

DEAR Professor Wilson: We have never met, but I write to you now as a man in the middle of my own less illustrious scientific career who sees you as something of a living icon and a hero. I want to express my gratitude. Thank you for reminding me and thousands of others why we became scientists.

Your book "Letters to a Young Scientist" is first and foremost a book about passion and the delight of discovery. You celebrate the work of your colleagues, friends and graduate students.

LETTERS TO A YOUNG SCIENTIST
By Edward O. Wilson
244 pp. Liveright Publishing/
W. W. Norton & Company. \$21.95.

You relish memories of your childhood, catching snakes in Alabama, settling early on a life of biology and undertaking expeditions in Australia, Sri Lanka and Vanuatu.

You show us that the enthusiasm of youth has survived over a career that spans 60 years, in which you've identified some 450 ant species, written 27 books and won two Pulitzer Prizes. Your book includes two photographs posted side by side: one of you as a boy in Mobile, Ala., in 1942, the other of you last year, an octogenarian on the summit of Gorongosa Mountain, Mozambique. In both, you are peering into a butterfly net, engrossed in your find. The chapter heading reads simply, "I Never Changed."

I thank you, too, for emphasizing the diversity of life. "Life on earth remains so little known," you write, "that you can be a scientific explorer without leaving home." You describe the wealth of species lurking in a rotting tree trunk or in a square meter of soil. You remind us of the work yet to be done, that fewer than two million of the estimated 10 million species on Earth have been named and described.

And then there are your beloved ants: "angry" *Aneuretus simoni*, primitive *Nothomyrmecia macrops* and the Mesozoic *Sphecomyrma freyi*. You use these ants to show us that it is not so much the organism

Bill Streever's latest book is "Heat: Adventures in the World's Fiery Places."

of choice that brings success to the biologist, but how it is used to generate and test hypotheses.

Readers will find encouragement and inspirational maxims scattered throughout the book: "So much has been written, yet so very little is known." "A real scientist is someone who can think about a subject while talking to his or her spouse about something else." And my favorite: "I like to call Earth a little-known planet."

You offer philosophical guidance — "Deep ignorance, when properly handled, is also superb opportunity" — and practical career advice: "Unless your training and research commit you to a major research facility, for example a supercollider, space telescope or stem-cell laboratory, do not linger too long with any one technology. There will be a temptation for a young scientist to build a career in the new technology itself rather than to make original studies that can be performed with it."

You do not, as one might expect of a scientist and a professor, value mathematics above all else. Instead, you confess your own shortcomings in the realm of numbers, and you advise young scientists who share your weak-

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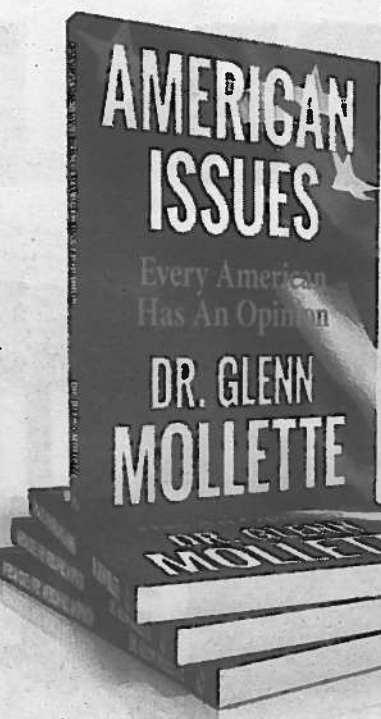
ness to collaborate with mathematicians.

Your good counsel reveals how profoundly this kind of dialogue is missing from our science departments. Young scientists must hear from older scientists. They need to learn what has inspired their mentors, what has sustained them and what has slowed them down. They need to hear about what it means to experience science as a vocation, and the variety of ways they can pursue it, not only in the academy but also in government agencies, nonprofit organizations and the private sector. And scientists at all levels need to be reminded to "stay on the path you've chosen, and . . . travel on it as far as you can. The world needs you — badly."

With sincerity, from an aging biologist who has had to find his own way. □

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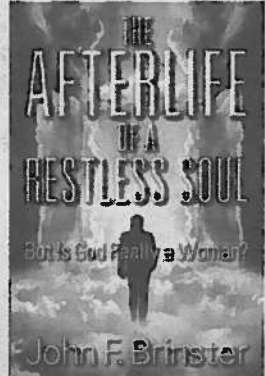


Each of us grapple with the relentless, nonproductive debates concerning Immigration, Social Security, Medical Insurance, War, Military, Abortion, Civil Union, Jobs, National Debt and much more. Reasonable, common sense solutions exist.

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