

**A Service of Memory and Celebration  
of the Life of Ernst Mayr  
Carleton-Willard Village  
Bedford, Massachusetts**  
**The Rev. John Gibbons of the First Parish in Bedford, Unitarian Universalist,  
Officiant**  
**26 February 2005**

*Out of the stars in their flight, out of the dust of eternity, here we have come,  
Stardust and sunlight, mingling through time and through space,  
Out of the stars have we come, up from time;  
Out of the stars have we come.  
Time out of time before time in the vastness of space, earth spun to orbit the sun,  
Earth with the thunder of mountains newborn, the boiling of seas.  
Earth warmed by sun, lit by sunlight: this is our home;  
Out of the stars have we come.  
Mystery hidden in mystery, back through all time;  
Mystery rising from rocks in the storm and the sea.  
Out of the stars, rising from rocks and the sea,  
Kindled by sunlight on earth, arose life,  
Ponder this thing in your heart; ponder with awe;  
Out of the sea to the land, out of the shallows came ferns.  
Out of the sea to the land, up from darkness to light,  
Rising to walk and to fly, out of the sea trembled life.  
Ponder this thing in your heart, life up from sea:  
Eyes to behold, throats to sing, mates to love.  
Life from the sea, warmed by sun, washed by rain,  
Life from within, giving birth rose to love.  
This is the wonder of time; this is the marvel of space;  
Out of the stars swung the earth, life upon earth rose to love.  
This is the marvel of life, rising to see and to know;  
Out of your heart, cry wonder: sing that we live.*

*("Out of the Stars," Robert Terry Weston)*

We gather to remember and celebrate the marvelous life of Ernst Mayr whom some of you have known all your life – and whose presence may sometimes have seemed your single most constant. I extend a particular welcome to Christa and to Sue and to all the grand and great-grandchildren and to this far-flung extended Mayr Family. There is something both wonderful and odd in being the

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family of a man so distinguished and renowned. The world knew the celebrity; you knew (when he did not) where the man put his socks. Welcome also to everyone from Carleton-Willard, you who were Dr. Mayr's neighbors, table-companions, caregivers and friends.

We are all here together to remember, to honor and to celebrate Ernst Mayr's long good life.

This is a memorial service; memory is what we have. These are the words of theologian Frederick Buechner: "Memory is more than a looking back to a time that is no longer. It is a looking out into another kind of time altogether where everything that ever was continues not just to be, but to grow and change with the life that is in it still. The people we loved. The people who loved us. The people who, for good or ill, taught us things. Dead and gone though they may be, as we come to understand them in new ways, it is as though they come to understand us – and through them to understand ourselves – in new ways, too...(and we realize) something of the power and richness of life itself (that) not only touched us once... but continues to touch us (now)."

We are here in recognition that the power and richness of Dr. Mayr's life touched our lives and, though different now, touches us still.

### **Readings:**

As a preface to our remembrances, I've chosen several readings that touch on his life and work and character. When he and I talked, he made a point of saying that his interests were wide-ranging, extending to literature, music, and art. He also said that there was only one form that held no appeal for him and that was poetry. I suspect that, as a scientist and a naturalist, he was interested in the thing itself and not the metaphor about it. He doesn't have to listen to it, so I've chosen mostly poetry.

Mayr, the author of more than 700 publications who made full use of his every day, month and year, valued productivity among the great virtues. These are excerpts from "To Be of Use," by Marge Piercy:

*The people I love the best  
Jump into work head first  
without dallying in the shallows  
and swim off with sure strokes almost out of sight.*

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*They seem to become natives of that element...*

*I love people who harness themselves, an ox to a heavy cart,  
who pull like water buffalo, with massive patience,  
who strain in the mud and the muck to move things forward,  
who do what has to be done, again and again.*

*The work of the world is common as mud.  
Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.  
But the thing worth doing well done  
has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.  
Greek amphoras for wine or oil,  
Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums  
but you know they were made to be used.  
The pitcher cries for water to carry  
and a person for work that is real.*

Mayr's work was real and he was vigorous. I'm told that at Harvard's MCZ when well into his 90's, he declined the elevator and bounded up the stairs to his 5<sup>th</sup> floor office.

He was, of course, an ornithologist, a naturalist, a biologist who believed in getting out of the ivory laboratory, into the field, often around the world. Living off the land in the South Pacific and collecting more than 3000 birds from 1928-1930, the obituary in the Boston Globe said they all went in the pot and "he is said to have eaten more birds of paradise than any other modern biologist."

Mary Oliver is one of our naturalist poets and we'll hear another of her great poems in a little while, but this is hers titled, "Look and See":

*This morning, at waterside, a sparrow flew  
to a water rock and landed, by error, on the back  
of an eider duck; lightly it fluttered off, amused.  
The duck, too, was not provoked, but, you might say, was laughing.*

*This afternoon a gull sailing over  
our house was casually scratching  
its stomach of white feathers with one  
pink foot as it flew.*

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*Oh (Life), how shining and festive is your gift to us, if we only look, and see.*

Mayr believed in looking and seeing. He was also a realist (not a romantic, his family will assure you, nor a pessimist); he was a believer in what is. These are the words of one of the first to embrace Darwinian thought, 19<sup>th</sup> century naturalist John Burroughs:

*I certainly have found "good in everything" in all natural processes and products – not the "good" of Sunday-school books, but the good of natural law and order, the good of that system of things out of which we came and which is the source of our health and strength. It is good that fire should burn, even if it consumes your house; it is good that rain should fall, even if it destroys your crops and floods your land. Plagues and pestilences attest the constancy of natural law. They set us to cleaning our streets and house and to readjusting our relations to outward nature. Only in a live universe could disease and death prevail. Death is a phase of life, a redistribution of the type. Decay is another kind of growth.*

There is, in Burrough's and Mayr's realism, not an ethical neutrality but an ethical *imperative* for it is we – not God or Fate or Life itself but *we* who bear all responsibility. This is Wislawa Szymborska's poem, "In Praise of Feeling Bad About Yourself" :

*The buzzard never says it is to blame.  
The panther wouldn't know what scruples mean.  
When the piranha strikes, it feels no shame.  
If snakes had hands, they'd claim their hands were clean.*

*A jackal doesn't understand remorse.  
Lions and lice don't waver in their course.  
Why should they, when they know they're right?*

*Though hearts of killer whales may weigh a ton,  
In every other way they're light.*

*On this third planet from the sun  
Among the signs of bestiality  
A clear conscience is Number One.*

It is this call to conscience and to responsibility that is so inspirational in Mayr's life and work.

And somehow I think he would approve if I close these selections with these, Mayr's own words:

*"...the living world, through evolution, can be explained without recourse to supernaturalism; essentialism or typology is invalid, and we must adopt population thinking, in which all individuals are unique (vital for education and the refutation of racism); natural selection, applied to social groups, is indeed sufficient to account for the origin and maintenance of altruistic ethical systems; cosmic teleology, an intrinsic process leading life automatically to ever greater perfection, is fallacious, with all seemingly teleological phenomena explicable by purely material processes; and determinism is thus repudiated, which places our fate squarely in our own evolved hands. To borrow Darwin's phrase, there is grandeur in this view of life. New modes of thinking have been, and are being, evolved."*

**Reflection:**

You know that I did not know Dr. Mayr well and thus I'm glad that we'll hear from Becky and Joe and Sue and, indeed, there will be an opportunity for any of you – if you wish – to share a brief memory or comment. It has only been in the last year – when it became apparent that he might not live forever – that Dr. Mayr and his family figured that *someone* ought to say *something* when this day came.

My first meeting with him did not go especially well. Knowing that I could not long sustain a conversation on the topics of speciation, the new synthesis, or punctuated equilibrium, I decided to ask him who were his mentors and teachers, a reasonable question - I thought. He dismissed it, however, because it was actually unreasonable: so vast were his interests and pursuits that his mentors were truly innumerable. I then asked about the strange persistence of creationism in this country but succinctly he made clear that this delusion is so preposterous that it warranted no response. And then, after a brief pause, he advised me that he had work to do and that perhaps we might meet some other time.

We did meet much more agreeably thereafter and, fortunately for the task today, he left explicit instructions as to how he wished to be remembered. Mayr said, basically, three things.

He wished to be known as generous: generous with his time and the attention he gave to students and to colleagues; generous with the money he received for academic prizes which he gave to purposes of education and conservation.

We may be generous, he further said, because life is a generous giver – abundant, teeming, over-flowing, full of insight, beauty and humor if – as the poet said – we but look and see. It is not coincidental that it was he, of course, who looked and saw – among a great many other things - 26 new species of bird (more than anyone else now alive) and 38 species of orchid.

Dr. Mayr asked also that he be remembered as tolerant, that he overcame – or strove to overcome - the racial, religious and ethnic prejudices of his birth. Indeed, as new immigrants from Germany, he and his wife Gretel endured years of hardship and official suspicion before they were allowed passports and granted citizenship.

Moreover, Mayr advised that all people be tolerant because the essence of life is difference and diversity, ebb and flow, chance and choice. And it is not coincidental that, in his work, he debunked typological thinking – the origin of all prejudices – and reminded us that (like birds and flowers and all living things) we are each unique individuals, constituents of a multi-faceted population.

Last fall I conducted the wedding of two Ph.D. biologists, so I asked Dr. Mayr what he would advise them. “I would tell those biologists getting married, ‘Don’t be too one-sided; always stay curious about what is on the other side of the fence.’” In life and in marriage, tolerance is the only survivable response to the way things really are.

And third, Dr. Mayr asked that he be remembered for his appreciation of mystery and the unknown. In science, religion and many things there’s no point in speculating about things we do not or cannot know. In discussions and debates, he never made assertions about the Bible or any religion; he refused to entertain unanswerable questions. The island of knowledge, he knew, is surrounded by a vast shoreline of mystery.

Now I must admit that once, within earshot of Christa, I reminded him of his espoused appreciation of mystery to which Christa quickly said to him, “For

somebody so appreciative of the unknown, you're pretty darn sure about an awful lot of things!"

I expect that his family can readily cite exasperating behaviors contrary to each of the ways he wished to be remembered. And thus let it also be said that for all his generosity, his toleration and his open-mindedness, we are also the beneficiaries of his supreme self-confidence and intellectual ego; his intolerance of illogic and unreason; and, indeed, many questions were *thought* unanswerable until he boldly answered them.

In our conversations, Dr. Mayr expressed concern that his professional life may at times have shortchanged his attention to his wife and children, though he said he hoped that the summers at Cold Springs Harbor and at the farm in New Hampshire helped. And though they surely recall times when they were not to disturb their father, when he seemed unaccustomed to the language of love, Sue and Christa also remember his attention to them, their children and his great-grandchildren, the deeds of love and devotion; the stories he read with them in his lap; and, yes, the times at Cold Springs Harbor and the farm really did help.

I'll close my remarks with the words of fellow naturalist Rachel Carson who summered in Maine and whose path may well have crossed Mayr's.

In the summer before she died, Rachel Carson spent a morning with a close friend on a rocky point where they witnessed the migration of Monarch butterflies. Later that day Rachel wrote her friend a note:

*This is a postscript to our morning..., something I think I can write better than say. For me it was one of the loveliest of the summer's hours, and all the details will remain in my memory: that blue September sky, the sounds of wind in the spruces and surf on the rocks, the gulls busy with their foraging, alighting with deliberate grace.... But most of all I shall remember the Monarchs, that unhurried drift of one small winged form after another, each drawn by some invisible force. We talked a little about their life history. Did they return? We thought not; for most, at least, this was the closing journey of their lives.*

*But if occurred to me this afternoon, remembering, that it has been a happy spectacle, that we had felt no sadness when we spoke of the fact that there would be no return. And rightly - for when any living thing has come to the end of its cycle we accept that end as natural. For the Monarch butterfly, that cycle is measured in a known span of months. For ourselves, the measure is something else, the span of which we cannot know. But the*

*thought is the same: when that intangible cycle has run its course it is a natural and not unhappy thing that a life comes to its end. That is what those brightly fluttering bits of life taught me this morning. I found a deep happiness in it - so, I hope, may you. Thank you for this morning.*

At this point, I think Ernst Mayr would borrow Darwin's phrase and say, "there is grandeur in this view of life." And we will say, "thank you for this life."

### **Musical Interlude**

**Becky**

**Sue**

**Joe**

**Others?**

Children of a common mysterious origin are we all, flung up by forces beyond our comprehension, fragments of some inscrutable but wondrous Power. We are likewise co-partners in a common mysterious Destiny.

Here on a little planet-island, in a vast ocean space, for a brief moment in time, we are brought together and whether we like it or not, we must live together and make the best of a common lot. If we have the wisdom, we shall strive "to be comrades in the quest for the high places of life." We shall perfect the art of helping one another, and the science of mutual understanding. We shall continually keep our faces toward the Light. We shall gladly shoulder our share of Duty, however far we may be from solving the riddle of its meaning. We shall realize that we are the indispensable link between the world that was and the world that is to be. We shall resolve to pass on the torch of Knowledge, at least undimmed, and if possible with even brighter flame. We shall bequeath to those who come after us a better and a kinder earth than we have found.



In the rising of the sun and in its going down, we remember him. In the blowing of the wind and in the chill of winter, we remember him. In the opening of buds and in the rebirth of spring, we remember him. In the blueness of the sky and in the warmth of summer, we remember him. In the rustling of leaves and in the beauty of autumn, we remember him. In the beginning of the year and when it ends, we remember him. When we are weary and in need of strength, we remember him. When we are lost and sick at heart, we remember him. When we have joys we yearn to share, we remember him.

So long as we live, Ernst Mayr too shall live, for he is now a part of us and we remember him. (from Roland B. Gittelsohn, adapted)

One last poet's words:

May we, like Ernst Mayr, not die an unlived life.

(Like him) may we not live in fear  
of falling or catching fire.

May we choose to inhabit our days,

to allow our living to open us,

to make us less afraid,

more accessible,

to loosen our heart

until it becomes a wing,

a torch, a promise.

(As he so chose) may we choose to risk our significance;

to live so that which came to us as seed

goes to the next as blossom

and that which came to us as blossom,

goes on as fruit. (Dawna Markova, adapted)

And remember, "Don't be too one-sided. Always stay curious about what's on the other side of the fence." Amen and amen.