

## ELEMENTAL SERVICE

By Rebecca Blair '80



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# Robert Brooker

In the winter of 1934, inside his bedroom in the Munro place in southern Illinois, sixteen-year-old Robert Brooker shivered in the -20 degree cold. The traditional methods the family had employed to warm the beds had not produced lasting results, and Brooker was experimenting to find a more effective alternative. Seized by an inspiration, he ran a wire from the light fixture in the center of the room, attached a receptacle, and screwed in a light bulb. Leaving the lighted bulb to warm the bed, he went to the barn to milk the cows. On returning to the house, he found his mother and sisters beating out ashes from the bedding. In his book, *Charting the Elements: My Life and Times*, Dr. Robert Brooker draws a larger point from this anecdote: "I thus learned another valuable lesson. Light bulbs do indeed warm a bed. Now, all I needed to do was to find some way to control the energy."<sup>1</sup>

The need to control his energy forms the central theme of Brooker's approach to life and prompts a career of exemplary service in military, industrial, and academic environments. Service, in his view, requires the individual first to inventory the self in order to identify his or her strengths and abilities. Then, the individual must focus this life's energy, his/her willpower,

to accomplish that which is essential and necessary in any situation or environment to meet the needs of others. Such service may stretch the individual beyond what he or she thinks possible, but it is this very process of stretching and reshaping that Brooker defines as education. The functional outcome of meeting human need through service, then, is education, which informs future service.

Brooker accumulates in his book the anecdotes that embody his life story as a means of allowing his reader to dwell in time with him, and thus, to experience and learn from his story the essential lessons of service in the human community as he has derived them, an effective instructional process that he also used in his chemistry classroom. Such stories have a potent moral dimension that frames the narrative structure, and it is this moral component of the impulse to service that Brooker foregrounds since, as the writer Scott Sanders observes, “moral judgment relies as narrative does on a belief in cause and effect. Stories teach us that every gesture, every act, every choice we make sends ripples of influence into the future.”<sup>2</sup> Just as every chemical or physical action produces a reaction, so every human response becomes an opportunity for positive service.

Born on January 4, 1918, in Troy Grove, Illinois, Robert Brooker, as the middle child and youngest boy in a family of five children, expected a life of farming as his future. From the dilapidated house on the narrow dirt road that the family called “The Shanty” to the relatively more prosperous “Whalen Place” on the gravel road where the family moved in 1928, Brooker apprenticed in livestock and grain farming under his father’s tutelage. Early on, his father inculcated the expectation that his sons would move immediately to accomplish each task as it was assigned and would complete the task to perfection. Since this way of being functioned so essentially in the working of the farm, Brooker comments that when his neighbor, Roy Keutzer, paid him extra for his labor as a hired hand because he was “worth it,” this new notion of his own worth impressed him so much that he “lived off



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that statement for many years” (85) and remembered the strength of its impact as he made the same comment to others throughout his life.

Indeed, “neighborliness,” the complex of values including hospitality, loyalty, and selfless concern for the wellbeing of others as a gesture to mark their worth as fellow humans, serves as a concrete representation of service for Brooker. But in Brooker’s conception, the process relies on the reciprocated understanding or expectations of both parties. For example, he relates the story, told often by his father, of the neighbor who, having recently moved in, inquired if the neighborhood was any good. His father replied by asking how good the old neighborhood was. “The answer was that the old neighborhood was not any good at all,” Brooker relates, “that they were poor neighbors and he was glad to be leaving. Pop told him that this neighborhood was exactly the same, that he would not get along with this one either.” Brooker concludes this anecdote by noting, “It took a little while for me to figure out some of Pop’s wise sayings” (85).

One particular neighbor who crucially channeled the energy of Brooker’s life into a path of education and service is the Rev. Dr. Leila Anderson. A member of Arlington Presbyterian Church in Arlington, Illinois, along with the Brooker children, Anderson founded and taught the “Young People’s Class” at the church for several years. Brooker remembers the class fondly, observing that “you joined the class when you got into high school and left when you decided that you were no longer young. I don’t think I’ve ever left that class” (133). The class

took the format of the contemporary youth group, convening each Sunday with Bible study and discussion before planning a social or recreational activity for later in the week. By coupling Biblical example with situations in daily life, Anderson led members of the class to reflect upon and construct meaningful responses to human need within a larger Christian context, to make theological precepts real in human life.

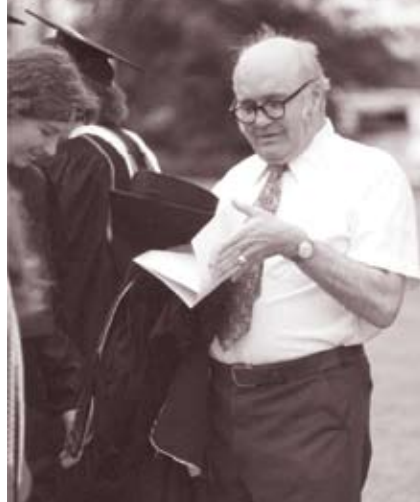
Anderson’s life ethos focused on the idea that one should attend to Christ’s work on earth and, if one did so, the Lord would take care of the rest.

In her memoir, *The Pilgrim Circuit Rider*,<sup>3</sup> Anderson details how, after earning her PhD at the University of Chicago, she followed her calling to missionary service abroad, first traveling to Iberia Junior College in Iberia, Missouri, to work as the registrar. It was during her tenure at Iberia that she recommended that the Brooker boys attend the college to develop the latent intellectual gifts that she had discerned in each of them. Anderson took a similar active interest in a number of such students from Depression-era families whom she met during her career.

In 1934, the two older boys, Francis and Donald, accepted the work study positions she had arranged as a means to pay their tuition, and Robert followed a year later, chiefly to assuage a deep homesickness he felt while living and working full-time at a gas station and as a hired hand seven miles from home. He figured that his homesickness would abate with his brothers nearby. The room and board at the school cost three



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dollars per week, but the work study jobs paid just enough to cover the cost. To make ends meet, Anderson herself paid for the cost of incidentals, transportation, and other necessary expenses. Each of the Brooker boys made sure to pay back to Anderson the financial debt he had incurred. Brooker notes that “she told us that we were among the few that had paid back their debt,” and his brother, Donald, commented to Anderson in reply, “We did indeed pay you back the money, but we will never repay the debt” (132).

Anderson’s functional, active care, and concern impressed Brooker, but it was her modeling of a selfless, hospitable, Christian ethos of service which marked his life most deeply. In his memoir, he sketches this portrait of Anderson:

“Andy was the perfect Christian. She lived her religion and did not demand that you live as she did. She always practiced Christianity to everyone and made no demands in return. Nobody could ask for more.”

“The modern-day preachers try to make us all follow their rules and then preach against us if we don’t. Andy never did. She accepted us for what we were, loved us with all our faults, and let us know it” (133).

Brooker contrasts this embodiment of Christian love with the brand of hospitality extended to his family from the Presbyterian Church during one of his mother’s extended hospitalizations with heart disease in 1925. His father, left to care for five children and to continue the work of farming, struggled to keep up. Some relatives cared for the two girls, leaving the elder Brooker to manage

with the three boys and the hired hands. The boys maintained the household and continued their farm chores while their father cooked for the entire group. After his mother recovered, Brooker reminisces, his father refused to return to church, complaining that “the good Christians of the church had been of no help” (6). Later, Brooker comments that the women of the church worked to save the world at large, but lacked the perceptive abilities to see the needs in the immediate world around them. The selfless model of service provided by Leila Anderson, contrasted with the negative example of the church ladies, reinforced Brooker’s conception of the educated servant as one who orders the will to meet the needs of others at a basic level, and of service as active and functional. In fact, Brooker established the Peters Award at the University of Indianapolis, presented annually to a junior student exemplifying these neighborly Biblical qualities, to mark the kindness and generosity of two other neighbors, Hobart and Ella Peters, who lived down the road and shared their resources freely with the Brooker family.

Dr. Brooker, along with his wife, Ruth, amply lived out this imperative in his personal life, an expression of service to those around them that naturally flowed into his academic life as chair of the Chemistry Department and the Herbert G. Bohn Chair of Chemistry at Indiana Central College, later the University of Indianapolis. Indeed, he credits his wife as being the essential guiding force in his life. During his first week in college at Iberia, he met Ruth Gott at a party, starting a tumultuous romance

that would lead him to follow her to the University of Missouri in Columbia to complete their bachelor’s degrees, and later his PhD after service in WWII. From the beginning of their tenure in Indianapolis, the Brookers, who built and lived in the small house at 1431 Windermire Avenue adjoining the campus for nearly 45 years, assisted countless students in need over Dr. Brooker’s thirty-eight year career. From providing basic needs—food, shelter, clothing, transportation—to providing medical and spiritual care, the Brookers, including children Russell and Roberta, quietly yet unflinchingly acted as caring and concerned neighbors, enacting the practical ethos of servanthood cultivated over Brooker’s life. The man with the gruff exterior whom many students feared possessed a heart drawn fundamentally to nurture human need.

Brooker’s approach to academic life also embodied a consonant ethos. In fact, the story of his receiving the endowed chair in chemistry reveals much about his approach to service. A frail, elderly man, slightly deaf, enrolled in a short course on thin-layer chromatography that Brooker offered to students and the public. The man attended several such courses as well as the American Chemical Society meetings at which Brooker was present. The man’s deafness caused him to interrupt the person speaking frequently for clarification and to monopolize the speaker’s time afterwards to extend the discussion of ideas that had occurred to him during the session. By all appearances, he was penniless and friendless, so Brooker made a point to sit next to him, conversing and joking before and after the presentations.



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One morning, Brooker received a telephone call from the man, who announced that he would like to endow a chair in chemistry, and he needed to know the name of the college official with whom he should speak. Brooker referred him to Dr. Lynn Youngblood, then director of development, cautioning Youngblood to treat the man with kindness and dignity, even though he was obviously poor. As it turns out, the man, Dr. Herbert Bohn, was not poor. Having earned a degree in pharmacy from the Pharmacy College of Philadelphia, Bohn had engaged in pharmacologic research over a distinguished career, and now wanted to endow a chair in chemistry to provide the opportunity for young people to prepare themselves academically for similar lives of service to humanity—provided the chair was filled by Brooker, the man who understood the essence of service to others.

“Education for Service” was elemental to the identity of Dr. Robert Brooker.

In countless classroom stories, not only did the attentive student learn the building blocks of chemistry, but also the essential features of human existence.

One particularly instructive classroom narrative detailed his experiences in WWII at the Remagen Bridge. Brooker had been drafted into the Army in May 1941, training to be a surveyor and entering Officer

Candidate School to earn a commission as a second lieutenant in the Corps of Engineers shortly thereafter. As the role of the United States in the war intensified, Brooker shipped out to England and then France as part of an advance reconnaissance party. Landing on the beaches of Normandy in October, Brooker’s unit, Company C, moved inland to Bastogne, where they found themselves encircled by enemy forces. The enemy was dispersed by U.S. air support and Company C, after a week’s rest, moved on to engage in a challenging campaign, attacking across the Roer River near Aachen, Germany. As Brooker dispassionately relates, “We went through Stadt Mechanheim to the Remagen Bridge where our jeep was blown up on the bridge. My driver was killed, and both the sergeant and I were wounded. After getting a new corporal, a new sergeant, and a new jeep, we went on.”

As many of his former students know, Brooker related this story to teach a larger principle. Both life experience and formal knowledge are valuable, and it was both in concert that kept him alive during the tumult of WWII, and which also made it possible for him to develop chemical compounds and pharmaceuticals during his service as a consultant and pharmaceutical chemist at Pitman-Moore and Dow Chemical Company, earning 10 patents. For Brooker, mastering and using the basics comprehensively meant there was no limit to what one could do—in war, in the chemistry lab, in service, in life.

In his story, one catches the sense of servanthood stripped of rhetoric and piety. Grounded in practicality, he saw clearly the world around him, endeavoring to meet each individual need with care and dignity, hope and hospitality. Through his model of his active service, we may be educated to live out vocation elementally, yet richly as neighbors, as Christians, as humans.

— *Honorary Alumnus 1981*



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— Dr. Brooker was the author of two books of memoirs and reflections including *Charting The Elements: My Life and Times* (Ames, IA: Prairie Harvest Press, 1997) and *What I Know Now: Reflections on Living a Long Time* ed. Russell Brooker (privately published, 2000).

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- B (p. 139) Robert Brooker in military uniform (1940s era). Family photograph with permission to reprint given by Ms. Roberta Brooker.
- C (p. 139) Robert Brooker (ca. 1990s). Photograph made available by family members with permission given by Roberta Brooker.
- D (p. 140) Robert Brooker with President Jerry Israel in background on the occasion of the dedication of Martin Hall, Alumni Weekend 1999. Photograph made available by family members with permission to reprint given by Roberta Brooker.
- E (p. 140) Robert Brooker outside with cap and gown (opening the program after 1981 graduation ceremony). Family photograph with permission to reprint given by Ms. Roberta Brooker.
- F (p. 140) Brooker with cap on his head (at UIndy sports event; date unknown). Family photograph with permission to reprint given by Ms. Roberta Brooker.
- G (p. 141) Rev. Leila Anderson holding plaque on the occasion of the inaugural presentation of the Leila Anderson Award (endowed by Dr. Brooker) in 1983. Family photograph with permission to reprint given by Ms. Roberta Brooker.
- H (p. 141) Bob Brooker with Senator Evan Bayh and Eugene S. Pulliam on the occasion of receiving an award for volunteer service. Family photograph with permission to reprint given by Ms. Roberta Brooker.
- I (p. 141) Robert Brooker with wife, daughter and son-in-law. Family photograph with permission to reprint given by Ms. Roberta Brooker.