

Remarks of James Russell Wiggins
at E.B. White Memorial Service
Blue Hill Congregational Church
October 26, 1985

E.B. White's friends could not have gathered to pay tribute to him in his life time, as they have gathered here today. He would not have permitted it. Those who knew him at all well must be a little uncomfortable, as I am, about doing it now. It is not the sort of thing that would have had his endorsement or consent.

I think Andy enjoyed public approval, but he did not have what James Madison, in an allusion to Lafayette, called "a canine appetite for popularity."

When readers praised his editorials, his poems, his books, his poetry, he was pleased, but not surprised. He was aware that they were good. He enjoyed savoring his stuff in print. But he did not write to please others as much as he wrote to please himself.

His writing had the two chief qualities of great writing: he had something to say and he knew how to say it. So much has been said about his writing these past few weeks, and so much has been written about it that the man behind that writing might seem in eclipse by his literary works; but the man and his works are one.

As White said in "an Approach to Style" in the Strunk/White little book: "Every writer, by the way he uses the language, reveals something of his spirit, his habits, his capacities, his bias. ...All writing is communication; creative writing is communication through revelation - it is the Self escaping into the open."

So he wrote for himself and of himself. It was his curious and special good fortune that he so often spoke as his readers would have spoken. Many writers have the gift of describing vividly the things they have seen, felt, and thought; fewer have the ability of speaking for their readers as well as to them.

In the past ten days, I have received many telephone calls and letters from readers of "Charlotte's Web", reflecting the response of his youngest readers: one from a third grade class in a Missouri school; one from a young girl of eight in New Jersey; one from a teacher in Carolina whose students had just read "Charlotte's Web." One might wonder what was the secret of his ready communication with young people.

It was I think the small boy that remained in him. William Wordsworth wrote:

Heaven lies about us in our infancy!
Shades of the prison house begin to close
Upon the growing Boy,
But he beholds the light and whence it flows

He sees it in his joy.
The Youth who daily farther from the East
Must travel, still is Nature's priest,
And by the vision splendid
Is on his way attended;
At length the Man perceives it die away
And fade into the light of common day.

In Andy's case, it did not "fade into the light of common day." It lingered into his latest years, and could be summoned up into words with which very young children could identify.

But he spoke not for the young alone. He wrote of things that touched elderly people, reminiscences of his generation that seemed to them to be speaking for them, and of their times.

Similarly, he spoke of cities, in a way that moved the urban readers of "The New Yorker," and made that cynical and sophisticated audience embrace him as its voice. And then, with equal authority, he spoke of and for rural America and its life, drawing from his friends and neighbors about him, here in Brooklin, recollections of an earlier time, when life in this country was largely rural. Crafts and skills were then foremost among the arts of society.

He had an inquiring mind that probed into contemporary affairs giving him an instinctive feel for the essence of things, but he was not an omnivorous reader, at the time

of his life when I knew him. His expressions and reflections on events were not the regurgitation of the views of others, but were invariably touched by his originality. He wrote with remarkable insight about great national and world issues.

It says much of his sense of humor that he was most amused by typographical errors that he spotted for "The New Yorker" and dressed up with wonderful headlines and comment. He also liked outrageous puns. And he had a gift for one-liners that he deftly dropped here and there in a conversation. He continued to do this even in the last weeks of his life.

His wry humor was his solace in the long weeks of his illness. He explained to me one day that his family had surrounded him with constant attendants because they were afraid he would fall. He added that he fell down every once in a while so the ladies who took care of him would not think they were wasting their time.

He was not exactly pleased when E.B. White the individual began to be E.B. White an institution, and he waged a private war against the invasion of his personal cocoon, but seemed to have a wry sense that it was a losing war. The publication of his letters exposed too much of his private life to suit him wholly. He murmured a bit protestingly. When he was in this mood I told him one day I had been tied up for a while on a private project. He asked what it was, and I told him I had been living in the

woodshed and burning my private correspondence. It was of course, not true. E.B. White was one of the last letter writers whose correspondence merited reprinting. The only comparable letter-writers in the circle of my acquaintance were Julian Boyd, editor of "The Jefferson Papers," and Lyman Butterfield, editor of "The Adams Papers."

It is remarkable that Andy's letters were so informative and revealing, and entertaining, given the amount of writing he did professionally. He must have taken as much pains with many of his letters as he did with the "Talk of the Town" or his essays for "Harpers." What a happy circumstance produced their publication. It is a lost art, nearly destroyed by the invention of the telephone and by television's exaltation of the spoken over the written word.

In his later days he spoke frequently of the good fortune that enabled him to be in his own home, among his friends and his family. It was for him especially important to retain this comfort and consolation. He spoke often of how much he enjoyed Joel's daily visits and of Joel's kindness in reading to him his essays and letters.

Katharine was always much on his mind. Her death was the great misfortune of his life. It was a great satisfaction to him to see her garden pieces published in the book for which he wrote an eloquent preface. I know he was thinking of her, in August 1977, two weeks after her death, when he spoke to me about a photograph on the

editorial page of "The Ellsworth American" and a rhyming caption I had written for it. The photograph showed a man looking out on Frenchman Bay at the end of a day. I am going to close my remarks with the lines that appeared beneath that photograph because they seemed to reflect his views.

Sun, gull, and sea on Frenchman Bay,
Draw down the shade on a summer day,
To every summer watcher sending
The message that the day is ending.
And like each sunset round the world
Whenever night's dark cloak's unfurled,
It sadly, sweetly tells each friend:
Each day, each life, each world must end.
May life depart, at the close of duty,
Like a summer day, in a blaze of beauty.