The Enjoyment of God and Creation
by Norman Wirzba

Norman Wirzba grew up in southern Alberta where he practiced farming and studied history. After studying for a Master's degree in theology at Yale, he completed the Master's and Doctorate degrees in Philosophy at Loyola University in Chicago. He writes in the areas of environmental philosophy and theology, and recent European philosophy. He is editor of The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry. He lives with his family in Kentucky where he is Chair and Associate Professor of Philosophy at Georgetown College.

Wirzba asks us to consider how one of the gifts of creation - chickens! - might be properly enjoyed. He intimates that one important element of its proper enjoyment is through boycotting factory-produced poultry, raised in "misery and ill health." He then lovingly describes his own grandfather's care for his chickens. When grandfather ate chickens, Wirzba writes, "his was a sacramental eating."

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How does one properly enjoy a chicken? This is no paltry matter, for according to one Jewish tradition, we will need to give an account for the times we did not enjoy the gifts of creation when we had the chance. The enjoyment of creation - encompassing the gifts of family, friends, food, worms, chickens, buffalo, water, soil, air, and light - is not simply an activity we can postpone for our spare time, but rather goes to the heart of what we do now and who we are to become. The extent and character of our enjoyment, in other words, will be the test of our own righteousness, the measurement of our trust in the gracious goodness of God. This is why Sabbath observance, the festive time when we refrain from our own ambition so we can fully appreciate the gifts of God, became central to Jewish thought and life. If we observe the Sabbath properly we enter into God's own rest and delight in creative work well done. We anticipate and participate in the divine peace and joy. As the rabbis put it: "If Israel keeps one Sabbath as it should be kept, the Messiah will come..."

We will not come to the proper enjoyment of creation until we focus our attention on the fundamentals of life, for it is here that the grace and blessing of God are most apparent. It seems odd to say this until we recognize how much of our time is spent occupying and responding to the demands of a purely human contrived world: the world of the appointment calendar, instant messaging, etc. The course of our lives, viewed in its daily and most practical aspects, comes to be over-determined by and confined to the range of our ambition or fear. In this human world we live by our own effort and power, and so do not come face to face with our dependence on God's grace for our lives, our dependence on the complexity and blessing of creation for our lives.

To think and live fundamentally, however, is to willingly take ourselves out of the security and control of our personally designed worlds and immerse ourselves in the rich depth and
beneficence of the lives we live with others. What this means is that we make ourselves vulnerable before and accountable to the lives of those we depend upon for our own life. It is to acknowledge that we live only because of the support and sacrifice of others (both seen and unseen), and so recognize that our lives are always and everywhere maintained by a grace we cannot comprehend or even intend.

When I think of a life lived fundamentally, a life open to the possibility of genuine enjoyment, I think of my grandfather Wilhelm Roepke. As a small-scale farmer he understood "in his bones" that his life was not his own. For his own livelihood he depended on an unending amount of support: good weather, soil fertility, healthy livestock, pest-free crops, generous (or at least cooperative) neighbors, the wisdom of forefathers and foremothers who taught him the skills of husbandry and care, a sufficient supply of water, his own health, and so on. None of these elements could be taken for granted, for the absence of even one had serious repercussions in his economy.

The acknowledgment of the graced character of his existence resulted in a life that stands out as unique among our current stressful and anxious ways. Put simply, my grandfather was able to enjoy the life he was given. This is not to say that his life was without sadness, grief, or tragedy. But it is to suggest that the context of his daily activities was a Sabbath context. Because he understood himself to be art of a vast and rich web of interdependencies, and because he saw these interdependencies as good, he was freed to enjoy the elements of his life as graciously given. In my grandfather's view the world simply could not be reduced to the human scale of personal ambition and fear because in that reduction too much of life was either overlooked, falsified, or destroyed. He understood, innately I think, that a purely human world, one limited to and driven by primarily human interests, breeds anxiety, destruction, and despair, whereas the world of creation experienced as the blessing of God produces joy, contentment, and peace. The most telling characteristic of my grandfather's enjoyment was the care with which he treated his dependents. Seeing and appreciating his dependence on others, he took seriously the dependence of others upon him.

For most of us the enjoyment of chicken is a thoughtless affair. We "enjoy" them as we consume, oblivious to the mostly gruesome conditions in which they were factory-produced. In certain respects our enjoyment is sacrilegious because it is premised on the misery and ill-health of chickens so produced. My grandfather's enjoyment of chickens, however, was of an entirely different order. As a child I still remember walking with my grandfather to various places in the yard where fresh grass could be cut, put in a pail, and then delivered to the chicken coop where hordes of chickens eagerly awaited his arrival (they knew he was coming and greeted his coming with obvious enthusiasm and delight). Did the chickens need this freshly cut grass, especially when performing this menial task interfered with more important work that needed to be done? Clearly not. What I remember, however, is my grandfather's pronouncement that it brought him such pleasure to see his chickens enjoying the fresh grass. These chickens, as with so much else in my grandfather's economy, were the object affection and responsibility. In their well-being he saw his own. And so when grandfather sat down to a meal of chicken, his was a sacramental eating, a Sabbath eating that participated in God's own care for us and for the whole creation ....
The modern food industry suggests that we have forfeited our trust in the grace of God and exchanged it for the control and profit that comes from industry. We have decided that we do not want to live within the limits of our created vulnerability and interdependence. The results of this choice have been serious. Control has replaced the contentment and joy that can come from attentive care. Our experience of the world has been seriously narrowed as we have come to think of the needs of creation are coterminous with human need (note the prevalence "use-value" in economic accounting practices). And perhaps most seriously, we have prevented ourselves from seeing that in the care of creation we participate in God's own care and delight…

The whole creation is one lavish feast to which all of us are invited. There is… as my grandfather so calmly experienced, an inner beauty that shines within the creation. Nothing could please God more than for us to enjoy creation so lovingly made and maintained.


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