

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

Remarks by John Wilson

Thank you for honoring my father with this service. Not for his own sake but for the sake of those he loved, he would have been grateful for the kindness and respect shown today. He would have known how much this means to his wife of 58 years and to his family. And he would have wanted you to know how much he admired and cherished his wife, family and you: his friends, colleagues and community. He would not have wanted to be at the center of attention. Instead, he would want to focus on you, and to permit any merit to pass on to you and into the future.

Following the wonderful remarks shared by the preceding speakers, and anticipating my brother's, I don't think there is too much for me to say. A week after my father died, my mother announced, "The future lies forward." Such resolve would have surely made my father proud. He lived his life facing forward. He knew the importance of intention, and he leaned into the future – intent, purposed, but open to surprise. Pragmatic intentionality was a core trait. He liked projects. You have heard about many of his professional projects already. Here are a few examples from later in life.

Ten years ago, at the age of 81, he climbed onto the roof of my home in upstate New York to help replace shingles. He enjoyed it. Five years ago, he climbed a mountainous path in Southwestern Virginia. He persisted despite the occasional need to stop and rest. He wanted to get to the end, which culminated in a beautiful set of cascades. He succeeded. Among his final intellectual projects were advanced calculus and Keynesian economics. He learned them. The day before he died, he was pushing himself still during a walking tour on Mackinaw Island. He continued to learn things and follow trails right to the end. Those of you who knew him well cannot imagine him otherwise.

Although he pushed himself, he was also interested in the space between his projects, and in the space between his own thoughts. He was able to rest in this space. He practiced at it, or in it. He knew that unintended, surprising and sometimes wonderful realizations can arise by paying attention in this way. In one of his later conversations with me, he referred to this orientation as awareness of groundlessness. He practiced Tai Chi and meditation. He delighted in spontaneity that arose outside of things intended. He was ready, if you can be ready, for surprise.

His sense of humor was rich, a great sign of his ability to enjoy the surprises between thoughts. I remember him reading Huck Finn to my brother and me early in our lives. Laughter and tears of mirth poured from my father's face. He infected us with giddiness despite the fact that we, or at least I, didn't quite get the joke. Wit and playfulness became something relished deeply by my brother and me, and by our children. My father joined in with gusto. Picture this elderly scholar down on his hands and knees, bearing his then four-year-old grandson on his back, savoring the role of steed to the conquering knight waving a wooden sword in triumph.

As you know, my father had...conspicuous eyebrows. They often rose with interest, surprise or delight. These were among his most characteristic affect states. Those lifted eyebrows also may have been among his last expressions. Early in the morning of his final day, he was briefly awake and lucid in the hospital, though unable to speak. The ICU nurse informed him that he had suffered a heart attack and had occlusion in three vessels. Up went those eyebrows. Disease and death are always unwelcome, but he did not turn away. He opened up. It was striking enough for the nurse to notice.

One of my most vivid memories of this expression occurred during childhood, when my family went to a tourmaline mine in southern California. The tour there involved turning off electricity to demonstrate the complete absence of light in the depths of the mine, and the tour guide was concerned for everyone's safety.

He wanted to select someone from the group to bring up the rear. The guide spotted my father and announced, "You there. You're the one. You look like you have an honest face." Up went my father's eyebrows, down went his jaw. It was surprise, or incredulity. He later debated whether honesty could be detected on the face, but at the time viewed himself as no more honest, no more worthy, than anyone else in the group.

In fact, honesty can be detected on the face and my father had a thoroughly honest one. The tour guide was right. No one got lost in the dark that day. As I knew him, my father was never in the dark. He had the integrity to know what he knew. He presumed little when he did not know. He knew the dangers of over-confidence and self-deception. He was not enamored of his own opinions. He listened well, not only to the world around him and to you and me, but also to those spaces between his own thoughts. This kind of integrity led to a profound modesty. These were unmistakable traits, traits that gave rise to what so many people have remarked upon since his death: his gentleness, and his gentlemanliness.

I have one more note to share. After my father's death, following my mother's instructions, I took some of his clothing over to a donation center. I was met with inquiries about the occasion. I explained that my father had just passed on at the age of 91. The reply was unexpected and instructive. I was told, "Well, at 91 he was entitled." Had he been alive to hear it, I think my father would have chuckled, perhaps with a twinkle in his eye. He would also have been deeply saddened, knowing that this final entitlement was taking him away from those he loved. But he lived well, knowing the impermanence of all things, and he died well. In this sense, I suppose it could be said that he "deserved" the end of his life. He imposed himself on no one. Instead, he opened up space for others to enter and join him in listening. The merit and memories he has left behind for our future are the stronger for it.