

Memorial Service for Curtis Wilson
September 30, 2012
St. John's College, Annapolis

Remarks by Nancy Buchenauer

It is a great honor to speak about Curtis Wilson. I first met him in my early years in Santa Fe when I was an utterly ignorant tutor and he was an almost mythical figure. Those of us new to the College passed his lectures and manuals around to one another, sure we would find crucial insights and interesting ways to help both ourselves and our students. To us in Santa Fe Curtis Wilson was one of the great men of Annapolis, who had been part of its formation in the old days when it was rising and finding its way. He was a person universally spoken of with respect and affection, as the best colleague one could imagine.

With great pleasure I came to know the man himself after I moved here in 1997. The generous hospitality I met in the home of Becky and Curtis was paradigmatic of the active, living intellectual community that one heard of from the college's early days. They brought together wonderful groups of people from in and outside our college with whom I would not otherwise have become acquainted. In Curtis I encountered a man who seemed never to age, but to be truly one of the immortals, always ready to share whatever question in astronomy he was currently engaged with, the conferences or study groups he was attending, the books and articles he was reading or himself about to publish. He spoke with a kindly, sparkling-eyed wit, as would a man so full of the delight in learning and discovering that he could not help but pass it on to those around him.

Curtis stood for something, a kind of moral perceptiveness and intellectual integrity. He showed himself genuinely unselfish and completely honest. Invariably his words were deeply considered and deeply human in the highest sense. In conversations with me once about the deanship he expressed the urgency to continue explicating and fostering the liberal arts, which he saw to be the fundamental task of the Dean as it is of the College. His own lectures enacted what this meant, by presenting an irresistible question in which the students might find themselves already immersed. In "The Archimedean Point and the Liberal Arts," he wrote:

"[Man] can become aware, as by a sidelong glance, of his own linguistic activity, and raise it to the level of conscious artfulness, liberal artistry." (p.16)

And further:

"Man exists at the horizon between appearance and idea: his being is intermediate, metaxy, as Plato would say...And the task of education, starting in the middle of things, is to use the appearances, the images, the names and the sentences, to produce a development toward hierarchy and wholeness which uses all the terms...So questioning

and responding, both to himself and others, man becomes a responsible being, a moral being.” (p.22)

Curtis thought much about science, what it is and what it is not, and unfolded his understanding with delightful clarity and precision. He exposed the stereotyped project of modern science to present “the completed description of the world and of ourselves as an assemblage of spatially and temporally located, deterministically interacting parts – a machine,” calling this “a bad metaphysical dream, a world of bare fact from which problems and persons, learning and knowing and valuing are absent.” [“On Knowing How and Knowing What,” p.26.] In his own thought and writing, persons, learning and knowing and valuing, were never absent.

Curtis was one of the fine scholars in our community, bringing us a touch of the academic glory of the outside world, and showing that it could find a place in our midst. Owen Gingerich in the notice soon to appear in the *Journal for the History of Astronomy*, calls Curtis “the most highly regarded historian of astronomy of this generation,” and adds:

It was no surprise that, when the L.E. Doggett Prize for contributions to the history of astronomy was established by the Historical Astronomy Division of the American Astronomical Society, Curtis Wilson was unanimously selected as its first recipient in 1998.

Still, for all his excellence as a thinker and teacher, Curtis will always be dearest to me as a kind and generous friend, one who could smilingly correct an error or just ask the right question to further another’s work. I am grateful to have known this wonderful man.