

**A Service of Blessed Memory for
Dr. Edward Osbourne Wilson
Rev. Dr. Rand Peabody, Officiant
January 7, 2022, Lexington MA**

Dr. Wilson's Obituary

A Reading from Genesis 1
Psalm 90, selected verses

John 1: **1** In the beginning was the Word (LOGOS: an organizing principle and power], and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. **2** He was in the beginning with God. **3** All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being **4** in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. **5** The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

I Corinthians 15: 42ff.

The Officiant's Remarks

A Time of Remembrance

Stefan Cover, Curatorial Assistant, The Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard University
Kathy Horton, Dr. Wilson's Secretary

A Minute of Silent Reflection, and the Gloria Patri
Dismissal to Westview Cemetery

Edward Osborne Wilson

I'm Pastor Rand Peabody. I'm on frequent call here at the Douglass Funeral Home, and it's my honor to be your officiant today at this personal service of remembrance and celebration for the esteemed Dr. Edward O. Wilson.

Edward Osborne Wilson of Lexington, passed from this life on Dec 26, 2021 . A prolific author, a Biologist and a Naturalist, he was Professor Emeritus in Entomology at Harvard University. He was the beloved husband of the late Irene (Kelley) Wilson, and the Father of Catherine I. Gargill and her husband Jonathan of Orlando, Florida. We gather today to remember and celebrate his legacy. He will then be interred at Westview Cemetery. A public memorial service will be announced at a later date.

Well, believe it or not, there's still more to be said. And in particular, Stefan Cover, Ed Wilson's Harvard colleague and friend, and Kathy Horton, his secretary of half-a-century, are here to say

it. As am I, in the interest of exploring Dr. Wilson's sense of the interface of science and theology. But to begin, I have asked Ed's long-time attorney and personal friend, Al Schraer, to read two selections from the Old Testament.

The Officiant's Remarks

Rev. Dr. Rand Peabody

In talking with Al Schraer about his friend Ed Wilson, he told me, "Ed loved Legal Sea Foods. He used to do a lot of his writing in a back booth there." A light went on. I thought, "So he was a Southern Baptist in his youth, but he went on in later life to become a Pescatarian!" So here we are. And where we are is a pretty special place. We are here to remember, and to celebrate, a good life, indeed a great life. And in his four-score years and twelve, Dr. Wilson was pretty prolific. And highly effective. Why, he made ants fascinating to millions. And I know he didn't write everything at Legal Sea Foods, because his Curriculum Vitae extends to a seventh page of closely arranged, low-font type. And by all accounts, throughout his long career in entomology, he mentored many, while breaking much new ground of his own. Watching him interviewed, you get the impression of a man who was capable of expressing a scintillating complexity of thought based on a practice of acute scientific observation, but doing so in a way that made that thought accessible to the ears of a layman, and delivered with a characteristically Southern warmth and wit. Speaking of his beloved ants, the Doctor once quipped, "Karl Marx was right; socialism works. It's just that he had the wrong species."

Following his Southern Baptist upbringing in Alabama, Dr. Wilson went on to view religions as being like what he called tribal entities protective of their own turf. And hence he saw pastors and other religious leaders as being like tribal chiefs. And as a man who had climbed to one of the most remote summits of New Guinea as part of his research into the classification of ants native to the South Pacific, I'd be certain that he felt confident in his ability to relate to such chiefs in ways that accorded us respect while seeking and indeed expecting our respect with regard to his own concerns and conclusions. As he wrote in 2006 in *The Creation*, a very readable book cast as a series of letters to a prototypical fundamentalist clergyman, he was ever interested in seeking common ground between his sphere- namely, arduous scientific probing and the insights it wrought- and the theological enterprise and its moral and ethical concern for human good. Considering science and religion to be "the two most powerful forces in the world today", Dr. Wilson queried his imaginary pastor: "*Does [our] difference in worldview separate us in all things? It does not. You and I and every human being strive for the same imperatives of security, freedom, personal dignity, and a cause to believe in that is larger than ourselves.*" And Dr. Wilson went on to express the sheer urgency of that cause: "The Creation- living nature-", he wrote, is in deep trouble. If destructive human activities continue at their present level, half the species of plants and animals could be gone or fated for early extinction by the end of the century. The current extinction rate is calculated in the most conservative estimates to be about a hundred times above that prevailing before humans appeared on earth, and it is expected to rise to at least a thousand times greater in the next few decades. The cost to humanity will be catastrophic. [And] because we are part of it, the fate of Creation IS the fate of humanity."

It could be said that Dr. Wilson found value in theology's focus on ethical and moral precepts, though not so much in the specific religions which theologians tend to perpetuate. Personally, as he stated in *Consilience*, *"I found it a wonderful feeling ... to be released from the confinement of fundamentalist religion."* Yet he went on to stress that *"I had no desire to purge religious feelings. They were bred in me; they suffused the wellsprings of my creative life."* And in fact that is why I, as a Pastor, have been asked to officiate at this service. Ed wanted it that way. For as he wrote, *"I had been raised a Southern Baptist, laid backward under the water on the strong arm of a pastor, been born again."* Now you know, that word "baptize" has a root meaning of "to be dyed". And those colors are strong!

Eight years after he wrote *Consilience*, Dr. Wilson said at the beginning of *The Creation*, *"I am a secular humanist"*. *"There is no guarantee of life after death ...* But he also stated that *"I am still searching."* (And then humbly he added) *"I may be wrong ... or partly right."* So in my role as a "tribal chief" who has been invited to officiate at this service of blessed memory, I will hold out my understanding that the Bible does see a spiritual continuation to our physical individuality. And also, that the Bible can, and to my mind should, be read to stress that there is a human vocation of wholistic "stewardship" in relation to this wondrous natural order in which we find ourselves -an order which, according to repeated affirmations in the Book of Genesis, its own Creator saw as being "good". And I am quite certain that Dr. Wilson would concur in that perception of the goodness of the natural world. And that he would urge us, therefore, to strive to be "good enough" to foster it. When Al Shrater told me that he once said to Ed that he thought Christians should see themselves as stewards of the creation, Dr. Wilson responded, *"I wish more Christians would see it that way."* For as Ed Wilson fully knew, if and as we fall in such stewardship, it would be to the utter perili not only of our planet, but of our human species as well. For - think of it - aren't we simply a part of a huge ornamental fountain of nearly two million species, each of them a-gush with life according to their own particular and unique biological configuration? Indeed, Dr. Wilson was instrumental in getting the incredibly inclusive *Encyclopedia of Life* initiative off the ground, with the goal of creating a global database to include information on the 1. 9 million species recognized by science. The EOL forms an open and searchable digital repository for organism traits, and measurements, and interactions, and other data contributed by more than 300 international partners and countless scientists around the world. For his part, Dr. Wilson described more than 400 species of ants.

What an example the EOL is of the sort of incredibly complex mental endowment we humans possess-and what a witness, therefore, to the unique responsibility we have with regard to all the rest of our fellow citizens of earth. But as Dr. Wilson clearly stressed, there's a problem afoot. And it's an age-old problem. For, along with its emphasis on the goodness of the natural order, and our role in the stewardship of it, the Book of Genesis also presents the myths of a human falling away from what we might call an ecology of grace. Dr. Wilson wrote eloquently of that human alienation, saying: *"We strayed from nature with the beginning of civilization roughly ten thousand years ago. That quantum leap beguiled us with an illusion of freedom from the world that had given us birth We have been trying ever since to ascend from Nature instead of to Nature. The consequence is both bewildering complexity of scientific*

knowledge, and dangerous ignorance of the biodiversity that sustains us." Or think of it this way: Dr. Wilson may have pioneered the subject of the biodiversity of islands, but I believe he might look at that astounding NASA picture called "Earthrise", taken from the moon, and say to us that our whole orb is like an island in the immense sea of space. So, he would urge, let's really try as hard as we can to treat it as such. Well, I ask you - How might we honor a man like this? How indeed, but to take his concerns to heart, personally and individually to be sure, but gJ_so on the corporate and communal levels of human society where real and lasting differences can be made. The E.O. Wilson Biodiversity Foundation is one such entity hard at work to promote the legacy of what its recent notice of his passing called "Darwin's Natural Heir".

Indeed, beginning afresh in this moment, in his honor, may we be inspired or re-inspired to sound an insistent alarm that will awaken a trans-disciplinary, and trans-national, desire to sustain the web of planetary life at all costs. For prophets welcome the company of those who would make common cause. And it was Edward Osborne Wilson's great and prophetic vocation, in this millennium of metastasizing ecological peril, to stress the utter imperative to do all that we can to preserve the intricate goodness of a creation into which he himself looked so deeply, and indeed with such an abiding passion, and compassion.

And now his fellow myrmecologist and Curatorial Assistant at Harvard's Museum of Comparative Zoology, Stefan Cover, will share some things with us about his friend and colleague.

I will now also ask Kathy Horton, Ed Wilson's faithful secretary of half-a-century, to offer her remarks.

**A Service at the Graveside
Westview Cemetery, Lexington, MA**

Buried under the snow, I suspect, is the marker for his beloved Irene, his Reenie, who just died in August. I invite each person present to get in silent touch with his or her thoughts about Edward Wilson, and perhaps their personal experiences of him.

[Gem/setting image] As for the gem: Paul Simon, friend and member of the E.O. Wilson Biodiversity Foundation board shared, *"It is a rare combination of good when an intellectual giant like Ed Wilson can leave a legacy of enormous scientific contributions with a memory trail of a kind, humble, generous man who had great exuberance for life."*

And as for the setting into which we now place that gem - well- from our purely human standpoint, this is where it ends. Dust to dust and ashes to ashes. But I am fond of saying at moments like this that we stand here at the crossroads of time, and the timeless. None of us can have a twenty-twenty sense of what that timelessness shall involve. Jesus Christ comforted his disciples on the eve of his crucifixion by giving them this image: "In my father's house are many mansions, or many rooms", he said. "And I go to prepare a place for you." He

didn't tell us, and we can't know, the details of such arrangements. But don't we somehow feel it within ourselves - that spark of eternity?

Ed Wilson wrote of having "religious feelings". And he said, *"We are obliged by the deepest drives of the human spirit to make ourselves more than animated dust ... Could Holy Writ be just the first literate attempt to explain the universe and make ourselves significant within it?"*

As Moby Dick is perhaps the great American novel, Our Town is perhaps the great American play. Indeed, it is more than American - it is universally human. It is, as its agnostic, and possibly Deist creator, Thornton Wilder, called it, "The life of a town against the life of the stars." And in the momentous Third Act of that play, set in the cemetery of Grover's Corners, New Hampshire, the strangely omniscient figure whom Wilder calls The Stage Manager, muses about a mystery that may be at the heart of life itself. He says: "Now there are some things we all know...etc."

And so with our best and most respectful wishes, thoughts, or prayers, according to our understanding of such things, we now commit this good and great man, EDWARD OSBORNE WILSON, unto the peace of this place of earthly repose, and to whatever shall lie Beyond for him in the grace of our Creator. As the church has for so long affirmed: Glory be to the father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

Oh - and as for this Great Snowy Meanwhile in which we live and move and have our being-well, at the end of that speech from which I just quoted, the Stage Manager asks, "What's left, when memory's gone, and your identity, Mrs. Smith?" In Edward O. Wilson's case, may the answer to that question be found, at least in part, in this spinning little blue-green jewel of a planet that is a better and healthier place for ALL of its inhabitants because he lived here. So be it!
