Richard Taylor would have been 100 years old on November 5th. His generation fought World War II and put people in space. They invented computers and cured polio. If you are a (slightly) older beekeeper, you probably know Richard Taylor as the quintessential beekeeper — practical, yet nerdy; laid-back, yet a tireless worker. He wrote some of the best books about bees and he made a lot of money keeping bees — it nicely supplemented his real job as a philosophy professor. Beekeeping gave him plenty to philosophize about, too.

Richard Taylor was an early champion of round comb honey, a commercial beekeeper with just 300 hives, and a philosopher who “wrote the book” on metaphysics. Really, he wrote the book on metaphysics — for decades, his college text, called “Metaphysics,” was a best-seller and introduced first-year philosophy students to the nature of cosmology and the existence of all things.

Although his musings on philosophy were speculative, unprovable, and abstract to the highest degree, Richard Taylor was as common and down-to-earth as it’s possible to become. I will write about his philosophy and how it shaped his politics and perhaps affected your beekeeping, but first, let’s celebrate his life.

Richard Taylor and his twin brother were born November 5th, 1919, shortly after their father had died. That left a widowed mother raising a family during the Great Depression. To help make ends meet, Richard bought a hive of bees when he was fourteen. It was 1934, the year that a quarter of Americans were unemployed and soup-lines leading to Salvation Army kitchens stretched for blocks. He began beekeeping that year, and except for submarine duty as an officer during World War II, he was never far from bees. He respected honest hard work and the value of a penny, but he nevertheless drifted, trying college, then quitting, and taking on various uninspiring jobs.

Things came together for him during the war. Evenings, on his bunk in his navy sub, Richard descended into the gloomy passages of Arthur Schopenhauer. Somehow the nihilistic philosopher appealed to young Richard Taylor, ironically giving him a renewed interest in life. Because of this new interest, Taylor went back to school and became a philosopher himself.

Richard Taylor earned his PhD at Brown University, then taught at Brown, Columbia, and finally Rochester, from which he retired in 1985 after twenty years. He also held court as a visiting lecturer at Cornell, Hamilton, Hartwick, Smith College, Ohio State, and Princeton. His best years were at Rochester where he lectured while his trusted German shepherd Vannie curled under his desk. Professor Taylor sipped tea and told his undergrads about the ancient philosophers — Plato, Aristotle, Xeno, Epictetus. In the earlier days, he often drew on a cigar while he illuminated his flock of philosophy students. Those who attended his classes remarked on his simple, unpretentious language. They also noted that he usually dressed in bee garb — khakis and boots. He and Vannie disappeared to the apiaries when the lecture ended and the last student withdrew from the hall.

A Hippie Beekeeper?
It’s probably unfair to call Dr. Richard Taylor a hippie beekeeper, but perhaps he was exactly that. He sometimes dressed the part, though I think that was more a reflection of frugality than counter-cultural aspirations.

Richard Taylor: The Metaphysical Beekeeper
by RON MIKSHA
As a beekeeper, he was reclusive. He refused to hire help. Rather than deal with customers, he set up an unattended roadside stand where people took honey and left money.

Taylor disdained big noisy equipment. He claims to have sometimes taken a lawn chair and a thermos of tea to his apiaries so he could relax and listen to the insects work, but I doubt that he did this very often. Through the pages of American Bee Journal, Bee Culture, and several beekeeping books, he described best beekeeping practices as he saw them— and those practices required hard work and self-discipline more than relaxed lawn-chair introspection.

Running 300 colonies alone while holding a full-time job and writing a book every other year demands focus and hard work. His bees were well-cared for, each producing about a hundred pounds annually in an area where such crops were rare. If he was a hippie, he wasn’t a lazy one.

By 1958, Taylor began switching from extracting, which he disliked, to comb honey production, which he loved. Comb honey takes a more skilled beekeeper and better attention to details, but in return it requires less equipment, a smaller truck, no settling tanks, sump pumps, whirling extractors, or 600-pound drums. “Just a pocket knife for cleaning the combs,” he wrote.

It is somewhat surprising that Richard Taylor embraced the round comb honey equipment called Cobanas. The surprise is that the equipment is plastic. Reading Taylor’s books, one recognizes his affinity for simple tools and old-fashioned ways. Plastic seems wrong. But it’s not.

In the past, comb honey sections were square-shaped and made from soft, pliable wood, usually basswood. That required the destruction of forests of stately basswood (linden) trees, something that did not appeal to Taylor. Plastic lasts a long time and can be recycled. These are real benefits to a person as frugal and practical as Richard Taylor. Plastic is light-weight, durable, and ultimately very sensible for bee equipment. He promoted comb honey and he was sure that Cobana equipment, invented by Michigan physician Wladyslaw Zbikowski in the 1950s, would lead the way. He was so enthused that in 1958, living in Connecticut, he wrote his first beekeeping article about the new plastic comb equipment for the American Bee Journal. Below is the photo that accompanied his story.

Richard Taylor, the comb-honey producing beekeeper, was financially successful. In today’s dollars, his honey farm returned about $50,000 profit each year—a tidy sum for a hobby and more than enough spare change to indulge his habit of frequenting farm auctions where he’d delight in carrying home a stack of empty used hive bodies that could be had for a dollar.

Taylor, the Teacher

Richard Taylor immensely enjoyed teaching and lamented what he called “grantsmanship” which arose in America while he was a professor. Grantsmanship is the skill of securing funding for one’s projects while possibly ignoring the fundamental duties of teaching. This, of course, can lead to big dollars flowing to researchers who are willing to claim that sugar, for example, does not contribute to obesity and cigarette smoke does little more than sharpen one’s senses. Richard Taylor saw the conflict and regretted the demise of good faculty instructors who were replaced “largely by graduate students, some from abroad with limited ability to speak English. Lecturers who simply read in a monotonous monotone from notes are not uncommon,” he wrote.

Meanwhile, the (sometimes unethical) pursuit of grants was accompanied by the rise of the “publish or perish” syndrome. In his own field, Taylor pointed out that academic philosophers engaged in “a kind of intellectual drunkenness, much of which ends up as articles in academic journals, thereby swelling the authors’ lists of publications.” Taylor wrote extensively on this in 1989, saying that there were 93 academic philosophy journals published in the USA alone that year—seldom read, seldom good, but fill-

Richard Taylor’s son, Randy, packing round comb honey, 1958. (Photo from ABJ)
ing mailboxes with material to secure a professor’s promotions.

This was not the academic world that Richard Taylor sought when he began his career in the 1950s, but it was the world he eventually left. Although he wrote 17 books — mostly philosophical studies, but also several rather good beekeeping manuals — he didn’t publish many academic papers. He spent more time in the lecture halls and with his bees than he did writing papers about “the existential reality of golden mountains,” as he put it.

THE PHILOSOPHER AND THE BEES

Richard Taylor, the philosopher, studied and taught metaphysics and ethics. His essays on free will and fatalism are renowned and influential, even today. Taylor’s 1962 essay “Fatalism” is still included in anthologies of philosophy, over fifty years after he wrote it. He also published his musings about ethics. His 1995 book, “Restoring Pride: The Lost Virtue of our Age,” includes the widely quoted line, “Many people ... go through life with hardly an original thought; gravitate from one pleasure or amusement to another; gain a livelihood doing what someone else has assigned ...” Taylor tried to steer us away from such a mundane existence. Beekeeping is one way to achieve the “virtue of pride” that he thought constituted a full and self-directed life.

I never read his paper “Fatalism,” nor have I ever taken a philosophy course, so anything I say about the subject will probably embarrass me. But a few years ago, during a winter trip to Florida, I carried Taylor’s “Metaphysics” with me. Sprinkled among his explorations of difficult philosophical questions, one finds homilies such as this: “We must, if we ever hope to be wiser, adjust our theories to our data and not try to adjust our data to our theories.” That’s deceptively simple, but it is surely one of the most important signposts on the road to wisdom. I read every word of his college textbook “Metaphysics” and I think that I understood it at the time. For me, it was mostly transparent common sense. Since it was well-crafted and interesting, Taylor may have lulled me into believing that I understood him, his description of the universe, and the Taylor road-map to a moral life — even though I likely had only a shallow grasp of any of it. It occurred to me, however, that Taylor’s study of philosophy helped lay the groundwork for his philosophy of beekeeping. And beekeeping undoubtedly affected his worldly philosophy. Knowing a bit about one leads to an understanding of the other.

TAYLOR-MADE POLITICS

When I saw Richard Taylor — just once, at a beekeepers’ meeting — I indeed thought that he was a hippie, a common enough form of beekeeper in the 1970s. It was that baler-twine belt, unkempt beard, and broad-rimmed hat. I was surprised to later discover that Richard Taylor identified as a conservative and voted Republican. But he was also an atheist, advocated for women’s rights, and late in life (though proud of his military service) he became a pacifist, “coming late to the wisdom,” he said. He valued hard work, self-sufficiency, and independence. He disliked Nixon, but gladly voted for Reagan.

At age 62, still a professor of philosophy at the University of Rochester, and the recent author of the book “Freedom, Anarchy, and the Law,” he wrote a widely-circulated New York Times editorial, praising Reagan’s inaugural address. Richard Taylor wrote that the president reminded us that “our government is supposed to be one of limited powers, not one that tries to determine for free citizens what is best for them and to deliver them from all manner of evil.”

Taylor warned of anti-constitutional subversion in American politics: “If anyone were to try to replace the Constitution with, say, the Koran, then no one could doubt that this would be an act of subversion ... Similarly, anyone subordinating the principles embodied in the Constitution to those of the Bible, or to those of one of the various churches or creeds claiming scripture as its source, is also committing political subversion.”

Taylor tells us that conservatives are correct that “it is not the government’s function to pour blessings upon us in the form of art, health, and education, however desirable these things may be.” He adds that it is likewise unconstitutional for “the Government to convert schoolrooms into places for prayer meetings, or to compel impoverished and unmarried girls, or anyone else, to bear misbegotten children, to make pronouncements on evolution, to instruct citizens on family values, or to determine which books can and cannot be put in our libraries or placed within reach of our children ... it can never, in the eyes of the genuine conservative, be the role of Government to force such claims upon us. The Constitution explicitly denies the Government any such power.”

Richard Taylor showed complicated and unexpected quirks. For example, he was an avowed humanist, yet showed a spiritual nature. In his office, he mounted a certificate which honored him as a laureate of the International Academy of Humanism, one of just a few people chosen over the years. Others included Carl Sagan, Richard Dawkins, Steven Pinker, E.O. Wilson, and Karl Popper. He was in extremely elevated intellectual company. Taylor belonged there among the other atheists, even if he wrote in his most popular bee book, “The Ways of Man are Sometimes, Like the Ways of God, Wondrous Indeed.”

TAYLORISMS IN THE BEE YARD

Richard Taylor was complicated for a simple man. It is said that he could not stand complacency, vanity or narcissistic behavior, yet he seemed to get along in gatherings of beekeepers where such attitudes are often on display. He had a love of paradox and mental games, yet he was disciplined and direct as a writer. He delighted in the pessimism of Schopenhauer, yet he was not a pessimist himself. He suffered from failed marriages, yet he finished a book on love and marriage not long before he lay dying from lung cancer. Indeed, he was quite a puzzle.

I will end with words from Richard Taylor, the beekeeper. Richard Taylor’s finest bee book, “The Joys of Beekeeping,” is replete with homely truisms that every aspiring beekeep-
er would do well to embrace. The book itself is slim, entertaining, and personal. For most of us, it is also quite instructive in the art of keeping bees. Or, as Taylor once said, in the art of “living with the bees. They keep themselves.”

Here, then, are some select Taylorisms from “The Joys of Beekeeping”:

Beekeeping success demands “a certain demeanor. It is not so much slow motion that is wanted, but a controlled approach.”

“… no man’s back is unbreakable and even beekeepers grow older. When full, a mere shallow super is heavy, weighing forty pounds or more. Deep supers, when filled, are ponderous beyond practical limit.”

“Some beekeepers dismantle every hive and scrape every frame, which is pointless as the bees soon glue everything back the way it was.”

“There are a few rules of thumb that are useful guides. One is that when you are confronted with some problem in the apiary and you do not know what to do, then do nothing. Matters are seldom made worse by doing nothing and are often made much worse by inept intervention.”

…and my own favorites . . .

“Woe to the beekeeper who has not followed the example of his bees by keeping in tune with imperceptibly changing nature, having his equipment at hand the day before it is going to be needed rather than the day after. Bees do not put things off until the season is upon them. They would not survive that season if they did, so they anticipate. The beekeeper who is out of step will sacrifice serenity for anxious last-minute preparation, and that crop of honey will not materialize. Nature does not wait.”

“Sometimes the world seems on the verge of insanity, and one wonders what limit there can be to greed, aggression, deception, and the thirst for power or fame. When reflections of this sort threaten one’s serenity, one can be glad for the bees…” — “The Joys of Beekeeping”

REFERENCES:

Ron Miksha, a hobby beekeeper, is currently engaged in bee ecology research at the University of Calgary. Ron was a commer- cial honey producer and queen breeder with farms in Flori- da, Saskatchewan, and Alberta. He lives in Calgary with two hives of bees, a dog, and his family. Ron can be reached via badbeekeepingblog.com

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