



Michael Calvin McGee: Some Memories to Share

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Living with someone for thirty years takes away perspective on that person's life and accomplishments. Yet, I put fingers to keyboard to provide a very personal view of Michael Calvin McGee with stories and a few reflections on his quest to live the life of the mind.

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Do you remember the first time you interacted with the person you came to call best friend, lover, champion, soul mate and in my case, husband? Nothing too extraordinary struck me about the blonde, blue-eyed man who handed me my registration card for my fall semester classes in Speech and Drama; but, for some reason I remembered his smile and effort to be friendly in the heat and humidity of an Alabama summer.

Later, I learned his name, Mike McGee, fresh from doing graduate work at The University of Iowa and Cornell University. Knowing little about institutions out of the South other than Ohio State, second father's alma mater, I did not understand the "pedigree" he brought with him to the University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa. Nor did I have any idea that he ranked number one among students coming out of all the Ph.D. programs in the country.

As the faculty work-study student, I took dictation and typed correspondence for McGee the year he spent at Alabama – 1969-1970 academic year. While I did not fall in love with Mike McGee at that time, I did appreciate the times we would sit and talk about different ideas and politics in between letters.

But, then, I took a class from McGee, "Introduction to Rhetorical Theory," and my life changed forever. Seeking the answer to "why people did what they did" had me

looking to English, Political Science, Journalism, Sociology, and American Studies; but I found the answer in Rhetoric, a word I only learned in my junior year – spring semester, 1970. And, McGee's class gave me the perspective that I had longed to find since I first became conscious of society and politics in sixth grade – the Rhetorical Perspective.

Anyone whoever had the opportunity to have McGee in class or to hear him give a presentation/performance learned that he was different. If you did not get engaged, you chose not to for his skill in teaching/performing made all but one of my professors, look like novices or cardboard figures. McGee lived, breathed, smoked, and drank Rhetoric. For Rhetoric was his passion, his love, his reason for being.

When we first got together again in Memphis in 1971 as lovers and friends, teacher and student, I well remember McGee telling me in no uncertain terms that Rhetoric and his work came first and always would and any relationship we had would come second. From my perspective that worked. You see, I was and remain McGee's biggest fan. Taking classes with him, listening to him read his writings, arguing with him and learning with and from him, I believed that what he had to say needed to be heard by the country and the world. I still believe that. To the end, however, he resisted becoming a public intellectual whose work got popularized and used by the movers and shakers of the free world.

Knowing that many of the readers of the American Communication Journal never met Michael Calvin McGee and that others who did only knew him after his physical body began to wear down with multiple diseases – rheumatoid arthritis, emphysema, congestive heart failure, diabetes and the chronic pain of damaged cranial nerves suffered when he had a severe case of cranial shingles in 1999, I think it would be fun to just provide you with some stories that reflect the person of McGee as a young turk fighting for Rhetoric's place in the Canon of intellectual discourse.

McGee told me several of these stories and most represent turning points in his life.

McGee's Diversion from Law and Politics into the Pursuit of Rhetorical Understanding

In 1964, George Corley Wallace, Governor of Alabama known for his anti-civil rights rhetoric and actions, ran for President in several state Democratic primaries. Indiana, birthplace of the John Birch Society, was one of them. What came out of Wallace's campaign in Indiana changed Mike's life and his career ambitions.

At that time, McGee worked for Democratic Senator Birch Bayh, father of the current Senator Evan Bayh. He served as President for the Young Democrats of

Indiana and had proved to be a successful collegiate debater. These two conditions coincided with a challenge from Wallace to debate the Democratic favorite in a face-to-face debate. You see, in the politics of the mid-twentieth century, Presidents did not run against challengers such as Wallace in a state primary. Presidents had people stand in for them on the primary ballot. In Indiana, that person was Governor Welsh. The Governor did not want to give Wallace the legitimacy of a serious challenger and refused to meet him Wallace's challenge. Rather, Welsh knew that Butler University had more than one national caliber debaters on its National Debate Team. McGee, Craig Pinkus and Bill Nehr happened to be those hotshot debaters for Butler University. That's where McGee and Pinkus got into the mix.

The story goes that Welsh and other Democratic leaders decided to have McGee and Pinkus debate Wallace on Indiana Public Television. After all, they were top collegiate debaters and should be able to "show the citizens of Indiana how ill-equipped Wallace was to be President of the United States and to show how dangerous his racist politics were for America." Instead, Wallace humiliated, out argued, and out foxed McGee and Pinkus on statewide television. To say the least McGee could not figure out how he had done this nor why Wallace's specious and illogical arguments could succeed in the face of strong factual evidence and logic. Wallace won the primary in Indiana in 1964. And, Michael Calvin McGee's future life plans changed. He decided to wait to attend the University of Michigan Law School, until he finished his graduate studies in communication at Cornell University. Please understand, McGee considered Wallace to be as dangerous as Hitler and he had to know how such individuals could become so strong and powerful with a discourse of exclusion and in most cases hate and fear.

McGee's Rhetorical Quest and the Demise of the Cornell Ph.D. Program

Cornell University evidently had the finest graduate education in rhetorical studies in the country in the early 1960s. Numerous individuals who claimed leadership in the discipline at the time, such as Edwin Black, had received their doctorates from Cornell. Yet, when a University committee evaluated the Cornell department and the discipline, then known as Speech and Drama, the discipline came up lacking. Cornell, the "finest Ph.D. program" of its time received the axe. This decision meant that neither McGee nor his good friend and fellow student, Dick Ranta, could finish their graduate studies at Cornell. They were permitted to finish the Master's degree but then both had to move to another institution to finish their graduate education.

McGee never forgot the elitism of the Ivy League, the dearth of outstanding scholarship in the discipline at that time, nor the need to earn the respect of the power brokers of the Academy; e.g., historians and philosophers.

McGee gave himself two options – going to Michigan Law or working with Donald C. Bryant, his Masters Thesis advisor/mentor, John Bakke’s Ph.D. advisor. That meant going to The University of Iowa. Both Ranta and McGee showed up in Iowa City, Fall 1967 to finish their Ph.D. program.

McGee’s Response to Donald Bryant’s Class in Middle Age and Renaissance Rhetoric

Mike, as he was called, missed one of Professor Bryant’s seminars. Bryant called him into his office to take him to task for an unexcused and unacceptable absence. Few, if any, Professors in the discipline at the time could be as biting as Bryant in his prime. A scholar of British Public Address, Bryant told McGee “If you have something better to do with your time than attend this class then show me by bringing me a publishable paper at its end.” And so, McGee, who seldom if ever, turned down a challenge, took it up. He spent his class time in the library researching and writing his first publication, *Thematic Reduplication in Christian Rhetoric*, *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, Vol. LVI, April 1970, Number 2, pg. 196-204.

McGee Leaves Iowa and Chooses the University of Alabama over Harvard

Few, if any, ever questioned McGee’s intellectual talents. Many, however, often questioned his judgment; particularly, his decision to turn down Harvard University when offered a five-year contract to teach Rhetoric in a line that kept the presence of Rhetoric in Harvard’s curriculum. At the time, graduate students left once their coursework had been completed and they had passed their Ph.D. comprehensives and had a dissertation prospectus approved by their committee.

Thus, McGee went on the job market without having finished the dissertation. The job market could not have been better. The 1960s in many ways were the Golden Age of the modern research university. McGee received fifteen+ job offers (I have the letters of offer in a trunk). He, however, had a wife, a new baby, Heather and lots of bills to pay. His choice ultimately came down to who offered him the most money with a promise that he could teach in summer school. Consider the extremes he confronted – Harvard offered him \$5,000 without the dissertation in hand and \$7,000 with it; Alabama offered him \$12,000 with guaranteed summer teaching.

For years, Bryant harbored ill feelings about McGee’s decision as did many others in the field, particularly those who had held the Harvard Rhetoric line and suffered the low pay so they could “name their job in any other school in the country because they had taught at Harvard.” With McGee’s refusal to accept Harvard’s

offer, the discipline lost the Rhetoric line and it's never been recovered.

McGee as Catalyst at Alabama – Spring 1970

In 1969, I worked as the faculty's work-study student including Mike McGee's "secretary" as he liked to say. By Spring term 1970, I was in McGee's class reading Eric Hoffer's well-known text, *The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements* and actively involved in the small anti-war movement on campus.

On May 1, 1970, I heard bits of the day's War news; then it was time to go to work. I went to McGee's office to check in and see what work needed to be done. Instead, he said, "So what are you and your friends going to do about the US bombing of Cambodia and its expansion of the Vietnam War." That morning, none of my activist friends, most members of the local SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) had put forth any ideas – of course most of the house was still sleeping when I left. But, I went back to them with McGee's question, "what are we going to do about this illegal incursion into Cambodia?" And so began, three weeks of demonstrations, abuse from Tuscaloosa police who covered their badges with duck tape, 6'5" State Troopers coming in to replace them so peace could be maintained, hundreds of students getting arrested on laws that did not exist. All of this began with a simple question from a professor to a student. McGee knew the question to ask and who to ask it of for the situation. Provocateur and catalyst describe him in intellectual, personal, and political circles. With a single question, Michael Calvin McGee changed my life and many other people's lives forever.

But, McGee's passion for "doing the right thing" often got the best of him. He did not give any leeway to foolish administrators as they mishandled anti-war demonstrations following the bombing of Cambodia. He claimed he called the Assistant Dean of the College of Liberal Arts a "congenital idiot" for the administration's reaction to the protests on campus. Of course, if it had not been for McGee, there may never have been protests at the University of Alabama in May 1970.

Earlier in the Spring, the department brought John Bakke, Associate Professor of Speech and Drama at Memphis State University to campus. McGee hoped to recruit him to Alabama, but instead, Bakke ended up recruiting McGee and my mentor Jack Sloan to Memphis. And so, McGee left Tuscaloosa after a single year to go to Memphis State University to be with the duo of John Bakke and Mike Osborn – both young, brilliant professors.

McGee Comes into His Own

McGee remained in Memphis from 1970 - 1976. By then, he had caught the attention of Edwin Black, Professor at the University of Wisconsin Madison and Editor of the Quarterly Journal of Speech, with his essay "In Search of 'The People': A Rhetorical Alternative", Volume 61, October 1975, Number 3, pp. 235-249. The essay won the James A. Winans/Herbert A. Wichelns Award for Distinguished Scholarship in Rhetoric and Public Address, National Communication Association in 1976.

McGee moved to the University of Wisconsin, Summer 1976, so he could teach Ph.D. students. He bemoaned the fact that Memphis State had only a Master's program in which he found exceptional students he had to send elsewhere for further education. On his journey to Wisconsin, McGee took his attitude of caring deeply for his graduate students as scholars, students, and as family. Wisconsin did not take well to this attitude. Thus, a 'disconnect' with his Wisconsin colleagues was inevitable. When a student ran up against the traditions of Wisconsin graduate study, McGee jumped into the fray arguing that "it mattered" how students were treated by professors and the system. He understood Wisconsin's attitude to be opposite his – one of disinterest and rigidity rather than one of intense interest and caring. In 1979, McGee chose to leave Wisconsin for his Alma Mater, The University of Iowa and to continue his research and writing. He had turned down an exceptional offer from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute to be the Chair of the Department there, due to his concern that administration would take its toll on his creativity. (While at Wisconsin, McGee changed his publication name from Michael C. McGee to Michael Calvin McGee and so it stayed until his passing.)

In May 1979, McGee joined the Iowa faculty where he remained until taking disability in 1999 and early retirement. Following this, McGee taught graduate courses for the University of Memphis (previously Memphis State) via the internet and technology to provide distance graduate teaching for students in the new Memphis Ph.D. program. And so, in many ways, McGee went full circle with the two institutions he loved deeply – The University of Iowa and The University of Memphis. In fact, John Bakke, and McGee were well into planning a jointly taught course for Spring 2003 at the time of his passing.

McGee's love of teaching and the life of the mind never left him; only his energy and his breath. I know that his work, his ideas and his love of asking the unanswerable question and of seeking those answers at the primary and the metaphysical level continue.

And, I trust that those who worked with him and learned from him care as much about helping young scholars find their voices as much as he did.

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