

The Friendship Collaborative

Pastor Ken Wilson and scientist Carl Safina met in an unexpected way. They'd both agreed to attend a retreat in the longleaf pine woods of South Georgia that brought together evangelical leaders and some of the world's top scientists. They were responding, in part, to the invitation made by scientist and author E.O. Wilson in his book *The Creation*, in which he called on conservative Christians and scientists to work together to honor and protect God's handiwork.

At that meeting, the participants discovered that they had much to agree upon. Months later they released an "Urgent Call to Action," which stated in part "We clearly share a profound moral obligation and sense of vocation to save the imperiled living world before our damages to it remake it as another kind of planet."

Though it was the public statement that captured media attention, some of the participants discovered something else at the retreat. They weren't merely "co-belligerents" uniting to fight a common threat. They liked each other. They had much to learn from each other, but they left as friends, and committed themselves to intentionally strengthen their ties.

Wilson, Senior Pastor of Vineyard Church Ann Arbor, and Safina, President of Blue Ocean Institute, learned from and enjoyed their unique friendship so much that they decided to forge "The Friendship Collaborative" to foster more bridge-building between other scientists and people of faith. Their premise is simply what worked for them: the chance to meet face to face and talk about shared beliefs regarding creation and the environment that supports life.

Blue Ocean Institute staffer Marah Hardt conducted the interview for *Creation Care* magazine. She asked Wilson and Safina to reflect upon the mutual influence and insight sprung from their unexpected friendship.



Ken Wilson

CC: What have you gotten from each other about your faith and your science that you didn't get before?

KEN: Carl taught me that love for the natural world could be a mystical experience. I read his book, *Song for the Blue Ocean*, after working with him in one of the small working groups at the retreat in Georgia where we met. In the book, Carl described experiences with nature that were very much like experiences I've had in prayer—mystical experiences that involve a sense of being connected with something greater than yourself in such a way that the ordinary boundaries of the self as a separate entity in the world blur, giving way to intuitive sense. Carl was having these experiences, primarily with the ocean that he loves, and writing about them in a way that built a bridge to my experience as a praying person.

So I credit Carl with being an important part of revealing to me something that is in fact, central to my own faith: understanding reality—the world around us—as a mystical place and as a window through which we can see the real God.

CARL: Science and religion differ mainly in that science demands proof and religion demands faith. That seems like a fundamental difference. But through Ken I've come to better understand that science and faith share a desire to know the world, and by so doing, to understand the human role here. That is a fundamental similarity. To me it runs deeper than the theological difference of perspective. In fact, if Ken can come from a theological perspective and I can come from a scientific perspective and we arrive at a similar view of our responsibilities to creation, it speaks powerfully of what we must do. It also speaks powerfully of what we can do together. To me it opens the possibility of saving the planetary world from human destruction. Science cannot save the world. Only a value system that decides that saving the world is important can actually save it.



Carl Safina

Science can only provide information and predictions. So science and religion need each other here. And Ken has shown me that this can seem a natural, easy, and enjoyable alliance.

CC: What surprised you about each other?

KEN: His intuitive grasp of religion. Carl presented

himself to me on first inspection as a no-nonsense New Yorker who perhaps didn't have a personal interest in religion. He described himself to me as atheist and secular, though he said he prefers the term secular because it's more about what he's for than what he doesn't believe.

I suppose it was my own ignorance of the intentionally secular sensibility that thought of this as a non-religious sensibility. But like I said, I found Carl to be someone I could talk to about religion, knowing that he had an intuitive grasp of the subject. So I think he's a religious secular guy!

For example, he told me early on that his two heroes were Charles Darwin, for showing us the relatedness of all living things, and Jesus of Nazareth, for his teaching on loving our enemies, which showed us that all human beings are related. It blew me away that he had latched on to the central and distinctive thought of Jesus, and not some side issue that happened to appeal to him. That shouldn't have surprised me, but it did.

CARL: Ken is very welcoming. I was very open with him about the fact that I am secular. When people first meet me, it's not unusual for them to think I'm religious in the usual sense of equating religious with belief in God. I didn't want any misunderstanding. But people also often believe that science is the opposite of religion. That's not at all true. Science and religion are very similar in some ways and very different in others, but they're not opposing forces. They ask different questions and perform very different roles in society. And many scientists have a strong faith in God. I respectfully explained to Ken that my view on the question of whether God exists had little to do with science and everything to do with the suffering of innocents. Ken really took me by surprise by saying he respected that view. I realized that Ken and I both have bigger fish to fry, so to speak. I realized that after that there were no barriers between me and Ken and that we could really enjoy a very warm friendship and try to maybe accomplish something good together.

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CC: What do you have in common that you might not have realized before?

KEN: It sounds strange to say, me being such a chronic hopelessly religious or spiritual person of the Christian variety, but I feel like I have a worldview, or at least major parts of a worldview, in common with Carl. As an ecologist or conservationist (I'm never quite sure what Carl is, but I know he's one of those!), Carl is a bit of a zealot—meaning a man with a mission that he passionately pursues. And, like a believer such as myself, his vision has an apocalyptic quality to it—meaning he sees things looming on the horizon that could devastate life as we know it. He even views himself, if I'm not being presumptuous here, as someone who has some important message that more people ought to be listening to and if they did, the world would be a better place. And he's part of a minority group that wants to convince the world to act differently. So, in a lot of unexpected ways, we see the world through a very similar set of lenses.

CARL: I took from my religion (I'd been raised Catholic) the importance of compassion, concern for the less fortunate, the challenge of loving one's enemies as a matter of immense practical value, and a deep sense of reverence and awe for the living world and the great universe. I am, in a very real sense, a person with a mission to help save the world—the natural world, creation—from our sins, to put it in those terms. I think Ken and I are similar enough to really understand each other, or at least to be really comfortable as we get to better understand each other. Our interests aren't identical, but they broadly overlap. The fundamental similarity is that I buy what Jesus was talking about. And Ken sure does. A lot of the practicing "faithful" may believe firmly in God but they don't seem to have heard Jesus's message of love, peace and compassion. Ken sure gets it. I think I get it. So in a sense, one can be faithful to the message (or, rather, can strive to live up to the challenge of the message) even without believing in the theology. For me the message—and what we *do* with the message—is more important than what we believe about the author of the message. Ken believes

Jesus is God, but I don't. That difference is, for me, rather beside the point. The point is whether we take up this immense challenge, and whether we will use it to save the world from ruin. I think Ken and I are both very concerned with the challenge and convinced of the rightness of it; that's a deep similarity I feel.

CC: What's the most pointed question or concern that you've raised with each other?

KEN: I asked Carl why environmental scientists who tend to view living things as populations weren't raising more of an alarm about abortion practices in places like India and China, where there is now a gender imbalance introduced into the human population through sex-selected abortions favoring the abortion of female unborn babies. I said that it seems to me that biologists, of all the disciplines, should be alarmed by this and concerned about the perils of messing with mother nature in this way. And that I thought it was something more like political correctness in the worst sense that kept them, as scientists, from speaking out against this practice.

CARL: I don't question Ken's beliefs. But I was afraid he would not respect mine, and he quickly dispelled that fear by accepting my views on the problem of suffering. And we've been over the hot-button issues that have been so destructive to America—abortion, evolution, homosexuality. It's part of the trueness of Ken's compassion that we can talk about these things. Some religious people can be so rigid on these topics that they can't even talk about them. I think a few religious leaders have used these topics as wedges to drive America apart so as to draw lines, emphasize differences, and win politically. That strikes me as both deeply un-Christian and deeply un-American. Ken realizes the world is complicated, and he's so secure in his views and his faith that he can talk about these issues. I'm very appreciative of that.

CC: How has your interaction changed your perspectives about human interactions with nature?

KEN: Carl has given me a more global perspective about how the things we do in our ordinary lives impact nature on a global scale. His book about the Albatross helped me see the ocean with new eyes. That image of baby albatross birds choking on plastic toothbrushes that the parents regurgitated into their throats from debris ingested from the ocean—man, that was a world-rocking image! I throw away stuff like that all the time without a thought about where it ends up. And now I see that as a moral issue and myself in need of some moral reforming.

I suppose, like most people, I viewed the ocean as this pristine wilderness unaffected by humans. But now I see the ocean as something we're treating like a free dumping place. I must say, I was completely ignorant, and my ignorance was of the worst sort because it was completely self-serving and convenient to be ignorant.

CARL: Ken has helped affirm that my view of the human interaction with nature as part of a moral continuum is a valid view. That is of great value to me. It means we science-types can work together with people of faith on matters of nature from a creation perspective. He has helped me see, and also helped affirm, that poverty doesn't just happen to people. When we impoverish nature, we also impoverish people. And that is a clearly religious concern.

CC: How has your relationship changed how you discuss environmental or religious issues with others?

KEN: It's given me a little gumption, a little nerve, a little fire in the belly. Unfortunately, evangelical churches in the United States have been a kind of gathering place for people who feel comfortable not caring too much about "environmental concerns" or who view them as the effete concerns of the academic elites who don't have the normal problems of everyday people so they can afford to be upset about the spotted owls. That can create a social environment where people who do care about the environment get intimidated or put the muzzle on their passion. It can feel like a passion that somehow isn't a faith-generated passion.

It's more like a hobby than a central concern of faith. But I find Carl's passion about the environment to be nothing but sane and reasonable and completely in keeping with my faith. So he's given me a little backbone on this issue.

CARL: Mainly, because Ken views this as a moral matter, it helps me talk to *scientists* about the environment not just as a matter of new findings and lines on graphs, not just about trends in animal populations, but as a matter of universal moral concern. Morality is powerful because it's more conservative than the way most environmentalists approach the issues. Environmentalists ask, "Is this sustainable?" This is a sound question but it's more open to fudging and abuse and lip-service by people whose real interests lie elsewhere, so it doesn't get applied well. The moral perspective sets a higher standard, asking, "Is this right, or is it wrong?" That is more difficult to answer in a complex world. But if we'd taken that view all along, we'd have gone slower, and we wouldn't be facing the dangerous situations we've created. Fundamentally, understanding Ken's views about the morality of our relationship to creation allows me to speak openly about life on planet Earth as a matter of the most basic and most crucial practical as well as *moral* importance to all people, everywhere. Frankly, I think more people will be able to hear that message.

For more information on forging surprising friendships, visit www.thefriendshipproject.org.

To read about the original meeting and the "Urgent Call to Action" go to http://chge.med.harvard.edu/media/releases/jan_17.html

Carl Safina is President of Blue Ocean Institute.

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