



**Baccalaureate – May 2017**  
**“To Seek the Best for All”**

It can be somewhat deflating to be reminded of the inadequacies of the human species. World-renowned, Harvard socio-biologist and ethicist E.O. Wilson (the one, you’ll recall, who earned his second Pulitzer Prize for his study of ants), reflects on the evolutionary basis for human behavior in his work, The Social Conquest of Earth. When discussing the origins of the urge to create art, for example, he emphasizes not the powers but rather the limits of our senses. He writes: “*Rich and seemingly boundless as the creative arts seem to be, each is filtered through the narrow biological channels of human cognition.*”

He goes on,

*"Our sensory world (...) is pitifully small. Our vision is limited to a tiny segment of the electromagnetic spectrum, (...) the ‘visual spectrum.’ (...) Just beyond blue in frequency is ultraviolet, which insects can see but we cannot."*

In rather humbling terms, Wilson goes on to extol the abilities of tropical fish to navigate murky water by means of electrical impulses; of birds to employ Earth’s magnetic field for migratory routes; and of honeybees to use polarization of sunlight for direction.

**As for sound**, bats depend on ultrasound frequencies, inaudibly high for humans, which guide them in their precision aerial maneuvers; elephants engage in complex social and emotional interactions emitting grumbling sounds too low for the human ear. And given our relatively limited taste and smell, our faculties leave us even further removed from a large percentage of living organisms that make extensive use of highly specialized senses to send and receive chemical messages known as pheromones.

Indeed, from a certain perspective, we are rather **lacking** as a species. Yet, Wilson’s aim is not to trivialize the human experience, and in fact I suspect he is an optimist about our condition.

Our intrinsically human urge to create art seems to have evolved to give us an advantage – perhaps due to, or in spite of, our sensory limitations. Art binds us together, inspires

deeper social bonds, and creates shared understanding of what matters. The musical compositions of hunter-gatherer societies, he writes, for example, "...invigorate their lives. The subjects within the repertoires include histories and mythologies of the tribe as well as practical knowledge about land, plants, and animals." Songs and dances of these tribal societies, he says, "...draw the ... members together, creating a common knowledge and purpose. They excite passion for action. They are mnemonic, stirring and adding to the memory of information that serves the tribal purpose."

I should add here, **as an aside**, that when I watch the bonding experience of the annual Spring Dance Concert, the crowd response to the Kirby Music Festival, or the enthusiasm of the audience during the Senior School Meeting just last week, this notion of art binding us together and energizing our social interactions seems quite real and relevant to our own tribal experience right here on this campus.

In any case, while Wilson's discussion of the arts begins with our sensory shortcomings, he suggests that these very deficiencies gave rise to a desire to enhance the world around us, to help us see and appreciate idealized beauty, to seek something beyond the simple reality that our senses communicate to us. "To the poet," he writes, "the sun rises in the east and sets in the west, tracking our diel cycles of activity, symbolizing birth, the high noon of life, death, and re- birth..." The poetic metaphor adds deeper meaning and mystery to an already beautiful phenomenon, connecting it more closely to our own lives. So art may distort reality at times, but only as it seeks to reveal something more important, some deeper truth.

Wilson references the writer E. L. Doctorow, who asks us, rhetorically, "Who would give up the *Iliad* for the "real" historical record?" We do not read artistic creations, says Doctorow, "... as a newspaper is read; it is read as it is written, in the spirit of freedom."

Paleolithic bone flutes; the masterful cave paintings found in Lascaux, France and Altamira, Spain; and early sculpted artifacts from the dawn of human history are all examples of aesthetic activity that created better social bonds, a sense of shared purpose, and to some extent an enhanced appreciation for and sense of connection with the surrounding world.

The human urge to create art, in this sense, responds to an evolutionary need in that it provides a social advantage, and ultimately emerges as **a rather important factor in our success**.

This is equally true, according to Wilson, for many of our other distinctly human traits, and if you follow his thinking on various aspects of the human condition, he tries to **challenge** and even **reframe** assumptions about what drives human behavior, assumptions about

certain traits that may not always heretofore have been seen as key to our ability to thrive.

His bigger question in the book, **in fact**, is to examine what leads, **from an evolutionary perspective**, to advanced and highly successful social behavior. And though he acknowledges the importance of **individual selection** – that is, the Darwinian notion of the survival of the fittest, which he refers to as “competitiveness and selfish behavior among group members” -- he also makes a compelling case for the powerful force of **group selection** that “tends to create **selfless** behavior, expressed in greater generosity and altruism, which in turn promote stronger cohesion and strength of the group as a whole.”

He writes, “An unavoidable and perpetual war exists between honor, virtue, and duty, the products of group selection, on one side, and selfishness, cowardice, and hypocrisy, the products of individual selection, on the other side.” Ultimately, he concludes, to a greater degree than previously acknowledged, natural selection has favored group cooperation, selflessness, and the sacrifice of individual needs for the benefit of the group.

Our *virtues, in this sense*, are largely responsible for our success – evolution favors our better impulses. Empathy, compassion, altruism, and cooperation give us an edge in the cut-throat, law-of-the-jungle, cage-fight struggle for survival. Greed, deceit, and self-interest ultimately offer fewer advantages to our species.

It turns out that respect, patient collaboration, and honesty aren't just quaint notions for use around the Harkness table. Living side by side with open-minded cooperation in our Houses is far more than just pleasant etiquette. Our enduring purpose, as our mission states, “... is to inspire the best in each to seek the best for all.” Who knew? It sounds as if science is finally catching up to what we have known all along at Lawrenceville.

I find this perspective reassuring, and it reinforces my own faith in humanity. As we study the world and our place in it, we spend a great deal of time dwelling on the negative, tragic side of human behavior. We catalogue the catastrophe of war, the crime of slavery, the tragedy of genocide. The human capacity to abuse, to exploit, and to brutally mistreat each other is well established and at times can seem limitless.

But repeatedly failing to measure up as a species does not mean we stop aspiring to live good lives or to create just societies.

- Just because there are lies does not negate the importance of “Truth” as an ideal.

- Merely because cruelty seems pervasive in human interactions does not mean we must be defined by it.
- Even if mistrust of “the other” seems embedded in our psyche, we feel better when we resist and overcome that instinct.

While we may have weak sensory powers, we have strong **imaginations**, developed and enhanced through our artistic endeavors, and we can imagine **what could be** – we can imagine

- better social justice,
- a more equitable economic system,
- a more peaceful world.

The world, in fact, for all its tricks and deceptions, for all its tragedies and disappointments, can be a wonderful place.

- Whether we take Wilson’s biological basis for our altruism;
- whether we prefer to see divine intervention;
- or whether we attribute it simply to the deeply ingrained traditions of goodness and integrity at a place like Lawrenceville, we humans are moved by stories of compassion that help us to see noble possibilities in our lives.

We find it all the time in literature. Every time I reread Dickens’ A Tale of Two Cities, I am inspired by Sydney Carton’s act of redemptive self-sacrifice. Taking Charles Darnay’s place in line for the guillotine, he feels deep satisfaction in allowing someone else to live in his stead:

“It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known.”

Real stories may be even more compelling. There is the heroism of the Bulgarian Bishop Metropolitan Kirill who incited crowds of bystanders to block the Nazi deportation of Jews to death camps. The success of these efforts in Bulgaria during WWII led to the cessation of Nazi efforts to round up and deport Jews and meant that at the end of the war, Bulgaria was the only European nation whose Jewish population was greater than it had been at the beginning.

There was the Iranian Oscar Schindler, Abdol-Hosein Sardari Qajar, the wartime Iranian envoy to Paris during WWII. He risked his life to save thousands of Jews from deportation by issuing forged passports. Given the current state of affairs between Israel and Iran, it is especially worth noting this minor chapter of history. He began with Jews of Iranian decent, but when Jews of all origins began coming to him for help, he realized the extent of the Nazi plan for annihilation, and he redoubled his efforts.

I am inspired when I hear of Senator John McCain, who spent over 5 years as a prisoner of war in North Vietnam, enduring torture and privation. Though he could have used his political connections to gain his freedom, he refused to leave until other prisoners who had been there longer were **first** released.

Our all-school read this summer is Just Mercy by Bryan Stephenson, who rose up from very modest roots, defied vestiges of segregation that might have held him back, and made his way to Harvard Law School. Instead of pursuing a much more lucrative future, he headed after law school to Montgomery, Alabama where he started the Equal Justice Initiative, which advocates for fair treatment for the poor and minorities in the criminal justice system. The stories he tells are heartbreaking, which make his successes over the decades all the more remarkable and uplifting.

Or one might be inspired by a rather different kind of heroism, the selfless act displayed by navy veteran

Wesley Autrey, the “Hero of Harlem,” who spontaneously leaped onto the subway tracks in the face of an oncoming train to shelter a man who had fallen and could not get up. He pinned the man down and let the train pass overhead, coming so close that it left a smudge of grease upon his cap. Afterwards, he told a reporter: “I don’t feel like I did something spectacular; I just saw someone who needed help. I did what I felt was right.”

Humans faced with impossible choices follow their better impulses all the time. Individuals have tremendous power to do the right thing, to make a difference, to stand up for what is right, **“to seek the best for all.”**

And if you have learned anything in your time at Lawrenceville, it is that **the only life worth living** is one constructed around such ideals. We don’t need E.O. Wilson to provide us with an evolutionary basis for doing good, **but I suppose it helps to know that natural selection is on our side.**

All of you Fifth Formers assembled here, poised to graduate, are about to step across a threshold. You have been in a protected place, a place built upon the notions of trust, integrity, and fundamental respect for others.

And you go off into the world knowing that these things matter –This is the **most important knowledge** that you, our graduates, take from this school.

Just as Lawrenceville will always be a part of who you are, these values embedded in the fabric of the school will also always be a part of you.

And as you head out to make your way, as you begin to shape your future and decide where you wish to have an impact, you will bring along a faith in these simple notions, and surely this faith can make the world a better place. --Thank you very much.

*-- Stephen S. Murray H'55 '65 '16 P'16 '21  
The Shelby Cullom Davis '26 Head Master*