

UNTIL IT HEARS FROM YOU

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich
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The American poet Richard Wilbur garnered two Pulitzer Prizes and a National Book Award over an extraordinarily-long career as one of our nation's most celebrated poets. Wilbur died last October at the age of 96. During an era when many leading poets tended to be experimental and self-absorbed, Wilbur's traditional modernism reminded many of Robert Frost. In my view, Wilbur at his best equals Frost.

Among my favorite Wilbur poems are two collections he describes as "Poems for Children and Others." The collections are titled *Opposites* and *More Opposites*. Here's an example:

What is the opposite of *flying*?
For birds, it would be *just not trying*.
Perhaps the opposite for us
Would be *to take a train or bus*.

Or this:

The opposite of *doughnut*? Wait
A minute while I meditate.
This isn't easy. Ah, I found it!
A cookie with a hole around it.

And finally this:

An *echo*'s opposite is the *cry*
To which the echo makes reply.
Of course I do not mean to claim
That what they say is not the same.
If one of them calls out "Good day"
Or "Who are you?" Or "hip, hooray"
Or "Robert has an ugly hat,"
The other says exactly that.
But they're still opposites. Know why?
A cry is *bold*; an echo's *shy*,
And though it loves to shout yoo-hoo,
It won't until it hears from you.

Note these lines again:

*An echo's opposite is the cry
To which the echo makes reply...
And though it loves to shout yoo-hoo,
It won't until it hears from you.*

It has become a cultural commonplace to bemoan the fact that more and more of us are living in echo chambers. It's true that we tend to surround ourselves with people whose opinions echo our own, which reinforces our view that the opinions we hold and the conclusions we draw are the correct ones. Sometimes this is a good thing, but at other times, it's not.

Victor Snyder, who is CEO of a consulting firm and sits on Forbes magazine's Coaches Council, wrote a column this week for Forbes titled, "Rethinking Culture Fit to Avoid the Echo Chamber Effect." In early stages of growth and development, Snyder says, companies that hire for culture fit rather than for skills or potential are less likely to fail. But at a certain point, he says, the focus on culture fit becomes dangerous. "It is here that leaders must take a hard look at what's missing in their culture mix. Failing to do this means perhaps languishing in the echo chamber that got you where you wanted to get — but that doesn't have the wider perspective to get you any further."

When it comes to our lives as individuals, the recent controversy concerning Facebook's newsfeed algorithms could lead us to conclude that echo chambers are someone else's fault. Facebook has been accused of — and indeed has admitted to — tailoring newsfeeds to reflect individuals' political and cultural preferences, based on their Facebook friends and history of likes.

In a recent article in the *Guardian*, however, Dr. David Robert Grimes, a physicist at Oxford University, concludes that echo chambers are mostly of our own making. He says, "The data suggests that we play the lead role in driving our own polarization. We are much more homogenous than we think, and tend to interact more with people who echo our beliefs." He adds, "A recent study in [the journal] *Science* found that we tend to engage most with information that flatters our ideological preconceptions, and that this accounted for much more selection bias than algorithmic filtering."

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It turns out that this tendency to live in echo chambers isn't a creation of social media. Rather, it's a creation of evolution, at least according to Harvard evolutionary

biologist Joseph Henrich in his book titled *The Secret of Our Success*. Henrich insists that we're not just chimpanzees that are a little less hairy and a whole lot smarter. Rather, he says, we are a new kind of animal that has learned that it's better to be social than to be smart.

More than a million years ago, our most distant human ancestors found that they could learn more from previous generations than they could possibly learn in a lifetime by themselves. Over time, evolution began to favor individuals who were good cultural learners. The adaptation that enabled early human beings to develop, Henrich concludes, was that they were willing to follow whatever practices seemed to be prevalent, even if they didn't understand why the practices came to be prevalent.

On these terms, the big difference between baby humans and baby chimps isn't that we've mastered the art of reasoning, but that we are, as Henrich puts it, "prolific, spontaneous and automatic imitators, even willing to copy seemingly unnecessary or purely stylistic steps." Under pressure to keep up with the culture, we are built to imitate and fit in — often without knowing why we are doing what we are doing, except that it's "the way it's always done."

But imitation isn't the whole story, of course. Even if our evolutionary instincts set us up to live in echo chambers, our human intelligence gives us an opportunity to do something different. You don't become part of the echo, Richard Wilbur says, until it hears from you.

As you might suspect, the question of whether we develop by mindless conformity or by deliberate choice has also played out in the theological realm. Catholics and Calvinists have insisted, each in their own way, that salvation comes to individuals who conform either to the sacraments administered by the church, in the case of the Catholics, or the predestination decree of God, in the case of the Calvinists. Our Unitarian Universalist forebears, like the Anabaptists (of whom my Mennonite forebears were part), insisted that we have a choice in the matter — whether to believe or not to believe, and if so, in what. Like Wilbur, we believe that nothing will echo us until it hears from us.

My question for us this morning isn't about what sounds we hear in the world around us. It's about what sounds from us end up echoing. What are people hearing from us?

Truth be told, life today resounds both wonderfully and terribly — and not in equal measure, depending who we are and where we are. As Charles Dickens famously said, describing the French Revolution and the ensuing Jacobin Reign of Terror, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us," and so on.

Some people today argue that life on earth has never been better. While that may be true in some ways and for some people, in other ways and for other people, life has

never been worse. All of us hear the turmoil, and many of us hear the tragedy. The question is whether we are willing to bear witness to the suffering and then sound the promise that will then echo back.

In an article about Richard Wilbur in last Sunday's *New York Times* titled "The Poet of Light," Christian Wiman notes that many poets, especially poets of Wilbur's generation, were driven by what Wiman calls "the engine of agony." He says that many poets appear to believe that "if you're happy, then your page stays blank. There must be some friction for the words to catch fire. No suffering, no song. No absence, no art."

Not so with Richard Wilbur. Despite encountering significant struggles of his own, including serious depression and addiction, Wilbur remained focused on what he called "the blind delight of being." No matter what, he believed that "this life is worth its grief." He was the poet of light.

In a world of darkness, you and I are called to reflect the light in order to drive away the darkness. We are called to echo the goodness of life in order to mitigate its tragedy. In the face of agony, we are called to echo possibility. The echo won't begin until it hears from us.

Even in the face the difficulty and especially in the face of tragedy, we listen for what's hopeful and echo it. We look for what's beautiful and reflect it. We look for what's possible and pursue it.

My very favorite opposite in Richard Wilbur's collection of opposites articulates the power of doing this work together. It's a simple couplet — only two lines. It reads:

What is the opposite of *two*?
A lonely me, a lonely you.