

Charles McCabe Himself

I ENCOUNTERED a couple of good teachers in my time, but they only emphasized for me the inadequacies of the others, at least from the point of view of this one student. My idea of education was then, and is now, simply using your head—being so stimulated by a leader that you examined with the greatest skeptical care the foundations on which you based your life.

One reason why there are so few teachers who proceed in this fashion, rather than just hammering doctrine into the pupil's head, is that teachers tend to remember the fate of the most famous of these questioning teachers, Mr. Socrates. A slap in the face with a flounder is better than a bowl of hemlock.

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WHAT IS a good teacher? The other day I read a description of what seems to me such a person, written by a Berkeley clinical psychologist, Abraham Levitsky, Ph. D. Mr. Levitsky was writing about something else, but this is what he said:

"Now and then we meet persons who have a certain aura. They radiate an atmosphere which leaves us singularly free from pressure. They are glad to express their opinions, but we feel no compulsion to agree. We feel emancipated and refreshed.

"And these people are not cold or aloof. It is simply that they have such emotional solidity that they want nothing from us but that which we can freely give. A therapeutic atmosphere is set up in which others feel safe, can be themselves, can flourish and grow. These fortunate individuals have the power to convey a most extraordinary gift."

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WHAT THE Berkeley psychologist describes is quite what I aspire to. The last thing in the world I wish is to elicit agreement, though on certain matters I'm not above a little covert persuasion.

When I wrote a sports column for The Chron I used to be asked the same question, What the hell are you up to? The reply was more straightforward in those days: "I like to start arguments in bars." Arguments in bars are almost as important a part of the sports scene as the action on the field. This was a discovery I had made when quite young.

Now, the idea is not dissimilar. I like to shock people into sentience by asking questions, often ridiculous and exasperating questions. If all this leads to a hemlock cocktail, double, so be it.

The Modus

"WHAT ARE you really up to anyhow?" asked the Bore Pugnacious at Mooney's Irish Pub the other night.

I might add the Bore Pugnacious was also the Bore Academic and the Bore Drunk. He teaches somewhere and has what he describes as a questing mind.

"Apart from the fact that it's none of your rugged business," I replied, "I think I ask questions, I try to get people to join in the search."

"But nobody with any sense would agree with you about anything," the B. P. insisted. I replied, "That's precisely the point, you morbid brute."



And so it is. I'm not asking anybody to agree with me about anything, ever. If I'm wrong about that, I'm wrong about everything.

I often meet people who say they read my column but "don't always agree with you." To which I almost always say, "I wouldn't want to talk to anybody who agreed with me all the time."

Fate does funny things with the dice we call our lives. When I was younger the idea that I would some day become a kind of teacher would have truly shocked me, for my experience with teachers of almost all kinds had been close to catastrophic. I never seemed to want to hear what they wanted to tell me. In the classroom my drummer was not only different but very distant.