

February 10, 2008
Rev. Clare Petersberger
Evolution

WELCOME

In the words of Annie Dillard: *We are here to abet creation and to witness to it, to notice each other's beautiful face and complex nature so that creation need not play to an empty house.*

OPENING WORDS

The anniversary of Charles Darwin's 200th birthday will be next year on February 12th. And next year also marks the 150th anniversary of the publication of his most famous book, *On The Origin Of The Species*. Charles Darwin was raised in a Unitarian church in Shrewsbury, England. This was one of the influences on his appreciation for the natural world which we hear in our opening words taken from the last chapter of *On The Origin Of The Species*:

It is interesting to contemplate an entangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing in the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent upon each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us.

CHALICE LIGHTING

In affirmation of this, please join in a unison reading of words adapted from the 20th century naturalist, Loren Eisely, which are printed in your order of service to light the symbol of our free faith.

High above us the sun shines.
Below our feet the earth still simmers with its first fire.
We come together, compounded of the ancient elements,
Mud and the fire within it we call life, vast waters, and something –
the intangible substance of hope – out of which the human dream is made.
We light our chalice in wonder and with hope.

Charles Darwin didn't just wonder about the world outside – the natural world. He also wondered about the world inside – the nature of kindness. He wrote, *Of all the differences between people and the lower animals, the moral sense or conscience is by far the most important – leading us without a moment's hesitation to risk our lives for that of a fellow-creature; or after due deliberation, impelled simply by the deep feeling of right or duty, to sacrifice it in some great cause.*

Henry Bergh was another 19th century Unitarian who observed the world around him. What he saw was that animals were being routinely abused by people in New York City. He felt it was his duty to stop this. He got support from his minister, Henry Whitney Bellows, to found the American Society for the Prevention Of Cruelty To Animals. And today, our students will be raising funds to support the ASPCA to rescue cats and dogs. And, our students will be meeting Karma Dogs. Karma Dogs are primarily rescued dogs who help children become better readers and work with the disabled.

SONG

Family Tree

Tom Chapin

led by Spice Kleinmann

Before the days of jello
Lived a prehistoric fellow,
Who loved a maid and courted her beneath the banyan tree.
And they had lots of children.
Their children all had children.
They kept on having children until
One of them had me!

We're a family and we're a tree. Our roots go deep down in history
From my great great grand-daddy reaching up to me,
We're a green and growing family tree.

My grandpa came from Russia.
My grandma came from Prussia.
They met in Nova Scotia, had my dad in Tennessee.
Then they moved to Yokahama
Where Daddy met my mama.
Her dad's from Alabama and her mom's part Cherokee.

One fine day I may go
To Tierra Del Fuego.
Perhaps I'll meet my wife there and we'll move to Timbuktu.
Our kid will be bilingual,
And though she may stay single,
She could, of course, comingle with the
King of Kahtmandu.

The folks in Madagascar
Aren't the same as in Alaskar.
They have different moods, different foods and
Different colored skin.
You may have a different name,
But underneath we're much the same;
You're probably my cousin and the whole world is our kin.

We're a family and we're a tree. Our roots go deep down in history
From my great great grandmother reaching up to me,
We're a green and growing family tree.

REDO

At TUUC, how you identify yourself theologically may have a different name than how the person sitting next to does so. Here, we know we need not think alike to love alike.

To affirm this, members have been volunteering to deliver their "credo" in worship services. In its literal sense, credo means "I give my heart to this." After seeing that the announced topic for today's worship service was evolution, Patrick Millet e-mailed to ask if I needed any help with today's worship service, since he is a biologist by training. When I learned that he feels passionately about this subject, I asked if he would like to offer a credo. We are fortunate that Patrick readily volunteered to share the truths to which he, as a biologist, gives his heart.

Patrick Millet Credo

I have been interested in science from a very young age. In fact, when I was little, I used to line up my dinosaur toys and lecture my parents on the inaccuracies of all of them. As I went through school, I quickly honed in on the biological sciences. I studied them through college, and currently work in a biomedical lab. Throughout my time learning about the field, a few overarching themes about life in general have become apparent to me.

One of the most fundamental truths I've learned is this: life is messy. It is chaotic, it is sloppy, it can behave in ways that are completely illogical and non-sensical, right down to the molecular level. Living systems can be exceedingly complicated and inefficient, and are often forced to develop even more complex systems to cope with their inefficiencies. In the words of King Alfonso X of Castile, "If the Lord Almighty had consulted me before embarking upon Creation, I should have recommended something simpler."

Creation scientists claim that life is so elegant and beautiful that it must have been designed by some higher being. In fairness, life has invented some beautiful systems. From the complexity of the human brain, to the graceful simplicity of the catalytic triad, it is hard not to be in awe of some of the things living systems have come up with. Of course, these same systems gave us the appendix, male nipples, and hind leg bones on a whale. So much in the living world only makes sense when viewed through the lens of evolution. Life is messy. Every advance it makes is a kind of glorious accident. Yet, there is a certain kind of beauty in that perspective as well.

Life has an amazing versatility. It can put together completely unrelated factors and come up with something totally unexpected. The first dinosaurs that developed feathers likely did so to keep themselves warm. Yet from that, the capacity for flight emerged. Life can make anything work to its advantage. It can carve niches out of any environment, including barren deserts, ocean depths, and waters acidic enough to eat through metal. And it does this, not by the hand of some all knowing creator, but by sheer perseverance.

The history of evolution is filled with compromises, imperfections, false starts, and dead ends. Life has had to start over from base organisms on several occasions, but it has never been stopped since the very first cell came into being. Even after many catastrophes and countless hurdles, life has spread to every corner of the globe. Through evolution, life has turned every hardship to its advantage. It has adapted and survived for billions of years, and will continue on for billions more, divine intervention not required.

RESPONSIVE MEDITATION

Out of the Stars
Rev. Robert T. Weston

Out of the stars in their flight, out of the dust of eternity, here have we come, Stardust and sunlight, mingling through time and through space.

Out of the starts have we come, up from time; Out of the stars we have 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, black 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 ea, warmed by sun, washed by rain, life from within, giving birth, rose to love.

This is the wonder of time, this the marvel of space; out of the start 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.

SERMON *Evolution Sunday*

Back in December, I received an e-mail from Professor Michael Zimmerman, currently the Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at Butler University in Indianapolis. I do not know Professor Zimmerman, personally. But the subject of the e-mail was “Evolution Weekend and Unitarian Universalists.” Intrigued, I read on.

It turns out that several years ago Professor Zimmerman lived in a town where the School Board was asked to consider teaching Creation Science – the idea that God literally created the world in six days – as part of the curriculum. Professor Zimmerman’s response was to write a letter to the School Board. He began by noting that teaching Creation Science as science was a bad idea, since

regardless of its name, it is a particular religious cosmology. But he went on to say, that he believed that “religion and science need not be at war with each other.” He invited local clergy to sign the letter. In the past three years, he’s taken his campaign nationally.

Over 11,000 clergy have signed a letter which reads: “We...believe that the timeless truths of the Bible and the discoveries of modern science may comfortably coexist. We believe that the theory of evolution is a foundational scientific truth, one that has stood up to rigorous scrutiny and upon which much of human knowledge and achievement rests. To reject this truth or to treat it as ‘one theory among others’ is to deliberately embrace scientific ignorance and transmit such ignorance to our children.” The letter ends, “To argue that God’s loving plan of salvation for humanity precludes the full employment of the God-given faculty of reason is to attempt to limit God, an act of hubris.”

The e-mail from Professor Zimmerman asked me to sign on to this letter and to celebrate “Evolution Sunday,” today. In his final paragraph, he acknowledged that “not all UU members consider themselves to be Christians,” and that the letter begins, “We, the undersigned Christian clergy....”

He went on to explain, “This was to counter those who said the only way to be a ‘good’ Christian was to reject evolution.” He hastened to add, “If you do not consider yourself a Christian, there’s still absolutely no problem participating in Evolution weekend.”

It’s 2008. Do we really need an Evolution Sunday? For the past several years, no flu season goes by without speculation on talk shows, news shows, and in the print media, about what will happen when the bird flu mutates, jumping species, and infects the human population. Most of the stories stress “not IF the bird flu mutates, but WHEN it does.”

So why do we need “Evolution Sunday?” One of the reasons Professor Zimmerman gave was the first Republican Presidential debate. The question which garnered the most votes from the audience was: “Do you believe in evolution?” Senator John McCain answered, “Yes.” He went on to add, “But when I hike the Grand Canyon, I know that the hand of God is there also.”

The follow-up question was, “Are there any candidates that DON’T believe in evolution?” Representative Tom Tancredo, Senator Sam Brownback, and Senator Mike Huckabee raised their hands. But there was no follow-up to THAT question THAT night.

Did that mean that, as President, these candidates would NOT care about the possibility of a pandemic flu and prepare accordingly? Fortunately, there WERE further questions about evolution at a subsequent debate. And what became clear was that no Presidential candidate was defending, as science, the creation of the world and all its creatures in six days six thousand years ago.

Instead, the responses revealed the religious odysseys of some of the candidates – the trials they had survived and the religious beliefs that had sustained them: that the universe was created and is guided by a God who created each of us as unique and precious souls for a particular purpose.

I wondered how many of these candidates knew of the personal religious odyssey of Darwin, himself. Since Darwin could not stand the sight of blood, he could not follow in his father’s footsteps as a physician. It was agreed that he would study to become a country clergyman. Darwin wrote, “I did not then in the least doubt the strict and literal truth of every word of the Bible.” In those days, it was not uncommon for a member of the clergy to study the natural world – a legacy I take comfort in as I watch the cardinals foraging for food in my back yard!

And so it was that, as a young adult, Darwin set sail for a five year expedition to South America aboard the *Beagle* as naturalist for the surveying expedition. In the beginning, his religious views were still quite orthodox. He wrote, "I remember being heartily laughed at by several of the officers for quoting the Bible as an unanswerable authority on some point of morality." But the experience of traveling, itself, led Darwin to begin to build his theology.

If the universe is being guided by a wise intellect with vast creative power, why had beautiful deep-ocean creatures been created where no one could see them? Or if there was a purposeful and beneficent creator God, then why did a certain kind of wasp sting to only paralyze, not kill, caterpillars as live food for its eggs?

I was reminded of Darwin's questions on Friday. In a course on Philosophy and Film at Towson University, the professor was giving an overview of the role of faith in philosophy through history. When encountering the problem of theodicy, "If God is good, why is there evil in the world?" the late 17th century logician Leibnitz argued that perhaps what is evil to us is not evil in the "big" picture. For example, most of us are irritated by mosquitoes. Perhaps mosquitoes are not evil. But they are certainly a nuisance. However, a certain kind of bird depends on mosquitoes for its food. What kind of bird? The songbird. So to live in a world with songbirds, one must have mosquitoes.

Less than 200 years later, studying the mockingbirds and finches in the Galapagos Darwin became persuaded that the religious idea of the independent creation of each species made no scientific sense. Much more plausible was the idea of transmutation of species, or, what we know, today, as natural selection. However, when Darwin first shared his theory with his wife, Emma, she responded with the argument now known as intelligent design. She reminded him that the eye proves the existence of God because only God could have designed such a complex organ.

Darwin put away his theory for a few years to think how best to respond to such criticisms. At the age of 40, Darwin became quite ill. He did not view his illness as divine punishment. Rather, he saw it as the natural process of suffering and pain that all species undergo.

The event that most shaped Darwin's theology was the death of his ten-year-old daughter, Annie. He could not accept "reasons" for her death offered by the theology of his day. The thought that death was "the cost of original sin" or "a heavenly recall" did not comfort Darwin. The real cause of Annie's death – tuberculosis – was unknown. All Darwin knew, as he wrote, was "We have lost the joy of the household and the solace of our old age: she must have known how we loved her; oh that she could now know how deeply, how tenderly we do still and shall ever love her dear joyous face."

After Annie's death, Darwin knew that he could not continue to go to a church that preached about God's infinite goodness. Darwin would walk with the family to the door of the church but would not enter for the service. For her part, Emma, also a Unitarian, believed religion to be "an affair of the heart, not the intellect." She took comfort in the idea of an afterlife. And she wrote Charles a letter expressing her concern that in "giving up revelation," Darwin had given up the possibility of spending eternity together. Darwin saved this letter. He wrote on it, "When I am dead, know that many times I have kissed and cried over this."

And yet for all the changes in his own religious journey, Darwin did not become an atheist, denying the existence of God. He defined himself as an "agnostic." He never fully rejected the idea of a First Cause. In 1873 he wrote a correspondent, "I may say that the impossibility of conceiving that this

grand and wondrous universe, with our conscious selves, arose through chance, seems to me the chief argument for the existence of God; but whether this is an argument of real value, I have never been able to decide.” Darwin continued, “I am aware that if we admit a first cause, the mind still craves to know whence it came from and how it arose. Nor can I overlook the difficulty from the immense amount of suffering through the world.”

Darwin was not only writing of his family’s personal suffering or of the pain he had seen in the animal kingdom. The practice of slavery deeply troubled him as a moral issue. So Darwin concluded, “The safest conclusion seems to me to be that the whole subject of God is beyond the scope of man’s intellect; but man can do his duty.”

Yet Darwin was adamant that others could hold a belief in God AND believe in the theory of evolution. This would probably come as a surprise to the Presidential candidates who were denying the theory of evolution in order to affirm their faith in a Creator, and in meaning and purpose in our lives. This would also come as a surprise to those who spent 27 million dollars constructing the Creation Museum in Petersburg, Kentucky. This museum depicts dinosaurs co-existing with Adam and Eve, and claims the dinosaurs were wiped out with the flood, except for two which Noah took on the Ark which then didn’t survive because they couldn’t find food, has been exporting their particular Biblical literalism to the classrooms of Europe.

This was not what Darwin had in mind when he noted one “can be an ardent Theist and an evolutionist.” What Darwin meant is that evolution is silent on the question of God. Evolution can neither prove nor disprove the existence of God. This does not mean that even liberal theologians have been silent on the implications of evolution for religion!

The most recent issue of The Christian Century has an article entitled, “God in Evolution” in which various liberal theologians speak about the impact the theory of evolution has had on our images and understanding of God. Philip Clayton, a theologian at Claremont School of Theology “likens creaturely life to the unfolding of a jazz composition: God provides the motifs, but creatures (of various kinds, from the smallest to the largest) provide the original riffs.”

Perhaps this is an illustration that as Dr. Edward O. Wilson writes, “The human mind has evolved to believe in gods not in biology.” But I’m not so sure.

When I was in seminary, one of my mentors used the following illustration for God: God is what makes a flower grow. I can fertilize the soil. I can water the plant. But I can’t make a flower blossom. And yet, now, twenty two years later, Elliot M. Meyerowitz, a plant scientist at Cal Tech could tell my mentor how plants make flowers from floral induction genes.

And Dr. Nancey Murphy, who teaches philosophy at Fuller Theological Seminary is writing how “All the human capacities once attributed to the mind or soul are now being fruitfully studied as processes involving the brain, the rest of the nervous system, and other bodily systems.” Does this mean we don’t have a soul? Not necessarily.

Perhaps contemporary biology is leading us back to the idea of 13th century Thomas Aquinas, that there is a soul in all living things. This is why I can appreciate Professor Zimmerman writing to encourage Christians to see that science and religion need not be at war.

As a Unitarian Universalist, I celebrate Charles Darwin and numerous geneticists who have given us so much information to support what Darwin intuited. And I agree with Professor Zimmerman that we need to embrace what science teaches about the “how” of life as well as what religion teaches about the “why” of life – its value, meaning, and purpose.

What would Charles Darwin make of these biological discoveries in the 149 years since publishing *Origin Of The Species*? And what would he make of how Unitarianism has evolved from taking the Bible as its source of authority to making individual human experience refined through reason and tested in community our authority? Perhaps he would not be too surprised. After all, he concluded *Origin of The Species* with these words: “There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.”

Indeed.

Thank you Charles Darwin. Happy Evolution Sunday. Here’s to becoming what we are meant to become.

CLOSING WORDS

Between the dawn and dusk of our being, let us be brave and loving.
In our little passage through the light let us sustain and forward the human venture –
in gentleness, in service, and in thought.

Amen.

Go now in peace.