

This weekend, we put my dear little granddad to rest.

Werner Haller was the sunniest man I ever knew.



Werner Haller, 1915 – 2012 (photo by Leif Söderlund)

Few people have inspired me as much as he has. Most inspiring people I've met did so with their words; my granddad inspired with his life. He walked the walk, ever humble, ever grateful, ever on the search for a better self, a truer way.

He was born into a modest family in 1915. Switzerland was not a rich country yet. Born the eldest of four, his father was a handyman who made tin cans for condensed milk and fixed the tin milk containers the farmers used to send their fresh milk to the cities. His grandfather had been a small farmer whose only possession were two wheelcarts - one for the manure, one for the feed - a few chickens, and a cow. When my grandfather was five, he was sent to work with his grandfather for a summer, traveling the distance on his own, taking trains through several cities, carrying a cardboard with his home and destination addresses around his neck in case he got lost. He helped his grandfather plough the fields, which the old man did by hand and with bare feet, the possession of shoes being a luxury he could not afford.

My grandfather was blessed with a sincere heart, an insatiable curiosity, and a stubborn belief in the good of mankind. As a young man, he decided to do an apprenticeship with the Swiss Postal Service, because this would allow him to travel through Switzerland and learn the country's languages. Higher education was not something he could afford, but working for the Swiss Post allowed him to learn the languages he became fluent in: next to his native German and Swiss German, he spoke French, English, and Italian. I suspect that he wanted to learn these languages out of a deep desire to learn about this world and to meet its people, a desire that would burn in him throughout his life.

During his apprenticeship, he was sent to Perugia, Italy, with two of his apprenticeship buddies, to learn Italian. It was the late 1930s, and the shadows of war were haunting Europe yet again. Despite the somber mood in those years before the war finally broke out, Werner and his friends decided to travel on to Libya, then an Italian colony. They visited Tripoli and Benghazi on the coast, and traveled further inland as well. In the small black and white photos he had from the trip, one can see black-clad Mussolini youth in the streets of Rome, war ships in the port of Tripoli, and piles of newly fired vases in the desert of Libya, one of which he bought and kept in his dining room.

Like any young man in Switzerland during that time, he joined the Swiss army, a militia, for two years, working his way up the ranks, believing to serve his country and protect it from the frightful forces that were swirling through Europe at the time. But at the same time, another voice was speaking in him; the voice of a pacifist, of someone who knows that guns can't solve problems.

He was eventually appointed at the central office of the Swiss Postal Services in Basel. As an amateur violinist, he joined a local chamber orchestra. The pianist was a rather elegant lady eight years his senior. He was twenty-two at the time, she was thirty; he was a simple boy from Central Switzerland, she was a city lady from a middle-class family. Against all odds and certainly against the standards of the time, they fell in love.

Second World War had broken out in the meantime. Marriages were a costly thing, and they waited quite a few years before walking down the aisle. Eventually, in 1943, they got

married in a very simple and modest ceremony. They went on their honeymoon a few months later, hiking the Swiss Alps for a week.



Honeymoon, 1943

He would later tell me that even though they were exhausted from hiking all day and from sleeping outside, washing in the cold glacier streams in the morning and drinking coffee on the steep slopes of the mountains made them happy. In 1945, when my grandmother was 38 years of age, my father was born.

Before the war, my grandfather had gotten involved with a group called the Oxford Group. These young people believed that in a world turned up by giant wars, the only way to do good is to start the work of love with oneself. They believed that the world can only change if we change, and that this change has to start in one's own heart.

This conviction and the pacifist voice my grandfather had heard earlier would soon change the young family's life. After the war, a small number of wealthy members of the Oxford group bought a delapidated luxury hotel with the help of a hundred people who shared their convictions and donated their money. The old hotel was located in Caux, Switzerland, 3000 feet above sea level, overlooking Lake Geneva and its shores. The hotel had gone bankrupt between the wars. During and after the Second World War, it had

been used to house refugees who had escaped the fangs of fascism. Its new owners had great plans for the hotel: They wanted to build an international congress center in which people from all over the world, politicians, leaders, and everyday people, would be able to meet, converse, and work together as simple citizens to understand that if one doesn't carry love in one's heart for oneself, one will not be able to carry love in one's heart for one's neighbor. They had given their organization a new and, for the times, rather radical name: The Moral Re-Armement. (It was later renamed Initiatives of Change.)



Caux Palace, a.k.a. Mountain House (photo by Anne-Catherine Haller)

Still working in Basel's Central postal office at the time, my grandfather was on his way up the ladder of the Swiss Postal Services thanks to his diligence, exacting work ethic, and pleasant nature. But fate came knocking at his door, and he heard the call. It so happened that the postal services were looking for a postal worker to run the office in Caux, the very place the Moral Re-Armement had chosen as their headquarters. Sensing that this was a unique opportunity for him to join forces with this organization while still being able to feed his family, my grandfather applied to the position. Many people thought he was crazy. Why would a young up-and-coming man with a young family sacrifice his career and a relatively comfortable city life for a life in a Swiss mountain village, away from all the things he had acquired over the past decade? The decision certainly must not have been an easy one, especially for my grandmother, a woman used to the city life of Basel, where she had lived close to her family and friends her entire life.

But they took a chance and left for Caux. Now having two children - my aunt was born three years after my dad - they started over in Caux. My grandfather would work long 12 hour days at the postal office, often helped by my grandmother, to deal with the enormous workload. Thanks to the Moral Re-Armement, Caux hosted people from all over the world, people who were eager to share their experience in Caux with loved ones back home. When he wasn't serving those people at the post office, he would work in his giant garden just in front of the chalet in which they occupied a modest apartment. In his garden, he grew just about everything that grows under the sun on a steep Swiss mountain slope. Whatever free time was left, he would spend it with his family, often making music with his wife in the evenings. It was a life full of hard work, and full of

rewards.



Chalet "La Patinoire". The Hallers occupied the apartment with the balcony to the left (photo by Anne-Catherine Haller)

There were times of doubt, as well. In the late fifties and early sixties, the Moral Re-Armement went through an unpleasant anti-communist phase. Disgusted by the distortion of the original teachings, my grandfather and grandmother never wanted to set foot in the hotel building, now called the Mountain House by the members of the organization, ever again. I can only imagine the sense of loss and confusion my grandfather must have felt, he who was responsible for changing his whole family's environment for a cause that seemed to have been forgotten. Luckily, the organization came back to its senses after a while, continuing its work of international connection through the arts and through dialogue.

The Hallers lived on that mountain for many years. My father and aunt grew up there, way above the clouds that would cover Lake Geneva in the winter.



The view from Caux train station over Lake Geneva, covered by clouds (photo by Leif Söderlund)

They met people who came to Caux from all over the world. My father gets teary-eyed when he hears the South African anthem N'kosi sikelel' iAfrika, because he grew up hearing and singing it at the Mountain House, where the leaders of Apartheid and the leaders of its opposition would be given an opportunity to meet as equal human beings, to work side by side in the kitchen, and to exchange their hopes and fears in theater workshops and evening discussions, working towards reconciliation way before the day the end of Apartheid finally came. My aunt met her Swedish husband at the Mountain House, and they went on to dedicate their lives to the work of world peace in Sweden.

As children, my sister and I would visit our grandparents every year, taking the marvellous setting of their home above the clouds for granted, realizing its unique wonders only later in life. My Swedish cousins spent every summer of their childhood in Caux, making the trip with my aunt and uncle in their worn-out Saab all the way from Sweden. They grew up running around in the giant Mountain House, showing us its every nook and cranny, introducing us to their international friends with whom they spoke English. The Mountain House was a fairy palace for every child, and we spent many enchanted hours running up and down its long corridors, shrieking in delight.

After his retirement, my grandfather and grandmother finally had time to do the travels they had always wanted to do. One can see them in pictures, standing on Norwegian shores and looking out into the horizon. My grandfather built his home garden into an empire of bounty, sending food to family and friends all over Switzerland. And they

would keep in touch with the Mountain House, meeting people from places such as Argentina, Zimbabwe, Moldavia, Australia, India, Vietnam, China, Cameroon - you name it. They invited people to their modest apartment for tea and musical entertainment. Their guest book is a witness to the interesting conversations and warm exchange they had with their international guests.



Norway, 1977

Then, in the mid eighties, my grandmother had a stroke, then another one. She was now bedridden. For eleven years, my grandfather took care of her day and night. Only when it became too hard for him to wake up several times a night so she could go to the bathroom did he finally decide that it might be better for her to be taken care of by professionals. A few days after moving into a nursing home in early 1998, just a few weeks short of her 91<sup>st</sup> birthday, my grandmother passed away.

I remember the year following her death as a somewhat somber year for my grandfather. He must have been tired from working so hard his entire life, and he must have been sad at her loss. He was now alone on his mountain, still a regular visitor of the Mountain House, working in its kitchen as a volunteer. But he was far from being done with life.

In the summer of 1999, when he was 84, his relentless enthusiasm for life would once again get hold of him. That summer, he met a group of young dancers and musicians from all countries of South America who had come to the Mountain House. They called themselves Gente Que Avanza (People Who Go Forward), and they toured all over their continent to further the dialogue between the peoples of South America. They fell in love with this curious little man, and boy, did he fall in love with them. They would be at his apartment, making music and dancing with him. He took out his violin, he borrowed a

cello from his godson, he started to play the piano. He even learned a little Spanish to be able to read the letters his new friends would send him, and to write back to them. During those years, his cards and letters to me were signed with "Un abrazo muy fuerte - abuelito" (a big hug from your little grandfather). He had fallen in love with life all over again, and music was his driving force.

That was the year I really got to know him. I had had similar experiences in Australia in the summer of 1999, just as I had turned twenty. While he had fallen in love with life because he was old, I had fallen in love with life because I was young. I remember talking about this when I met him at my parents' house at the end of that summer. We were sitting at my parents' kitchen table, giggling like teenagers, our eyes sparkling with enthusiasm. I could tell by the twinkle in his eyes that we had become friends.

He also developed a giant crush on the organist of his church, a professional musician half his age and with a family, and who showed great patience towards this curious little man. They developed a friendship which consisted mostly of her practicing her organ, and him sitting a little off to the side, enjoying the music he loved so much and admiring the grace with which she played her instrument.

During those years, he was out and about, discovering the world all over again. He bought himself a Swiss railway card that would allow him to ride all trains, buses and ships in Switzerland at all times. He made good use of it, chatting up people in the train who would sit down next to him. He stayed fit by dancing to Swiss folk music in his kitchen twice a day and by walking down the 2000 feet of sea level distance from his mountain flat to the shores of Lake Geneva, hitchhiking and chatting up more strangers on his way back. With all the encounters he made, he had a total of about 200 pen pals, hailing from every single continent. He diligently wrote them birthday and Christmas cards every year, in his perfectly crafted hand writing, throwing in the occasional spontaneous letter whenever he had time. He played his three instruments every day, making up new tunes on the piano, and kept inviting people he encountered for a thé dansant at his place, making them dance with him in his kitchen or his living room. His guest books once again filled up with kind words by people from all over the world.





2008 (photo by Anne-Catherine Haller)

His body at times had a hard time keeping up with his lust for life. His heart eventually

forced him to stop his treks down the mountain. In his eighties and nineties, he safely made it through several health scares, such as a cancerous tumor in his throat, serious heart trouble that forced him to take pills – something that was hard on his body so entirely unused to any type of drug, and a brain tumor that entailed brain surgery. Every time, he would bounce back, determined to go on living life. He told everybody who wanted to know that his secret was to send good thoughts to his body, to help it heal by focusing good energy on its wounds. It must have worked, because the doctors couldn't get over how well he recovered, stating that his scars were healing as if they belonged to a 15 year old. The fact that he enjoyed his hospital stays - he called them "vacation" because he didn't have to cook and clean - and became fast friends with a considerable part of the nurses must have helped as well.

He would sometimes come to visit me in Basel, where I studied, and where he had started his life as a young man so many years earlier. He would show me the little wound streets he had walked and the places where he had lived. I lived in an old house named "Samson" that had been built as a part of the hospital in the 1600 hundreds. Its rooms were big, its giant terrace faced the sunset, and its inhabitant population was made up of students, artists and musicians who came from all over the world: South America, Eastern Europe, Asia, North America. He would stay with my roommates and me. Five languages were spoken around our kitchen table, and my grandfather would hang out with us, fitting right in, chatting about the world.

A few years earlier, my aunt and her husband had bought a farm near Stockholm and were now running a bed and breakfast alongside a business of selling grass-fed beef. My grandfather had visited Scandinavia many years earlier with my grandmother, but he hadn't been back in decades. One day, he told me that he would like to see his daughter's place before he dies, but that he didn't think he could do this trip on his own anymore. "Well, let's go together then!", I said. And that's what we did the following spring, when he was 87 and I was 23. Refusing to take the airplane - because he had never taken one in his life, and because he thought it a bad idea to travel without seeing the countryside from a train wagon's window - we embarked on a two-day train trip from Switzerland to Sweden. He left Caux in the morning, made sure to make a detour on his way to Basel to see the Swiss Alps, and arrived at my flat in the late afternoon, where we hung out with my roommates. While I slept in the bed of a roommate who was out of town that night, he slept in my queen sized futon bed, looking tiny and rather mischievous as he wrapped himself up in my sheets with a big boyish smile. The next morning, we departed for Hamburg, spent the night there, squeezed in a visit with my sister who lives there, and went on for Stockholm on the second day of our trip. It all went well, except for one time where he tripped and fell flat on his face. Luckily, he didn't hurt himself, and the only consequence was a scary moment and a big black bruise on his face.

During all those years, he kept being the humble, curious, fun-loving, sincere and caring soul that he was. He told me that every morning, he would think of everybody he knew and loved - by now you will understand what a long list of people that was! - and send them good thoughts. He also thought a lot about the Divine, deciding to give up all belief in church dogma and instead referring to God simply as "Le Grand Amour", the great force of love. He quietly prepared himself for his final departure, living on in gratitude in

the same flat he had lived in for the past six decades. He took care of himself up until his 97th year, living in the stunning mountain setting he had chosen so many years earlier as his physical and spiritual home.

Only late last year, his body finally failed him. He broke his leg while he fell trying to climb into a bus. Recovery took a while this time, and his body grew weak from the lack of exercise. After some reflection, and after all these years of insisting that he wanted to die in Caux, he came to the conclusion on his own that he would be better off in a nursing home. The last few months of his life were spent there. It wasn't easy for him to depend on others and to be away from Caux. He who had held on to life for so long now said that he wanted to die, that he was waiting. Sometimes he cried, but I never heard him complain. When we visited him, he would often talk about his childhood adventures, as old people so close to death often do. He had had the luxury of preparing his final departure for a long time, and he was ready.

He finally passed away after breaking his leg once again, and suffering a heart attack as a consequence. He died with my aunt beside him, who talked to him and sang his favorite music to him. The message of his passing spread out into the world to reach the many friends he had known, and the enormous number of letters and emails from all over the world that flooded my father's and my aunt's mailboxes are witness to the extraordinary impact this man's soul has had.

This is the soul we laid to rest this weekend. For his final celebration, and according to his belief in *Le Grand Amour*, he had told us years before that instead of having a traditional Christian funeral, he wished for a musical celebration of his life. He had diligently chosen his favorite pieces by the great masters of classical music, to lighten the task for us. And thus it was: his organist friend played the organ, my aunt sang, his godson, who had lent his cello for many years to my grandfather, made this instrument resonate with his spirit. My father told us the story of his life. It was a wonderful gathering, and the church was full. I think he was happy with it.

Of course we are sad at his loss, but it is easy to be grateful and happy for a life so fully lived and a final departure so well prepared.

I often think that if I achieve just half the things that he's achieved in life, I will have done a good job.

Rest in peace, dear Werner, *mi abuelito querido*. You must be delighted to have been united with *Le Grand Amour*. Your soul is finally free to forever dance to your favorite tunes.

Your life on earth will resonate for a long time onward in the countless souls you have touched.