Sapere Aude – Dare to Be Wise: 02 Robert J. McDermott, PhD

CHILDHOOD

Full name: Robert James McDermott

Tell me about where you were born and how you grew up.

I was born in Madison, Wisconsin, home to a world class university, and the seat of municipal, county, and state governments. When I was growing up there, and long before it became a city of size, it had five local television stations (pre-cable, pre-satellite, pre-streaming), two daily newspapers, and multiple radio stations. One had to work hard *not* to be informed. Then and now, it is set apart from other cities by its excellent education system, one that is respectful of teachers and embraces the value of learning among persons with diverse race, ethnicity, language, and ableness, among other qualities.

Madison also is a place with rich traditions in the performing, visual, and literary arts, business and industry, scholarship, and athletics. There were advantages to growing up in this environment and there are many notable persons who were born there or spent extended time there: artists and architects such as Frank Lloyd Wright and Georgia O'Keefe; business and industry figures such as Oscar Mayer, whose products filled my lunchbox, and Judith Faulkner (CEO-Founder of Epic Systems – e.g., MyChart); politicians Stacey Abrams (of Georgia fame), Liz Cheney (yes, *that* one), and Senator Gaylord Nelson (founder of *Earth Day*); authors Lorraine Hansberry (*A Raisin in the Sun*) and Thornton Wilder (three-time Pulitzer prize recipient); journalists David Maraniss (Pulitzer Prize recipient – *Washington Post*), Rita Braver and Jeff Greenfield (TV network investigative reporters), Michele Norris (NPR host), musicians Ben Sidran, Boz Scaggs, and Steve Miller; actors, directors and screenwriters Bradley Whitford (*The West Wing*), Jane Kaczmarek (*Malcolm in the Middle*), Tom Wopat (*The Dukes of Hazzard*), Jerry Zucker, David Abrahams, and David Zucker (*Airplane!*), and Chris Farley (*SNL*); scholars and scientists John Bardeen (only two-time recipient of the Nobel Prize in Physics), Aldo Leopold ("environmental ethics"), John Muir (founder of the environmental movement), Carl Rogers (humanistic psychology, client-centered therapy), and Abraham Maslow (hierarchy of needs); and athletes – Beth Heiden (national or world champion in speedskating, cycling, and cross-country skiing) and Eric Heiden (five speedskating gold medals in the 1980 Winter Olympics), and Bob Suter and Mark Johnson (two stars of the 1980 "Miracle" Olympic gold-medal-winning USA hockey team).

What did your parents do for a living?

Although not perfect by conventional metrics, my parents, *as parents*, excelled in many ways. My father, Auty, was born in the passionately Irish Dorchester section of Boston, the youngest of four children. At age four, his mother died; with his father working multiple jobs, his rearing was left primarily to a sister, just five years his senior. His father was somewhat distant and ill-tempered, and of his two brothers, one was kind but the other was cold and aloof. During the Great Depression, and despite being both bright and creative, Auty left school to go to work to help support the family. During World War II, he joined the Army Air Corps and was assigned to the China-Burma-India (CBI) theater of war, flying in unarmed cargo aircraft over the "Hump" from India to China dropping supplies to Chinese and American forces fighting the invading Japanese. His military record was a distinguished one, despite the experiences of war and the region's indigenous diseases. He endured a three-month episode of blindness due to severe conjunctivitis. He was decorated by both the American and Chinese governments. His training as a radio operator brought him to Madison, where he met his future wife and had two children – my older brother, John (1946), and me (1953). He remained there after the war and spent his work life mainly as a truck driver, rarely missing work. Interestingly, I do not know of a single person who disliked him and I know of no one he ever turned down for a favor. A friend of

his once said, "If I had ten more men like 'Mac,' I could run the world."

My mother, Rosemary, was a native Madisonian and the youngest of three children born and raised in the Irish ward of a multi-ethnic downtown neighborhood. She was smart, wise, and industrious. However, after completing high school, she received no encouragement for further formal education, a true shame. She was capable of being a company CEO, a political champion, or a writer-journalist; in today's vernacular people would say that she possessed "a lot of people skills." Her father died when she was 19 and her two brothers were bestowed the booming custom-made furniture and upholstery business that my grandfather started in 1917. Whereas the term "sexism" did not enter the language until the feminist and civil rights movements of the 1960s, I cannot help but reflect on the unfairness of her educational deprivation and how she was snubbed where the business (and its modest wealth) were concerned. There was nothing compensatory that she received – and when talking about these matters years later, she would facetiously proclaim – "I most definitely '*got the business*.'"

After stints with the telephone company and a printing firm, she worked most of her adult life as a secretary to the national advertising manager of Madison Newspapers, Inc. She got to "oversee" about a dozen sales*men*, most of whom would have her get them coffee, send flowers to their wives on holidays and birthdays, buy their anniversary gifts for them, and "cover" for them when their martini lunches became extended. These activities were expected as part of her employment; eventually, she drew the line at shopping for their girlfriends. Their sexist disrespect for her may not have been uncommon in the 1950s office setting, but when I was five years old, during an after-party party at our home, I witnessed her verbal protests as the sound of her voice awakened me and I saw one of the office "gentlemen" follow her upstairs and attempt to force himself on her. She handled the incident better than I did, but it was a mighty and lasting life lesson for me. When I watched the TV series *Mad Men*, set in the same era, recollection of the accounts of her work life returned to me in startling fashion as the portrayals had an uncanny accuracy. However, throughout life, my mother was there to guide and encourage (and worry), but most of all, she was always a presence for right and justice.

What about your education, your educational environment, and your interests in high school?

Kindergarten (1958) provided another important life lesson for me. On the playground before the bell on school day one, I watched as the only black child at school was assaulted and beaten up by some of my white peers. After being dared to participate, I joined in the fray. That evening at home I reported the incident to my mother. She told me it was a dreadful thing to do and told me to find this boy and apologize to him the next day – which I did. He thanked me and asked why I helped the others. I had no satisfactory answer. Perhaps not too surprisingly, he became the toughest kid at school. From that day forward no one ever challenged him again; he became a close friend, and on at least two occasions, my defender against persons who aimed to do me physical harm. Issues of prejudice mostly ended for me with one day of school, yet just a few years later, matters of civil rights would define our country.

Overall, I liked school, wanted to succeed there, and enjoyed most of my teachers – whom I wanted to impress and make my family proud. My parents instilled in me that dedicated work would merit reward. However, it came at a social cost. Whereas some peers admired my success and looked up to me, several scoffed at my achievements and equated academic prowess with being weak and nerdy. I endured both teasing and threats. To that end, outside the classroom, school was not so much fun.

We all remember great and influential teachers. I had at least two. My ninth-grade math teacher challenged us and never cut us any slack. One did not dare show up unprepared in her class. She made us better and we came away understanding the meaning and value of "earned achievement." There was also the band director. He echoed the philosophy made famous by

legendary football coach Vince Lombardi of "you give 100% all of the time, you seek perfection all of the time, and although true perfection can never really be achieved, you strive to be the best you can be all of the time – and not just some of the time." Although he left teaching after only a few years, he imparted the concept of being your best and encouraging others.

Academic success notwithstanding, the tacit wisdom was that popularity at school arose from a combination of being a *slightly above average* student and a capable athlete. Whereas I was never an elite athlete, I *was* a capable one. By high school I was a relatively fast runner who also could throw a football on a clothesline trajectory or kick it through goal posts from 30+ yards away, pitch or hit a baseball, and make jump shots from a distance that now (but not then) counts for three points. However, being anything short of an "elite" athlete at my school was the equivalent of getting a C- in gym class. There had been two football All-Americans who grew up on my street; they played in the National Football League (NFL); another local played on the aforementioned Gold Medal hockey team.

Physically, I did not look like an athlete – at about six feet tall I was scrawny and gangly – even at graduation I weighed only 117 pounds. Coaches encouraged me to "go out for trigonometry." But, as a junior I tied a 20-year-old city record for the mile run; however, by my senior year, two adversaries from another local school and a third from some forty miles away were challenging the national high school record, while I was nursing injuries. Two eventually were invited to the Olympic trials and one ran in the 1972 Munich Olympics. In terms of sports, I was well on my way to being the next Bob Uecker. Academically, I graduated tops in my high school class of 714 students, but without recognition. My high school was the only one of the five in town not to bestow the honor of valedictorian. Valedictorians were introduced at commencement, made speeches, and got their pictures in the newspaper – but not me. Whereas I had the personal satisfaction of being #1, with no "All-Conference" honor to put on my resume, the lack of distinction hurt. That slight notwithstanding, I still believed that meritorious performance would be rewarded someday.

EDUCATION

Undergraduate and graduate education – influences and experiences.

For all of my college life, even reaching back to my last year-and-a-half of high school, I worked at a local newspaper. My roles varied but gained me experience in hearing about and sympathizing with consumers' perspectives on customer service (and non-service), how city rooms operated, and what business mindsets are about. I also tried my hand at editing classified ads and writing obituaries, forcing me to learn the skill of *word economy*, i.e., newspapers cannot sell advertising in space taken up by unnecessary word clutter. I strolled the sidelines of NFL games as a photographer's assistant; briefly, I was an entertainment columnist's aide, and brushed shoulders with recording artists of the day when concerts came to town. I worked with slightly older peers who later would be editorial leaders of the *Washington Post*. I met several politicians, activists, and journalists who passed through those 1970s doors – Jane Fonda and Tom Hayden, George McGovern, Ted Kennedy, Richard Nixon and Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein. In comparison, college was something of a letdown.

I was not sure what I wanted to do in college but I was attracted to medicine, and to science in general. Pursuing a career in academia also had appeal because I had a close friend whose mother was an academic. In contrast to conditions at my house, I noted how next to the chair where she read there was always a foot-high stack of journal articles on one side, and a stack of exams or term papers on the other. Whereas the dining room table at my house had a Victorian-style lace tablecloth and candlesticks, their dining room table was cluttered with books, a typewriter, more articles, and handwritten manuscript pages on a lined notepad. I liked the "scholarly look." I spent many evenings at their house from before high school until the start of college, including some when the adults' book club comprised

mostly of university scholars convened. Although the names meant little to me at the time, I came to realize that there were some giants in the book club: the aforementioned psychologist, Carl Rogers; Harry Harlow (psychologist noted for his study of primate bonding with objects as surrogate parents); paleontologist J.T. Robinson and his wife, Sybil, also a distinguished scholar (Theater and Drama); Philip Lewis Jr., (Landscape Architecture, and promoter of the "environmental corridor" concept) and his wife, Libby, an environmental advocate in her own right; Betty Boardman (leader of the campus and community anti-Vietnam War movement), and her husband, Eugene Boardman (East Asian History scholar and anti-war activist), among others. Children of these individuals accompanied them and I noted how the things about which they spoke differed from conventional topics shared with my *other* friends. Whereas other friends and I debated how many games the Packers might win that year, these peers shifted the conversation to mechanisms for U.S. disengagement from Vietnam, ensuring economic gains for unemployed urban blacks and Hispanics, and establishing peace talks with Russia, China, and Cuba. It was a revelation – if not a wake-up call.

When my friend's mother accepted a faculty position elsewhere, I visited him and encountered additional persons of scholarly renown – Carl Sagan (Astronomy), Uri Bronfenbrenner (Ecological Systems Theory, contributor to creation of Head Start), Irving Lazar (Early Childhood Education and promoter of Head Start), Joseph Califano (Secretary of HEW in the Carter Administration), and Barbara Wertheimer (Director of the Institute for Women and Work at the Industrial and Labor Relations School). The commitment to an academic career was gathering fuel.

College started well – success in arduous chemistry, biology, and calculus classes, weekend dates with my high school girlfriend, and occasional guy time for philosophizing and beer drinking. This pattern continued for a couple of years during which I was just shy of being a *straight A* student. Taking science classes involves lengthy labs – for instance, organic chemistry, which met Friday afternoons 1:20-5:30 and continued on Saturday mornings 7:30-11:50. It required sacrifice, as one missed Friday night parties, Saturday morning sleep-ins, and during football season, pre-game tailgating. I was envious of friends majoring in business whose curriculum liberated them from Thursday afternoon until the following Monday. I was still confident that my labors would produce something meritorious.

My future looked bright until I got hit with an unanticipated curve ball. The U.S. Selective Service made me its #1 draft choice – just as the Nixon Administration was furthering its secret incursions in Laos and Cambodia. Although my high school had not recognized my #1 status, the government was more than happy to celebrate me and sent an invitation to report for a physical exam, and later, induction. I had moved well beyond my hawkish youth and was now strongly anti-war, having been profoundly influenced by, among others, the Boardmans, the events at Kent State, and the bombing of the Army-Math Research Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison by four activists, including two from my high school. Ultimately, I received a deferment and did not go to war. However, in the interim, the lack of a clear future sidetracked me, and in the short run, my attendance at school, and in turn, my grades, suffered. When I regained direction, I put the medical school application on hold, and decided that my anticipated B.S. dual degree in zoology and chemistry was unlikely to get me employment in a weak job market. I used a summer and fall to take required education courses that facilitated a teaching credential as a temporary stop-gap. One of the statutorily required courses – *Health Information for Teachers* – was taught by Warren H. Southworth, a Lynn, Massachusetts native whose doctorate in public health was from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where he studied with legendary community health pioneer, Clair E. Turner. Southworth came to Wisconsin in the 1940s and was instrumental in public health and education initiatives that addressed outbreaks of tuberculosis and polio. He was an advocate for school health education. His most productive years were behind him when we became

acquainted, but he merged my interests in health and education and I made the aspirational shift from medical school to graduate school. He was my advisor for both my M.S. and Ph.D. programs.

His Boston background was perfect because of my father's history, and among other things, we spent many days discussing where one might find the best New England clam chowder – this, at a time when clam chowder was as easy to find in Wisconsin as 90-degree days in January. I asked my father, who produced homemade chowder every Friday, to include some for a lunch with my mentor. When Southworth first tasted it he smiled and said, "this is *Depression chowder* – it brings back memories." I was puzzled until he explained that to make meals stretch during the Great Depression, New Englanders added generous portions of milk to the "mash," giving it a thin quality – something that my father continued to do into the 1990s. I must say that I prefer the real thing over the Depression version, but history is important and in the process, I learned how families survived the Depression.

Southworth pushed me to enroll in as many public health and preventive medicine courses as possible – and including those, other measurement courses, and access to a first-hand oral history of the previous 40 years of public health, I had a well-rounded education. When a biostatistics class conflicted with some other required course, he recommended a Department of Agronomy alternative. This was serendipitously ingenious as the course was a hybrid of statistics and research design. I came to realize that planting wheat, corn, and soybeans – and varying the fertilizer, sunshine, and irrigation – could translate to school 1, school 2, and school 3 and the offer of distinct versions or levels of intervention. I learned the *ins* and *outs* of designs, such as the Latin Square, that only rarely got coverage in other research courses – and never in a statistics course. The value of interdisciplinary work as a "promotor gene" in health behavior research took hold.

I might have moved on and out after the master's degree except for three things: (1) I was not impressed by the skills of some peers who concurrently finished *that degree*; (2) I was offered a graduate assistantship, tuition waiver, health insurance, and an office; and (3) I had two office mates, ahead of me in doctoral studies, from whom I could learn the things that do not get into curricula. Moreover, I was now inspired and hooked; I felt I had found my purpose. As mentoring as Southworth could be, he also could be a gruff *"x!#x*&x"* and make himself unavailable just when you could most use his attention. Perhaps his style was purposeful, requiring me to seek out answers alone – I am not sure, but his unapproachability at times resulted in my developing self-sufficiency and critical thinking skills, not necessarily universal attributes of emerging degree-holders.

Southworth's interest in infectious diseases and in school health led me to include both elements as I prepared my doctoral research. My dissertation title was *Planning for the Future of STD Education in the Public Schools*. My mixed-methods study showed that education and public health were so complacent about health education in general, and sex education and infectious disease in particular, that the system could be ill-equipped in responding to a disease outbreak. Although I was thinking in terms of conventional sexually transmissible diseases, less than three months post-degree, what became the HIV/AIDS epidemic emerged. My stated fears had become prophetic.

PROFESSIONAL LIFE

Let's move beyond your education time and talk about your career.

My first post-PhD job almost did not happen. Interviewing with the dean of a college of education did not start well. Our conversation went something like this:

Dean: You are just leaving a graduate program – what would you say was the most useful course you took?
Me: Easy, it was ballroom dancing!

Dean: What the *...x!#x*&x*…? Not exactly what I was hoping you would say.
Me: I was rather good. I later taught ballroom, disco, and Latin dances. I gained confidence. I was popular at clubs and weddings. Through ballroom dancing I met my future wife, Kay. No other course *ever* did anything like that for me.

Dean: Let me ask you this – what is the most important trait that a college instructor should have?
Me: Again, an easy one – a sense of humor – laugh at yourself and with others.

Dean: What if you don't have a good sense of humor?
Me: Try to develop one.

Dean: What if you don't succeed at developing one?
Me: Well, I'm not sure; I guess you go into administration.

By the time I was to my next interview, the dean had called the department office and recommended that I be escorted to an early-departing aircraft. Fortunately, the chair knew of Southworth's recommendation that I was "the best T.A. he had had in 37 years" and it made a difference – I was hired. The dean and I eventually developed a strong mutual respect and laughed about our first moments together – in the process, proving that *even difficult people* can develop a sense of humor.

From a learning perspective, my five years at that institution were the equivalent of ten, seeing both the good and bad that academic institutions bring to bear. I had three senior mentors and one other who was emerging as a bright star, and to this day, is one of the best thinkers I know. I honed my teaching and developed a broad base of content expertise. I also cut my research teeth but learned that institutions need a philosophy and an infrastructure to support high-level studies. Unfortunately, I did not find those elements there, but I left with a better command of research fundamentals than when I arrived.

I moved to a new college of public health at an emerging university. I spent more than 25 years there, rose through the ranks, interacted with a wide array of colleagues, and had experiences that confirmed my long-held beliefs that academic and research programs are best when conducted through an interdisciplinary lens. We built a competitive doctoral program from scratch. We connected with local and state health officials. For years, I felt that I had the best job of its kind in the country. I developed an international education and research program, and along with two colleagues, an annual interdisciplinary conference with the University of Cologne, still in existence. I received numerous accolades from external professional peers and found the "merit" I had often sought when the American Academy of Health Behavior was born.

Describe the most courageous thing you have had to do in your academic career – perhaps something that put you at risk for the sake of standing up for a principle.

Whereas I have spent nearly seven decades working in universities, mostly public ones, I became disillusioned early on with academia, propelling me to become more outspoken over time. It was not a smart move on my part, but not an incorrect one. University officials do not enjoy being told that their baby is ugly. Disillusionment came from many sources. For example, the percentage of State support for one university close to my heart was around 43% in the 1970s; today it is about 14%. *The Hetchinger Report* in 2019 showed that 2007-2017 per-student funding in Alabama, Arizona, Illinois, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania and South Carolina declined > 30%. Institutions compensate for this loss through private support, federal dollars, research grants, and tuition increases, but not all are successful. I have been at schools that failed to make the hard decisions during increasingly austere times, deciding instead to – (1) maintain failing graduate programs because they are historically important at the school, the equivalent of keeping the doctorate in stagecoach driving, because 175 years ago that skill was relevant; (2) accept graduate students "because

head count matters" regardless of applicant qualifications or means of support; (3) launch new "sexy" degree programs because they can attract students and receive capitation funding – e.g., the public health undergraduate degree – despite the fact that per student funding is not infinite, the program requires allocation of already stretched resources, and one reduces the credential for professional entry, and in turn, compensation; (4) maintain programs with declining student enrollments, declining faculty productivity, or both, instead of jettisoning them; (5) merge two or more low-enrollment programs even when the groups of faculty and students share only peripheral interests and work histories; (6) tenure persons who have not met or only marginally met the criteria – "so we won't lose the line" – whereas faculty lines can be defended and regained in the future, poor tenure decisions can haunt for decades; and (7) live in an institutional "bubble" believing that past greatness carries you to the future, failing to recognize that the present already is different, the future will be vastly different, and just maybe you were never as good as you thought you were. Nevertheless, some programs subscribe to the most famous line from the movie, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* – "when the legend becomes fact, print the legend." We work in science with quantitative and qualitative data – why do leaders often fail to apply "research" to the tough decisions faced in higher education?

I have borne witness to and even been a victim of programs lowering expectations about student performance and placing the burden of adjustment on faculty – challenging a person of another gender makes one sexist, or if of the same gender, a bully; challenging a person of color makes one a racist; challenging a non-traditional student suggests ageism, and so on. Attempting to teach students the origins of some contemporary health beliefs, I regularly shared those based on the Judaic Hygienic Code or the Code of Hammurabi and read excerpts from the Bible (e.g., Book of Leviticus of the Old Testament), the Quran, and the Tanakh/Torah. Despite having no objections over thirty years using this approach, some students started becoming offended – not merely offended, but "deeply offended" by the religious inferences. Even among Christian students, it mattered whether the cited text came from the *Good News Bible*, the *Jerusalem Bible*, or the *King James Bible*. Teaching no longer was about helping students to make connections and promote critical thinking; it was about packaging information and selling it like unscented soap. We have to accept responsibility for some of the pushback we see today from state legislatures and boards that govern state universities or entire state systems – pushback that curtails what is taught or how it is taught, and pushback to an office of diversity, equity, and inclusion, a perfectly reasonable and necessary element that maybe got applied overzealously at times. Michael Karson (2021) writes, "Awareness of unfairness in the treatment of others not only makes the world a better place and us better people, it creates a culture in which the marginalized receive empathy instead of blame. Everyone has marginalized thoughts, feelings, and desires. Everyone has a history of managing unfair expectations and humiliations. A woke culture would be a pleasure to live in for everyone." However, he goes on to say, "*But every movement is susceptible to becoming the thing it despises*." Possibly one of the marginalized groups that needs protection is comprised of people with alternative views, not hateful ones, but *notably different* ones. *Tolerance* is a value to be championed, as it has been lost on a number of campuses that make the news when controversial speakers get "uninvited." We need *diversity of thought* as much as we do of race, gender, and the others. Perhaps universities have failed to make a thorough evaluation of the impact of "cancel culture" and "wokeism." Not long ago I conducted exit interviews with MPH students and got an earful from some regarding how they were afraid to interject their conservative views into discussions about policy or politics. Some reported that when they did so they were shouted down by fellow students or embarrassed by faculty members. All institutions have a philosophy, motto, vision, and/or mission – I doubt that any of their stated values includes "sanction, censure, or shut down any forum for

the opposition." There is no question but that universities must safeguard students and staff against bigotry and harassing "isms;" however, protocols and judgments must be fair and respectful. They are not always so.

What has been your proudest research or other professional accomplishment to date?

I had one early career research accolade – articles I co-wrote addressing the prevalence of smokeless tobacco use by youth were cited in the *Report of the Surgeon General on the Health Effects of Smokeless Tobacco*, a document giving rise to warning labels on these products. Later, I contributed to an initiative resulting in objectives about social marketing being included in *Healthy People 2020* and *Healthy People 2030*. However, my best moment was playing a role in our institution being awarded a Prevention Research Center by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, introducing a planning and evaluation model encompassing principles of community organization and social marketing – but even more notably, the camaraderie of sharing success with dear colleagues Carol Bryant, Kelli Brown, and Melinda Forthofer. That era of team effort was my professional *Camelot*.

Tell me about the philosophy that guides your research chain of inquiry and other academic pursuits.

My philosophy is not a complex one. First, partake in "think-tanking" to draw out as many ideas as possible. Second, never shrink from the prospect of interdisciplinary inquiry.

Inasmuch as you have been successful in disseminating your research, what advice do you have for young professionals who struggle?

First, be persistent. Second, make sure that you do research that matters – research responsive to *Healthy People* goals or *World Health Organization* objectives, or to other groups that monitor population health. There is a lot of effort consumed by "so what" types of projects, even if they produce an abstract and a poster or a paper. Third, when you enter into research, do so with thoughts about the implications of your findings – i.e., how do they translate to practice – something more than "*this work adds to the growing body of extant literature*" on such-and-such. Not every study produces a dramatic effect for practice, but researchers do not think about implications enough. Fourth, avoid the needless complexity of scientific writing that makes translation opaque. Finally, take time to "sift and winnow" professional knowledge, a metaphor for pursuit of truth coined by Charles Kendall Adams in 1894.

What single best piece of advice would you pass along to a new investigator or student researcher-in-training today?

If you are still in the formative stage of your research career, find a mentor. In addition, if you can be part of a stable and continuing research team, seize the moment. The best research with which I was ever involved was as part of a team. Teamwork inspires you, motivates you, unleashes your instincts about responsibility, and drives you to be better in all aspects of your research life.

When your professional career ends, how would you like to be remembered?

I do not need to be remembered for papers I wrote – I would prefer to be remembered as one who encouraged the underdog student or junior faculty member who needed an opportunity for success.

Professionals in any field have been known to say there is a price for success – to what extent has that been your experience in the academic world?

I did not keep my social and professional worlds separate enough. If I had a do-over, I would keep better boundaries between work and home. Moreover, I would make vacations true vacations

– rather than times to work on papers without the day-to-day interruptions.

LIFE OUTSIDE OF ACADEMIA

Who are the people outside of your professional world who have impacted your life and what have some of those impacts been?

My brother, John, was a mentor for me during childhood. He elevated my game. I have mentioned a couple of teachers but in reality, there were many. I had neighbors, family friends, and others who modeled the behavior of hard work, generosity with time, and the imparting of wisdom. To name them all could consumer this entire essay. If I had a do-over, I would have spent more time with them.

What are some leisure time activities for which you have a passion?

I enjoy travel to other countries but not as a "tourist" – I embed myself in the culture or community – taking in the pub, the market, or the outdoor café (versus sites in the brochure) where I can observe people and life. I also like history and museums. I consume videos and books containing historiographic viewpoints. I would have embraced being a historian-author. Finally, I like to study, read about, and evaluate wine (spoiler alert: it requires tasting). One can learn a lot about a region and a culture by studying its wines. Ben Franklin was right – "wine is proof that God loves us and wants us to be happy."

If you could spend an evening with anyone, living or dead, contemporary character or historical figure, who would it be and what would you want to talk about?

The first person who comes to mind is Muhammad Ali. Although he was the greatest boxer in my lifetime, I am really more interested in how he dealt with the stress of persecution and the prospect of giving up not only a career, but the art that he honed for years to near perfection. Whereas they are not the most famous of his quotes, I am especially fond of *"He who is not courageous enough to take risks will accomplish nothing in life."* and *"Only a man who has been defeated can reach down to the bottom of his soul and come up with the extra ounce of power it takes to win when the match is even."* I would ask him to elaborate and just listen. The second person is Robin Williams. I have no idea what the conversation would be about, but I wonder how long I could keep up before exhaustion overcame me.

If you weren't doing what you are doing career-wise, what would you be doing?

I would have been a social justice lawyer. I would have thrived on the scholarship of researching and contributing to case history books. If I had a do-over, I probably would *not* select academia.

Which three books outside of academia would you recommend for others to read and why?

The most influential book of my life was Philip Slater's *The Pursuit of Loneliness – American Culture at the Breaking Point* (1970). A description of it from www.philipslater.net notes, "While new governments around the world strive for democracy, the United States is becoming increasingly authoritarian and undemocratic. Congress-bashing and low voter turnout are symptoms of a larger decline in our faith in the sharing of power and information. He explains what democracy means at a personal level – at work, in politics, in religion, and at home – and how some of our most familiar and unquestioned assumptions tend to undermine it." Sound familiar? Check the publication date again! The second book is David Brooks' (2023) *How to Know a Person*. He describes that getting to know someone is an art and how certain techniques facilitate people doing a deep dive on you as well. The third is Barbara Tuchman's (1962) *The Guns of August*, in which she details the miscalculations that led to the first world war. President John F. Kennedy referenced the book during the Cuban missile crisis.

Share something about yourself that you believe is misunderstood by others.

My sense of humor has served me well but also has made my relationships with some people a trifle edgy. Even with this downside, I would not remake myself from who I am. I am sometimes self-deprecating and I regret that my criticism of people and institutions that lack the courage to be self-reflective and to laugh at themselves is misconstrued as irreverence, arrogance, or an "ism."

Editor's note.

Dr. McDermott joined as the 10th founding member on April 26, 1997. He served as the third president (2003-2004), named a Fellow (1998) and a Research Laureate (2023).

Elbert D. Glover and Robert J. McDermott are the Feature Editors of *Sapere Aude*.