

Planetary Posts: the Moral Equivalent to Globalization, in loving memory of Bob O'Brien

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1. Between America and Africa

My friend Bob O'Brien was born April 12, 1918 in Framingham, near Boston in Massachusetts. He died on November 16, 1996, at the age of 78 years in Kampala, the capital of Uganda, Africa. So Bob's life journey went from the USA to Africa. As a matter of fact he visited almost any place on the globe, but this is where his journey began and ended. Between America and Africa we find Europe, where Bob spend much of his time, particularly in Haarlem, The Netherlands, where he lived the last twelve years of his life, as a permanent guest in the Rosenstock-Huessy Huis.¹

Bob's life span encompassed the era of Europe's confusion, from the First World War through the Second World War and on to the war in Yugoslavia. The age during which Europe was not capable of taking care of herself and when there was no day on which Europe was not dependent on the United States of America.

This European dependency on America defined Bob's life. He came to Europe twice, no, he was sent to Europe twice, I should say. The first time by the Pentagon, during the Second World War with the mission to help destroying nazi-Germany. The second time in the 1980s, he was sent on a mission not less official than the first one, as the representative for the American continent and vice-president in the Executive Committee of the Coordinating Committee for International Voluntary Service, the CCIVS. As this organization was hosted by UNESCO in Paris and he often had to travel to the French capital, Bob preferred to have a pied à terre in Europe. Bob asked the inhabitants of the Rosenstock-Huessy Huis in Haarlem if he could live there. He was accepted as a permanent guest and got a nice room on an attic. Through the windows one could see the roofs of the houses in the old center of Haarlem and the church with the Damiate bells which rang every evening around nine o'clock.

That was around 1984. No bombs this time, only letters. Letters and postcards like white doves from anywhere in the world to anybody in the world who was willing to lend him his ear and listen to Bob's one and final goal in life, the foundation of a planetary service as a

way of life, as an institution integrated in society, a eternal institution like the monasteries and universities.

Bob's life story is divided between the historical text book facts of 1914 and 1992 on the one hand and history incognito, a kind of hidden history which concerns the creation of a new global society. It starts (a) in the 1920s with the German camps for workers, farmers and students. It jumps over the ocean to (b) America, to Camp William James. It leaps back to Europe again, to the (c) Rosenstock-Huessy Huis and the concept of Planetary Posts. I will now tell you a bit more about these three different stages which in my opinion fit together like vertebrae forming the backbone of our contemporary history.

2. Work camps in Silezia

I don't know much about Bob's youth, but I imagine him playing with his friends, with animals and enjoying life in the open as much as he could, in 1927 as a nine year old boy in Framingham, Massachusetts. In that same year 1927 at the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, in the very poor district of Waldenburg in East Germany, now Poland, a law student went to see his professor to ask him what could be done about the extreme poverty in the Waldenburg region. The student was the 20-year old Helmuth James von Moltke, who lived at the estate Kreisau, now called Krzyzowa.²

The professor was Eugen Rosenstock, at that time about 39 years of age and working in Breslau, now Wroclaw in Poland, since 1923, teaching history of law and working in the field of adult education. What was the problem in the region? Unemployment was not a key issue. It was a booming period, two years before the beginning of the Great Depression. There was work, for example in the mines, but wages were low and living conditions very bad. So there was poverty and a general lack of prospects for the local population.

Secondly, there was a much more important social component to the Waldenburg problem. And that was a national German problem. Already before the First World War, which had ended only nine years earlier, Germany was split up in countless groups and factions: various Christian denominations, Christians versus atheists, promoters of democracy versus adherents of dictatorship, political parties on left and right, a tremendous generation gap, a vivid anti-Semitism and a glaring contrast between workers and academics.

The churches, the political parties and the universities only offered partial solutions for such problems. Clerics, politicians and scholars were all locked up within their own

organizations. There was little or no dialogue, only theological struggle, party quarrels and academic discussions.

Moltke consults Rosenstock because of his engagement in the field of adult education. Rosenstock stresses that a radical change of the political and social culture is a precondition for any improvement. The churches, the political parties, the nations and the classes will have to learn to listen to each other, to reach sound compromises with an eye on the future and in the interest of all. They will have to get rid of prejudices, to get rid of party slogans, they must learn to acknowledge each others' interests and to use rational arguments.

The most profound action which one can take in such a situation is to create the right circumstances for the social and political processes which need to take place. This was done by Rosenstock, Moltke and numerous other people by organizing work camps for people from all walks of life, more explicitly for workers, farmers and students. The first such meeting took place in March 1928. Some hundred young men lived and worked together for a period of three weeks.

In the morning, after breakfast, they would listen to a brief lecture about their common background and situation. Rosenstock, for example, spoke about the origin of the professions: the historical context of the farmers, the citizens and the workers, their functions in society and the industrial society. Other lectures touched upon European history and future. During that period, Rosenstock was writing "Die europäischen Revolutionen"³, which formed the basis for "Out of Revolution"⁴.

During the morning the participants worked for a few hours in the local community. Building, construction, gardening, that kind of work. They received some money for part of this work which helped to finance the camp and to compensate the participants for the loss of wages during these weeks.

In the afternoon there would be another lecture followed by group discussions. Twice a week they would practice sport and the group was regularly visited by guests from political, religious, economic and academic fields, for lectures and discussions.

So what was the result of these three weeks? In one of the reports of the work camp we read - I have shortened this quote a bit: "The camp created an indestructible foundation of confidence which and in which the socialist workers, the dozen Christian workers as well as the thirty students of the Schlesischen Jungmannschaft (...), the small number of catholic students and the twenty young farmers and agricultural workers took part."

It seems to have been both great fun and interesting, but more importantly, the concept helped to get these people together, to bridge gaps between individuals and groups, to create mutual understanding. More important than short term and partial solutions, such as the construction of facilities for the local community, however useful these were, there was the revolutionary new atmosphere, a new consciousness of sharing a past and more importantly, sharing a common future. That was the essential precondition for the rebuilding of German society.

The work camps were repeated in 1928 and 1929 in the same area. The concept became a great success and was copied elsewhere. Unfortunately, when Hitler seized power in Germany he stole the idea of the work camps and used them for the indoctrination of the youth.

When during the Second World War Moltke formed the Kreisauer Kreis, the group of people who discussed what the Germans needed in order to be able to rebuild society after the fall of Hitler, which they thought was inevitable, Moltke not only contacted several former participants of the Silezian work camps but he also adopted the very same principle which had been at work so successfully at the end of the 1920s. He saw that it would not be possible to rebuild Germany if the different social groups would not co-operate. The composition of the Kreisauer Kreis also reflected the main streams in German society. That, and the fact that most members paid for this with their lives, is what makes this resistance group so important.

3. Camp William James

But Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy was of course no longer in Germany at that time and he had no direct contact with Moltke, as far as I know. In 1933 he emigrated to the United States and we will follow him there. Bob O'Brien visits Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire, and Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy is a professor there. Of their first meeting, in 1938, Bob gave me a vivid account which I would like to quote:⁵

“There was a literary club which received financial support so that it could pay a modest stipend to literary figures of some vote to come to speak to us. A significant event for me occurred in 1938 when W.H. Auden came to speak.

“In the course of his speech Auden suddenly was groping for a word and there was an awkward silence in the room. Suddenly, from the back of the room the exact word that Auden was groping for was offered in a heavy German accent. Like others in the room I was deeply impressed to hear a German coming up with the word that one of

the leading poets in the English language had not been able to find. I leaned over to the person sitting beside me and asked: 'Who was that?' The answer was whispered, 'Rosenstock-Huessy'.

We are now in the second phase, the story of Camp William James. The best account of this work camp that I know of is the book by Jack J. Preiss.⁶ Here, I will follow the thread of Bob's own story, which he told me in an interview on June 7, 1994.

The story starts with Frank Davidson, a graduate student from Harvard University who was worried about the widening conflicts and segregation in American society. Jack Preiss writes in his book: "A boy on a farm in the Ozarks had as much connection with the son of a Chicago banker as a grain of sand in the Sahara had with a snowflake in the Arctic. Their chance of ever having a conversation together was equally remote - except possibly in an army barracks or in the belly of a B-17." Frank Davidson gets in touch with Rosenstock-Huessy and asks him for advice.

You see the parallels with the Silezian questions brought up by Helmuth James von Moltke in 1927? What strikes me is the fact is that both times Rosenstock is visited by a student with a question about an urgent social problem and both times Rosenstock gives practical advice.

Rosenstock-Huessy advised Frank Davidson to join the Civilian Conservation Corps, the CCC. Established in 1933, this organization had as its objective to take care of the unemployed youth, specifically from the poorer classes. The organization could offer temporary jobs to some 300,000 young men and in order to make sure that those places would go to those who needed it most, enrollment was explicitly not awarded to people, this is a quote, 'whose family or personal circumstances permit them to maintain better than a normal or average standard of living in their respective communities'. In other words: you have to be poor to get in.

This is a typical example of how a social organization with very praiseworthy objectives attains the very opposite of what it is supposed to do. At first sight it looks nice. The boys live in camps and work together, digging, doing construction work, etc. One could even be reminded of the Silezian work camps. But in reality this organization made them even more conscious of themselves as a group which did not belong to the average society. Moreover, the boys had to wear a uniform and there was within the organization a military command structure which left little or no space for free will or spontaneous initiative.

Frank Davidson and several of his friends from Harvard succeed however in joining the CCC as ordinary enrollees, with the help of a CCC official. Davidson begins writing reports on his experiences on how much of the life of the boys in the CCC was wasted and how ordinary human principles were totally ignored. Here is a quote from a letter by Frank Davidson to Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy:

“You and the Greenes (Henry Copley and Rosalind Huidekoper Greene) were dead right. There is quite a difference between a Harvard boy with a bright idea, and a person who really lives what he believes. I have never felt so sure of my own personality as I do now. Manual labor is a great and important thing, and I am glad to have been forced to get along in what would have ordinarily been an uncongenial group; digging a garbage pit (our work for a day) turned out to be a really dramatic experience. The CCC comes closer than I thought it would to William James’ idea of an army against nature.”

William James - his name has been mentioned a couple of times now. I have to include a few sentences about his meaning for this story. In 1910, the last year of his life, the American philosopher William James wrote an essay under the title “The Moral Equivalent of War” in which he defended a new type of draft for all youth.⁷ A new type of army that as its objective would not go to war against people but to help people. James dreamed of making active human capacities that normally only become visible in times of war, in times of peace and for the sake of mankind. A single quote from the essay will help making his point clear:

“If now - and this is my idea - there were, instead of military conscription, a conscription of the whole youthful population to form for a certain number of years a part of the army enlisted against Nature, the injustice would tend to be evened out, and numerous other goods to the commonwealth would follow. The military ideals of hardihood and discipline would be wrought into the growing fibre of the people; no one would remain blind, as the luxurious classes now are blind, to man’s relations to the globe he lives on, and to the permanently sour and hard foundations of his higher life...”

“I spoke of the ‘moral equivalent of war’. So far, war has been the only force that can discipline a whole community, and until an equivalent discipline is organized, I believe that war must have its way.”

Inspired by Rosenstock-Huessy, Frank Davidson understands that a new type of non-military leadership is needed for the CCC organization. At that time there was a CCC Camp in Sharon, Vermont, and in 1939 Rosenstock brings groups of his Dartmouth students to this

camp to meet their peers who are of the same age but have such a different background. I am not really sure if Bob O'Brien also visited Sharon. Maybe he did.

However, in March 1940, Frank Davidson and Rosenstock-Huessy learned that the CCC camp in Sharon was to be closed. Both were now deeply involved with CCC operations in order to introduce the new type of leadership which they envisage. In May 1940 the Annual Conference of CCC educational advisors for the New England Area was held at Dartmouth College. Rosenstock argues that the American nation needs to be rebuilt and that the young CCC members should do the same for their country as the immigrants did in American history. A quote:

“The boys in your camps must take the place of the eternal immigrants of the last one hundred fifty years. Immigrants have always represented the future of America. The unemployed must now reproduce the ‘immigrant faith’ which has built up this country.”

The Sharon Camp was however closed.

Summer 1940, Bob went hitchhiking through the state of Vermont. A key problem in this area was that young people had to move to the city to study and work. It's a well known problem nowadays in every agricultural area in the world. The old folks have to do all the work themselves. Here is another quote from Bob's interview:

“On the first day of that trip, I was picked up by a farmer,” he told me. “We were somewhere in the middle of Vermont and I had no idea of where he was going. Then I asked him if there were some jobs available in his town. Yes, he said, there is a lot of summer work to be done, mostly haying. (...) The couple really needed help. They had a small farm of some eighteen or twenty cows and the family had been in that little town for generations.”

This was in the town of Tunbridge, Vermont. Bob wrote to a friend who came two weeks later. He was hired by farmers half a mile away. These people were 75 years of age and immediately took him up into their family as if he were their son. The story continues, I quote again:

“Then a week or so later three former classmates came along in an automobile which one of them had got for his graduation. They were on their vacation and in the car were their golf clubs and tennis rackets. (...) They looked at me and thought it hilarious to see me farming. None of them could imagine me at a farm picking up hay. I found three extra pitchforks and they helped to fill the horsedrawn wagon. Then came the same question and the same answer. They were taken to neighboring farms

and were hired. So then we were five guys. A sixth one joined us and that was how the Dartmouth Group came into existence.”

Most of the Harvard boys leave the CCC for various reasons and some travel to Vermont to meet the Dartmouth group. The two groups join and decide to found a provisional camp in the spirit of what Rosenstock had intended for the Sharon CCC location. The name of this new group is Camp William James. Tunbridge, the place where Bob originally started his working project, becomes the basis of their operations. They win the support of the local population and get in touch with Mrs. Roosevelt, the President’s wife, who sympathizes with the initiative. Frank Davidson, during that same period, is in Washington and gains access to various government departments and even the President himself. The struggle for the reopening of Sharon is a long and complex story which finds a climax in a memorandum by president Roosevelt to the Secretary of Agriculture, dated October 18, 1940. It deserves to be quoted here:

“Please do what you can at once to open the Sharon CCC camp and go through with the Tunbridge project. Also, please put Professor Huessy in some kind of supervisory or advisory capacity in the camp.”

As I said before, Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy did not take the initiative. In this case the initiative was taken by Frank Davidson and Bob O’Brien. But Rosenstock often intervened to give a direction to the project. Here is a striking example. The Sharon CCC Camp is to be reopened by order of President Roosevelt, given in this memorandum. But who is going to man the camp? This is what Bob told me:

“At that point we felt that our work had been done. Then Rosenstock-Huessy called us together at his home in Norwich. When we arrived he was not there. We all gathered on the driveway before his house and when he came he passed us without speaking a word. We followed him into the house and there he began to speak. ‘I have something to say to all of you’, he started. ‘From this moment on I am your temporary commanding officer! No one of you is to leave the group at this moment. It is of crucial importance that all of you stay if we want this leadership camp to succeed. You must all postpone your academic appointments for the fall.’

“We all sat quivering, and Rosenstock-Huessy was as serious as he could be. There was no joking and no arguing.”

No joking and no arguing. What follows is the story of how to form a group. In the beginning, the camp consisted of two groups. On the one hand there were the students from Harvard who had worked in the CCC, who had experienced the army leadership there and

who had been doing the political work. On the other hand there were the Dartmouth boys who had been working on farms. The Dartmouth group thought the Harvard group was too much involved in politics, they were really hard-boiled political fighters. The Dartmouth boys were idealistic, so to say, and creative. From the beginning there were many discussions. In Bob's view something entirely new was starting to take shape, not the adjustment or reformation of old institutions, but the foundation of an entirely new one. During one of these disputes Bob O'Brien exclaimed: "I don't want reform. I want to create."

But the two groups had to work together in order to make Camp William James a success. This is what Bob tells:

"We did not really overcome our differences until we got the opportunity to live together for two weeks in the middle of winter under extremely difficult conditions. There were 25 of us, living in very primitive circumstances, without running water and heating. But Rosenstock-Huessy came as well and he lived with us. He guided and inspired us and in the end we became a group. He had a tremendous gift of getting very diverse people to become a group.

"He brought in a former British army officer, a colonel during World War One who led us at night skiing with lighted torches. He taught us dirty army songs. All these things melted the walls between us. And after two weeks we were ready to live and die for Camp William James. It was December and some people went back home to celebrate Christmas. But some of us were so inspired that we did not go back to see our families. I was one of those who stayed. We kept the fires burning in spite of the incredibly harsh physical conditions.

"On the first of January fifty people from all walks of life, black and white, from reform schools or broken families, came to the camp. The people selected were those who were considered to have the capabilities to become the new leaders (within CCC) if they had the right preparation. Davidson and his friends had kept an eye out for those people during their period in the CCC. And besides there were many who applied for a membership. The group had become known from coast to coast in America. People came and wanted to join."

This is where I want to end the report about Camp William James. The rest of the story is complicated and moreover, the camp essentially came to an end on 7 December 1941 when Pearl Harbor was bombed and the United States were drawn into the Second World War.

4. Planetary Service and Planetary Posts

At least two times Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy demonstrated how to solve a particular set of problems in society where 'disintegration' is a keyword. The disintegration of society, its

being split up in various groups which lack a common future, was a main problem in Silezia. There was no common belief, there was not even left a common hope for a better society. Everybody was locked up in some group. In Vermont the isolation of young people and of the elderly in their own respective environments had led to a situation where there was no labor where the people were and there were no people where the labor was. Moreover there was the segregation of the poor and the rich.

The parallels to today's society are clear. Here, I don't want to sum up today's problems for you. Such a summing up is the most effective way to destroy any hope for a solution. Bob O'Brien did not sum up problems. All of his life he was summing up solutions, possibilities, perspectives. When he told about the problems in Yugoslavia, he was not talking about the struggle in Sarajewo, but about the work camp in the Croatian town of Pakrac where 150 volunteers were trying to build up a village that had been heavily damaged in the war. Where volunteers from all over the world were living in harsh conditions, sleeping on the ground with little shelter and always the danger of new fighting.

Voluntary work service for all, as described by Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy in 'Planetary Service' and put into practice in Silezia and Vermont, offers a new perspective for all of us.⁸ It may save the young people from the curse of their individualistic education, it may offer them a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to follow that specific imperative which calls all of us to contribute to the wellbeing of mankind, it may help to create a mutual understanding between people and groups anywhere in the world by working, studying and talking together - someone might ask me why I don't mention the word 'praying'. Well, for the time being that prayer might not be experienced by folding our hands, but rather by offering our hands to the world - and then, finally, give them a basis to understand what society and history is all about.

This is no romantic adventure. We should carefully study the principles of such voluntary work service. That is why I gave you so many details in this story. Bob O'Brien foresaw that eventually this work service would acquire an established place in society, comparable to that of monasteries and universities.⁹ The basis of such a worldwide service would not be some kind of official organization, no huge company-like institutions but rather a myriad of spots on earth where people work and live together. He called them planetary posts and in his view the Rosenstock-Huessy Huis in Haarlem was one of these. Here we find another type of globalization, even another type of anti-globalization. It takes the globalized world for

granted and works to make something good out of it, for the benefit of all. I conclude with some remarks about these planetary posts made by Bob O'Brien in a speech to the CCIVS members at a meeting in Denmark in 1994:

“Another great sentence from Rosenstock’s letter to Dan Goldsmith states, ‘The true experience of the work service must be in how to rebuild a community.’ I have probably read *The Christian Future*¹⁰ thirty times in the last about forty years, but only after I had lived in this community did my readings of it reveal how profoundly Rosenstock felt about ‘rebuilding community’. On page after page he refers to that as our primary task.

“In my ongoing discussions with some friends from the Dutch branch of SCI, we have been suggesting a marriage between the work camp movement and the community movement. Existing intentional communities would offer space to groups of volunteers. From these bases volunteers could tackle the social and environmental damage inflicted by uncontrolled economic exploitation. The communities would not only provide shelter, cooperation, concern and affection to the groups of volunteers, but they would also keep continuity alive, for volunteers service for a limited period of time and there is a need for linkage in the work that is being done. The volunteers, mostly young, with their enthusiasm and imagination, would be a constant source of spiritual vitality to the communities. We have called such communities Planetary Posts and we envisage such bastions as strengthening the new society, just as Outposts secured the unorganized Wild West in the U.S. during the 19th Century or as monasteries stabilized the wilds of Europe after the collapse of the Roman Empire.”

Notes

(For details about the works by Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy mentioned here, see: Molen, Lise van der, *A Guide to the Works of Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, A Chronological Bibliography with a Key to the Collected Works on Microfilm*, Essex Vt. (USA), 1997, isbn 0-912148-14-4).

¹ See *Memories of Bob O'Brien, 1918-1996*, letters, poems, etc. by friends of Bob O'Brien, published by Rosenstock-Huessy Huis, Haarlem (NL), 1996.

² See e.g. Roon, Ger van (Hrsg), *Helmuth James Graf von Moltke, Völkerrecht im Dienste der Menschen*, Chapter 1: 'Löwenberger Arbeitsgemeinschaft' (pp. 43-62), in 'Deutscher Widerstand 1933-1945, Zeitzeugnisse und Analysen', Berlin, 1986, isbn: 3-88680-154-3; and Moltke, Freya von/Michael Balfour/Julian Frisby, *Helmuth James von Moltke 1907-1945 - Anwalt der Zukunft*, Stuttgart, 1975, isbn 3-421-01710-7; and *Letters to Freya, 1939-1945* by Helmuth James von Moltke, edited and translated by Beate Ruhm von Oppen, Vintage Books USA, 1995, ISBN 0679733183.

³ Rosenstock-Huessy, *Die Europäischen Revolutionen. Volkscharactere und Staatenbildung*, Jena, 1931. Republished as *Die europäischen Revolutionen und der Charakter der Nationen*, Moers (D), 1987.

⁴ Rosenstock-Huessy, *Out of Revolution, autobiography of western man*, Norwich, Vt. (USA), 1969, reprint 1993.

⁵ Houweling, Feico, 'An interview with Bob O'Brien', in *Mitteilungsblätter der Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy Gesellschaft*, Vol. 1995, pp. 31-36, Körle (D), 1995.

⁶ Preiss, Jack J., *Camp William James*; Norwich, Vt (USA), 1978, isbn: 0-912148-08-X (paper) - isbn 0-912148-07-1 (cloth).

⁷ James, William (1910): 'The Moral Equivalent of War' (essay), written for and published by the Association for International Conciliation ('Leaflet' No. 27). Published also in *Memories and Studies*, ed. Henry James Jr. (New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1911).

⁸ Rosenstock-Huessy, Eugen, *Planetary Service, A Way Into The Third Millenium*, Norwich Vt. (USA), 1978, isbn 0-912148-09-8 (paper), translation of *Dienst auf dem Planeten - Kurzweil und Langeweile im Dritten Jahrtausend*; Stuttgart (D), 1965; in Dutch *Dienen op de Planeet. Korte en lange adem in het derde millennium*, Haarlem (NL), 1988

⁹ Bob O'Brien, *Planetary Service - A New Beginning*, paper written for the Co-ordinating Committee for International Voluntary Service, Askov meeting (DK), 1994. (Copies available from the author).

¹⁰ Rosenstock-Huessy, Eugen, *The Christian Future - or The Modern Mind Outrun*, New York, 1946.