

In Memoriam
Roy H. Vogt
(1934-1997):
Losing Oneself in Service to Others



Al Reimer, Winnipeg, Manitoba

We grew up together in Steinbach, Roy and I, but in my teens he was to me only the kid brother of my pal Ernie, Roy's oldest brother. He was the "pest" we denied entrance to the upstairs room where we played cards at the Vogts' on Sunday afternoons. I had no inkling then that this friendly, cheeky kid would someday become an important part of my life and my intimate friend. That he would be my moral and ethical model, an exemplar of what an intelligent, committed Christian could be and do in this world. And that I would feel his loss as keenly as though he had been my brother all those years.

When I contemplate Roy's life and career I am struck by two things: the rich mix of his human qualities, and the seamlessly integrated facets of his fruitful public career. He was that rare person who met the challenges of several demanding professions while remaining in his private life a warm, utterly honest and essentially down-to-earth human being. He lived life passionately but with purpose, moving through it with bold and unabashed eagerness. He loved people and they were equally drawn to him, starting with his own family. Roy and Ruth enjoyed an exceptionally close and loving marital relationship and raised a fine

and close-knit family of three children: Kathy, Paul and Karen. They were also devoted to several large circles of friends and miraculously juggled social schedules in Winnipeg, Arizona and at their cottage which made German railway schedules look simple by comparison.

Roy's professional activities covered a wide range over almost 40 years. He began as an interim lecturer in economics at United College, then became a minister at First Mennonite Church in Winnipeg, and finally moved on to a full-time academic career at the University of Manitoba. In mid-career he also became a magazine and book publisher, an editor and columnist, served on important national councils, tried unsuccessfully to enter federal politics (his only public failure), and finally, along with Ruth, developed another sideline as tour host. He had no trouble keeping these various careers going simultaneously and brought his unique style of resourceful but egoless service to all of them. "Losing oneself in service to others," as he once described it, and "to speak the truth in love" were the guiding principles of his splendidly productive life.

Roy was born in Steinbach, Manitoba, on December 14, 1934, the fourth son of Peter and Susanna Vogt. His choice of parents was fortuitous: his father had come from Russia in the early 1920s, a man of cultivated tastes who loved opera and appreciated good literature. His mother was a native Steinbacher who shared her husband's cultural interests. The family general store on Main Street was a thriving business even during the depression years and Roy, along with his brothers, took his turn working in it part time. It was a happy, lively home with a comfortable backyard behind the store and attached living quarters. The Vogt home became a focal point for a whole generation of local lads who appreciated the abundance of toys and sports equipment provided by Roy's parents and the generous indulgence with which the Vogt brothers shared them. Roy's name (originally Reinhard) was taken from his boyhood hero Roy Rogers, whose yodel he would still imitate with alacrity fifty years later.

After completing high school in 1952, Roy entered the University of Manitoba where he won several prestigious scholarships and graduated with a B.A (Honours) in 1956. His greatest coup at university, however, was meeting and winning Ruth Blair, who had recently arrived in Winnipeg from her native England. Ruth became the great love of Roy's life and his closest friend for the rest of his life. Given her non-Mennonite background Ruth, I think, helped Roy to expand his personal perspectives, to outgrow more quickly the parochial attitudes that growing up in a small ethnic community tended to foster in those days. While Roy retained a life-long attachment to his Mennonite church and community, he was never afraid to take a carefully thought out critical stand against what he perceived as deficiencies or excesses both in and out of the the Mennonite church.

After completing his M.A in economic history on a fellowship at the University of Toronto in 1957, he returned to Winnipeg as a lecturer at United College (now the University of Winnipeg). He and Ruth were married in 1958 and Roy took another important step that year by enrolling in the Mennonite

Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana. There, under the tutelage of enthusiastic young scholar-teachers, Roy delved eagerly into his Anabaptist-Mennonite heritage. The years in Elkhart were productive in more ways than one. By the time Roy received his B.D. degree in 1961, the young couple had been blessed with two children.

That same year Roy accepted a call from his home church, First Mennonite, to become a full-time assistant minister to *Ältester* J. H. Enns. But Roy felt he needed further preparation for his ministerial post. First Mennonite was still a German-oriented church and Roy would need to be fluent in German as well as in English. So he took his family to Hamburg for a year on a German government fellowship (DAAD) to pursue further theological studies in German. The year in Hamburg turned into another eye-opening experience for him. He had the opportunity of ministering to German Mennonites still suffering from the traumatic effects of war. Along with this, he discovered the radical theology of the great Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer's emphasis on a living Christ here on earth rather than on a transcendent God nebulously remote from human experience appealed to Roy. It was a socially concerned, practical Christianity which he practised for the rest of his life. He also benefited greatly from the lectures of Friedrich von Wieszacher, a former physicist who had turned to theology. Never again would Roy take even Anabaptist theology for granted without subjecting it to rigorous critical examination.

Roy came back to his ministerial post at First Mennonite not so much a changed man as an enlarged one. He was ready to serve with a loving heart but with much sharpened critical eyes. He developed a warm rapport with the much older *Ältester* Enns and was instrumental in setting up a regular Sunday service in English. He also initiated the "18th Step," a recreation centre designed for young people not only from First Mennonite but from the surrounding community. All in all Roy made a considerable impression on the church, making many life-long friends in the process. His informal and direct speaking style made him a convincing preacher from the outset.

After five years of innovative service at First Mennonite, Roy once again decided to pursue further studies in economics. Retaining a part-time ministerial post at First Mennonite, he embarked upon doctoral studies at the University of Manitoba. He completed his Ph.D in 1970 with a dissertation on the economy of East Germany, and began a teaching career at his alma mater which would continue until his death. He was a popular lecturer and year after year had the department's largest classes in his introductory economics course. Students enjoyed his classes not only for his clear and thoughtful elucidation of economics, but also for his seemingly endless store of jokes and witty anecdotes, many of which were drawn from his home town of Steinbach.

Roy's colleagues, showing their high regard for him, elected him president of the Faculty Association in 1973-74 and under his leadership it became an effective faculty union. In 1981-82 he served as interim chair of his department and honed his editorial skills as Associate Editor of *Prairie Forum* from 1981-

84. During the same period he served on the Economics Council of Canada, and spent many hours (productively, as usual) on flights between Winnipeg and Ottawa to attend meetings. During the late 70s he was also a member of the Canadian Council on Multiculturalism and from 1980-91 was co-chair of the Soviet and East European Studies Program at the University of Manitoba. In 1980 he took the unusual step (for a practising Mennonite) of joining the Catholic college of St. Paul's on the University of Manitoba campus. He always regarded that as one of the better moves in his academic career. It introduced him to a new environment in which he could discuss theology, art and politics with his colleagues and thus again expand and deepen his intellectual and spiritual resources. It was a move typical of this flexible, tolerant and intellectually curious man.

In addition to these many professional activities, Roy continued to pursue research in his special field, the development of alternative economic institutions. He wrote articles on economic planning and workplace democracy and spent several periods of research in East Germany. Following the collapse of Communism and the re-unification of the two Germanys, Roy wrote articles on the effect of the re-unification on the former East Germany. His last major scholarly work was a book on property rights in Canada, a manuscript he completed just before his death. The book will be published by the University of Toronto Press this fall and Roy's voice and erudition will once again be shared with others.

Roy's various writings reflect the breadth of his interests. In 1980 he was asked to write a Canadian version of *Basic Economics*, an introductory economics textbook which had been adopted by hundreds of American colleges and universities. In fact, Edwin G. Dolan, the young academic economist who had written the original American version, became a millionaire from the sales of this one textbook in its several editions. For Roy, whose Canadian version was equally popular in relative terms, the sales from the four editions of his book never amounted to more than a modest addendum to his regular salary. He worked long and hard on these various editions, and when another deadline loomed he would hole up in his little writing shack at the lake, deaf even to the coaxing of grandchildren and golfing buddies.

Roy's energy and range of interests knew no bounds. In 1971 he and Ruth founded the monthly magazine *Mennonite Mirror*, designed to serve Mennonites in Winnipeg and beyond as a general news and literary journal. In its twenty-year run the *Mirror* became an institution still missed by many of its faithful readers. Having been associated with the enterprise almost from the beginning, I know how important it was to both Roy and Ruth. Virtually every Manitoba Mennonite writer - Patrick Friesen, Di Brandt, Sarah Klassen, to name a few - had early work published in the *Mirror*. Unlike church-sponsored Mennonite periodicals, the *Mirror*, under Roy's guidance, welcomed these bold new Mennonite literary voices and the important contribution they were making to the community. Roy also established the Mennonite Literary Society, a non-

profit umbrella organization which not only published the *Mirror* but also a series of books by and about Mennonites. During the 70s and '80s the Society published 16 books and thus became another important proving ground for budding Mennonite writers. Not since the heyday of Arnold Dyck (coincidentally, Roy's uncle) in the 30s, 40s and 50s, had there been a Mennonite cultural entrepreneur in these parts who had done as much to foster literary activity in the Mennonite community as Roy did.

After six years as editor of the *Mirror*, Roy handed the editorial reins over to me so that he could devote more time to the business end of his thriving publishing enterprise. He also began to write a chatty but reflective and carefully crafted column called "Observed Along the Way," which became the most popular and talked about feature in the magazine. Ruth took over as editor for five more years before we reluctantly decided that 20 years was enough. For a while Roy tried to get a younger editorial team to extend the life of the *Mirror*, but when the only candidates to come forward failed to reactivate it the magazine was quietly laid to rest.

Busy as he was, Roy found time during the *Mirror* decades to serve on the boards of Westgate Mennonite Collegiate, the Mennonite Village Museum and *Journal of Mennonite Studies*. He even took a run at politics, which had always fascinated him. In the spring of 1978 he was asked to seek the federal Liberal nomination for the Winnipeg riding of Assiniboine, a seat then held by a Conservative. Roy had good reason to think that his candidacy would be unopposed. I tried to talk him out of running for political office on the (to me, sensible) grounds that he was not cut out for the often ethically ambiguous and uncertain world of politics. But he would not be dissuaded and I (setting aside my NDP loyalties temporarily) ended up as his nominator (which proved, I suppose, that friendship can be stronger than political convictions). Roy's high hopes, however, were rudely shattered when the leader of the Manitoba Liberal Party declared a late candidacy and packed the nominating meeting with enough supporters to win the nomination. Roy accepted his defeat with typical grace and in the next issue of the *Mirror* wrote a witty and unbiased account of the experience.

Roy loved traveling and did a lot of it, both on business and for pleasure. With characteristic resourcefulness, he and Ruth developed a sideline as tour hosts in the 80s and 90s. Every second summer they would take an enthusiastic group of tourists to places like the Soviet Union, China, the British Isles, France, Italy, Spain and Portugal. A trip to Greece and Turkey had already been scheduled for 1998. The nucleus for these trips was formed by people from Manitoba, Ontario and the West who had become good friends and were devoted to Roy and Ruth as efficient, knowledgeable and, above all, friendly tour hosts who spared no efforts to provide memorable travel experiences in foreign lands.

Roy's high-profile career in a number of areas inevitably brought him honors and awards. He accepted these accolades with becoming modesty, never drawing attention to them or even talking about them. His personal style was to talk and write about his own activities in a gently self-deprecating manner that

was both humorous and candid. In 1991, for example, when he was presented by the provincial government with a Prix Manitoba award for his contributions to multiculturalism, he began his thank-you remarks at the formal reception at the International Inn in Low German to the large gathering of government dignitaries and other guests.

Roy Vogt was an idealist who knew how to transmute dreams into practical plans, a visionary who never lost sight of his immediate surroundings. For years after beginning his academic career he still took his regular turn preaching Sunday mornings at First Mennonite. I can still see him in the pulpit, delivering his message in a simple, friend-to-friend style, his tone jocular, insistent or challenging as befit his theme, but unfailingly giving his hearers the rich spiritual nourishment they had come to expect from him. In later years, after he had given up preaching, he was so much in demand for weddings, not to mention funerals, that he finally decided to retire from all ministerial duties except for officiating at the weddings of his children Kathy and Randy Gregg, Paul and Meredith (Menlove) and Karen and Grant Anderson.

Roy loved life as much as any person I have ever known, living from day to day with a zestful energy and enthusiasm that I think of now as a kind of sanctified joy. He loved the natural world, God's created world of nature, with a direct, naked sensuality which could elicit from him startling bursts of song and yodelling and spontaneous flights of rhetoric wherever he might be - golf course, beach or on a scenic walk. The family cottage at Belair was his personal paradise, and there he and Ruth lived with the serenity of Adam and Eve before the Fall, a serenity loudly disrupted when their beloved grandchildren arrived in midsummer. They loved their trailer in Arizona almost as much and were planning to add a comfortable "Arizona" room for the benefit of their children and grandchildren.

Roy had thought long and hard about life, about its possibilities as well as its consequences, and about the compromises it exacts in daily life as well as in the larger scheme of things. His years in the ministry had made him keenly aware of how vulnerable, fragile and brief human life is. He was trained in theology but always grounded theory in common sense. He had a scholar's analytical mind but without a trace of intellectual posturing or disdain for those of less sophisticated mind. His gentle nature camouflaged a strong independence of mind and a stubborn adherence to principle. And while he believed in most Anabaptist-Mennonite tenets, he did not believe in all of them: he could not, for example, accept the tenet of nonresistance in all circumstances, and was not afraid to defend his position.

People were drawn to Roy because of his compassionate nature. They sensed that his interest in and acceptance of them was genuine. Students knew that he would take time to counsel and help them, but they also discovered that he could be firm and resolute and would not accept flimsy excuses for late papers or missed tests. He would always take time to counsel couples experiencing marital problems, as well as bereaved families or people in financial difficulties.

He had a special knack for befriending the black sheep and losers of this world, offering them his acceptance and listening to them with a sympathetic ear.

How can one sum up such an immensely rich, creative and above all *useful* life? One can't, of course, because the sum is beyond count or calculation. Roy Vogt has passed from our midst much too soon, but he has left us his lived life intact, fulfilled, not a moment of it wasted or unused. He once memorably wrote: "Truth alone makes us free to love." Looking at his life one can see that by his own definition Roy's lifelong pursuit of the truth in life had indeed made him free, free to love those fortunate enough to be part of his life, free to embrace the world as a Christian embarked, in his own phrase, on "the most glorious adventure that a person could undertake."