

“Bringing Ellul to the City Council: A Council Member Reflects on how Ellul has Guided his Work”

Interview of Robb Davis by Mark D. Baker

Robb Davis holds a master’s degree in public health and a Ph.D. in population dynamics from Johns Hopkins University. He has over twenty years’ experience in international development in the field of maternal and child health and nutrition. He was the executive director of the Mennonite Central Committee. He contributed an article to the *Ellul Forum* (#46). He is fluent in French and reads Ellul in French. He was elected to the Davis, California, city council in June, 2014 and began serving as mayor of Davis in July 2016. In addition to his role in city government he also dedicates a significant amount of time to work on issues related to homelessness and restorative justice in relation to youth crime.

Mark D. Baker, professor of theology and mission at Fresno Pacific Biblical Seminary, interviewed Robb on July 7, 2016 as part of the conference of the International Jacques Ellul Society. What follows is an edited version of excerpts of that session, including two of the questions from the audience.

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Mark: It would be surprising to many that an enthusiastic reader of Jacques Ellul would run for political office. How did Ellul’s work factor into your decision to run for city council?

Robb: I’ll start by that saying Ellul arguably is the reason I became involved in city politics. Maybe even more surprising than my claiming to have run for office on the basis of something Ellul said, which many might consider to be paradoxical, is that I am also a Mennonite. I wasn’t just trying to break some molds. I had spent about 25 years travelling the world. I was a technician, dispensing wisdom to many villages and communities all over the planet—45 different countries. I started reading Ellul, and Patrick Deneen, and they started challenging me about living and acting locally. I realized that I didn’t know anything about my hometown Davis, California. So about 7 years ago, I stopped travelling. I decided not to get in an airplane anymore. And that changed everything, and not always in a good way. Because when you make a decision like that, all of a sudden everything that your identity is tied up in is no longer there. People in my hometown didn’t know me. When I started digging into my hometown I realized that the brokenness that I had experienced other places was actually more profound in Davis, California. We had a veneer of privilege and beauty, and not too far below the surface we had serious problems of addiction and homelessness and racism and exclusion. And the more I got involved, the more I realized that acting locally is really not fun. I didn’t really want to look at it. I wanted to leave, actually, but I stuck it out. While staffing an overnight shelter I saw firsthand

how we fail as a society to treat mental health, how we fail as a society to deal with addiction, and how these things are syndromes that leave people broken, and our solutions are to toss the problems over to the nonprofits to try to figure out a solution. So what I want to say about that experience, and where I really drew from Ellul quite a bit, was the idea of the flourishing of intermediating entities outside the state. The state was incapable, even at a local level, of really effectively dealing with these problems. Into the interstices into the breach, came these small organizations. My commitment at that time was to try to work with them to make them stronger, to help them plan, to try to take some things I'd learned in my trips around the world, and to try to bring them into the community. And of course in a situation like that sometimes you do that for a while, and you're asked to be on a commission, you're asked to be on a task force, and then somebody knocks on your door one day and says, "Maybe it would be useful for you to run for office." I didn't believe that I should or could do it. And my main concern was some things that were raised today at this conference about power. Could I go into politics and authentically bring some solutions? The thing that pushed me towards the decision was the idea that perhaps in that role, and this gets back to power, I could encourage the flourishing of these intermediating agencies in the community. I could encourage them. Because one reality of being a political leader is, when you pick up the phone and say to someone, "Come to a meeting," they'll come. They will. I thought, "Maybe I can bring people around the table who aren't talking to each other, maybe I can bring the school district together with the police department, together with the city, to do a restorative justice program."

Another key factor that led me to run was born out of something I read in Ellul: "A key fact of this civilization is that more and more, sin has become collective and that the individual is constrained to participate in it." (Ellul, *Présence au monde modern*, 1948, p. 19—Robb's translation). I was talking to a friend of mine, and we realized that if we had someone in office who was engaging in regular confession about our participation in that collective sin, maybe that would be helpful to a community. And so I've tried to make it my practice to be confessional.

Mark: How did Ellul influence your campaign, how you ran?

Robb: In *The Technological Society* Ellul, commenting about propaganda, states: "Whether technique acts to the advantage of the dictator or the democracy it makes use of the same weapons, acts on the individual, manipulates his subconscious in identical ways, and in the end leads to the formation of exactly the same type of human being" (375). What I saw is that people running for office even locally were using propaganda for very, very specific ends, which is the building of allegiance toward themselves. They have around them people using propaganda to do one basic thing: build allegiance toward that figurehead. Why? Because it's a lot easier to raise money when you can invite someone to pay \$300 a plate at a table around a leader than it is to give it to some disembodied political party or university. So right out of the gate, I was being told, "You've got to sell yourself. This is about you, Robb. This is about your image; this is about what you've done in the community." And I knew I couldn't do that. I mean, I could have done that, but I felt like that was idolatry. That the real problem with propaganda is that it creates

allegiance towards something that's not God. And I am a follower of Jesus. So I struggled with that.

When I was discerning whether to run or not, through a long series of conversations others helped me understand that it came down to two things. Could I run a campaign where I could be honest about my limits? And the limits of political power? I brought that commitment into the campaign, but my campaign team said, "Do not ever talk about that." I wrote an essay that I put out on a local news blog, without telling my campaign team, and it was entitled, "I'm going to disappoint you." What I was trying to say is, "you are projecting on me many, many hopes. You are projecting on me your desires. I'm going to disappoint you. Because there's no way I can fulfill those needs." So that decision to not listen to my campaign team, and to actually get them upset, was an intentional act to try to communicate that I did not have solutions to these problems. That all I offered was the ability to try to bring people together, to try to work together to solve some of the issues.

Mark: With the campaign team, was it one time you did this, and they said, "Robb that's stupid," and then it was over, or was it ongoing conflict with them?

Robb: It was ongoing conflict, but not about everything. For instance, I made a commitment during the campaign that my political career begins and ends in Davis. So I am committed to localism. I'm committed to this bioregion. I'm committed to naming the giftedness of the people in this town and drawing on that giftedness to solve our problems. I'm committed to understanding the natural resources, to solving conflict locally. So I laid that out and I said, "This is my commitment, that I will not seek higher office." My campaign team was okay with that.

I think the reason I won, even though I did not always follow the counsel of my campaign team, is that we knocked on every single door in the community and I held almost 40 face-to-face meetings around tables in neighborhoods where we sat and listened to people. And, oh my goodness the fear and the trauma I encountered in a privileged community like Davis; you would be shocked by what people were afraid of. And all they wanted was someone to listen.

Mark: Let's return to your comment about confession for collective sin. Can you give an example of how you do that?

Robb: I am asked to speak frequently at different events. Recently I spoke at a demonstration against Bakken crude oil coming through our town by rail. It is very volatile and there have been railroad accidents and explosions in other places, killing many people and causing significant environmental destruction. What I mean by public confession is standing in front of a group of environmental activists and saying, "You know the oil company is not going to the Bakken formation to make our lives miserable. The oil-producing company is not going to the Bakken shale to give us heartache, or to challenge our goal of local control of land use. They're going to the Bakken shale because we're telling them too. We're asking them, we're begging them, our

society, our lifestyles are drenched in oil. That's why they're going." Now, that's my public confession of my participation in systemic sin. We're raping Canada's timber to build houses in California. We've despoiled the Ecuadorian rainforests to drive our cars. We need to say that; we need to acknowledge that. And I've felt like I could make a commitment to do that. And in the end to be confessional to acknowledge my role in the systemic.

Mark: Ellul wrote: "The first great fact which emerges from our civilization is that today everything has become 'means.' There is no longer an 'end;' we do not know whither we are going. We have forgotten our collective ends, and we possess great means: we set huge machines in motion in order to arrive nowhere" (Jacques Ellul, *Presence of the Kingdom*, p. 63). How have you observed this?

Robb: Two months after I was elected an MRAP, Mine-Resistant Armored Personnel Carrier, arrived in our town. It looks like a tank without a turret. It was surplus military equipment sent by the U.S. Government at the request of our police department.

Mark: Sent to your town and many others. . .

Robb: Many others. Hundreds of towns across the United States. I asked, "We need a tank?" And the police said, "Yes. We need it for lone shooter events were somebody's hiding and shooting. We need it in case of a disaster. We need it in case there's a riot."

Means and ends. The day it arrived, the first thing that came into my mind was, "Means and ends." What did Ellul say about means and ends? Now let's think about this vehicle, the MRAP. It has an end. It was developed for a reason. It was developed for one very specific reason. It can carry large numbers of soldiers down a flat Iraqi road, have an explosive device go off underneath it, and preserve the lives of the people inside. It was created because of a lie. If you disagree with me that the Iraq war was a lie we can discuss it later. The end to which it was set was based on a lie. It achieved the end of keeping people alive, but when the war was over, the U.S. Government needed to do something with it, and so it committed to sending these MRAP's to every community that wanted one in the United States, no strings attached. A vehicle worth \$750,000 each.

And our police are saying to me, "We need it. We need it." So I challenged them, and I said, "What's the concern? Security, right? We need it for our security." And we did Town Hall meetings, and people came and said, "We need it for our security." That's the end that we're trying to achieve, security.

So I asked the police in public meetings, "What's the security threat?" They said two things, which are very telling in this world. And think of this through the lens of Ellul. Everything is becoming means. We've forgotten the ends. So we have a machine that's created for certain ends, which are based on a lie, now this machine, this means, is coming to a community and

what we're trying to do is find an end that justifies this means so that we can keep it. We "create" ends to justify its continued use. But it's an instrument of power and control.

And so, the police said, "Well, we have drug deals going down in our town, and the drug dealers are stealing each other's stashes, and they get into gun battles with each other, and we need it in case we're going in to arrest the drug dealers because they're heavily armed."

Okay, now think about that in terms of ends. The first question was, "Who's buying the drugs?" And the police turned to me and said, "Our largest problem is drug sales--a heroin problem among our young people and a methamphetamine problem among our middle-aged population." This is a real problem in our community. The demand for drugs is not dropping out of the sky; again, these guys are not cultivating drugs and selling them just to make our lives hell, they're doing it because there is a demand. So how do we respond to this problem? We're going to address addiction with an MRAP. We are trying to achieve certain ends (reduction in drug sales) by focusing on the wrong means. We should be looking at the causes of addiction, not stopping drug sales caused by it with an MRAP

The second one is even more telling. It gave me chills and I hope it gives you chills too. The assistant chief of police came to me separately, and said, "Robb, we have legitimate concerns. There are people in this community who are tactically trained. They're trained in police tactics, and they know how to counter us, and by the way Robb—some of these folks have PTSD. If they get guns in their hands, it's very difficult for us to deal with them." And I said, "We have people in our community who are tactically trained, who have PTSD, and access to weapons?" He said, "Yeah. Former military."

Means and ends, right? We go off to Iraq. We wage war. Men come back with PTSD, tactically trained. And the way we deal with them is an MRAP so that we can take them out? And the government is not paying anything to deal with the PTSD? This is the way we're dealing with the problems in our community? With an MRAP? So we voted to get rid of it. It felt significant, but the Department of Defense sent it 10 miles north to the city of Woodland. We were the laughingstock of the neighborhood. The big blowback came a few weeks later though and relates to another insight from Ellul. In the film, "The Betrayal of Technology" he said, "Technique will not tolerate (or accept) any judgment passed on it. In other words, technicians do not easily tolerate people expressing an ethical or moral judgment on what they do."

"Technique does not accept judgment." Moral Judgment. And then Ellul wrote, "in other words, the technician." I find it very interesting that he started by saying, "*la technique*," which shows me that technique is a spiritual power. In addition to the technicians, there is *la technique*, there is technique, which is the Power. The blowback we got, which was severe, and I almost thought I was going to be recalled, was that we were accused of compromising the security of our city. We were accused. I sat with the police and the police said, "We are the experts. We understand security. *You* are a politician, you do not know about security, you've taken a tool of security out

of our hands.” I said to them in a public meeting, “The problem I have with the MRAP is that it is a symbol.” It is a symbol of the most destructive military force that the world has ever known, and we’re bringing that into our community.”

Most politicians don’t want to talk about ends, because a lot of times the ends that they’re working towards are hidden. They’re not the ends that they say publically. Push them on ends. Push them. Push them. The other thing is that we do have, in every bureaucracy, we have people who are enamored with means who will look for ends to which the means can be applied. It is means in search of ends.

Mark: In what ways have you personally felt challenged in relation to these themes we have been talking about, and what have you done in response?

Robb: People don’t corrupt you overtly. They do it this way: “Man, you’re amazing. You know if you—I know we have a weak mayor form of government Robb but, if you push this, it’ll pass, because people respect you. And so, could you push it?” So it’s subtle. It’s people projecting their hopes on you and convincing you, or trying to convince you that you are the solution to the problem, and if you take the lead—and that’s every single day. Every single day there is the temptation to use power in a way that looks good, but here’s what happens. For instance, I want to work on restorative justice with youth. So one day I pick up the newspaper and it says, “Robb Davis led the initiative on restorative justice.” I read it and think, “Actually, no I didn’t. There were like 10 of us in the room.” So I have a choice at that point. Am I going to go correct the paper and say, “Actually there were 10 of us in the room, and I didn’t lead anything.” Or am I going to let that go.

And most people would say, “Let it go. Let it go.” Because if you let it go, you can move that initiative forward so much more quickly. People will follow you. And you’ll be able to move much more quickly.”

Here’s what happens: The goal is restorative justice. That is the end that you want to achieve. What happens when you start listening to those voices, or when you don’t correct those errors, or when you accept you know that praise? You actually start going doing that path. And you start saying, “You know what’s most important is that I am able to bring change.” And so what I need to do is I need to accumulate a little more of that status and power so that I can be better at bringing change.

Two things can occur. First, I can use the positive end, restorative justice, to justify means inconsistent with restorative justice itself and, for me, importantly, inconsistent with the way of Jesus. Second, with increased emphasis on the means to achieve power, eventually the original end of implementing the practice of restorative justice can get lost. Achieving power becomes the true end—even if not the acknowledged one.

Therefore, I must re-orient regularly. I so easily get pulled off track. As part of that re-orientation I have had to do things like go before people and say, “You know what, I should’ve spoken up earlier, I had nothing to do with that. I didn’t do anything about that. I can’t take any credit for that.”

Mark: As you point out, to make effectiveness the supreme goal can become problematic, yet you do seek to be effective, correct? As you state, you desire to see an increased practice of restorative justice. You want to be effective in that.

Robb: Yes, we can’t live without some commitment to effectiveness. The problem is making effectiveness or efficiency the supreme goal that drives and determines everything. I have found it is of utmost importance to have made premediated commitments. For instance, like Ellul I am committed to not use violence. Without that commitment, if violence appeared to be required to achieve a goal I might too easily succumb to the ends justifying that means—the means of violence. Ellul has certainly been a key influence in helping me, as a follower of Jesus, determine what my pre-commitments are—things I will not do in spite of what efficiency may demand or promise. This is not to say I am always faithful. As I just said, re-orientation is a constant necessity.

David Lovekin: If I were an average citizen in Davis I would probably have the idea that you are a thoughtful politician, more thoughtful than most, but would I know you are a Christian?

Robb: I made a decision to bring some explicit Christian theological language into my day-to-day political work. One explicit way I bring in faith language, and I think an authentic way, is to say what I’m actually doing as a leader in the community is I’m looking out for giftedness. I’m looking for gifts that can be brought to bear on dealing with the challenges of our community. So I use concepts like that, that we are given gifts. I don’t say God gives us gifts, I say we are given gifts, and they’re for the good of the community. That’s Paul. I also say, to my colleagues, “What we need to be modeling as a council is grace and forgiveness.” I talk explicitly about needing to reconcile the broken relationships in our community. And I do that by encouraging factions, whether it’s in the business community or whatever, to go through mediated processes. And these are things that have never happened before in Davis, but we’re starting them, and we’re having some success. And I talk about reconciliation and forgiveness. Grace, reconciliation, forgiveness, giftedness. Confession. I encourage people to confess when they hurt someone else. So I bring those terms in because they’re meaningful to me. I think they’re meaningful to the discourse. People definitely pursue me afterwards on certain things and say, “Where did you get that from? Like giftedness. What do you mean by that, Robb?” I haven’t had any pushback, and part of it is I’m not saying, “Paul said,” “Jesus taught.”

David Gill: As an ethics professor I always say to my students something like this: “Ethics is a team sport, not a solo sport. So you’re not going to do well living or discerning what’s right all by yourself. So you need some people around you.” So my question is, do you have some people

around you who will help keep you sane, keep you in check so you don't get arrogant about good things that happen?

Robb: In the spirit of confession, I think I'm doing that rather poorly. Leadership of this kind is isolating. And there are real trust issues. So the people who I trust are not engaged in city politics. And people engaged in city politics have some trust issues. Can I just acknowledge that? So I'm not doing a very good job at that. And it's lonely and it's not healthy.

Mark: But you do have people that you get together with who pray for you?

Robb: Yes, every two months we have a small group of people who come together on a Saturday afternoon and they put their hands on me and they pray for grace and patience and wisdom. You know, that's important. But it's not easy to get a group of people around who can simultaneously entertain deep conversation on policy and really be trustworthy--that they don't have an interest that they're trying to push. And I haven't found that group yet. And I'm despairing that I will. And so, maybe I'll just leave it at that.