



## REMEMBERING ROBBIN

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This is an essay of recollection. As it developed it also became an essay on the significance of Robbin Hough on the evolution and character of my career.

Robbin Hough in my opinion was an Old Oak because he was the best of the old group, not simply because he was at Oakland for a long time. Although he was here for a long time. At his death on Thanksgiving Day, 1999, he had been at Oakland for 37 years. He was from Montana and every once in a while the big skies could be heard in his speech and the School of Mines in his thinking. Carol, his wife, one time accused him of sleeping with his boots on or at least very near the bed. He was a bartender of note who decided to attend MIT and become a professional economist.

There can be some doubt what an economist actually does, just as there is the same question about people in sociology or political science. Robbin held strong ideas about his new profession and wrote a book about what economists actually do. These ideas carried him to this “Harvard on the prairie” in 1962 where he graced the economics department of the College of Arts and Sciences. Within three years he had become chairman of the department, and by 1967 when I first met him and his family, he was a recognized institution on campus: the person who represented economics, the poker player who loved big cigars, and the pragmatic colleague with a mind that would not stop, and whose ideas often came out

with the rapidity of bullets from Mr. Gatling's gun. Meet this man at a party, begin conversing with him, and your whole life could be changed. Bill Hammerle was that way as well; the kind of mind that just would not admit boundaries and yet walked around very quietly, almost shyly. Once a person got to know either Hammerle or Hough they were seen to be a long way from shyness, but initially, they were both so far from bluster that it seemed like shyness.

The old department of economics had offices in North Foundation Hall next door to political science and the two departments shared a coffee urn supervised by an office manager named Mary. Since I really liked coffee, I got to know that small economics faculty rather well, but especially Hough, whose name I first pronounced as Hoe then Hawgh. Robbin quickly assured me that his last name sounded like tough or rough, not dough or cough.

Robbin and I were neighbors at work, but we were also neighbors outside of work. My family and I had rented a house on Walnut Blvd in Rochester in mid 1967, the Geib house that the Heubels had occupied during the previous year, and across the street from this house was the "Hough House". This was before the Houghs moved to the place on Main Street, and when my wife was working every day at the local hospital. It was summertime and my teaching did not start until September, so I could take care of my kids (5 and 6) and write my dissertation in any spare time. My children began playing with Hough kids and the basis of a lifelong friendship was laid with both Robbin and Carol and the charming children Whitney and Eric.

The kids would come over every other day, thus creating spare time on the alternate days when Carol had them all. At my house they would play with my kids in the big Geib house that had lots of places to hide like low level cupboards and cabinets large enough to crawl into. So hide and seek became the *de rigueur* game. I don't recall the baby Tor, so maybe Carol kept him away from the influence of this political scientist. Tor seems to have thrived as a result.

When they were across the street I had free time to write my dissertation on the side porch. Because of the hide and seek I only had to surface when they were stuck behind the antiquated water softener or it was time to feed them. My kids would eat anything, but the Hough's could eat nothing I fixed. They had so many allergies that peanut butter and jam were out, for example, while Puffa Puffa Wheat and Rice were definitely in.

It all worked out quite well, and there was only one flea in the soup that I could see during that summer of 1967. I could not convince Robbin that the war in Vietnam was wrong. He played devil's advocate and he was quite good at it. I fell for it and would spend hours on his front porch or in his front room arguing my head off. One of his final arguments was that the war in Vietnam served the useful purpose of reducing population growth. It finally occurred to me that I was being played with; not even an economist would make such an argument!

In August the Houghs moved to the big house on Main that is still known as "Hough House." The next summer I and my family had moved away as well. Robbin continued as the chairman of Economics although there were rumors about making Economics a school rather than a department. He had become my best friend. He was a person like none I had ever met. Except for very practical matters, such as the number of classes he taught that semester or something, he was an unusual person with whom to converse. One reason was because unlike most professionals who imagine themselves intellectuals because they've mastered one narrow slice of knowledge and then generalized this narrow knowledge to cover everything, Robbin really did know a great deal about a great many things besides the narrow confines of "economics." Another reason was because he was the most interruptable person in my long experience. When he was talking you could stop him anywhere, ask your question, get an answer and he'd go right back to his original argument unless you had exposed a more interesting line to follow. Another reason was that talk-

ing with Robbin was never simply listening, nor listening while rehearsing what I would say next, talking with Robbin was always a discussion, a discussion about things that had never been thought of before, where new dimensions were explored. Talking with Robbin was a trip, as we used to say. He opened up for me a quality I never really knew I had, that of simultaneously seeing the opposite of something, or that of turning “idea rocks” over to see what was on the other side, of insisting on operationalizing broad concepts that few had ever tried to make empirical.

Robbin and I tried, off and on over the years, to apply these efforts to religion, to Christianity, and the result was probably a mixed bag but a great deal of fun. God, for example, became less an object somewhere, and more a goal of living and striving. If the noun “God” could be made a transitive verb, “to God”, that could be used as a gerund or gerundive to describe the virtuous life, there was no end to the way in which religions could be opened up.

For a time Robbin became quite active in Lutheranism. He began a church called The Genesis Ministry. Now this was a real church, with minister, collection plates, congregations, the whole bag. Was Robbin heading for ordination? Not at all. I did not become an active partner with him in this project because churches scare me a bit, but Robbin was the pivot around which this new church revolved. In one way the Genesis Ministry was simply a continuation of his research into small groups, what caused them, what killed them, and how they could grow the one from the other. The Genesis Ministry was supposed to be the beginning from which other churches grew as the first group created copies of itself which then did the same thing to others. Robbin was testing his ideas on group life in the empirical world.

Another dimension of this extension into religion were endless discussions about Martin Luther and finally Robbin’s own attempt to rewrite the Augsburg Confession to make it more of a humanist document. He read the revision to me over the telephone, and both of us were very pleased with how

it had come out. Why read it to me? He read it to me because I was his close friend and because I had earned a BD degree from Calvin Seminary in Grand Rapids. When we talked religion in his front room there were usually one or two ministers involved with us. Our discussions about Christianity were not play time, not social chitchat, but very much a part of our full time careers.

I was trying to fit Christianity and Communism together in some way that did not totally distort either one, and Robbin was looking for methods of making Christianity empirical. We both found what we wanted in Liberation Theology and in particular Robbin discovered in Ernesto Cardenal's *The Gospel in Solentiname* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1982) a way to make a religion like Christianity meaningful in everyday life for everyday people. The way in this instance was for non-professional people to define the concepts worshipped or revered. Don't tell them what the Holy Spirit is according to tradition, ask them what the Spirit of God means to them in their practical lives and then use that definition in the church service. In Liberation Theology I found a great many Christians who sought through communism the Kingdom of Heaven on earth; Christian communists who saw that private property was the biggest sin preventing the development of that kingdom.

We also tried over the years to bring the stimulus of academic discussion into the context of theory by forming discussion groups made up mainly of Oakland colleagues who would take turns presenting papers to the group. We met in Robbin's living room. The first one was the Lunar Society, patterned after Erasmus Darwin's Lunar Society in England's 1790s, while the second was called, optimistically, the Solar Society. After these failed to maintain themselves, I joined the Society for the Improvement of Communications Techniques, a Dearborn group that included prominent medical people and other professionals from the tri-county area. This was a successful group so I pulled Robbin in. We enjoyed these people until the group collapsed and then we helped to start a Rochester Torch Club, open to professionals of all sorts. Still

basically a present your research and discuss it sort of ambience, the Torch Club continues to this day.

All of this did not mean that Robbin had stopped other things. He remained chair of economics until the School of Business Administration idea was firmly in place, then happily returned to being a full-time professor. Around this time he tackled an ambitious project, measuring the volume of water flow from the mouths of the world's great rivers to test the notion that the amount of water flow, expressed in cubic feet per second, dictated the number of people that could be sustained in that river basin. As a clear example of his hypothesis he needed a major river and river basin on which data were available, and he chose the mighty Mississippi, whose discharge into the Gulf of Mexico is felt all the way to southern Texas where its impact is visible near Mexico. After he proved his theory and published his findings he went on to measure the flow of all world rivers and determined food-deficit areas all over the world, i.e., areas with human populations in excess of that theoretically allowable. It was original research charging well ahead of anyone else.

In spring 1968 my wife and I were invited to a newly re-decorated Hough House on Main Street to a party Robbin was giving for graduating Economics seniors, their families who'd come to the graduation, economics faculty, and some others like the Ozingas. The idea to entertain coincided with the move from Walnut Blvd to Main Street, and Carol's redecorating had to be done almost overnight with the whole family involved. The paint was barely dry as the guests entered.

The punch that Robbin had concocted was a delightful red drink called Hummingbird Stew. It was very tasty and very strong. I drank several glasses, completely at my ease because I had become quite close to the Hough family, what with babysitting and feeding the children Puffa Puffa whatever. I called them the Puffa Puffa kids, sort of implying that decent parents had better eating kids. At any rate, at that party where I was unknowingly getting sloshed, the guests gradually thinned out and I found myself alone with the entire faculty of

economics. I seized the opportunity to lecture them on the meaning of capitalism, and forever after was accused of believing in puffa puffa economics. Thirty-two years later I still believe the same: capitalists don't know what capitalism is any more than communists knew what communism is.

Robbin became involved in the gestation of the School of Business out of the former Economics Department, and all the stuff that went with that, and I became involved with the writing of my first book on communism. When I finished with the draft in 1974 the first copy of the not yet published book went to Robbin. When he was doing the papers on population distribution and water flow in river basins around the world, he was putting it all into the context of General Systems Theory. We had talked one day on his front lawn about a similar ending for my communism book, and so my last chapter, describing the future for communist ideas, introduced the reader to the mysteries and pleasures of general systems theory tied loosely to communist theory. So maybe it was puffa puffa systems theory, but for a time there we thought we were going to reform the world through general systems theory. He stimulated such an interest in cybernetics and systems in me that it became a part of my life and career even though I insisted I knew very little about it. Robbin simply smiled and went on.

We really did have that kind of a sense of purpose, about changing the world. There was the example of Stafford Beer, in Chile, working with Salvador Allende Gossens to reshape and reform Chile beyond recognition; an effort cut short by the CIA coup against Allende in which the first elected socialist president was killed in the name of democracy. Allende had also had an idea of the compatibility of socialism, general systems theory, and democracy.

This framework to improve communism beyond its performance in the Soviet Union was also an acknowledgement of the utility of centralized economies in achieving humanist goals. This was back in the days when Western economists generally praised the command economy because of its high

growth rate. The command economy was also feared because it could be anticipated that within a few years central economies would pass Western free enterprise in terms of production and the so-called Third World would turn to them rather than us as a model. So a limited copying of the centralized model was a popular idea for a time, a copying designed to prevent a country like Russia from becoming number one in production.

In this context Robbin, with his computers and his theory, had the means and the ability to run an entire country such as Hungary. He had no fear of tackling such a project as Hungary. He could have organized the heavy industrial sector of the Soviet economy far better than the Russians. We both knew it, we talked about how it could be done, and how we would achieve maximum efficiency with maximum levels of social well-being. It was around this time that Robbin thought his telephone was tapped by the CIA or whoever; some office or official who knew that Robbin could be a major factor in the future. The frequent clicks on his telephone lent substance to the idea that other people knew that he was on to something, that maybe he was only a call away from being catapulted from Main Street Rochester to Main Street World. I could never hear the clicks on my phone. It was a disappointment.

One of the ways in which the transformation from Rochester to the World could take place was through a financial award from the Club of Rome, a group of wealthy men who funded research in areas of environmental cybernetics and systems theory. It was not impossible that Robbin or Robbin and I could fit into their scheme. It would be a major leap into a different research future. The hope that one can make a major contribution to world development fades quickly in most people as they leave the ivory tower to fit into the real world. For Robbin and myself this fading did not seem to be as true. We saw things differently: he saw things as they can be and I as they could be, but it never disturbed us because we always corrected for whoever was talking. I pulled him toward



what might be and how we could get there while he tended to see things as they were and how they could be changed for the better. The difference lay chiefly in the perspective. His work on Walpole Island, for example, took the St. Clair River's pollution as a given and sought methods of *actually* doing something about it for the Indian people living there.

We began going to the same conferences in the seventies. We attended one in 1975 in New York where, I remember, we went from one panel to another looking for numbers. I was not so numbers oriented, but Robbin needed numbers in order to keep his interest. We finally found some speakers using numbers to prove their point, on a panel of political scientists of all places! Neither one of us ever forgot that man's presentation. It was about how people in political office had a built-in out of touch problem. Many Senators, for example, were in their sixties. That meant that their education came from the era just before the Second World War, during the depression. There we were in the 1970's expecting them to act very differently from how they'd been trained to act. Both of us used this insight many times. But numbers by themselves, of course, were not enough. There had to be content behind the numbers. A conference we drove to in upstate New York, pursuing the Club of Rome through Erwin Lazlo, was one where there were numbers but little content. We stayed a very short time, maybe two days. It turned us off this particular approach and left us open for others.

In 1978 a Society for General Systems Research Conference in Washington D.C. accepted my paper on altruism, and I was able to stay with Robbin in his Washington apartment when he was on the Presidential Task Force. From there my interest in General Systems Theory continued. It was around this time that I became involved with the Dutch systems people and by the second or third conference I had pulled Robbin in as well. Professor Gerard de Zeeuw, the patron saint of Dutch systems theory at the University of Amsterdam organized these international conferences every other year. In the off year the conference would be held in Vienna or Baden

Baden. Once Robbin began he went to all of them, practically all of the time. At the airports he delighted in using those executive clubs for business passengers where there are free drinks and peanuts and newspapers and people to worry about your connections.

Since 1979 when they began I only missed the Amsterdam conference once in 1985, and Robbin seldom missed Vienna, Baden Baden, or Amsterdam after the first few. As a result there was a group of men and women from Belgium, Holland, Germany, Italy, Slovenia, Hungary, the USSR, Japan, South America, and Wayne State University, loosely following Robbin's lead, who could be counted on to pull together a research paper in the twinkling of an eye. I can't tell you how many times Robbin would stop me in the fourth floor corridor of Varner Hall, for example, and say "Do you have a paper you can read next month in Vienna?" "Are you going to Baden Baden?" There was the expectation of constant researching because that is what Robbin himself did—he was always pushing, pushing, into new territory, and as a result had a possible paper to read at least once a month. He anticipated that others did the same thing. I rather liked writing books instead of papers, but I could usually come up with a paper every other year.

Some things we didn't bring up often because they were not pleasant memories. For example, Woody's promises about the new school of business, promises not kept. Or the time in 1977 when Robbin chaired a task force in the Carter years out of the Office of Management and Budget in Washington D.C., and Oakland refused to pay the salary on which his family depended during the year he was in Washington. He was thought of highly enough on a national level to be a top person in the business of bringing computers into government, but his own university refused to pay him. I took his case to President O'Dowd who turned him/me down again. When he tried to teach his systems class at home, he would teach it in his garage where all his computers were. Sometimes his students caught him in his bathrobe. Instead of seeing this as a

harmless eccentricity, the SBA administration considered it as a problem. Robbin, like everyone else, was not uniformly appreciated. If you make a mark, someone will object, and, oddly, unique intelligence coupled with creative application is often a target—even at a university. Funny, how that happens.

We didn't talk about this very often because the pressures of his conference work and his worldwide research more than made up the difference. Sometimes, in Europe especially, this would be done at evening parties. These could go on forever, or so it seemed to me. Before we left for Europe in the spring of 1999, both Carol and Tor had separately asked me to keep an eye on Robbin while in Amsterdam. I took that to mean don't let him get too tired, make sure he eats, just sort of keep track of him. No one would admit that he was dying of the damned cancer. Certainly not Robbin; he quietly gave us the confidence that he would find a new medicine or a new experimental drug, or that Carol would find it for him. Not to worry. But I watched a bit more carefully. The man was in his element. He lived it up, doing everything he had always done, bearing whatever pain he had with no comment at all. He acted like he had no pain. This wasn't true, by the way; he just acted as though it were. His very favorite occupation seemed to be smoking a big black cigar, sipping a black russian, and talking with the other people at the conference party about notables in the field, new approaches in systems theory, or just comparable events in a variety of schools. A scholarly shouting match took place at one point when a man from Chile argued that Allende had not been murdered in the 1973 coup. Nearly everyone in the room was very well acquainted with Allende's Chile because of Stafford Beer's involvement, so the group in 1999 was quite informed. Robbin was very much a part of the shouting match. He loved it.

Almost always when in Europe we rented a car and drove from Amsterdam over the dikes to Sneek in bucolic Friesland where my relatives have a hotel. We would have a lunch at the hotel and visit the town a bit and then drive back. Sometimes the car would be loaded: Robbin and myself, driving, John

Henke, Don Hildum, and the audiologist from Wayne State named Dale. We had a ball. Sometimes we would stop at Horne for coffee and a roll. The last time we looked for that restaurant we couldn't find it. The whole of Horne was torn up for repairs. What was the most fun was trying to recall how to get back to where we had rented the car. Entering Amsterdam is not the same thing as leaving it.

One time we had two cars. We flew into Brussels because that was the cheapest fare, but because we had six people in the group Robbin had negotiated two free cars from the American Airlines people. So after considerable negotiation, off we went from Brussels to Amsterdam. I was in the lead car with Robbin speeding down the autobahn, but the second car was driven by Don Hildum whose highest speed seemed to be 45 miles per hour. So we slowed down, but all the way to Amsterdam, the recurring phrase "I don't see Don" would have everyone in stitches.

At that same conference, on the evening before our departure, we pulled the cars up to the hotel in the Rembrandt Plein. This was illegal. The police placed those small poles in the ground so that we couldn't leave—the poles made a fence around the entire square. Robbin and John discovered one spot where the poles were separated a bit more, and we carefully drove the cars through to the cheers of the unemployed masses on the sidewalks who disliked the police.

One of the times we began the Amsterdam conference by driving from Schipol to Bonn to visit Whitney Hough who was then attending the University of Bonn on the Rhine and doing an internship in the Federal Republic's legislature. We were put up one night with one of Whitney's German hosts, and had Easter Dinner with a second. In the garage there were rabbit foot prints in the dust on the cars. After showing us this and having a good chuckle, we were summoned to the dining room for a feast of, yes, you guessed it, rabbit. I felt like I was eating a pet. Robbin drove nearly all the way that time, and you've never seen a car go faster. It was like we were on the proving grounds performing test drives. The vehicle we

were using was an old orange thing whose high speeds could only be developed going downhill with the pedal to the metal. Once there the car would go maybe 120 mph, but it took a while getting there.

Robbin wasn't all systems, or all economics in the usual sense. I recall when he discovered a correlation between the human consumption of wheat and human aggression. I was sick with the flu at the time and he called me up filled with this news. I remember lying in bed with the phone to my ear. All I had to do was say uhuh or wow every now and again. He talked for over an hour. This was back in the late sixties. I have forgotten the details, the dates, and the actual chemical interactions that cause wheat to push aggression, but I have never forgotten the critical point that violence is not inherent in the human individual. I wrote papers for conferences that later became a book on Altruism (Praeger, 1999) building on that earlier concept. I could say the same thing about his efforts regarding the Augsburg Confession. That attempt to make Christianity practical and meaningful, humanizing it, stayed with me as well, informing my teaching, my research and my books and papers, and my own private life.

But don't misunderstand. This was true of Robbin as well. What he worked on stayed with him and either stood on its own or became a part of something else. I can't tell you how many times I have heard him apply the ideas involved with the family therapy method of curbing juvenile crimes. Or bring up "critters" from the dim dark past as a metaphor for something else much later.

I am very fortunate to have matured with Robbin Hough. Looking back at my career in relation to his, I think it's a good thing I'm retired. My stimulus is gone.

Salut, my friend, wherever you are. The memories you leave are precious.