Time out

Sabbath observance was not simply a moment of my grandfather's week. It framed his attitude, focused his desire, and helped him shape the pace and direction of his daily walk.

by Norman Wirzba in the July 12, 2005 issue

When I was a child I could hardly wait for Wilhelm Roepke, my grandfather, to arrive at our farm. Though he had formally “retired” after a lifetime of farming in Poland, Germany and southern Alberta, he couldn’t stay away from the fields and the barns. His fields and animals had a hold on him, a pull that he responded to with affection and care. And so daily, come rain or shine, he would come to do whatever needed doing: feeding the cattle, trimming and gathering grass around fence posts (nothing was to be wasted), sorting lumber, cleaning the chicken coop, straightening nails from a disassembled shed, baling hay and straw or butchering a pig.

As he drove into our yard I would run out to meet him so I could ask, “How are you doing today, Opa?” His response, without fail, was, “*Immer gut—manchmal besser*!” Always good—sometimes better! This little ritual was a game then, but I now take his response as a serious description of how he lived. His estimation that life was indeed good, a gift to be treasured and cared for, could readily be seen in the gentle ways he looked after our fields and animals, and in the little pockets of time he found or created to enjoy the blessings of our life together. Surrounded as he was by a well-kept farm and a community of friends, I sometimes had the sense that in his view life was almost *too good*. Even if we tried, we would not have enough time or means to show proper gratitude.

My world, as well as the world of many of the people I know, is not permeated or punctuated with gratitude. We are too busy for it. Our greetings to each other—“You have no idea how busy I am!” or “I’m barely getting by!”—indicate that speed and stress, rather than care and celebration, dominate our lives. Though I knew my grandfather to be a hardworking man, I think he would be astounded at the frantic

schedules we try to keep. It would likely sadden him to see how little time we have to enjoy the gifts of family and friends, of changing seasons and fresh tomatoes, and how we don't seem to engage each other or our natural neighborhoods with much kindness or attention. He would want to know what all our frenetic striving is finally for.

What I remember is that my grandfather had time. He made himself available to me and to those who requested or needed his attention. I never had the sense that he viewed my incessant tagging along as an inconvenience or a burden. Though he always had work to do, he did not rush through his tasks. There was almost always enough time to fix a broken fence, treat and stroke a sick animal, collect grain that had spilled in the field, tell an amusing story or answer the questions of an eager child. He was as fully present to the world as any person I have ever known.

I cannot presume to fully understand all that made my grandfather who he was. What I know is that he experienced the joys of boyhood camaraderie and diligent farm work, but also the bitter violence and deprivations of war, the pain of family separation, the humiliation of being a prisoner of war. When the opportunity came to immigrate to western Canada in 1952 and set up a farm homestead, he took it. Coming as it did in midlife, no doubt this was a difficult decision to make. My sense is that he saw in this decision an opportunity to nurture a home and a community that would be, in some way, both a rejection of the ravages of war and a faithful witness and grateful response to the gifts of God.

When he came to southern Alberta my grandfather brought with him not only his family but also an agrarian disposition and set of values. He was not obsessed with speed and control, or driven by the anxious need to seize every opportunity. He demonstrated patient acceptance of life and an ability to rest and to find peace in the midst of hard work. Indeed, the character of his work showed that even in a violent world kindness and gentleness can inform our efforts, and that our striving can end in gratitude and delight. For him, the tasks and the gifts of the day were sufficient. Though he lived in the shadow and splendor of the Canadian Rockies, he did not feel the need to go there to relax. His paradise had always been his farm home. From its demands and possibilities he desired no escape.

I have come to understand that a Sabbath sensibility was at the heart of my grandfather's life. What I mean is that the teaching of the Sabbath is the best way to make sense of how he understood his place in the world and what was expected of

him. Sabbath observance was not simply a moment of his week. It framed his attitude, focused his desire and helped him shape the pace and direction of his daily walk. It inspired and enabled him to greet life with care and delight.

As was fairly common in the small Mennonite and Baptist farming communities of southern Alberta, Sunday was understood to be a Sabbath, which means that as little work as possible was to be performed, even in the middle of a busy harvest season. Animals had to be fed and irrigation pipes moved, but that was it. Tractors, combines, balers, trucks—all shut down on Saturday night and did not start up again until Monday morning. Sunday was reserved for worship and relaxation. It was the time to gather as a family and community to be refreshed by gifts of food, friendship and hospitality.

Sunday mornings were spent in church. Because ours was a relatively small congregation made up of German immigrants who often shared my grandfather's story, I knew everyone in it and they knew me. Together we formed a community that tried—we did not succeed nearly enough—to mirror in this life what God's love for everyone means practically. In Sunday school we were taught stories from the Bible such as those of Moses leading the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt, Jesus healing the sick and feeding the hungry or Paul risking life and limb to spread the good news of the gospel, and songs like "*Gott ist die Liebe*—God loves me dearly." Worship was devoted to more singing, scripture reading, the sermon and the collection of an offering to take care of needs in the church and to aid missionaries working in distant lands. The high point in the year occurred each Thanksgiving as farmers brought the fruit of their fields to display on the church altar. God's tangible, generous hospitality was powerful inspiration for us to share and give sacrificially.

After church we couldn't wait to get home for what was always the best meal of the week. Whether we ate alone as a family or with guests we had invited from church, the Sunday meal had a festive air about it. Chicken or roast, potatoes and gravy, vegetables and a salad, several kinds of cake, all mixed with conversation, made for a dining experience of which we never grew tired. On the table we all saw, smelled and tasted the gifts of God and the works of our hands, for in our house most of the food came directly from the barn, the chicken coop and the garden. Afternoons, when we didn't spend them visiting with guests, were reserved for naps and athletics. By supper it was time to head back to church for a more casual service and after that, if we were lucky, *Kaffe und Kuchen*, a time of coffee and cake when church members would go downstairs to eat and socialize. These were times to

laugh and tell stories, but also to learn of each other's needs.

What makes Sabbath observance so startling to me now is that from an economic standpoint, it makes no sense at all. Why would anyone work much of the year preparing a field and a crop for harvest and then, in the middle of a relatively short harvest season, sometimes with full knowledge that it would rain tomorrow, stop to rest? Sabbath observance could, and in several instances did, result in serious financial loss as crop quality was compromised or the crop itself (if the weather didn't improve) was simply left in the field to rot. Surely this part of my past should be written off as a naïve remnant of an antiquated religious tradition. Besides viewing it as unnecessary, we might even condemn it as wasteful and financially irresponsible. Perhaps looking upon this practice as foolish, few farmers still observe the Sabbath today. The occasions to eat and be together as a community seem fewer and farther between. Our week and our weekends, rather than being tuned to gratitude and delight, seem focused upon maximum productivity and profitability.

Why, then, did my family and so many others refuse to bale the hay or bring in the grain on Sundays? I suppose one could attribute their (in)action to the stubbornness of habit, but this explanation would miss the point. Sabbath observance, even if not always clearly communicated or understood (its fuller meaning has only dawned on me much later in life), reflected the profound sense that life's success is not to be measured by the extent or pace of our own striving. Instead, Sabbath rest provided a weekly chance to reflect on what our living, even the living of the animals on the farm, is finally for. It provided the occasion for us to acknowledge and celebrate the natural, social and spiritual contexts which make life possible at all. I do not recall the time of Sabbath as contributing to feelings of anxiety or insecurity. I remember it rather as an oasis, a time to give thanks, relax, rejoice and refocus in the midst of sometimes turbulent and always unpredictable farm life. Sabbath observance, in other words, showed us the importance of giving up our controlling, anxious grip on the world so that we might learn in a regular and concrete manner what it means to trust in the grace of God and community and to welcome and respect the gifts on which all the living depend.

It is easy, especially in drawing on childhood memories, to idealize the past or overlook the struggles these communities faced. Practicing the Sabbath did not automatically turn these people into saints. For instance, I know that our hands did not always or sufficiently mirror during the week the gratitude we expressed with our lips on Sunday. I also know that too much of the family's Sabbath rest depended

on the exertion of women providing extensive meals and presiding over many hours of hospitality. I well remember my mother spending hours on Saturday and then again early on Sunday morning tending to meal preparations for family and guests. Though we certainly enjoyed the food, we did not adequately appreciate her work or provide the conditions for her to be refreshed.

Nonetheless, the Sabbath gave us an anchor in life, as well as a goal by which to judge our desires and our striving. It stood before us, as much as we would let it, as a teacher and guide and as a reminder and rule, indicating when our lives together were at their very best and where they needed to change and improve. The test of Sabbath authenticity was whether or not we could stand before each other without shame and with a convivial attitude, knowing that we had been responsive to each other's needs, pains and joys. Sabbath practice was at its best when the goodness of the community and of creation took precedence over our own, often self-serving, desires.

If we are to recover a Sabbath sensibility for our time, we will first need to learn how to rest and how to become grateful people. To do this we will need to face head-on the anthropocentric ethos that sits at the heart of Western culture and religion. Anthropocentrism says that humanity is the goal of all life, and that all of creation exists to serve people's fairly narrow interests. Sabbath teaching, as it is expressed in scripture, shows that anthropocentrism is precisely the temptation we must overcome.

To appreciate this we need to consider the Sabbath as more than an appendage to the week, a mere break or reprieve from the hassles and busyness of our daily lives. As my grandfather made plain, the Sabbath is what we live toward. As such, it informs our living all the time, permeating our sensibilities so deeply that all our activity is seen from a Sabbath point of view.

The first creation story in Genesis does not end with the creation of humanity. There is a seventh day, the day when God stops to rest. Here is the first biblical reference to what we recognize as a Sabbath. What makes this passage so striking, but also revolutionary, is that Sabbath is characterized not by inactivity but by celebration. There is an oddity in the text: We are told that God finished creating on the sixth day, only to discover that God is said to finish again on the seventh day. Why the need to finish something twice? To this puzzle the ancient rabbis had a profound answer: while the material creation was indeed finished on the sixth day, what was

left unfinished was the creation of its spiritual goal. Creation needs something to move toward, something to complete it and give it meaning and purpose. This goal the rabbis called *menuha*, a term we can translate as tranquillity, delight and peaceful repose. Menuha, rather than the creation of humanity, is what completes God's creation and represents its best fulfillment.

The goal of all life is for it to share in God's own menuha, in God's delight in a creation proclaimed to be very good. The point of creation is not for it to serve our every whim and want, but rather for it to live out the excellence that God desires. This means that whenever we impair the ability of creatures to be what God intends, we also diminish God's capacity to experience delight.

Though my grandfather never talked to me about menuha, I know he understood this scriptural principle. I remember how after lunch, while others returned to work or took a break, he would grab his scythe and bucket, search out a patch of fresh grass, mow it down and head over to the chicken coop. The chickens knew what was up. In fact, I could swear they came running with smiles on their faces, for they clearly loved the offering of freshly cut grass. They gobbled it down as my grandfather grinned in sheer delight.

This little effort was clearly unnecessary. Our chickens ranged over the entire farm and had more than enough to eat. Moreover, my grandfather clearly had "more important" things to do. Yet he did this feeding daily during the summer months. It was his gift to his chickens, and they loved it. His labor grew out of his care for his flock and his sense that they were creatures deserving of their own forms of delight. I believe his action grew out of the same understanding that prompted him to take the Sabbath seriously. He understood practically—through his stomach—that he lived because of the gifts and sacrifices of countless others. The only appropriate response for him was to be grateful and turn his own labor into a gift that would benefit them in return. To abuse creation or to exploit it in any way was clearly anathema if not sacrilegious, a defiling of the grace of the world.

The example of my grandfather has taught me that we will not experience gratitude and delight if we do not also practice patience and care. This is a hard lesson because the fast pace of our lives makes it very difficult to exercise the sort of attention and affection that would lead to sympathetic engagement with others. Could we begin by committing to slow down one full day in the week, agreeing not to do anything that would pass as a checkmark on our ever-expanding "to-do" lists?

Restraint and rest, but also regular celebration, may well be among the most revolutionary practices the church can model to the rest of society. In doing this we would not only demonstrate that we trust in God to provide for us. We would also be examples to others of what a grateful life looks like.

If we are to be Sabbath people, we need to learn the discipline of noting and celebrating the many gifts—sunshine, water, soil, earthworms, wheat, chickens, family, neighbors—that make our living possible and a joy. As we commit to this discipline we will gradually learn that we cannot celebrate life and abuse others at the same time. Rest and celebration, when authentically realized, may yet become our most powerful stimulus to the creation of a more just and peaceable world.

The memory of my grandfather and the witness of the farming community in which I was raised demonstrate to me that our cultural course is not inevitable. We do not need to continue in the frantic, exhausting, destructive ways of competitive consumerism. Many of us, sensing the imbalance and impropriety of our lives, know that we have to structure our work and our leisure differently if we as a creation are to live well and with joy. The Sabbath can serve as a goal and vision that can help us become more attentive and patient. It can put us on paths that will lead to rest and delight.