

GREAT TEACHERS I HAVE KNOWN: ANDREW GUNN McIVER
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[Note: Most of you know I have worked with Tibetan teachers for some 36 years or so, but I have had other teachers before that, and one incredible teacher that I will tell you about here, Andrew Gunn McIver, who literally changed my life. I warn you bored-easily ones to skip this post as I am going to wax somewhat poetic when I feel like it and I don't want to disturb your equilibrium. You have been warned.]

One morning, sometimes in 1967 I believe, I met an old man on the Diagonal of the U. of M. campus who looked a lot like the writer Bernard Shaw. This meeting was to change my life forever. Here is a poetic account of that meeting written many years ago that, while perhaps over the top, will give you at least a flavor of what that meeting was like. You were warned of this above, so don't complain:

"It was ordained that they should meet. Preparation for this kind of meeting began far in advance. They put on their first disguises hundreds of miles and years apart. Even all the layers of flesh were hardly adequate as they reached each other in that first moment. All others even near wore protective glasses and heavy shielding. The light was, all around, white hot, and the heat had hidden them.

"The old man's eyes burned, crystalline structured, staring straight inside himself. Their eyes intensive, meeting no resistance, shot out and into the other. The old man let his secret start between them and he was understood. The impulse shot out into the other. Eyes eyed other's eyeing. Their words resounded in that great silence and then wore off, consonants crackling. Voices sputtering out in the silence. Silently speaking. This conversation crackled on endlessly. There was no reason. Sight itself was seen seeing — highly structured seeing.

"Their eyes lost the full shine of flesh and, flat out, they were seen seeing, eyes straight out sought support inside, and inside, settled, seeing structure itself shining outside. Their sight struck and they stuck united in two, tying inside into itself. They moved together parallel. In unison, they saw 'that' seeing. In unison they sought to set inside each eye such strength insight. Inside insight. His outer inner 'enting' entered out. Mind moved. They were of one mind and matter. What matter what remained.

"They showed in structure their souls in sight that shot forth and froze forever formed. Their eyes set singing inside shot out. Eyes set singing, slowly settled, and shared insight."

It was like that. And after that, for almost two years we worked together. The old man walking with the young man walking. Andrew would talk; I would listen.

Andrew Gunn McIver was born in Glasgow, Scotland in 1887. He served in the First World War, where he had the job of recording the dead. Later he immigrated to Canada, where he worked as a lumberjack, even though he was only a little more than five feet tall. He was burly, strong, and had red hair and fair skin.

And he worked for many years as a travelling initiator for a Rosicrucian order. Later in his life, he ended up in Ann Arbor, Michigan where he worked as a custodian and spent the last years

of his life. During those later years, Andrew became an important fixture on the U. of M. campus, where he met and probably befriended hundreds of students.

At the age of 66, a time when most are retired, he was caught in a boiler explosion at the University of Michigan and was almost killed. He spent six weeks in the hospital covered with burns, and had to start life all over when he was released. His hospital stay had used up all his savings and at the age most people are no longer working, he had to start all over from scratch. He was a custodian at the University of Michigan until his retirement.

His last years were spent living in a single room on a very modest amount of money. His passion was the mind itself and all the world religions, particularly Buddhism.

He was in his eighties when I first met him there on the U. of M. campus diagonal in Ann Arbor. A red-head in his youth, Andrew's now-white hair contrasted with his fair skin, which had a reddish hue. With his long white beard, he looked a lot like photos of Bernard Shaw. Andrew's fierce eyes were intense and yet very vulnerable at the same time. He had no fear of any kind and would just address people straight out.

"It's not 'Touch me if you dare!', but 'Touch me if you ARE!,'" Andrew would declare. To meet his gaze was to know what compassionate wrath is, fierce but open and kind at the same time, removing what had to be removed, supporting what needed supporting. There was no B.S. with Andrew McIver. Your whole being rose to the occasion the moment your eyes met his.

In my experience, Andrew was the only person I had ever met up to that time who did not have some form of shadow or dark side. The effect of contact with Andrew was always positive. He consumed darkness and had a kind of love affair with the Sun.

As a redhead, his fair skin should not be exposed to the Sun more than necessary. Yet Andrew loved the Sun and would stand in it for hours on an end until his pale skin would just peel away exposing red patches. "Imagine yourself standing at the center of the Sun," he would growl at me, "That's hot stuff!" He felt he had been consumed personally in the very heat and cauldron of the life process, and what remained had been purified. It seemed true.

"You have to choose," he would say, "between being a diamond or a pearl. A diamond is the result of a long time and immense pressures, while a pearl is created to protect the organism from irritating matter. Which one will it be?" Andrew was, without a doubt, the diamond, and he shone forth with an intense light.

I would look for Andrew around campus and often find him sitting on one of the cement benches along the Diag up near State Street, usually in the full sun. I would spend whole days with him listening to the various aphorisms and lessons he would speak.

Although normally talkative (can't you tell from my writing?), I seldom spoke when I was with Andrew, almost never. I just could not find anything important enough to say to interrupt whatever Andrew might be saying. I absorbed the information Andrew offered with a great thirst. Communication of this kind was what I had longed and prayed for my whole life. This was the real deal.

Andrew would tell me that he was tuning me like an instrument and that one day, years from now, I would respond to the information he was placing in my consciousness. How's that for straightforward? What he said was absolutely true and often, after 10 or 12 hours of intense

listening, I would be so exhausted as I stumbled home that I felt I would have to be sick and throw up. It was like chemical radiation, it was so strong.

Andrew spent a great deal of time in the libraries of Ann Arbor, particularly in the public library at the corner of 5th and Williams, where he read intently on mostly Eastern religious topics. He would write out short quotes from various books on tiny 3x5 slips of paper. At his death, I found thousands of these slips, each with writing on both sides. The sad thing to me was that the reason Andrew made the quote was often more profound than the quote itself. I only wished he had written out his ideas in his own words. His juxtaposing of the quotes was more brilliant than the original quotes. Think about that!

Andrew not only would repeat certain themes or sayings, he would ask me to memorize and recite them. And he did this in front of others, often at Circle Books, the local metaphysical bookstore where I worked. There, around a low circular oak table, Andrew would ask me to remember and recite particular aphorisms in front of a group of others gathered there. I was often embarrassed because my memory was not always that sharp, but it was a sign that Andrew took some stock in what he was drilling into me.

Andrew had been a traveling initiator for a Rosicrucian order and was familiar with almost all branches of metaphysical and occult wisdom. His reading was vast. He was very familiar and had worked with the Max Heindel school of Rosicrucianism and knew the book "Cosmo Conception" inside and out. He was familiar with astrology, numerology, occult science, and about every kind of metaphysical study. He was perhaps most interested in Buddhism of all forms, in particular, Zen. Also Sufi wisdom.

Andrew spent much of his day working with language, with words. Palindromes were a favorite, words that read the same forward as backward, like the famous one about Napoleon, "Able was I ere I saw Elba." More often he would take a word and create a list of all the other words that could be derived from it. And most often he would take the English language and spell words out on the spot to you, like: initiate. "In-It-I-Ate." Andrew would declare that was the inner meaning of the word. This was his gospel, or as he would say it "Go Spell." He would also do any and all kind of word games, where letters were rearranged. Not crossword puzzles, but other sorts of word gymnastics.

He had very little money and was somewhat frugal on top of that. He lived, until the very last months of his life in a tiny room at a boarding house. The few belongings in his almost empty room were always neatly placed.

He loved to read newspapers and, in particular, the fresh news of the day. It seemed that whatever happened on a national or international level would happen to Andrew in his life at the personal level. When race riots broke out in Detroit, that same day Black youths broke into Andrew's room and destroyed something. Andrew was totally aware of this and felt it represented a level of consciousness he had earned by burning off various obscurations.

It was the imperfections, Andrew would say, that kept him still around and he would show his slightly-bent little finger on one hand that had been injured years earlier. This imperfection, he would say, kept him from passing on. No one knew if he was just kidding or using this example to instruct others in one of life's secrets.

And Andrew was an expert on just about every business establishment in the campus vicinity. He made a point of visiting them all and would not stand for bad service or the deterioration of service. He was always vocal about this sort of thing, would make his observations known to

management, and if unanswered, he would avoid the place completely. I would not like to own one of those businesses that Andrew shunned.

There is no question that Andrew McIver was a protector being, perhaps what the Tibetan Buddhists call a 'dharma protector'. He was fierce, although his anger never burned anyone. The correct term for what Andrew often exhibited would be wrath, wrath at all that obstructed and obscured the pure flowing of the life force. If you can imagine encountering a five-foot figure in his eighties on the campus of the University of Michigan and casting this old man a condescending kindly glance, only to be suddenly eye-to-eye with the most vital force in the universe. Unforgettable!

Andrew had a notable meeting of the governor of the state of Michigan, who greeted Andrew as one more senior citizen in a group of elders. "How are you," Governor Romney said in his obsequious politic voice. Andrew responded, "It's not 'How are You?', but 'Who are you?' that matters," he replied, to the governor's complete confusion.

And Andrew was very careful with what he ate. Over his long life, he had tried eating almost everything and learned what each thing did to his system. He could tell you exactly what certain foods would do, a boil here, a rash there. He ate very simply and would cook food for me once in a while. Andrew taught me how to boil coffee by dropping the grounds into boiling water, turning off the heat at once, and covering the pan. We would drink coffee together often.

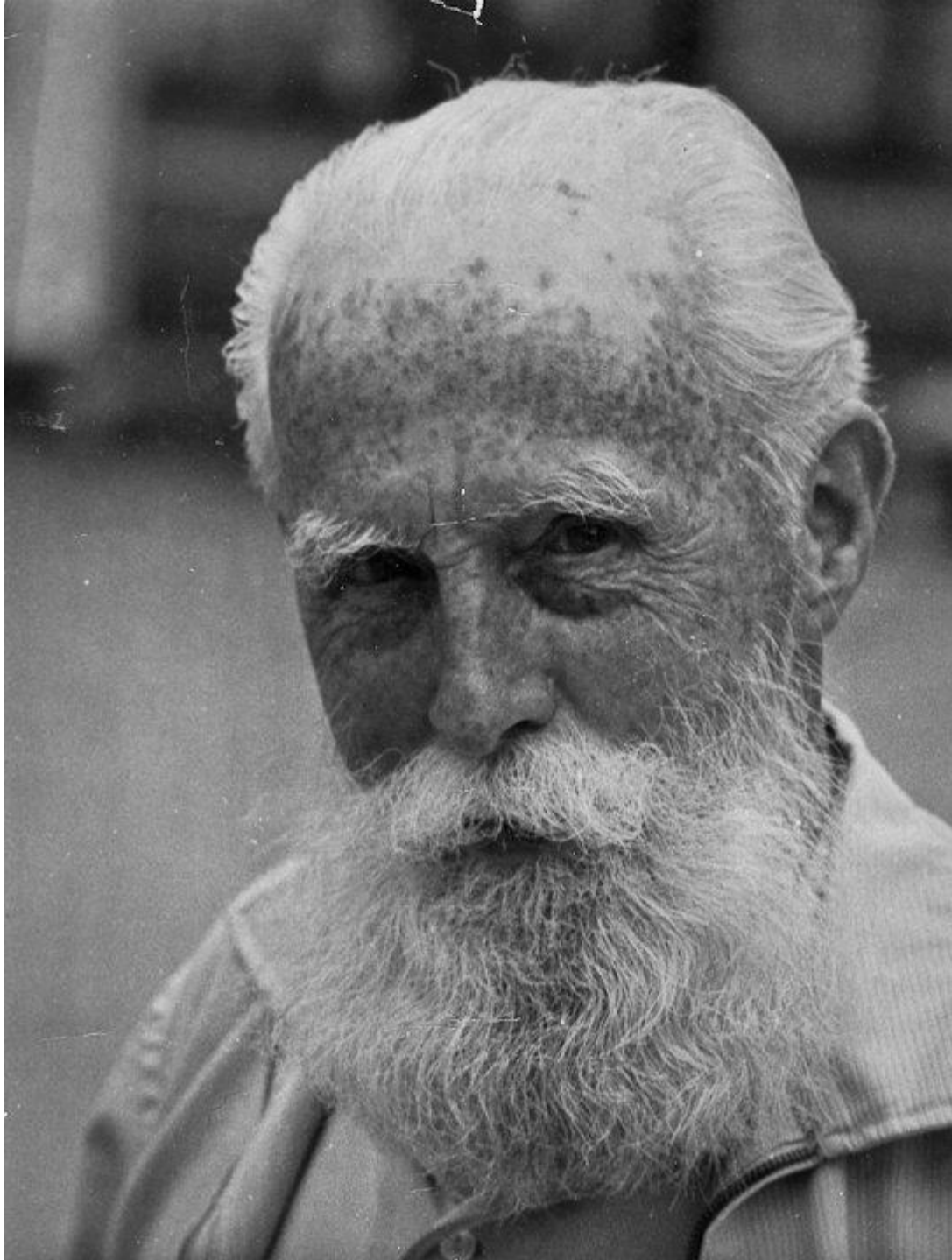
And he had real powers. I could recall many times when I had approached Andrew at a time when I was in a foul mood. Andrew could sense this at once and would always tell some story that led to an emphatic action on his part of some kind. He would be talking along, getting more and more crisp about some point when, taking the newspaper that he usually carried, he would bring it down sharply in his hand or on the edge of a table or something. Whack. In that instant, at the precise point where the sharp sound occurred, my headache or bad mood would just vanish. It was gone. Andrew did this all the time, like swatting a fly.

Andrew McIver must have had many students and many people benefited from his presence. I only knew a few personally. As time went on Andrew and I became almost inseparable. On Andrew's death on March 9th, 1969, it was me who worked with the police, contacted his sister in Scotland, his only remaining kin, and saw to his burial. Andrew was buried in the cemetery along Geddes Road in Ann Arbor, where I designed a tall granite stone with the symbol of the Sun on it, a circle with a dot in the center. It can be found just inside the fence along Geddes Road, about 3 blocks from the cemetery entrance to the East. The gravestone faces North, and when you are looking at it, you are facing Geddes Road, that is: facing south.

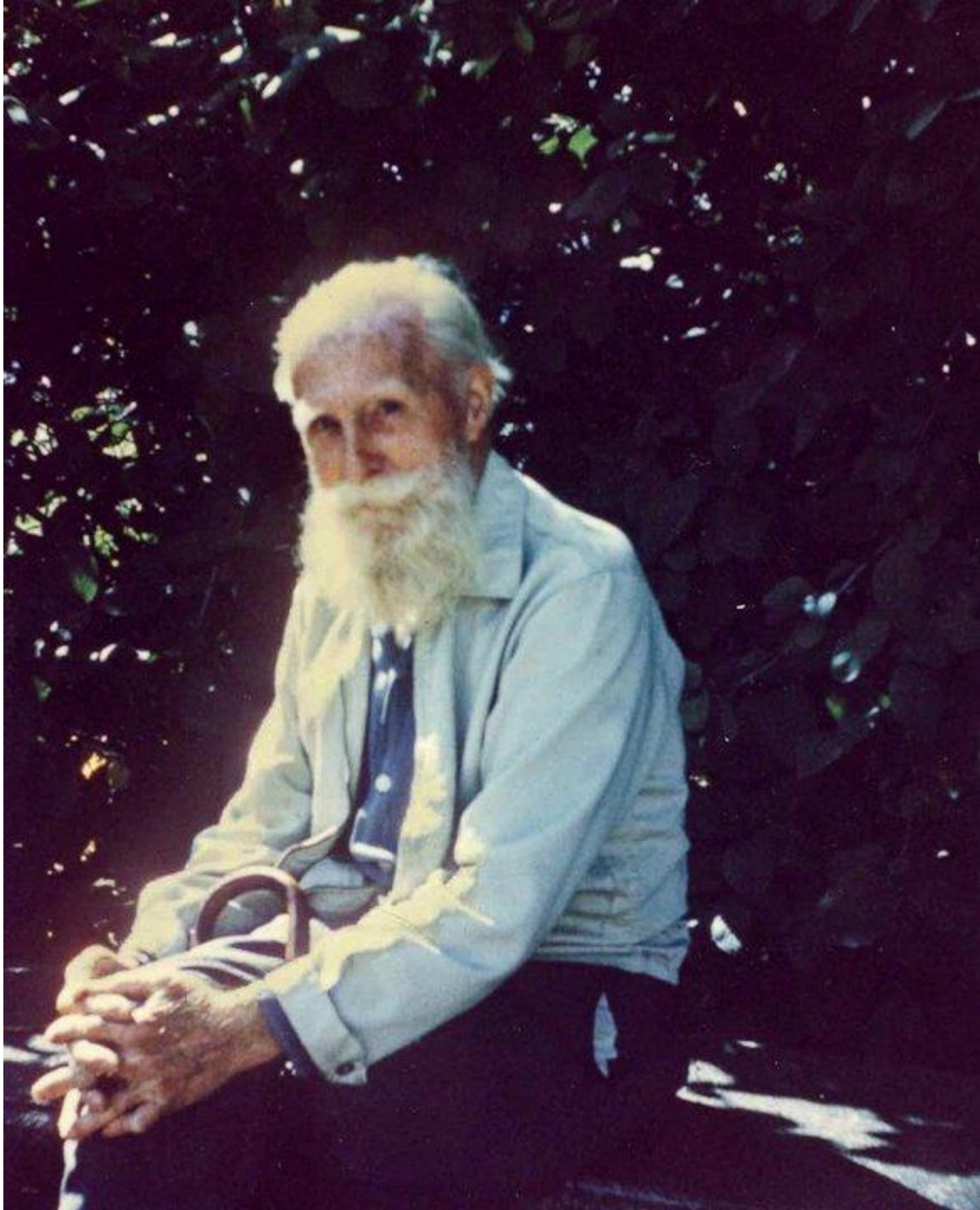
I have told you something about Andrew McIver, but the most important point of all is that in Andrew I had found an individual and a person who had no shadow, no personality flaw of any kind that I, with my outsized critical eye, could discover. Andrew McIver was absolutely transparent and void as far as obscurations were concerned. He had none that I could see and I looked, you can be sure. Through Andrew, I could at last see into the future of... myself.

It was clear when I met Andrew that this man cared more for me than I knew how to care for myself. I sensed that and trust arose in me (for the first time in my adult experience) for another 'person'. And through Andrew I could see clearly and I was able to open my heart to him, with no reservations. And with that gesture, all of my fear of other persons vanished and I ceased to be hung up on other people's personal faults.

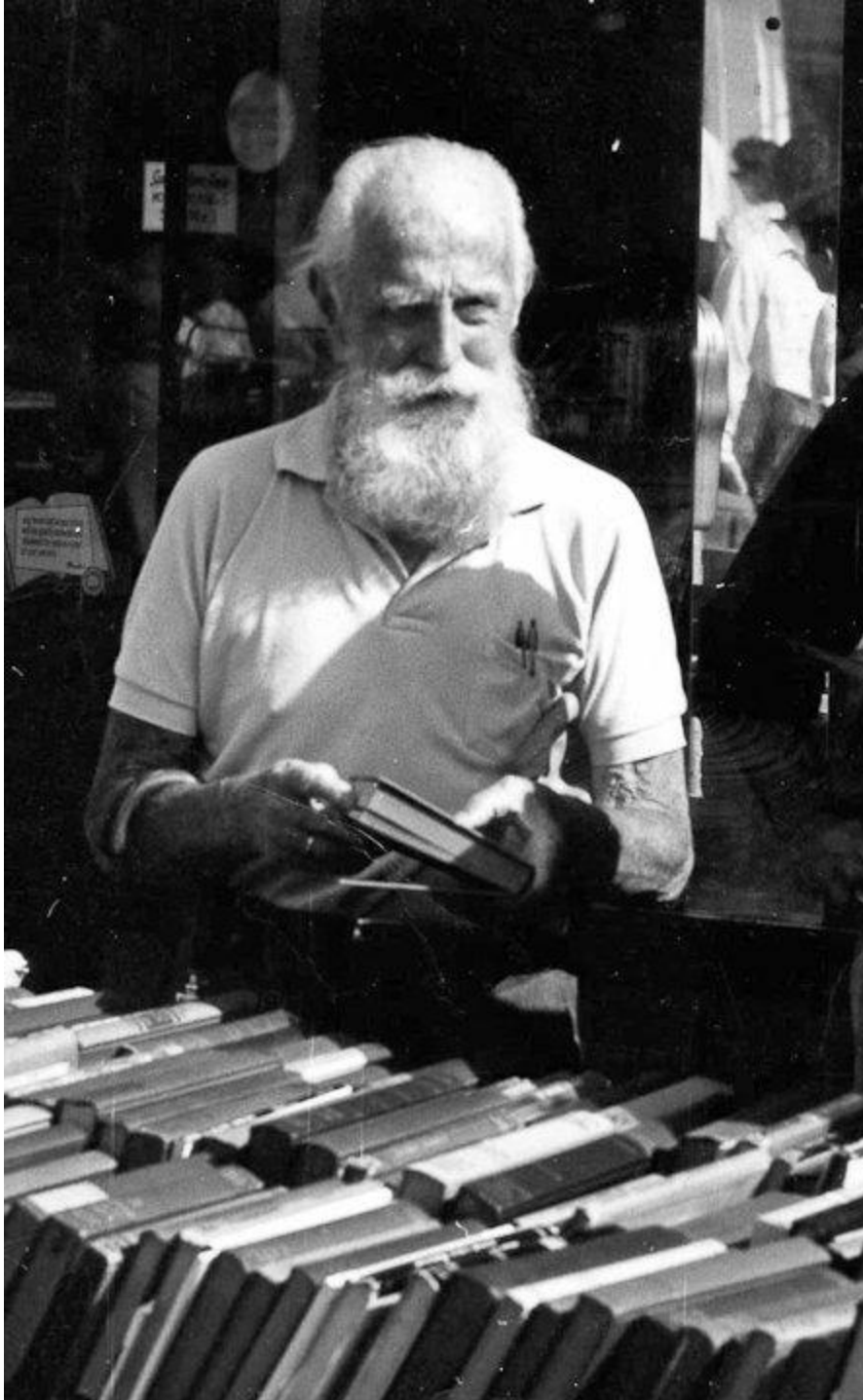
This is not to say that I stopped recognizing flaws in those around me, but rather that I was no longer in doubt as to whether the problem was in me or in the person I was meeting. Through Andrew, I was able to trust my own judgment because I had with me now the experience of the real deal, a fully realized being that, once known, left no doubt in me about who was a poser and who was not. Once you encounter someone like Andrew, you can never again get caught up with those who pretend to know. I knew the difference, and knowing that, I could have compassion for those who just pretended, as opposed to fearing them or debating them. It made all of the difference.



This is Andrew as I knew him, about eighty years of age at the time.



Here is where a student (or townie like me) would meet Andrew, sitting on one of the many benches scattered around the University of Michigan campus. He might look like some old man, but any contact with him would dispel that thought in a lightning!



Andrew loved books, but in a funny way. He would copy paragraphs from books to 3x5 pieces of paper, quotations that supported what he himself was thinking. Invariable his thoughts were more profound than the sources he was quoting from, aside from ancient texts, etc.



And just for reference, here I am back in 1967, at the time I met Andrew.