artists. They are a bother, agitators and activists urging voyages, explorations, questions, and queer company. If, on the other hand, we see ourselves as works-in-progress, born into a going world and catapulting through a vibrant history-in-the-making, and if we

ii

feel a responsibility to engage and participate, then the arts and the artists are the strongest allies we can have. It all depends on your angle of regard.

Perhaps that’s what Ferlinghetti was thinking when he published a slim volume with the provocative title *Poetry as Insurgent Art*, or what Picasso had in mind when he said, “Art is not chaste. Those ill prepared should be allowed no contact with art. Art is dangerous. If it is chaste, it is not art.” Add to that Einstein’s famous observation that “imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited to all we now know and understand, while imagination embraces the entire world, and all there ever will be to know and understand.” The poet, Ferlinghetti, meets the famous painter, Picasso, and the most renowned scientist of the century, Einstein, and they are immediately on the move and on the make, propulsive, dynamic, unsettled, and alive—on a voyage of discovery and surprise, up, up and

away, into the unknown. James McGrath finds himself firmly in their exalted company: an artist/teacher urging voyages.

Much of what we call schooling today blinds us to perspective and process and point-of-view, locks us into the well-lit prisons of our linear ideas, forecloses or shuts down or walls us off from options and alternatives, and from anything resembling meaningful inquiry or relevant choice-making. Much of schooling enacts a hollowed-out ethics and presents an unlovely aesthetic. When schooling is based on obedience and conformity, we are reminded that these qualities and dispositions are the hallmarks of every authoritarian regime throughout history. When schooling suppresses the imagination, banishes the unpopular, squirms in the presence of the unorthodox, and hides the unpleasant,

iii

it becomes cowardly, dishonest, and immoral. We lose, then, our capacity for skepticism, irreverence, doubt, and imagination.

James McGrath offers a lifetime of alternatives, a carpet bag filled with practical arts and concrete lessons grounded in humanistic assumptions and democratic dreams. He contradicts and disputes the dominant metaphor in education today, which posits schools as businesses, teachers as workers, students as products and commodities. He re-ignites—and tries to live out in his daily life—the basic proposition that all human beings are of incalculable value and that life in a free and democratic society is geared toward and powered by a profoundly radical idea: the fullest development of all human beings is the necessary condition for the full development of each person; and, conversely, the fullest development of each is necessary for the full development of all.

James McGrath foregrounds initiative, questioning, doubt, skepticism, courage, imagination, invention, and creativity—for him these are the central, not peripheral, ingredients of an adequate education. These are the qualities he models and nourishes, encourages and defends, and these qualities are precisely the precincts of the arts in their many incarnations. McGrath's concern is to help students ask questions, think the impossible, reinvent and refresh both themselves and their circumstances.

Foundational questions for free people are the vital stuff of McGrath's work: what's your story; how is it like or unlike the stories of others; what do we owe one another; what does it mean to be human; what qualities, dispositions, and knowledge are of most value to humanity; what kind of world could we reasonably hope to create; how might we begin?

If we, along with our students, cannot reasonably ask these kinds of questions and then notice or invent alternatives, we are not free; if we cannot dwell in possibility, we are not fully alive. With McGrath we might become more mindful of the plea in Gwendolyn Brooks' "Boy Breaking Glass," "I shall create! / If not a note / a hole. If not an overture / a desecration." But I shall create—the fundamental and primal cry of the young and of every human being.

On the side of a liberating and humanizing education is a pedagogy of questioning, an approach that opens rather than closes the process of thinking, comparing, reasoning, perspective-taking, and dialogue. It demands something upending and revolutionary from students and teachers alike: Repudiate your place in the pecking order, it urges, remove that distorted, congenial mask of compliance: You must change! You can change your life!

You can change the world!

Haki Madhubuti, Gwendolyn Brooks' publisher, claims that art is a "prodigious and primary energy source" and then turns to the connection of art to education: "Children's active participation ... is what makes them whole, significantly human, secure in their own skin." He offers a kind of chant, each line ending with the words "with art" or "through art." Every teacher or student, parent or community member can play along and add on:

Magnify your children's mind with art!

Jump start their questions with art!

Keep their young minds running, jumping, and excited with art!

Keep them off drugs, respecting themselves and others, away from war with art!

This is the urgency, excitement, and energy that James McGrath generates and embodies. 🐉



INTRODUCTION

Enter James McGrath




He ought to be famous, but he's only a teacher after all, and teachers are rarely famous in a country such as ours in which teachers are demonized and blamed by politicians for most if not all the ills of education. Maybe he will be famous on the day when America finally wakes up and realizes that teachers are “pilgrims to the horizon,” to borrow a phrase that the African American author, Zora Neale Hurston, used to describe the mentors and instructors who helped to lift her out of her own prosaic life and to propel her into a strange and wonderful territory of learning and freedom. In these pages, I have lifted James McGrath—the focus of this book—out of the classroom and out of the schoolhouse and showed him off to the world. Or perhaps, I've invited the world into his universe to watch and listen to what he has done for most of his lifetime and what he still does.




Unwilling to wait for that future day when obscure and largely invisible teachers will be acknowledged, I've aimed to acknowledge him here and now.

James McGrath comes from a family without teachers and without degrees in higher education, but he was born to teach and nurtured to become a teacher, too, by his own teachers, who took him to distant horizons. When I first met him in 2008, he was eighty years old. He was teaching and enjoying it. Of course, by the time that most American teachers reach the age of eighty, they have long since retired. McGrath's age and his ability to survive and to thrive as a teacher at eighty, and then at eighty one, eighty two, and eighty three, impressed me, but his age was not the only factor that made him unique.

2  Soon after I met him, I learned that in his sixty-plus years of teaching, he had never been a specialist; he never taught just one grade, whether kindergarten, junior high, or the first year of college. He taught every grade, from pre-school to post-graduate school and almost every age from three to ninety nine. He was a science teacher and an art teacher, and he taught every aspect of art, worked in every medium, and all around the world, from the State of Washington to New Mexico and in Germany, France, Italy, Japan, Korea, the Philippines, and Okinawa. He taught in the Congo, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen—places on the map where Americans had never taught before and, if he brought American art around the world, he also brought home with him art from everywhere on the globe, except Antarctica. Wherever he worked he made teaching his art form, and he painted and sculpted, too, exhibiting his art in Europe, Africa, and the Americas. If he was forceful and outgoing, he was also quiet, moody, and introspective.

Just how much McGrath had meant to kids, teenagers, and adolescents, I first learned from three former students. They studied with him at his first teaching job in the 1950s, and they all grew up to become renowned artists and art teachers themselves. Teachers are known by their own works, but they are also known by the works of their students, and this is especially true of McGrath and three particular students, Bill Wiley, Bob Hudson, and Bill Allan, whom I met before I met McGrath. When I sat down to talk with them, I was surprised to hear grown men talk with reverence and admiration about a high school

art teacher who had helped to nurture them when they were teens. Fifty years later, they still remembered him and his classroom exercises, and they still called him McGrath or "Teach," not Jim or James. I met them at Bob Hudson's northern California house, which he and his wife Mavis Jukes have filled with art by friends such as Joan Brown as well as art that Hudson made with Wiley and Allan. Playful and funny, it's a testament to their friendship. At the dining room table at Bob's, there was wine, bread, cheese, and silence. Then Wiley jumped in and started the conversation.

3  "There's never been anyone like McGrath," he said. "There's just no getting away from him or his influence. He changed my life as an artist and as a teacher. At the University of California at Davis, where I taught for a decade, I wanted at first to turn my students into professional artists. As time went on I adopted the approach that McGrath used when we were at Columbia High School. I asked each and every student, 'What do you want to do?' and 'How can I help you get there?' I stopped trying to turn them into professional artists

and instead urged them to be authentically themselves, which is what McGrath urged us to be.”

Wiley added that McGrath wanted students to “mingle poetry, dance, music, painting.” He encouraged Wiley to add words to his canvases and meld texts with colors and shapes. “McGrath persuaded me that there was more to drawing than making cartoons, which I loved to do almost all the time I was in high school,” Wiley said. “He called this other thing ‘art for art’s sake,’ and in 1953 in Richland, Washington, that was a bold, new idea.”

Bill Allan offered a perspective of his own. “We had a vital student/teacher connection way back in Richland, Washington,” he said. “Creativity went both ways and around and around. I think McGrath was influenced by us as much as we were influenced by him.” Allan remembered that McGrath taught him that he didn’t have to have a preconceived idea about art in order to make art. “His teaching helped me to become myself and trust myself,” he said. “He brought me through a doorway.”

Bob Hudson listened quietly. Then he began to talk, dredging up memories from his high school days. Hudson remembered that in 1954 McGrath taught him to drive a car and that they drove together to Seattle in a blizzard for an art exhibit—one of the first times that Hudson’s work was in the public eye. They had adventures on the way to Seattle and on the way home, too, and Hudson said he’d never been the same since.

Now Wiley had another insight. “There was something of ‘Mr. Rogers’ about McGrath,” he said. “He expressed the idea that you’re good just the way you are and don’t have to change anything about yourself. He was always authentic. He still is. I know he recently

turned eighty, but I think he’s younger than all of us here combined.”

Soon after that meeting with his former students, I met McGrath in person in Santa Fe and learned that he respected them as much as they respected him. “The arts captured Hudson, Wiley, and Allan at an early age, and they captured the arts,” he told me. “Even as teenagers in high school at Columbia, they were like a garden of flowers blooming at its peak. They were not competitive with one another, and they were dedicated to art at the start, which was rare for young men in the 1950s. They came to class, and they got to work.”


He paused for a minute as though searching for memories and added, “As a teacher and as an artist, I grew as they grew. We grew side-by-side in a community of learners that began in the classroom. All of us were part of a maturation process and a living, breathing struggle to be ourselves.”

In the twenty-first century, teachers such as McGrath are rare, indeed. They have always been rare in any century. It’s difficult though not impossible to find them today, and so this book is not only about a singular teacher but also about a way of teaching that now, for the most part, does not exist, not in America, Europe, or Asia. The loss, it seems to me, is ours, and so I have told McGrath’s story hoping that students and teachers today will want to borrow his teaching methods and his teaching philosophy and bring his style into their own classrooms.

Neither I, nor McGrath, are partial to lists, and yet we know that lists can be helpful. Here, now in a gesture intended to open discussion rather than end it and at the start of a journey of discovery, are eleven



teaching tips from James McGrath:

1. *Listen, empathize, and encourage.*
2. *Go on field trips.*
3. *Bring the outside world into the classroom.*
4. *Walk around your classroom; don't be tied to your desk.*
5. *Ask questions. Don't give away answers; help students find them for themselves.*
6. *Think the impossible. Do the impossible.*
7. *Take risks.*
8. *Keep moving; don't get stuck.*
9. *Simplify; less is often more.*
10. *Reinvent and refresh yourself.*
11. *Connect all the arts: music, dance, film, literature, and theater.* 



CHAPTER ONE

Stutter Steps: A Boy Becomes an Artist



I. Edison Elementary School

Long before he became a pilgrim and led students to distant horizons, James McGrath followed his own teachers on a pilgrimage that began in boyhood. McGrath grew up in an era when public schools were vital to neighborhoods, including his own, and when schools and communities were linked by students, teachers, parents, and administrators, too.

It was the Depression, and Americans might have been depressed, but instead they felt a sense of hope that, though social and economic conditions had thrown them out of their jobs and homes, the world could be changed for the better if people worked together. Education gave working class students such as McGrath a sense of hope in the dark days of the Depression. His own school provided food for thought for his family and for the whole community, and the community provided the school with a sense of identity. There were battles and there was bitterness, but teachers, parents, and





JAMES MCGRATH PERSONAL ARCHIVE

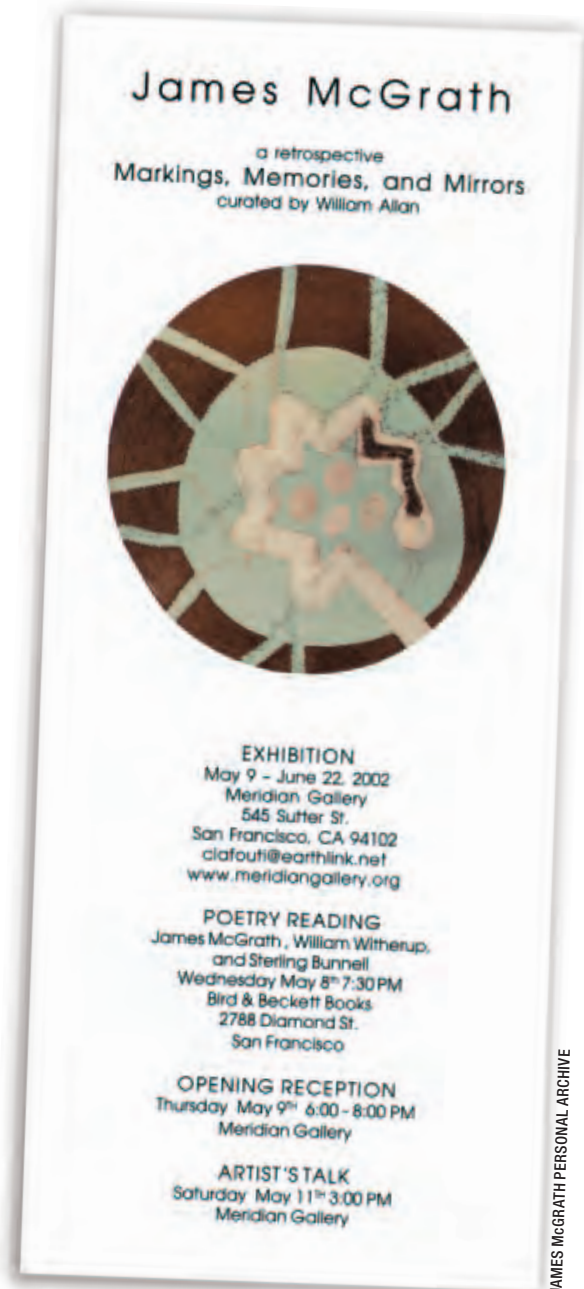
*At a mask-making workshop in Japan for teachers,
U.S. Department of Defense Overseas Schools, 1975.*



JAMES MCGRATH PERSONAL ARCHIVE



*McGrath with students and teachers
in Brazzaville, the Republic of the Congo, 1995.*



Pamphlet for an exhibit of McGrath's work at the Meridian Gallery, San Francisco, 2002.



McGrath with former students Kevin Red Star, Dorothy Dowis, Bill Wiley, Bob Hudson, Bill Allan, Bill Witherup, and Jim Scoggin at the Meridian Gallery.



McGrath with students at the Hopi School, Arizona.