The most extraordinary thing about English Professor John Mahoney may not be the honors he’s won, the books he’s written or his storied teaching skills.

BY BEN BIRNBAUM

John Mahoney is holding forth over breakfast at the S&S Deli, a redoubtable neighborhood joint in Cambridge, Massachusetts, that’s been his favorite eatery since the 1940s despite the fact that he’s long been able to afford better. He is telling stories, and while he speaks fast, no story is told quickly. Each is a feast of detail and allusion, garnished with locations, names, dates, quotations and subsequently corrected quotations. The stories emerge in complete sentences, and the sentences march in proper order through the paragraphs. The telling of stories is an activity John enjoys immensely. Over the 16 years I’ve known him, I have several times heard him tell the same story to two audiences within a matter of minutes and give the second telling greater punch. On this summer morning the stories touch upon a great number of humankind’s higher interests and John’s enthusiasms, including city life, jazz, Dr. Johnson, travel, a “simply wonderful” new play that he believes I must see at the earliest opportunity, and the quality of the S&S’s french toast.
Where most walk, John is a strider—on the sidewalk, in thought and in conversation. Even while listening, he appears to be covering ground, thought and emotion playing across his long, expressive face like landscape on the windows of a moving train.

John Mahoney is tall, broad of brow and rangy in the arms and legs—a quality that sometimes makes him appear too large for the furniture he occupies. And he occupies space as he does furniture. A colleague of his whom I spoke with called him “The Grand Old Man.” She had her tongue in cheek, but he is, in fact, a person who tends to get noticed whether he is moving or in repose, rangy in presence as well as in limb. Some of this is size, but there is also the formidable energy. He is always on the alert; always, it seems, prepared to engage. Where most walk, John, as a friend once noted, is a strider—on the sidewalk, in thought and in conversation. Even while listening, he appears to be covering ground, thought and emotion playing across his long, expressive face like landscape on the windows of a moving train. In the classrooms of BC’s English Department—where he has been famously successful since the late 1950s—this attentive energy works like a gravitational core, drawing student thoughts and ideas, which, amplified by the professor’s glosses, corrections and punctuation marks, are then shot back across the room to be inscribed as full lecture notes in student notebooks. Outside the classroom, his attentiveness (“He’s the man who visits on the holidays,” says an old friend.) has reaped what humane attentiveness always reaps—a harvest of friendships.

John’s is a thoroughly democratic attentiveness, lavished on literati and struggling jazz divas, on newly arrived as well as long-retired colleagues. The list of his acquaintances is formidable and not always explicable. One evening several years ago I ran into John and his wife, Ann, at the exceedingly democratic S&S, and he immediately took me across the room and introduced me (“the editor of the marvelous Boston College Magazine”) to another diner, a man who, it turned out, had refereed the BC-Georgetown basketball game the previous evening. While I stood casting my shadow on the man’s Salisbury steak, John proceeded to engage him in a detail-strewn conversation about the contest’s twists and turns and their effect on the referees. John’s disinterest in sports (except as it generally affects the well-being of the university he loves) is well established; and how he came to know so much about that particular game remains a mystery to me. But an indefatigable interest in the lives of others is a hallmark of his sensibility. “If you’ve ever come within John’s ken,” says Judith Wilt, a colleague since 1978 and current chairwoman of the English Department, “he likes to know where you are and how you’re doing.”

On this summer morning in his sixty-sixth year, John Mahoney himself is doing quite well, thank you. He is about to begin his fortieth consecutive year of college teaching; his literary biography of Wordsworth, a sort of magnum opus, is nearing completion; and he has recently been named the inaugural Thomas F. Rattigan Professor of English, the first BC humanities professor outside of theology to hold an endowed chair. Nor, it should be noted, is he displeased to be sitting for a profile in Boston College Magazine. He long ago chose the life of a public man, and on this summer morning, as on most occasions, he shows every sign of being pleased with all past choices as well as present prospects. And this may well be the most remarkable thing about John: not the books he’s written or his storied teaching skills; not his universe of friends or the fact that he may be the only human being who carries Wordsworth’s oeuvre and Bill Evans’ discography in his memory at all times, but the way in which he has gone about the difficult business of constructing a life that swings toward fulfillment like a compass needle swings to north.

He shies away when I mention this, when I ask, pointblank: “Are you happy?” He retreats to Johnson on life (“much to be endured and little to be enjoyed”) and then ticks off on his long fingers the instances of “extraordinary luck” he has enjoyed: his marriage, his children, family, teachers, health. Yes, luck is part of it, and particular luck in having a character engineered to be of this world: a powerouse of enthusiasms, curiosity and charity—this last a fairly astonishing presence in a man who is a critic by profession and by dictate of an ordering intelligence. But there is no scorn in him, certainly not for people. In 16 years, I have never heard John make a cutting joke about another person. In fact, I have noticed that when I make such jokes (it’s an old bad habit from the streets of Brooklyn), John laughs twice: the first time because he is entirely surprised, and then again be-
cause of the joke. But his charity extends to institutions and artifacts—even those that don’t deserve it. He was telling me recently about having watched the old sloppy, anti-historical “Rhapsody in Blue” Gershwin biography, a fat target for jazz aficionados or movie buffs—and John is both. “You know,” he begins, “it’s held up remarkably well.”

But to this streak of “luck”—as John might wish to see it called—he has brought a remarkable will and a disciplined ability to order what he does. An old friend recalled that when John had to have minor surgery while a student at BC High, he scheduled it for Christmas vacation. More contemporaneously, Rose A. Doherty MA’68, an administrator at Northeastern University who was John’s secretary for a period of time while he was chairman of English in the 1960s (she later taught in the department and, of course, became a friend), recalls that Chairman Mahoney “did not have unfinished work on his desk. He had the ability to wait for the right moment, when he had all his information and thoughts together, and then do something all the way through.” I myself saw this method in action nearly a decade ago when I asked John to write a BCM review of three books on higher education. Time passed with no word from him, and then he marched in one day and handed me a 4,000-word essay that he’d written in longhand the previous evening in one fell swoop on a legal pad. The piece was published as written, and I still have the manuscript and can find no more than half-a-dozen instances where he was obliged, in the course of writing, to scratch something out and change direction. He “simply” ordered his thoughts, and then he wrote.

“Order,” as it happens, is a word that has a way of creeping into John’s speech. Asked, for example, what it is about poetry that he loves, he immediately cites Richard Eberhart’s “poetry orders our imaginings” (adding, as he gazes like a bright bird at my notebook, “that’s imaginings, plural.”) Search-
The first two-hour meeting of “Studies in Poetry and Religious Experience” this fall did not begin particularly well. Students expect of first meetings in literature courses that they will be restricted to a professorial rendering of the syllabus and class regulations, and end in early dismissal. Since they’ve not done any of the readings yet, what else could there possibly be to talk about? John’s announcement, therefore, that they will meet for the entire two hours, falls like a bombshell. Feet swing beneath desks. Yawns and pen bouncing are epidemic. It does not help matters that the class began at 3 p.m. and the shoebox of Gasson 206 has been nicely warmed through the day by bright sunlight and packed-in bodies.

Blue-blazed John is the only person in the circle of students and teacher not in shirtsleeves, and for the first hour the only person who speaks or works. And he is working. The class is a seminar, and his expectation, as he tells the students, is both to teach and to learn from “my classmates.” In other words, he expects them to open up on poetry and religious faith, even today, even before they’ve had a chance to read John Donne’s “Batter my heart, three personed God!” or figure out the class standard for self-revelation: how much they may safely say without exposing themselves to charges of inappropriate enthusiasm.

Mahoney talks about playing Billie Holiday in a class on Byron. “I play a clip from the last album she made, singing a song she can’t sing anymore. It’s called ‘Glad to be Unhappy,’ and in a way it claims what Byronism is about.”

ing for a metaphor during a recent class lecture, he cites a jazz CD he recently purchased and only liked after several hearings. “When you break through the complexity,” he told the students, “you seem to see this luminous order.” It’s a statement (including the caveat, “seem”) that might pass for John’s credo, and a credo that might well serve most human beings, but most particularly young ones.

This was on my mind recently as I sat through some of John’s classes and watched him work his charms. What are they taken with? I wondered of the students. Is it the tweed-wrapped authority? The learning? The consideration with which he greets each and every remark he can squeeze out of them? The passion of his readings? Or is there something more that is responsible for his extraordinary charisma as a teacher—something he represents to students that is rarely to be found in postmodern culture or postmodern classrooms: perhaps that very old-fashioned and most uncynical possibility of finding (given luck and will) the “luminous order” behind the confusion; that possibility of an earned wholeness?
John knows all this, of course. He has been here before, and his objective today is to set standards “worthy of young men and women embarked upon a liberal education,” which is to say, high.

It’s a battle that he wages literally without breaking a sweat—this despite the heat, the blazer and the awkward fact that he’s taken a seat in direct sunlight. (Observing his fierce concentration on the work at hand, I wonder if he even notices the sunlight.)

As John talks about “the question of whether a poem loses its freedom if it becomes subject to Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism,” he works in a few quiet invitations for student reaction, including some complimentary references to remarks students had made in another class, earlier that day. He finds no takers, however, and after nearly an hour of these exertions he turns to a young woman he calls by name (he knows her from a previous class) and asks “What if I were to rely on your good nature to get us going? How would you define religious experience?” Rather unexpectedly—to me anyway—the young woman begins talking about love, and the possibilities within love for self-transcendence. It may or may not be what John had in mind as a starting point for “Poetry and Religious Experience,” but his welcome of her statement is gracious and sincere and he quickly, with a Phil Donahue snap, turns the question on the others and at the same time sets the topic back on its feet: “Is falling in love a religious experience?” he asks. Several students, not confident perhaps of their grasp of Donne, but sure they have trod these grounds, now raise their hands.

This was my first experience of John in class, but I’d heard accounts from others over the years. My favorite description was from Brian Doyle, once a member of the BCM staff, who sat in on several Mahoney classes in 1989, when John was named Massachusetts Professor of the Year. Brian told me that watching John teach was like watching an actor who has trod the boards for years—a John Barrymore or Gielgud—who knows all his lines and all his marks cold. There’s a broad sense in which this is true, but in John’s case the lines and marks are not quite fixed, the play is always being written, and so the plot is always live, urgent, in danger of collapsing, in need of the improvised response.

John lays his improvisations over a very clear and polished harmonic structure comprising, as near I can make out, five themes.

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**Presence**

Pleasure, hope, disdain, puzzlement—the whole gamut does a mime’s dance across his face as he speaks. His arms and hands move almost ceaselessly. It’s hard to take your eyes off him—which may be the point of it all—and there were moments, watching him, when I began to believe that you could know what he was saying even if you couldn’t hear his words. Laying into Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach,” he spreads the “calm” sea out with inverted, open hands. “The moon lies fair,” he says, and pauses to place a circle of thumb and forefinger in the night sky above his right shoulder. Discussing the French Revolution’s influence on European culture, he Blurts: “Liberté! Egalité! Fraternité!”—throwing out his arms at each word as if he were trying to break through a door, and so becoming a literal representation of the slogan’s affect.

On retelling, some of this may seem mannered, but in the flesh it isn’t because he passionately inhabits each gesture; he’s lost inside.

**Heart**

In six hours of watching John teach, I only once saw a student who, I thought, was unsatisfied with the fullness of his response to an offered reflection. John’s practice is to ennoble what his students say. “That’s exactly how Locke would have put it,” he informs one young man. He greets another student’s observation that love can be spiritual or carnal, depending, with a smile that suggests he’s never quite heard that before. “I love this exchange between the two of you,” he says to a pair of students who have not quite been speaking to each other (but who now get the idea that they should). Where appropriate, he becomes the student speaker, restating equivocations as opinion, turning confusion to clarity. “I believe that’s what she meant,” he says. “Am I right?” Even the weakest observations are nicely welcomed: “I want to build on that a little,” he says to a student, “and in a way you made it possible with your reflection.”
And all this, as the last response suggests, while gently moving the class to where he wants it to go. He has a name for this activity, very Mahoney-esque: he calls it “collaboration.”

**Knowledge**  John speaks to students in the same discursively learned way in which he speaks to everyone else—alumni magazine writers to basketball referees. He marches along, shedding sermonettes on the purposes of liberal education, mini-lectures on why Pope’s “Essay on Man” has earned so many citations in Bartlett’s, and glancing references to “Dear Lord David Cecil,” “the new historicism,” “Isaac Newton’s nature—that’s capital case N-A-T-U-R-E,” “my friend Helen Gardner, late of the University of Wisconsin.” He offers these sans context, sans ground. They are, he seems to be saying, the coin of our discourse, your entitlement as well as mine; that I happen to have a full purse is simply a function of years and work.

“John Donne was a poet I like a lot,” I heard him muse one day to a group of freshmen and sophomores, “and I’m sure many of you love him, too.”

An oblique reference he makes in “Poetry and Religious Experience” to “poor Job” brings a particularly dense flurry of puzzled looks, a nervous shifting of bodies. *Joe who?* one can almost hear the students thinking. *Piscopo? Montana?* I asked John about this afterwards. Had he noticed? “Oh, sure,” he said cheerfully. “When it comes to the Bible, we’re playing catch-up. But before long a student will come to me and say, ‘Who is this Job and where can I learn more about him?’”

**Ellipsis**  It’s the pause that awakens. Once, in “Poetry and Religious Experience,” in the midst of a faltering discussion of how a personal atheism might affect the work of a poet, John silenced the group and said: “Let me ask a wide-eyed, open, non-rhetorical question. Do you believe. . . ?” And here he paused for five endless seconds while the students drew themselves up, wondering whether the ultimate standard for self-revelation was about to be set. And then he concluded, “… that absence can trigger an experience in writers just as powerful as presence?” Students sank back in their chairs.

**Voice**  John’s is not an actor’s instrument—it’s got too little polish and too much Boston in it. Nor is it a siren’s call. Too much straight-ahead power. What it is is a rhetorician’s tool, a relentless underscoring machine, whether for stage direction (“and all that mighty heart is lying still.”), croaky disdain (“Poetry is not a *visual aid*.”), or simple instruction
("Imagine Pope sitting in his study with quill in hand. 'I want to write a new epic.')"

As John inhabits his gestures, so does he the words he speaks, and never more than when he recites a poem, whether from memory or from the page, interpolating as he goes, improvising an interpretation that's half color commentator's shorthand and half response to the poet's call. Here is the beginning of his riff on Donne's "Batter my heart," which he read to students during the second meeting of "Poetry and Religious Experience."

"Batter my heart, three personed God; for you As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend,—With me dear God you don't have your ordinary sinner. No. You've got to hit me hard. All you've been doing up to this time is not enough. 'That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow and bend'—If you want me to rise up you've got to first knock me down. An archetypal paradox. Only one set of circumstances under which it works. Only one person who can bring you up at the same time that He's knocking you down. 'Your force to break, blow, burn'—you've got to burn away my rust—and make me new."

It's midway through this session that the seminar begins to take off, develops its rhythm and direction. Suddenly, comments flow without solicitation. And it's then that I see John pull another trick from his briefcase. As a conversation begins to build among the students, John, who, seated, towers a foot above most of them, slowly sinks down in his chair until he disappears, showing his presence only by the turn of his head to follow the talk. When class is over, I wait until the students have left and then approach to ask a few questions about what had transpired. I wait while he collects books and papers. He turns and sees me. "It was great, wasn't it?" he beams.

Afterwards, in my office, I look through notes from a long conversation we'd had about a teacher's responsibilities. What's the most important skill you need? I'd asked him. His quick response (after telling me it was a very good question) was, "If you lose enthusiasm, you've lost it."

A few days later I made telephone contact with two of John's students in "Poetry and Religious Experience," How did you come to take this course? I asked each of them. One told me that her father, a 1966 graduate, had told her to take a class with Professor Mahoney. The other told me that her cousin, a 1980 graduate, had told her to take a class with Professor Mahoney. I called the cousin, Diane Ryan Tormey, a lawyer in Newton, Massachusetts, and asked how she came to take courses with John.

"He was highly recommended to me by a number of people," she said. The chain stretches back and onward.

John Mahoney's beginnings are the stuff of which 20th-century BC was mostly made: born on the top floor of a triple-decker in the working-class city of Somerville, Massachusetts; parents of Irish immigrant stock, his father a printer, his mother a housewife, both without much formal learning but with a desire to see John and his two sisters have that standing in society which education can bring. "They were in awe of anything to do with learning," John says. He was first schooled by the sisters of St. Joseph in the parish school; later, a scholarship allowed him entrance to Boston College High School; then the daily commute to Boston College (BA'50, MA'52), broken up by a stint in the postwar U.S. Army as one of Japan's occupiers; then a doctorate in English at Harvard, an appointment to the BC faculty, marriage, children and all the many evidences of professional and personal success.

It's a story simply told, and the simple telling, I believe, is the way John prefers it and the way I will pretty much leave it. John Sullivan MA'49, who taught alongside Mahoney in the English Department until retirement in 1989, once wrote a poem about John in which he said: "He is a man who wears his inside out. Exposition: He has learned a public cadence. Which fits his presence like a suit, well-tailored." Speaking to me on the phone recently, Sullivan noted, "John is a wonderful, open book—with a few closed pages." The confessional style, however, is simply not John's old-fashioned way. What more than outline you learn about his life from listening to him tell of it, therefore, you learn from attending to resonance. I think, for example, of the story John told me of how his father discovered that BC High's tuition was beyond their family's means but offered, as John says, "to go over with me and just look at the place." On that visit a Jesuit administrator tendered a $30 scholarship that brought tuition to $60—affordable even for a Somerville printer. One is left to imagine, though, the father ("in awe of learning") and the son (likewise inclined), and their conflicted hearts as they rode the T together to the South End to learn their mutual fate.

I think, too, of the day in class when John was inveighing against the idea that there could be a single interpretation of any poem, and said, "I can no more sum up a poem than sum up my wife. We
Only once did I feel as though I heard John tell an autobiographical story he had not yet mastered. It was the story of his father’s death of a heart attack during the early morning of September 1, 1956, the day of John and Ann’s wedding.

met when she was 22 and have been married for 38 years, and yet I continue to find new layers of meaning, new talents in her.” But ask him directly about marriage, and he simply says, shaking his head, “You know, I made a very good marriage” (a sentiment, by the way, with which everyone who knows John and Ann agrees).

Only once, in hours of observation and interview, did I feel as though I heard John tell an autobiographical story he had not yet mastered. It was the story of his father’s death of a heart attack during the early morning of September 1, 1956, the day of John and Ann’s wedding. He told it to me twice, breaking off the first time to say that “it’s an unbelievable story that I think I’ll save for another time,” and then coming back to it, unurged, a few days later as we stood on the narrow street in front of his old home in Somerville, and again stopping where he had before, as though still waiting for more news.

Some years ago, in a eulogy he delivered at the funeral of the jazz singer Teddi King, John spoke of her as “a singer in the noblest sense of the word . . . letting the music tell its own story.” John, too, it might be said, would rather let the music tell the story. Riffling through the out-of-date resume he gave me—it stops in 1991—I counted 48 substantial voluntary commitments that lie outside his direct responsibilities as a professor of English at Boston College. The beneficiaries include a parish, archdiocese, public libraries, a Jewish community center, seven colleges and universities, two publishers and government. Some of it is even more surprising than the Jewish community center. For example, he must surely be the only BC faculty member ever to have served on the board of Boston’s Katherine Gibbs School, a position he held for eight years at the request of his one-time secretary and student Rose Doherty, who, in her role as an administrator at Gibbs in the early 1980s, was asked to add a liberal arts component to the secretarial training course, and called on John for help. “In addition to work based on the impetus of his own imagination,” says English Chairwoman Judith Wilt, “John never says no to outside invitations. They are disturbing to some temperaments, but not his. Sometimes you think, ‘Well, this is going to be shabby.’ But it so seldom is.”

“How do you get everything done?” I asked John. “Well,” he said thoughtfully, “I’m a morning person and I find I can get quite a lot done in the early hours before I have to begin to do other things.”

If John Mahoney didn’t exist, BC would have had to invent him,” someone said to me several years ago. In a way, John and BC have helped to invent each other. For it’s at BC that he’s left his most enduring mark. It was John, as chairman during the 1960s, who by all accounts built a modern English department where none had been before; and there is hardly a committee, council, study group or advisory board that’s been convened in the last 40 years or so on which he has not had a prominent seat. In a 1972 journal article titled “The Deadlock of the Universities,” one of his rare excursions into personal writing, John used a telling phrase: “for those [of us] who live on campuses.” “Live,” not “work.”

And BC seems to live in him as well. In the generosity of spirit that abides alongside personal ambition, in the balance of his scholarship, teaching and service, in his devotion to people equal to his devotion to ideas, in his openness and catholicity (as well as thoughtful Catholicity), he sometimes seems a singular representation of the place, a large heart in which all the institution’s contradictions meet and find some peace. Wrap him in puddingstone, and you could just about stand him on Linden Lane.

It is not unusual for a college campus to sprout one or two such men or women, individuals whose lives, we like to think, speak with the institutional voice. What is unusual about John’s status, however, is that he has maintained it over that period of time during which Boston College changed forever and most radically, from—as we like to say here—local commuter college to national university. More than a few faculty of John’s era did not come happily through that transition. John thrived on it.

“Think about the turns he’s made,” says Judith Wilt. “He was a scholar at a time when BC humanities were nowhere near as publication-oriented as they are now. He was, nonetheless, working on it. He got involved with anthologies [texts...
And he remains intent, so that, for example, in this particular year, which will see his sixty-seventh birthday, and in which he could be forgiven an inclination to sit at the window of his cramped office and survey the Dustbowl, John is at work on his most ambitious book, is teaching a full load of courses, is helping to launch a new departmental program on faith and literature, is serving as a founder of a new BC journal on religion and the arts, and is organizing and leading a Jesuit Institute faculty seminar on “The Character and Possibility of a Catholic University.” A few days ago I asked him how the last was going. “Oh, it’s just wonderful,” he told me.

Wilt tells of once asking John whether ever, in all his life, he felt powerless. After some thought he replied, “Once, when I was in the Army.”

“Do you always feel confident?” I asked him one day in his office. “No,” he said, “I have doubts, lots of moments of doubt, but that’s not my external manner. I guess I feel there’s no alternative to optimism.” “Some would argue with that,” I said. “They could,” he said, “and I would reply that the alternative is too grim.”

“What makes a happy man?” I heard John ask his students, and then answer by running one of his literary riffs, this time on a phrase from Pope’s “Essay on Man.” “To live,” he declared, “on the ‘isthmus of a middle state’—neither Hotspur nor Falstaff.”

Over at the S&S Deli, we are sitting in a comfortable booth in the middle of the middle state that John rules—a brief walk from the Somerville triple-decker, a mile from Harvard, not many more from BC, not far from the homes of his children (and grandchild), and close by many of the jazz venues, concert halls and theaters, current and defunct, that he has been frequenting since high-school days. He tells a story about his younger self, out for a walk with a senior faculty colleague, regaling the older man with a long recitation of the individuals he admired, whom he wished to emulate. “This fellow was getting more and more amused,” John says, “and finally he said to me, ‘Why don’t you just be John Mahoney, since you can’t be anyone else? I love that. Isn’t it Johnsonian? Because Johnson says that envy is the most destructive emotion. Because you do nothing for the person you envy and you simply harm yourself. He’s so instructive on that. I don’t envy anybody.”

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