

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

Remarks by Joseph Cohen

We are here to celebrate the life and to honor the memory of Curtis Wilson. I believe it is no exaggeration to say that in the larger world of the St John's College community, Curtis Wilson was universally admired and loved by everyone whose life he touched as tutor, or dean, friend or colleague, including those who knew him mainly as a renowned scholar of the history of astronomy.

It is perhaps a truism that one's memories and thoughts arise from one's own experience and perspective. So I will naturally be speaking about my own relationship to Curtis and this College. Indeed, until his death, Curtis was the last survivor among those of my colleagues who had also been my tutor. Today I shall recall others of this community as well.

Looking back to the time when I first came to this college in 1952, newly graduated from high school, I have always felt that being here was being home, first as a student for four years and then as a tutor for nearly 50. Throughout this long and happy period, Curtis was for me a significant and beneficent figure.

During my undergraduate years Curtis was my tutor in junior mathematics, in senior laboratory and, with Jacob Klein, in senior seminar.

My own career as a tutor here officially began when Curtis was Dean. I was then teaching in the Basic Program of Liberal Education for Adults at the University of Chicago, and St John's was expanding its faculty for the expected opening of the Santa Fe campus. After an interview with the instruction committee, I received from Curtis a letter of appointment effective July 1962. He then sent another letter informing me that a major instructional proposal had been approved establishing preceptorials for juniors and seniors, thereby eliminating a number of seminars in those years. (Later I was told that this proposal became a matter of confidence. If it failed to gain faculty approval the Dean and Instruction Committee would have had to resign.) This letter also said I would be teaching a Junior Seminar, and asked me to prepare a preceptorial topic. I was delighted to join Michael Ossorgin and Tom Slakey in that seminar and I'm very pleased that Tom is here today.

During those years when Curtis and I were both active faculty members there were also many opportunities to visit socially with Curtis and Becky. Included were those annual occasions when a women's book club of equally long duration invited spouses to join the discussion followed by a well prepared meal. Becky and my wife Sandy are still members of that reading group, many of whose loyal members are here today. Another example of an opportunity to engage with Curtis was initiated by Chaninah Maschler, who also asked Ben Milner and me to join in the task of explaining Daniel Dennett's highly touted book "Consciousness Explained."

When Becky invited me to speak at this event I immediately and gratefully accepted. My remarks about Curtis will include the contents of a pair of letters from him which I happened upon recently and thought appropriate to share. They reveal a piece of who he was, which, although not surprising, may not be generally known.

The letters were written in January and February of 1998, and pertained to a Friday night lecture I was scheduled to give on February 20 on the subject of Spinoza's Theological-Political Treatise. In the January letter Curtis wrote:

“Dear Joe, Can you put up with a bit of advice about lecturing from the doddering, the superannuated, and the hearing-impaired? For the sake of us old folks, you must speak directly into the mike, keeping it only a few inches from your lips. There! I've said it. For some of us, it makes a lot of difference. I really do look forward to your lecture. Spinoza has always seemed interesting to me – perhaps because of my not-very-well- assessed romantic tendencies. I'll be there – with ears cocked!”

When I gave the lecture, I dedicated it to Michael Littleton who had died two weeks earlier. The words of the dedication were as follows:

“Michael's virtues and talents were indeed many and wonderful. In light of my lecture this evening, it seems fitting to say, that of them all, he may have most excelled in those qualities identified by Spinoza as “love, joy, peace, temperance, and faith towards all.” His memory is a blessing to his family and to all who knew him.

After the lecture, Curtis sent me the following note:

“Dear Joe, thank you for your solid, carefully constructed lecture, and thank you for defending Spinoza. It is the first defense of Spinoza I ever remember having heard in a Friday night lecture at St John's.

“I suppose that there is something to be said for [Leo] Strauss's attack on Spinoza, if one believes that the truth of miracles must be defended at all costs. Winfree Smith shocked me out of my wits when I first came to St John's by insisting on defending not only Biblical miracles but the magic in the Odyssey and other old stories. I have remained an unreconstructed liberal democrat, and it warms the cockles of my heart to have Spinoza defended. It was lovely of you to dedicate your lecture to the memory of Michael Littleton, another defender of peace and the liberal democratic tradition.”

I should add that Leo Strauss was one of my teachers when I was a graduate student at the University of Chicago and Winfree was one of my teachers at St. John's. He was significant for me in many ways: he was the seminar leader in my Sophomore and Junior years and my math tutor in Senior year. Winfree, who was an ordained Episcopal clergyman regularly offered evening classes on the New Testament, some of which I attended; and during my last three undergraduate years we had many conversations about philosophical and theological books. When I joined the faculty our friendship deepened, and I continued to benefit from his mentoring and his friendship.

In my remarks at Winfree's memorial service in 1991, I spoke of him as "a particular object of my wonder" because it seemed to me that he was both completely devoted to the cultivation and teaching of the liberal arts, the arts of reason, and also completely devoted to fulfilling the requirements of his Christian faith. Winfree seemed perfectly comfortable with this duality because he had decided on his priorities. In one of his sermons at St. Anne's Church he stated his belief that "the authority of the word of God is infinitely superior to the authority of human reason." But Winfree also believed that the Creator God had given to his creatures the gift of reason as well as the gift of faith. It was never clear to me why the gift of reason is deemed by some to be less divine than the gift of faith.

My last conversation with Curtis occurred just before he and Becky left for the trip to Michigan where he died. It touched somewhat on this same theme. We discussed a newly published book by Lawrence Krauss with the metaphysically seductive title, "A Universe from Nothing: Why there is Something rather than Nothing." The author is an eminent writer on modern science and cosmology who thinks he has the answer to Einstein's question whether God had any choice in the creation of the universe. Curtis did not disagree with Krauss' account of the experimental and theoretical discoveries at the heart of modern physics, but he strongly objected to what might be called his aggressive atheism. Curtis reacted to Krauss' concluding assertion that "even a seemingly omnipotent God would have no freedom in the creation of our universe...[which] further suggests that God is unnecessary—or at best redundant." Curtis thought this account did not properly include or embrace man's spiritual dimension. For Krauss, however, the scientific enterprise is itself a profound expression of the human spirit in its desire to know. I thought that Curtis would agree with this statement, but that afternoon our conversation had to stop. I fully expected it to continue when he returned.

To help me understand what Curtis may have meant, I turned instead to Becky. She told me that Curtis had for some years been engaged in various meditative practices based on Buddhist teachings. He was seeking and finding a non-dogmatic, non-orthodox way of attaining a peaceful mode of being. Perhaps he was referring to this mode as enhancing a life of the spirit.

Curtis had also spoken at Winfree's memorial service, and I quote the final words of his remarks: "For those of us who knew him, his influence and his presence will not disappear. He is missed. The love he evoked will remain." To conclude, I will apply these same words to Curtis himself. For those of us who knew him, his influence and his presence will not disappear. Curtis is missed. He is loved. And the love he evoked will remain.