

# Seventh-year advocates

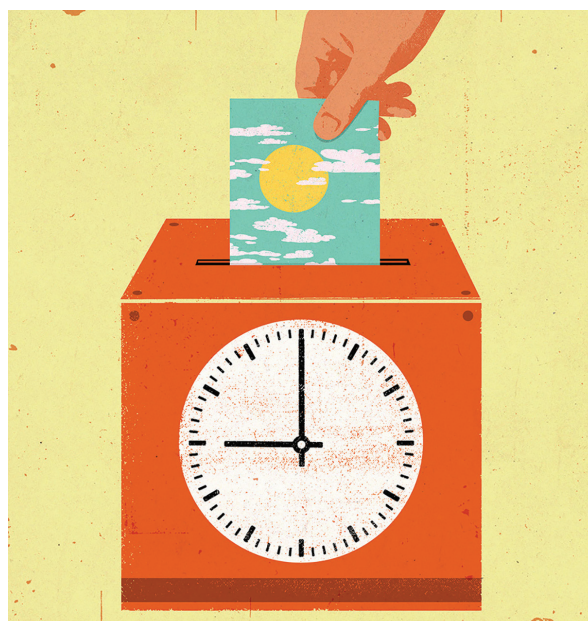
Academics aren't the only ones championing  
the septennial sabbatical

by PAUL ENGLEMAN

**I**n 1985, my future wife and I took a sabbatical from our jobs at a national magazine in Chicago and rented a farmhouse in the Italian region of Umbria for six months. I had a contract to write a mystery novel, and Barb had a reading list as long as the Arno River. The idea of buying a house or having kids was as far away as Osaka, the destination that the editor of the magazine told me we should have picked.

It wasn't entirely a sabbatical – we had to quit our jobs to go – but in every other respect, our half-year *hegira* qualified as a full-fledged furlough from the rat race. And this being pre-internet, it took a little more work to find a rental house than it does today: Our search engine was the ads at the back of the *New York Review of Books*.

Our location was more secluded than we could have imagined, 3 miles from the tiny village of Allerona, a drive that took 15 minutes over a steep and nearly impassable dirt and rock trail. We were befriended by Piero, the postmaster, and Giorgio, a young medical student and the only person in the village who spoke English. We learned our Italian



on the go, relying on Barb's high school Spanish, my innate grasp of grammar, and the patience of our interlocutors.

Our fluency had its limits. When Barb tried to order a turkey for our Thanksgiving dinner, she mistakenly requested an entire country that straddles the Mediterranean and Black seas. The grinning butcher understood that she wanted something smaller – *un tacchino* – but he did need to confirm one detail.

"Morto?" he asked. "Si, si," she replied. "Very morto!"

When not reading or writing – or tending the wood stove or gazing out our windows at the olive groves and

grazing goats – we took meandering drives through charming hill towns, stopping for leisurely lunches and sampling local wines. We made overnight trips to Florence and Rome and Siena and Assisi and became regulars in the nearest large town, Orvieto, where we developed a warm rapport with the local merchants.

It wasn't always *la dolce vita*. Random road stops by baby-faced *carabinieri* armed with Uzis had an unsettling effect on digestion. Soon after our arrival, the *polizia* conducted a midnight drug raid

on a house up the hill from us. Shortly thereafter, Piero told us we had to travel to the provincial capital to register our presence. The customs official who questioned us was notably not amused by our linguistic gymnastics. After he ushered us into a room marked "*droga*" and left for half an hour, we began to wonder if we were under suspicion of fraternizing with our *droga*-dealing neighbor.

And then there was the morning we were awakened by a volley of gunfire. Looking outside, we saw a convoy of Fiats and a cohort of men clad in camouflage and carrying shotguns. Hunting season

had arrived, and our bucolic surroundings were *terra prima* for bagging wild boar.

To Rotarians who travel to distant and sometimes dangerous regions to inoculate infants or build wells, our extended stay would hardly qualify as an adventure. Ours was a self-service project, plain and simple. But it was an indulgence that served us well – as any good sabbatical should.

The term sabbatical has its roots in the Greek word *sabbatikos*, meaning “of the Sabbath,” and connotes a time of rest. (In Mosaic law, the sabbatical year was the seventh year, when land could not be tilled.) The academic custom of taking sabbatical leave began at Harvard in the late 19th century. Today, faculty members traditionally become eligible for a year of sabbatical after six years of teaching, with the college or university typically contributing a faculty member’s full salary for half a year (one semester).

Ann Davies, provost and dean of Beloit College, a small liberal arts school in Wisconsin, explains that a sabbatical is not merely an opportunity to take a break or clear one’s head. (Disclosure: I attended Beloit and even graduated in four years.) “It’s expected to enhance your teaching,” she says. “When you propose your leave, you have to offer a clear sense of your project and how you see it benefiting yourself and the college.”

Jerry Gustafson, a retired professor of economics who incorporated entrepreneurialism into the Beloit curriculum, arranged for six sabbaticals during a 46-year teaching career, including a stint as a congressional aide – to learn about public policy firsthand – and two Fulbright-funded lectureships in Ankara and Istanbul. “Turkey was a garden of earthly delights for economics in the ’80s,” he says.

Gustafson points out that a sabbatical is as much about the comeback as the getaway. “What you want is the feeling that you can’t wait to get back and share what you’ve learned,” he says. He

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thinks sabbaticals could play a valuable role in industry, and he is encouraged that some companies have taken a page from the academic playbook and begun offering mini-sabbaticals to employees as part of their benefits packages.

At Morningstar, a Chicago-based investment research firm, employees qualify for six weeks of fully paid leave after four years on the job. Bevin Desmond, its president of global markets and human resources, says the company calls the benefit a sabbatical. “Our employees can use the time any way they choose,” she explains. “Some pursue hobbies, travel, or volunteer within local or even global communities. Most commonly, employees use the time to simply refresh or recharge.”

R&R – in this case “recharge and reboot” – is the title that Zillow Group, the online real estate database company, assigns to its extended leave program. Employees with six years of service qualify for six weeks of leave, three of which are paid. “We encourage people to work hard while they are here, but also to have a full life outside of work,” says Amy Bohutinsky, the company’s chief operating officer. “Our six-week sabbatical benefit is an extension of this philosophy.”

I caught up with Bohutinsky, who has been with the company 13 years, a few days before she left on her second sabbatical. Her plans included traveling “solo” to a surf and yoga retreat in Costa Rica; spending time at home with her family and their children’s grandparents; and taking the kids to Disney

World. For her first R&R session, Bohutinsky says: “My husband and I took a cycling trip across Sicily. I came back with new energy and creativity for my job, and I was excited to return.”

The six-week breaks that Morningstar and Zillow offer bear more resemblance to maxi-vacations than mini-sabbaticals, but why quibble? To my mind, the companies are exemplary rarities. In its 2017 employee benefits study, the Society for Human Resource Management reported that only 5 percent of U.S. employers offer paid sabbaticals, which is a shame. Any time I find myself in rush-hour traffic or shoulder-to-shoulder with commuters on public transit, it seems painfully obvious that we all could benefit from more time off.

Barb and I capped off our sabbatical with a leisurely two-week road trip to Paris. We returned to Chicago refreshed and recharged, albeit somewhat strapped for cash. For a while we caught ourselves answering simple questions in Italian, evidence that we had been in Italy long enough to say that we once lived there. Barb got rehired at the magazine and stayed until she found work at a nonprofit organization, a new career path she had laid out while on sabbatical. I began working from home, which means, as Barb sometimes points out, my sabbatical never really ended. The person I report to at work – me – is inclined to agree with her.

I found that the biggest challenge of working from home was the nagging sensation that there was always something work-related that needed doing – and if I wasn’t doing it, then I wasn’t being productive. After three decades I’ve finally convinced my supervisor that the more I enjoy myself, the better my job performance. But I still haven’t summoned the courage to ask for a sabbatical. ■

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