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More Than Just Luck: A Brief Biography of Wilbert J. McKeachie

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How do you summarize the life's work of one person in one chapter of a book? For a person of the stature of Wilbert J. McKeachie, the task is impossible. Something will have to be left out. Will it be his seven honorary degrees, his love of sports, his 10-year stint as department chair, his international influence and reputation, his twice weekly singing at the First Baptist Church, 10 editions of *Teaching Tips*, his role as husband to Ginny and father to two girls, his APF Gold Medal award for Distinguished Teaching in Psychology, or his service to the American Psychological Association? How do you tell the story of a man who arguably is the most influential person in the teaching of psychology in the history of the discipline?

Bill McKeachie found that perfect balance between being an active, engaging researcher and excelling at teaching. In most of our classes, we teach our students about the theories of Skinner, Maslow, Bandura, and Festinger. Bill was friends with Fred Skinner and Abe Maslow, knows Al Bandura, and occasionally debated with Leon Festinger. He is clearly a Renaissance man—someone who can talk about any topic while having the humility and grace to never let on how much he really knows.

How did Bill McKeachie come to have this competence, this passion for teaching, and the good fortune to make substantial contributions to the roles of teaching

and learning in higher education? The story starts in 1921 in Clarkston, Michigan, 40 miles from Ann Arbor, the home of the University of Michigan. Perhaps part of Bill's passion for teaching was sparked because both of his parents were teachers. The year before Bill's parents married, his mother was a school teacher. It seemed to Bill that she was always teaching in some form or another. She taught piano lessons to children and taught various arts and crafts to women in her neighborhood. Bill's father was his teacher for the first eight grades in a one-room schoolhouse. His father influenced Bill's passion for sports. As a child, Bill would go with his Dad to a Detroit Tigers baseball game once a year; they saw Ty Cobb and Babe Ruth play baseball. Bill and his classmates were unable to afford baseball gloves, so they played softball. Bill would retain his passion for softball for the rest of his life.

As a teenager, Bill became active in a local Presbyterian church. He was the secretary-treasurer of the Sunday School, where he calculated the average collection of 77 cents (checking the date on each penny in case he wanted to make a trade for a penny in his own collection). One Sunday he read in his Sunday School paper, *Young People*, a half-page article about psychology, and from then on he thought psychology was fascinating (*Psychology Today*, 1972). Bill was always a voracious reader—a trait that would be helpful in working 80-hour weeks.

In high school, Bill lettered in baseball, and he played one season of semiprofessional baseball before injuring his knee. After this incident, he could no longer wear cleats, so he went back to wearing sneakers and playing softball.

Unusual for the time and locale, Bill enrolled in Michigan State Normal College (MSNC; now Eastern Michigan University) in Ypsilanti in 1938. He chose MSNC because it was cheaper than the University of Michigan. To attend college, he had help from his family and also won a \$30 per year scholarship to help pay for tuition. He chose mathematics as a major. To earn money for clothes and personal expenses, he worked one summer on the assembly line at General Motors Truck and Coach, and he also played piano and sang with bands in bars. During his senior year at MSNC, he met Virginia (Ginny) Mack, whom he would later marry. He graduated with his bachelor's degree in mathematics in 1942.

Bill fondly recalls stories from his college days. When I asked him about this time in his life, here is what he said:

I helped support my college expenses (about \$200 a year) by teaching violin, piano, and cello at 50 cents a lesson and playing piano in small groups—e.g., for square dancing and round dancing in a barn. (The farm kids danced on the barn floor and we were playing from the top of the granary about 8 feet above them.) I also played in a beer garden (the Pal-O-U gardens) for a similar group and sang some of the ballads. When I left to play in the barn for more money, two of the older ladies said that it was as if they had hung black crepe on the door. My senior year I played in the largest bar in Oakland county (Ben's Inn) with a floor show Friday and Saturday nights with jugglers, magicians, exotic dancers, etc. Patrons would tell the bartender to set up a round of drinks for the band, and I would sometimes have 4 or 5 cokes lined up on my piano.

This was 1941–1942. After World War II Kate Smith's song "God Bless America" was popular. One night we played it and started a major riot which was finally broken up by the state police. Apparently one guy at the bar said to another, "take off your hat. They're playing the national anthem." The second guy said "that's not the national anthem!" Fisticuffs started and before long the whole place was bedlam with fists flying among people who had no idea what the fight was about. We played the "Star Spangled Banner" but nobody paid any attention until the police arrived and cleared the place out.

Bill continued to have the desire to teach and to become a minister. After graduation, he drove his 1936 Ford to the Upper Peninsula (UP) of Michigan and served as the minister for the Trout Lake and Hulbert Methodist churches. To earn more income, he also taught math, geography, English, history, and science at Trout Lake school (*Psychology Today*, 1972). While working in the UP, he corresponded with Ginny. He realized that to be a good minister he needed to be able to help people, and that perhaps a background in psychology would be helpful in that regard (Halonon, 1992).

The context of the war was inescapable, however; he would have continued his education in math if not for the war. Bill appreciated the symmetry and explanatory power that mathematics could provide. He carefully considered whether he was a conscientious objector or should join the Navy. Undecided, he chose the ministerial route. This decision was not easy for Bill, as he once said, "I had little doubt that the Nazis and Japanese were the bad guys, but I was not convinced that war was morally justifiable" (*Psychology Today*, 1972, p. 63). Notwithstanding his indecision, Bill's draft board decided that he had become a minister too late, so he joined the Navy. One day prior to joining the Navy, however, he married Ginny.

During World War II, Bill served as a Deck and Radar Officer (Lieutenant) on the U.S.S. *Guest* (DD 472) in the Pacific Theater. While on board, he became fascinated by the individual differences of his crewmates. He also held shipboard religious services when not in combat. He wrote to Ginny and told her that if he survived the war, he would like to go to graduate school in psychology. He was fortunate to survive the war, and later remarked, "war is not a pleasant thing. If you have actually participated in it, I don't think you would think it is a good thing to have wars" (Halonon, 1992, p. 222).

Bill entered the clinical psychology program at the University of Michigan in 1945. He earned his master's degree in 1946 and his doctorate in 1949. Not unexpectedly, his graduate training experiences shaped his career interests. As a graduate student, he served as a teaching fellow for Harold Guetzkow. These formative experiences with Guetzkow (such as the weekly dinners with teaching fellows) helped to foster his passion and interest in teaching. When his students had teaching concerns, Guetzkow encouraged his teaching fellows to answer these questions empirically. How did McKeachie land the position of teaching fellow? Because most of the veterans were not released until 1946, practically everyone entering graduate school in 1945 was offered a teaching fellowship. During the

summer of 1947, when the students beat the faculty in a softball game at the departmental picnic, it was ruled thereafter that teaching fellows were part of the faculty so that Bill could pitch for the faculty team.

When Bill completed his PhD in 1949, the Chair of the Psychology Department at the University of Michigan, Don Marquis, asked him to stay and teach the introductory psychology course and train graduate teaching fellows. Bill accepted the offer despite offers from Northwestern University and Yale University. By staying at Michigan, he also accepted the challenge of revamping the undergraduate psychology curriculum. During 8 weeks in the summer of 1951, Bill and five other psychologists worked to develop a model curriculum (the "Cornell Conference") that achieved the most important liberal arts goals they had identified (McGovern, 1993). His interest in national curriculum issues has remained steady, as he co-hosted the Michigan Conference in 1960 with John Milholland and was also a participant in the St. Mary's Conference in 1991.

Even in his early days of college teaching, Bill emerged as a talented educator. He received his first teaching award in 1955, the Alumni Award for Distinguished Teaching at the University of Michigan. Bill credits Don Marquis as the most significant person in the development of his teaching style. In addition to providing opportunities for Bill (such as the teaching fellowship, curriculum redesign), Marquis offered practical advice as well such as, when lecturing do not try to communicate more than three points.

In 1951, Bill became the first teacher of psychology on video, participating in live broadcasts. On Sunday afternoons, the Detroit News Station (Channel 4) would broadcast the University of Michigan Hour, where Bill would teach the introductory psychology course. Bill later remarked that he helped to boost TV sales in Michigan because many of his relatives went out and bought TV sets just so that they could see him. Because of this widespread exposure, Bill was elected president of the Michigan Psychological Association.

Bill became a full professor at Michigan in 1960, and in 1961 he became the Chair of the Department of Psychology. Lowell Kelly, the Department Chair before Bill, was asked by President Kennedy to become the Director of Selection for the Peace Corps. Bill became Acting Chair of the Department for a year, and when Kelly decided to stay in Washington, DC, another year, Bill became Chair. He served as Chair until 1971. During this period, the psychology faculty grew from 70 to 200 members. With this many faculty members, Bill was known to remark, "so I had a new problem every half hour" (Halonen, 1992, p. 242). He was also clear about his dealings with administrators: "When you move across the street to the administration building, it is as if the head of a nunnery had moved across the street to a house of prostitution" (Halonen, 1992, p. 243). In true McKeachie style, however, he found the good in the position and was able to put a positive spin on the demands of the job:

An academic man is not supposed to enjoy the role of department chairman. It is often perceived as being onerous and unrewarding. For me, however, it was a real

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opportunity to feel that I could have some impact upon the field. Moreover, the department chairmanship met my personal needs. I enjoyed talking to psychologists in all areas. I heard about new findings and hot ideas long before they were generally known. I liked the sense of being a real *general* psychologist. (*Psychology Today*, 1972, p. 67; italics in original)

Throughout Bill's career he was a good teacher and a good learner. He credits Don Marquis with important lessons about how to be an effective Department Chair:

1. Listen to everyone and use the elected executive committee for most decisions, leaving only major policy issues for the monthly faculty meeting.
2. Give nontenured faculty equal power as tenured.
3. Never hire someone unless you are pretty sure he or she will make tenure and that he or she is the best psychologist in the United States in his or her cohort and specialty.
4. Try to participate in hiring psychologists needed by other departments and schools of the university and give them joint appointments in the psychology department so that we can be proud of every psychologist in the university even if their salaries were paid by medicine, law, engineering, social work, natural resources, political science, sociology, the Institute of Social Research, the Mental Health Research Center, or other interdisciplinary center. (personal communication, March 12, 2001)

His love of sports continued throughout his academic career. Bill was the first recipient of the Intramural Department Award for Outstanding Faculty Athletes. Although Bill served as President of the APA, he was particularly proud of his 22–0 fast-pitch softball record that same year. In fact, in a fast-pitch softball career that lasted from 1933 to 1989, he pitched over 30 no-hit games, including one perfect game. His overall career record in pitching was approximately 900 wins and 300 losses, with a lifetime batting average about .300. Sports provided an important balance for Bill. In fact, he once remarked, "in any case I like the fact that my office has almost as much space for volleyball and softball trophies as for books. I wouldn't trade my 31 no-hit games for 31 publications" (*Psychology Today*, 1972, p. 62).

Those persons who knew Bill McKeachie as an instructor in those early days remember him fondly. Cliff Fawl, an undergraduate student of Bill's, recalls this about him:

First, his bright smile. When I think of Bill McKeachie, I picture a smiling person. That was true 50 years ago; it is still true today. Another snapshot comes from the year 1961 when Bill was a presenter at the Nebraska Symposium on Motivation. I invited Bill to have dinner at our home. My memory is of the two of us doing dishes following the meal. Doing dishes. That somehow seems right. It's the kind of thing Bill McKeachie would do as a guest.

Another snapshot goes back to my undergraduate days at Michigan. This snapshot is embarrassing, for I wish that I could replay my part in it. Most of you know that Bill pitches softball. The Psychology Department had a softball team and Bill was the pitcher. It was composed of faculty and graduate students, but for reasons I do not recall I was asked to play shortstop in a game. I did so and made an error. I had played a lot of baseball by then, and I knew what baseball players do when they make an error: they curse. I did so reflexively and with intensity. But no sooner had I done so than I remembered with humiliation that the pitcher was a minister. Bill, of course, made no comment nor even seemed to notice. (personal communication, February 1, 2001)

A biography of Bill McKeachie's life would not be complete without some mention of his contributions in the areas of teaching, research, and service to psychology. His impact as a teacher is clear and evidenced in many ways. In talks Jane Halonen has given about being a professor in the postmodern age, she has defined five categories of college teachers: (a) the energetic (first and second year), (b) the monomaniacal (pretenure), (c) the relaxed (early posttenure), (d) the vigorous (late posttenure who get back on the path), and (e) Bill McKeachie (personal communication, January 31, 2001). She rightfully puts Bill McKeachie in a teaching category all his own.

His impact as a teacher is seen not only through the thousands of students he taught at Michigan (or the hundreds he trained as teaching assistants), but also through his 10 editions of *Teaching Tips*, which has been translated into Chinese, Portuguese, Arabic, Japanese, and Spanish. Many of today's prominent teachers of psychology were influenced by *Teaching Tips*. Diane Halpern wrote:

When I was in graduate school, Bill's book was the first and only one that I read on college teaching. I didn't even know that anyone had ever written about it until I found Bill's book. I still use it. Bill has defined the field for us and has made it 'okay to care about teaching.' I love him! (personal communication, January 31, 2001)

Jim Korn wrote:

At an APA convention several years ago, Bill gave a talk on what makes a good teacher great. In his usual data-based style he reviewed the literature on good teaching and drew some reasonable conclusions. Then, at the end of his talk he became choked up as he talked about the importance of teaching and concluded that there is greatness in all of you.

I also have been impressed with his willingness to write and talk about spiritual values in teaching. He does that in the last chapter of *Teaching Tips*. He describes himself as a religious person who believes strongly that love and respect for other human beings is a universal value that should guide the behavior of all human beings at all times. The concluding sentence in that chapter follows a quotation from St. Augustine: "Hope has two lovely daughters, anger and courage. Anger at the way things are, and courage to see that they need not remain as they are." Let us have hope. (personal communication, February 2, 2001)

Bill was thoughtful about the learning process as described here:

I have argued elsewhere that all learning and memory involves transfer; we never use learning in exactly the same situation in which learning occurred. If the new situation is a little different from the original ones we describe the outcome as *near transfer*; if it is more different, we call it *far transfer*; . . . if the situation is still more different, we speak of *problem solving*; and if the new situation bears little resemblance to the situations in which relevant previous learning occurred, we talk about *creativity*. (McKeachie, 1994, pp. 343–344; italics in original)

Indeed, one of Bill's most important legacies is *Teaching Tips* and the role it continues to play for teachers new and old alike.

When asked about his teaching style, Bill revealed some of the secrets of teaching. What would students say about his teaching style? "I think informality. I'm trying to think of student ratings I've gotten. Generally they are quite favorable. I think they see me as being concerned about their learning. I think people will forgive a lot if they really feel that you are trying" (Halonen, 1992, p. 238). Two concepts are evident in this response. First, humility—yes, I would imagine that Bill McKeachie's teaching evaluations are *quite* favorable. The second nugget that emerges is the importance of communicating to students what you are trying to accomplish and why. Let students get to know you and what you are about. Bill made this abundantly clear when he recently said, "I believe that respect and concern for students is fundamental to teaching" (Herman, 2000, p. 9).

Bill's commitment to students is well known. Bill McKeachie served as Scott VanderStoep's dissertation co-chair in 1992, one of the last dissertation committees that Bill chaired before retirement. Scott wrote:

His commitment to his students extends far beyond the classroom. I think of him playing on the graduate student fast-pitch softball team (Bill's competitive softball pitching career spanned *seven* decades!). I think of the events he and Ginny would host at their house. I think of how he has shown great care for me and my family over the years. And I think of how he offered to buy coffee for his *entire* class of Learning to Learn students ($n = 80$) at a coffee shop after class one day (not all of them came, fortunately!). His vita on being gracious and charitable is as impressive as his professional vita. (personal communication, February 3, 2001)

As an aside, others have noticed his humility as well. Jane Halonen wrote

His humility is both exceptional and humbling. Not so long ago, I got an e-mail from him that was truly keeping in his character. He had heard a speech that I had given and an off-hand reference to a teaching strategy that had captured his attention. Would he be able to make it work in his classroom? As far as I know, Bill's thirst for improving ways to motivate his students knows no equal. (personal communication, January 31, 2001)

Bill's contributions to the research literature on teaching and learning are just as impressive as his contributions in teaching. A complete review of his research

interests is not possible here, but a brief mention is required. Pintrich, Brown, and Weinstein (1994) in a festschrift honoring Bill summarized his five basic areas of research: (a) the development of models and methods for understanding the cognitive structures of students; (b) understanding student motivation and, in particular, the role of test anxiety (Bill's first journal article, published in 1950, discussed college student anxiety); (c) interactions among student motivation, cognition, and instructional and classroom characteristics; (d) improving college classroom instruction; and (e) teaching students to become self-regulated learners, as in his "Learning to Learn" course at the University of Michigan.

These research interests have merged with his service activities. For example, Bill served as the Director of the University of Michigan's Center for Research on Learning and Teaching as well as serving as the Associate Director of the National Center for Research to Improve Postsecondary Teaching and Learning. In fact, Pintrich et al. (1994) reflected the interrelatedness of Bill's various professional activities when they indicated that "Bill McKeachie's legacy lies in his scholarly work, the work he has stimulated others to do, the thousands of students he has trained, the thousands of college teachers he has helped, and the lives he has touched with his wisdom, warmth, and support" (p. 11).

Amazingly to others (although typical for Bill), his record of service is just as impressive as his contributions to teaching and research. Here is a listing of his *Presidencies*: APA Division Two (then called) Division on the Teaching of Psychology, 1956–1957; APA Division One, General Psychology, 1972–1973; APA Division 15, Educational Psychology 1975–1976; National President of the American Psychological Association, 1976–1977; National President, American Association for Higher Education, 1978–1979; and National President, American Psychological Foundation, 1980–1982. Bill has served at the top of the governance structure of APA; as President, member of the Council of Representatives; and on the Board of Directors. Ray Fowler tells a story about how Bill kept getting elected to high offices without being a politician. Once when Ray told Bill that he had lost an election to the Board of Directors by one vote, Bill's reply was, "Gee, if I had known that, I might have voted for myself." (personal communication, February 16, 2001)

Charles Brewer and Bill McKeachie often work together in professional capacities. At a symposium honoring Bill McKeachie at the 2000 APA convention, Charles commented that

at numerous meetings, we have eaten enough stale Danish pastry to sink a battleship. Always prepared for the task at hand, Bill is astute, compassionate, diplomatic, evenhanded, generous, gentle, incisive, knowledgeable, soft-spoken, unflappable, unpretentious, and kind. I have never heard Bill say an unkind word about anybody, and I have never heard anybody say an unkind word about Bill, which may be unique in my experience with vocal bipeds. (personal communication, January 31, 2001)

In addition, Bill's vita lists the numerous service commitments to his university, professional societies, other associations, editorial boards, community service,

and consultantships. With regard to university service, Bill indicates that "I have chaired the Academic Senate, been president of the University chapter of AAUP, and have served on, or chaired, most of the major committees in the University, particularly those having to do with athletics, curriculum, economic policy, budget, and searches for President, deans and faculty." Only a Renaissance man could be well versed in all those areas, complete an impressive program of research, and be a world-class teacher/scholar simultaneously.

In his interview with Jane Halonen (1992), Bill mentioned two special awards that he had received—the American Psychological Foundation's Distinguished Teaching in Psychology Award (received in 1985) and the APA Education and Training Board Award for Distinguished Career Contributions to Education and Training in Psychology (received in 1987). Since that time, Bill has also received the Gold Medal Award for Enduring Contributions to Psychology in the Public Interest from APA (received in 1998). His citation from that award reads:

Wilbert J. McKeachie truly embodies what is meant by psychology in the public interest. Since the beginning of his career, he has been involved in research, innovation, and promotion to improve teaching in psychology, attract students' interest, and motivate students to succeed in their courses and apply what they have learned toward improving the human condition and advancing human welfare. (American Psychological Association, 1998, p. 872)

When you ask Bill McKeachie about the impact he has had on so many others during his career, he answers characteristically with humility: "I think each of us has to follow our own propensities and do the best he or she can, getting help from colleagues, working hard, not getting discouraged if things don't go well for a time, and taking advantage of lucky breaks when they come" (Herman, 2000, p. 10). A similar theme emerged when Halonen (1992) asked him about what would happen if he had the chance to start his career again. His response was, "I can't imagine it being better. Everything worked out better than I had any right to expect. Al Bandura makes a big deal of chance, and I think he's right. I've just been very lucky. In my marriage. In my career. In everything" (p. 256).

What has driven Bill McKeachie to live a life of service to others, to study and help understand fellow human beings? When I asked him this, he said:

I don't know any special insights. I'm a humanist and have been an active American Baptist for over 50 years. I take literally the statement "god is love"—a value, rather than a supernatural being. Most of the members of our church have more conventional Christian beliefs, but I believe the Anabaptist tradition is that no one knows ultimate truth; so one should respect others' beliefs and try to work together to put religion into practice both in everyday life and in church programs for the homeless, poor people in other countries, and so on, as well as in social policy nationally. (personal communication, March 12, 2001)

In the final analysis, it is both psychology students and psychology educators who have been lucky. We are lucky that at age 14 Bill McKeachie read a half-page article about psychology in Sunday school. We are lucky that, because in the course of World War II, Bill's interests changed from mathematics to psychology. We are lucky that Bill chose to serve the public at the University of Michigan, teach others how to learn, and conduct important research in the arena of instructional psychology. We are lucky that Bill chose to dedicate himself to 80-hour workweeks, and we are lucky that Ginny McKeachie was willing to make sacrifices as well. It is not that Bill McKeachie was lucky; it is that we are lucky to know Bill McKeachie, that we are lucky that his legacy lives on in his students, in his colleagues, in his writings and body of research, and in his life as a scholar and a gentleman. On behalf of teachers and learners everywhere, thank you, Bill McKeachie.

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I wish to acknowledge the generous help and support of Bill McKeachie throughout this project. The materials he shared with me and the e-mail correspondence between us has been invaluable in shaping this chapter. As with his usual grace and style, he helped immensely. I am also grateful to all the individuals who communicated with me about Bill McKeachie. Their words make this chapter much richer and bring Bill's legacy to life.

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THE TEACHING OF PSYCHOLOGY
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