

My Humanities

by Dr. Thomas H. Wilson

This is the first of a series of essays that explore how the humanities influence my life. The purpose is to illustrate how the humanities may impact individuals and to encourage reflection upon the humanities in each of our lives. An implicit assumption is that one can lead a more full life if one consciously explores the impact of the humanities on individuals and on society.

Each of us has significant experiences in the humanities. Not just those who dedicate great portions of their lives to the humanities, but everyone. Those who daily practice the humanities might reflect upon the impact of the humanities upon their everyday lives, or over the course of their lifetimes. Others might think explicitly less often about the humanities, but nevertheless the humanities are important in their lives. In either case, the humanities are significant to each of us.

The meaning of the humanities is a personal and lifelong journey. A threshold question is what is, or are, the humanities? At its most basic, the humanities are what make us human, the stories of individuals and the histories of societies. The humanities live within us, and are carried mutually as part of our shared cultures.

When the United States Congress, recognizing that “democracy demands wisdom and vision in its citizens,” established the National Endowment for the Humanities in 1965, it defined the humanities by discipline: literature, history, philosophy, ethics, languages, linguistics, jurisprudence, archaeology, comparative religion, and those aspects of the social sciences that employ historical or philosophical approaches. Also, the humanities include the study of the human environment with particular attention to reflecting our diverse heritage, traditions, and history, and the relevance of the humanities to the current conditions of national life.

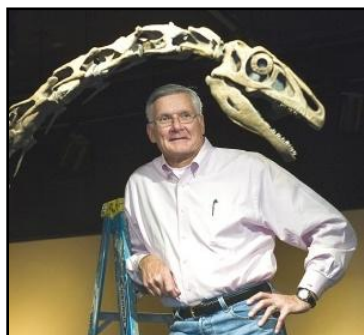
In these essays I will discuss aspects of my own engagement with the humanities. The theme of the first Arizona Humanities Festival in October, 2011 was Stories of Us. Sometimes, at the most elemental level, our engagement with the humanities comes down to stories, so I shall begin with one, the story of how I became an archaeologist.

I invite you to recall the first book you ever read or the first poem you ever learned. I have those memories. But I can also recall the exact moment when I chose to become a professional archaeologist. My uncle and aunt owned a ranch at the southern end of the Sacramento Mountains in southern New Mexico, about 18,000 acres of pine forests and juniper and piñon woodland. The ranch house and corrals were nestled near where a small spring provided cool, fresh water.

One day at the ranch when I was about six, I was looking for something to do. Members of my family suggested that I cross the canyon next to the house and look for arrowheads. They described an arrowhead, and by the time I was half way up the other side of the canyon, I found one. Today we would discourage this kind of plunder, but this find fired my imagination about the first Americans, who they were, how and when they arrived in the canyon, how they lived and what happened to them. It was almost magical, how this prehistoric object, made by a

human being and lost at some unknown time in the past, now rested in my hand. These questions, first stirred in my heart before I was in first grade, have never left me. Later, I realized that I could turn an interest into a profession in the humanities, and I became an archaeologist. I investigated those kinds of issues in the American Southwest, in Mexico and Central America, and East Africa. My work in museums took me to northwest Russia and southwest China.

That day in the mountains of New Mexico started my professional life in the humanities. Like all of us, my humanities experiences have made a profound difference in my life. In forthcoming essays, I will explore some of these relationships. Meanwhile, I encourage you to reflect upon your own engagements with the humanities—your own stories of us.



DR. THOMAS H. WILSON is the Director of the [Arizona Museum of Natural History](#) and the Arizona Humanities Council Board of Directors Chairman. Dr. Wilson has been director of the Museum of New Mexico in Santa Fe, the Beloit College Museums, and the Southwest Museum in Los Angeles. He earned a Bachelor's degree in anthropology from the University of New Mexico, and a Master's and Ph.D. in anthropology from the University of California, Berkeley. After two years as assistant professor at the University of Nairobi, Richard Leakey hired him to be coast archaeologist for the National Museums of Kenya. After seven years in Africa, Dr. Wilson returned to the U.S. and worked in the Museum Program at the National Endowment for the Humanities for five years. Tom completed a law degree at the University of Maryland, and he's licensed to practice law in New York. He has taught, written and spoken extensively on archaeology, museum anthropology, and law. In addition to the humanities, his passions are triathlon and German Shepherd dogs.