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M.B. McLatchey

Photography by Mark Andrew James Terry

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The beginner's
mind faces life
much like a child,

full of curiosity
and wonder
and amazement.

– MB McLatchey



~ Photos by Mark Andrew James Terry

AL ROCHELEAU INTERVIEWS M.B. McLATCHEY ON HER NEW BOOK, A REMARKABLE MEMOIR FOR TEACHERS, STUDENTS, PARENTS, AND POETS

AR: For a hardcore poet, returning to prose is a walk back. Of course, prose lends itself both to teaching and to narrative, as in this new book, *Beginner's Mind*. And yet, however framed in prose it may be, the offering is somehow *poetry* throughout. Do you think the strain of what is truly poetic winds through our early lives regardless, and that while we may be taught in prose, we yet immerse and arrange our young lives in poetry, the *living* of it? How did Miss D, your fourth-grade teacher, guide for a lifetime, and the focus of this book, understand that?

MB: So why would I, a hardcore poet as you describe, choose to write prose? A great question, and one that took me a long while to appreciate. Robert Frost often viewed it as a matter of choosing your canvas – either the *open field* that prose permits – or the *fencing in* that poetry requires. I knew that *Beginner's Mind* needed that open field. I also knew that it had to be a memoir, although embarking upon the book, I was not sure why. I came to discover, while writing the book, that memoir is really about honing perspective.

The 19th-century novelist, George Meredith, who was a favorite of Oscar Wilde for his experiments in narrative perspective, once stated that “Memoirs are the backstairs of history.” The *backstairs* were, of course, the stairs that the children and the servants used – they were the lookout post from which uttered truths were overheard and from which authentic human dramas were observed.

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Memoir has also historically been recognized as closest to a poet's sensibility. In memoir, as in poetry, the writer remains very much the *witness*. In Carolyn Forché's memoir of her trips to El Salvador, *What You Have Heard Is True*, she leans on a quote from the 18th-century Spanish painter Francisco Goya, "Yo lo vi" (I saw it). This becomes her refrain: "I saw it," Forché writes, "and I saw this, and also this." In this posture of writer-as-witness,

"The poet is very much a cousin to the writer of memoir."

The *witness* in *Beginner's Mind* is a 10-year-old in the fourth grade in a shipyard town south of Boston, who reports to the reader, in classroom scene after classroom scene, the liberating impact of a brilliant and loving fourth-grade teacher named Miss D. This was a teacher who understood how to unleash what the book's title points to: namely, *the beginner's mind*.

So, what is *beginner's mind*? Steve Jobs, when speaking of the creative mind that so strongly influenced him, is quoted as saying, "There's a

phrase in Buddhism called *Beginner's Mind*. It's wonderful to have a beginner's mind." As co-founder of Apple Computer and one of the most creative giants ever known, Jobs championed the concept of beginner's mind as the pioneering force behind his ability to imagine the revolutionary technologies that the Apple brand is known for. Jobs embodied this Zen practice in action, where the mind is left innocent of preconceptions, judgments, and prejudices – where the mind faces life much like a child, full of curiosity and wonder and amazement.

It is a mind that has not been seduced by a call to conformity. And, in the world of ideas, it is the imagination undeterred by the naysayers and the "experts." Put succinctly, the Buddhist monk, Shunryū Suzuki, wisely observed:

"In the beginner's mind, there are many possibilities, but in the expert's mind there are few."

AR: Teaching on the secondary level (and beyond) often involves expanding the scope of things, of learning off a line of many details, of practice, and of gaining one's own perspective eventually by arriving at one's own concepts of the instruction gained. Have you found that your own teaching over the years has tended toward unwinding the complexities of not only writing, but of creation and perception in general, back to the child's easy simplicity, so that you often mirror in your teaching what we find in the accounting of Miss D's lessons in the book?

MB: Did Miss D impact my teaching? Absolutely. And more and more as I grow older. More than a teaching degree from Brown University, more than years of training in workshops and seminars. Miss D was able to inspire her students to re-imagine the directions their lives were taking – in effect, to see the possibilities that open up for us when we ignite our imaginations and when we trust the *rightness* of our convictions – especially when these convictions run counter to the orthodox ideas of the day. A friend of mine, currently an Emeritus in Physics, recalls Einstein stating how he loved talking to young children *because they hadn't yet been brainwashed by education*. And, how Pasteur, so earnest in his desire to see progress in his field, warned fellow scientists to not surrender to the *tyranny of preconceived ideas*. Many of the great stories in history show us that advances in civilization depend upon the maverick, the one who rebels against the gods of conformity.



The best art tells us all the truths we need to know, regardless of our economic or social status. — M.B. McLatchey

The teacher at the center of *Beginner's Mind* shepherded her students, and even urged them to shed their attachments to the status quo and to their somewhat preordained destinies. Virtually every child in her fourth-grade class had fathers and grandfathers who worked at the shipyard. Virtually every one of them naturally imagined a similar future for themselves – if not specifically working at the shipyard, then certainly living a life in step with the shipyard's world view. Work, family, alcohol, and God.

There is no question that I mirror in my teaching what Miss D left as lessons for me. Her lessons are precisely the lessons that I shine light on in my book. Lesson #1: To cultivate a classroom for the *beginner's mind* – a classroom where students are inspired to let the left brain lean on the right brain, to be ready to take risks if needed, and to think outside the box.

AR: Our backgrounds are similar; working class (mine, a cotton mill town, Fall River, 47 miles from your own North Weymouth) and heavily multi-cultural. Do you think such conditions we grew up in made for a kind of equalizer, a common potential of life's ineffable (and simple) aesthetic side, so that writers could indeed have readers everywhere, and so that those who left their towns and made it up the steps of academia and a greater literary world would yet have someone to appreciate them and their work back home?

MB: My earliest mentors in writing, and in some ways my most impactful teachers – in timing and rhythm, and in the power of the pause – were the elders in my family, and the elders in my neighborhood who loved little more than the art of storytelling. They were first-generation Portuguese, Irish, and Italian. Gatherings around my mother's kitchen table and pot-lucks that turned into late-night parties were my first engagement with the performing arts. As I have shared in other conversations, ours was an oral tradition where books found their rightful place in the local library. The symposium occurred around a kitchen table, or at a grandmother's elbow.

Shakespeare's Hamlet famously observed, *The play's the thing wherein we'll learn the conscience of the king*. The play – or the artistic *performance* – is a great leveler of social classes and differences. The best art tells us all the truths we need to know, regardless of our economic or social status. I learned this as a very young girl.

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Trust our own experiences
and in return, the reader
will trust us. — Seamus Heaney



AR: Fourth grade was the same for me, M.B. Sticking with your experience, do you think the grade itself acts as some kind of a fulcrum of inflow and outflow, dictating the future creative balance of the student? Is it that the basics taught earlier may, at that particular time, expand the student’s vision, each individually, *providing* that the fulcrum point includes, as a catalyst, a great, natural teacher?

MB: Perhaps the fourth-grade is, as you say, a kind of “fulcrum” point. Miss D called it an “in between time.” A pre-pubescent age where we have come up from the previous three grades with our established identities as “good student” and “bad student” – labels like overtures that we bring with us as we graduate from grade to grade. Miss D inspired us to shed these labels and begin the work of fashioning a new self.

Graham Greene, regarded by many as one of the leading English novelists of the 20th century, stated that “There is always one moment in childhood when the door opens and lets the future in.” For me, this door opened in the fourth grade under the wing of a remarkable teacher. Now that I reflect on it, undoubtedly this kind of “door opening” has been experienced by many people – but they have simply forgotten it. I say this because, often when I have done public readings of chapters from *Beginner’s Mind*, people approach me afterwards to share their own vivid fourth-grade memories.

AR: The trajectory of your career (which obviously has a long way to go, thank goodness, and with even higher orbits to achieve) is so far remarkable in terms of degrees, publications, teaching credits, and the willing assistance of diverse grandmasters (Seamus Heaney, Richard Wilbur, Michael Harper). With this book, did you feel it was time to encompass what you had learned, alloyed with what you daily instruct to adults, in the form of this unique channeling of teacher/student, returning to the foundations of how you, and we, learn?

MB: Each one of the teachers whom you named exhibited a sense of humility and grace under pressure that continues to instruct me. *The wise man is the one who knows what he does not know*, Socrates famously stated. As a teacher, I attach to the call to self-reflection implicit in that statement. Miss D modeled for me a compassion for students that reminds me to look through a classroom of students to find each student’s unique and individual story. Although she died in 1992, Miss D continues to inspire me to whisper Socrates’s adage to myself before I enter the classroom.

AR: You were mentored over an extended period at Harvard by one of our greatest modern grandmasters, Seamus Heaney. What did he add to this book, considering his own wonderful focus on the magic of the local, of home, and childhood?

MB: Seamus taught us that as writers we should “trust our own experiences” and in return, the reader will trust us. “There is no sense in writing someone else’s poem,” he frequently reminded us, nor should we put “window dressing” on our true experiences. I suppose Seamus also added to my forthcoming book, indirectly, as a frequent reminder of the writer’s necessary posture: self-forgetfulness and an interest in making our art a work of service

somehow. As it happened, the teacher at the center of my book, Miss D, prized exactly this same posture as Seamus did, so I was shepherded through the book by their good spirits.

AR: I am always amazed how quick children are to pick up on anything. Games, rhymes, instantaneous images with which to string. They can respond to their surroundings at a snap, invent all sorts of mechanics, simple or elaborate, on the spot. Most adults, even “educated” ones (or perhaps *especially* those) are dolts by comparison. Miss D seemed to understand this, and so doled out empowerings of creation as if they were lollipops.

MB: Doling out gifts of creation like lollipops. I think you captured it. In writing *Beginner’s Mind*, scenes re-emerged where ancient ideas appeared in Miss D’s classroom like sign-posts. These were posters that Miss D had taped to the classroom walls: “Know Thyself” or “No Man is an Island” – and these axioms hung in the air in the classroom where a collective of thirty-two 10-year-old girls and boys in a shipyard town south of Boston struggled to make sense of their lives.



For a large part of the book, the narrator is a 10-year old girl whose impulse is to embrace this teacher’s dreams for her students – and yet, this is a town where dreams are quietly displaced for the virtues of work and whiskey. And so, there is the question: Will we chase our dreams? Dreams that a teacher affirms in young lives as worthy and noble. Or, will we fall in line, loyal to what our parents and a culture of limited means has designed for us?

“Education is not the filling of a pot, but the lighting of a fire,” the poet Yeats maintained. Miss D was Yeats’s fire starter. She ignited her students’ imaginations. Her classroom was a stage that she had set – and then invited all of her students onto, like actors to whom she would feed very encoded scripts. It was up to us to decode our roles in her classroom. Who we were. What our dreams were. What our fears were. She seemed to meet us for the very first time every single day.

AR: As if in a story, the teacher seems to hold the key. They can water to blossom or they can poison and ruin. And the system? It seems to me that in past decades the teacher was free to teach if they knew they could and so wanted to, rather than be fettered almost automatically by those who administrate, who demand compliance, who check boxes. Now, today, how can teachers teach somehow under the barbed wire of rote scrutiny, and make not only artists, but people who can appreciate such creations? Would Miss D have survived under the constricted definition of “educator” she would have to adhere to today?

MB: Miss D was part of a generation of single, professional women who *LIFE* magazine labeled, “The Golden Age of Spinsters.” This was a period in the United States between the two world wars when women were becoming self-supporting, were remaining unmarried, and were moving into professional careers. They were frequently college graduates and extremely talented. *Beginner’s Mind* opens with the dedication: “For Miss D and for that generation of Misses in our schools that prized immeasurable goals in a place of measured outcomes.” In that era, teachers seemed to have had more freedom to be who they wanted to be, as long as the results were seen in the children. In Miss D’s case, her pushback did not come from administrators – it came from other teachers, and yes, it also came from her fourth-grade students. As her students, we were products of the orthodox way of thinking in the shipyard town she taught in. Her call for us to “look up” to the stars for our inspiration, rather than “look around” for guideposts in a shipyard town – this was a call to arms.

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AR: To your credit, you do not make wrong other methods of teaching, whether in your own elementary school, in its other classes, and the regimens and motivations of mostly good teachers along your way. In your book, they remain as figures left alone in these dioramas of observation and reflection. Intentional?

MB: The poet Yevtushenko observed, “He who is conceived in a cage yearns for the cage.” Miss D rightly perceived that her challenge was not other teachers and not the administrators. It was her students: a collection of 10-year-olds who yearned to return to the simplicity of the world we came from. We were not ready for her brand of enlightenment, her handing over the keys to reimagine ourselves. As 10-year-olds, we were seasoned veterans in the customs and habits that our parents and previous teachers called “learning.” Like the church fathers who threatened Copernicus with death, we were not ready to have our universe opened up. We were not ready for the truth.

And yet, the choice gradually became obvious to us in how we should live our lives. We became apprentices to a remarkable guide that we could not imagine being gone. When we graduated to the fifth and sixth grades, we saw that our teachers loved us best when we were quiet and obedient. One fifth-grade teacher’s favorite gesture was to hold her finger to her lips to *shush* rows of students quiet. She found her students most charming when they were good subjects to a sovereign.

But even here, to this fifth-grade teacher’s credit, the *sovereign* was not the fifth-grade teacher herself. The sovereign was the ingrained and required obedience to rote ways of learning; it was a resignation by all of us to be taught as a collective of thirty-two students, and not as Miss D taught us – as individuals whose wonder and potential were impossible to even guess at.

AR: The lessons throughout this book are a succession of inlaid gems, generously offered by one brilliant person and shined by another. It would take too long to comment on each truism, and I will leave all that reflection to what I hope is a legion of readers. The book has such broad applications to whom that legion may hold in its ranks. For me, it would include students of every stripe, every order and age, and beyond them, every parent who would shepherd their children’s education, certainly every parent with the courage to home-school them (as I did with my youngest son for seven years, from sixth to twelfth grade), to every professional teacher, and to every single poet I know, who could learn from Miss D and, from the beauty of your writing, from you. The book seems to work on so many levels. Was this your intent, or did you find all that coming true as you wrote?

MB: I like Emily Dickinson’s response to the question, “Why do I write?” Her answer: *To know what time it is*. As isolated as she was, Dickinson recognized that writers are inevitably witnesses *to* their time, as well as voices *for* their time. In writing *Beginner’s Mind*, I had a compelling sense of what time it was. One of our most compelling questions today for parents, homeschooling parents, and for teachers-in-training is “How do we want teachers to teach our children?”

Miss D has the answer: To foster and nurture the *beginner’s mind*. She was someone who instinctively



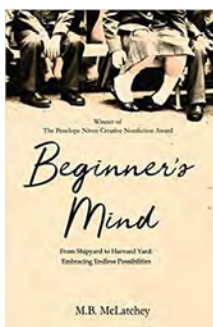
trusted the power of fewer directives and more leaning on one's imagination. In a sense, I think her teaching methods paved the way for how I had to craft scenes in the book – to *show*, rather than *tell* the reader, what the beginner's mind is. My hope is that parents, teachers in training, and homeschooling parents will take up the book and be inspired by her model of compassion for the whole child.

Miss D liked to give us a wink as we left her classroom at the end of the day, an assurance that she would be there when we returned. My hope is that this book will be a wink back at her – gratitude for her everlasting imprint on the lives of so many of us that, over the decades, passed through her classroom.

M.B. McLatchey holds a degree in Comparative Literature from Harvard University, a Masters in Teaching from Brown University, the M.F.A. in writing from Goddard College, and a B.A. from Williams College. She has over thirty years of teaching college students and has been recognized by her university as Distinguished Teacher of the Year and as Distinguished Scholar. She was awarded Harvard University's coveted Danforth Prize in Teaching as well as the Harvard/Radcliffe Prize for Literary Scholarship, and she received the Elmer Smith Award for Excellence in Teaching from Brown University. M.B. has authored numerous literary reviews, compiled several textbooks for Humanities courses, and has contributed to many books on teaching. She has received national and international literary awards including the May Swenson Poetry Award for her debut poetry collection *The Lame God* published by Utah State University Press and the FLP National Women's Voices Competition Award for her book, *Advantages of Believing*. Her recent awards include the American Poet Prize from the American Poetry Journal, the Editor's Prizes in Poetry from FOLIO Literary Journal and the Spoon River Poetry Review, the Annie Finch Prize for Poetry, the Robert Frost Award in Poetry, the Penelope Niven Creative Nonfiction Award, the New South Writing Award from Georgia State University, the 46'er Prize from the Adirondack Review, and the Vachel Lindsay Poetry Award. She has been featured in Verse Daily and as a "Writer in the Spotlight" by AWP. A tenured Professor of Humanities at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, she also serves as Florida's Poet Laureate for Volusia County and as Arts & Wellness Ambassador for the Atlantic Center for the Arts. Visit her at: www.mbmclatchey.com



M.B. sitting at Dylan Thomas's desk at his childhood home in Wales



[Link to book](#)



SELECTED POEMS

M.B. MCLATCHEY

Smiling at the Executioner

As if the open barrel were a lotus;
its roots anchored in mud.

How undeterred
by murky water, it submerges

and reblooms: petals like crystal
glazed and without residue.

As if you never felt something move:
no welcome and prescient ache,

no sudden flexing, no cycle taking shape.
No memory. No calendar. No yield –

because you are the bullet's shield. As if
you have nothing to lose. As if all that you have

learned to love: the beating heart; the mythic glove
of a palm blooming in the womb; the scent that follows

touch – is suddenly dust. Just the open-grinned,
white-toothed stare down this time;

the stayed and steady practice on your knees
of mastering someone else's pleas.

Originally published: *Sky Island Journal*,
Pushcart Prize Nomination, 2020

SELECTED POEMS

M.B. MCLATCHNEY

Learning the Scriptures

Molusco . . . Aqui . . . Aqui.
Bucket in hand, I follow

his lead. His silhouette
in the early light strikes

a perfect toe point – not ballet
but the liturgy's greeting

in a sun-steamed fandango.
The hard, muddy floor of low tide,

his stage. I see a clam spit
where he taps his toe. Plunging

my fingers into the cold,
black muck, I wriggle it out:

meal and sacrifice. A ritual-like
rhythm that the dance ignites.

When we steam the clams,
the smell of vinegar

and hops bubbling in the broth
overtakes us. A purifying incense.

Pabst Blue Ribbon for him and since
I am ten, Porto with *Ginger Ale*.

In the pot the clams flower and pop.
Pelican-like, he tips his head back to let

the fat belly slide down whole. *Delicioso*.
Body, blood, soul, divinity. Clean-shaven

for Mass. Brown. Azorean. *Vovô*, to me.
A welcome substitute to the homily: *Tap*.

Plunge. Smell. Dance. Taste. But not
in a faith, not in a language I knew yet.

Originally published: *Naugatuck River Review*, 2018

Bad Apology

As if in an endless rehearsal,
I packed and unpacked. The challenge,
you said, was to take no more
than I'd need. Tenderly, you followed
the track of a storm moving in from the east.

In bed, a wrinkled map across our laps;
you circled a town and highlighted a road.
A yellow, satiny, path. When we slept,
you tried the path, left markers
you had kept for days like these.

And the markers were keys. Clues
in a moonscape of dust-covered things –
a pair of gloves with suede tips; a scarf;
a ring. Ruins like proof of a marriage,
a story's skeletal sheen, small deaths, small

victories. Maestro, my mourning dove,
another chance? Put me back in that place
with its signals and gestures and promise
of more mistakes. And I'll show you
the hurtful lessons lovers make.

Originally published: *SWWIM* Journal, 2017

SELECTED POEMS

M.B. MCLATCHEY

Ode for an Ode on a Grecian Urn

Ode,
let your sorrows go.
Let brides be ravished, trees forsake
their leaves, let lovers kiss and fade, daughters age. Let loss
be the elixir that induces a new legend, new urn-dream:
Forests that seed, mature, starve, and reseed
without our overtures. Let wanting, waiting,
pacing be the rings in carbon dating. A new
museum piece. Imagine yearning bigger than an
urn, bigger than god; desire out of bounds, desire
crowned. Paint it fulfilled, the turning back of hounds.
What good is song if not the end of one man's wish,
what-ifs? I died at twenty-five. So many do. Urn, make
your story new: Beauty is truth when sung to a priest's
staccato voice and tone near a young marine's
too-heavy, too mature, burial stone; when love
betrayed makes lovers stutter phrases – sweet
 clichés – that they used to say alone. Put it
in stone: Beauty is truth when sung to
the beat of a child's quiet feet
leaving home; when
aging lovers sing
to one another:
*Remember when we
used to rock in one another's arms
and we knew god and the devil's charms?*

Originally published: *FOLIO* Journal, Editor's Prize, 2019

SELECTED POEMS

M.B. MCLATCHY

Urban Helicon

It starts like this: the clamps around my wrists.
The little Saturn ring around my head,
The wooden chair, the arms still warm, though dead;
Then the electric thrill, the arch, the twist;

The expiation just before the twist,
The quick reform of madame in her bed,
The spasm, the welcome-wagon for something newly wed;
Or the ambulance, the sirens, the sudden lisp.

It makes me so serene.
It ties me to a rock
And sends me swimming.

It causes quite a scene
To feel the wood and stone become a dock
To hear the pastoral in stillness singing.

Originally published: *Cold Mountain Review*, 2016