

AN EVOLVING FAITH

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CALL TO WORSHIP

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Evolution is an easily understood concept. It is simply change over time.

Charles Darwin did not think about evolution when he first encountered a variety of Finches when he set foot on the Galapagos Islands. It was long after his departure from the islands that he asked the question: 'Can I imagine all of those finches changing backward in time until they were the same finch?' To understand how the Finches might have evolved from one to many, Darwin needed to find the mechanisms that would explain such a change. Half a lifetime later he published, *The Origin of Species* and *The Descent of Man*, listing, not all, but many of the evolutionally mechanisms known today.

About twenty years ago biologists developed a technique that enabled them to read, genetic markers in mitochondrial chromosomes. The markers did not reveal the mechanisms of change, rather the history of the changes. Geneticists could, for the first time, read human evolutionary history. Scientists collected samples from the births of all varieties of humans, from all the continents of the world. They began to study the genetic markers from the placental mitochondria. By comparing the sequences of these genetic markers a few hundred generations backward in time, geneticists discovered that the more closely related human varieties began to have identical genetic histories. Reading further generations back in time, more and more of the human varieties began to reveal the exact same sequence of genetic markers.

Mitochondria are only inherited from our mothers thus the researchers made their ultimate discovery. In one, very specific, long ago, female, the history of evolution becomes the same for all varieties of humans. That female, it is assured, is the mother of all humans living today. Actually the great, great, great... you get the idea. great-grandmother of us all. The scientific team picked a name for this common female ancestor. I remember, when reading this article many years ago, of being wonderstruck when first comprehending its scientific significance and then being overwhelmed with spiritual awe that modern scientific research and the ancient writings of Genesis had made the same proclamation. The woman, from whom we have all descended, shall be named Eve.

Come, let us worship together.

READINGS

From the closing words of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species*.

"It is interesting to contemplate an entangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on 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 on each other in so complex a manner, have been produced by laws acting around us... There is a 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."

From Pilgrim Father John Robinson, before the Pilgrims embarked on their journey to a new land,

"God hath yet more truth and light to break forth from his holy word."

From late comedienne Gracie Allen,

"Never place a period where God has placed a comma."

SERMON

In the late 18th century in England an august group gathered about once a month. They were Joseph Priestly, Unitarian minister and an early scientist, indeed the Father of Modern Chemistry; James Watt, the inventor of the steam engine;

Erasmus Darwin and Josiah Wedgwood, both grandparents of Charles Darwin. They called themselves the Lunatics because they gathered every full moon to participate in radical freethinking.

Charles Darwin is one of the great historical figures with significant connections to Unitarianism. We can't quite fully claim him, but he has clear Unitarian roots. The Unitarian Church in Shrewsbury, England has a plaque "dedicated to the memory of Charles Robert Darwin, author of 'The Origin of Species', born in Shrewsbury, Feb. 12 1809. In early life a member and constant worshipper in this church."

Still Rev. James Ishmael Ford says we can only call him Unitarian, sort of. He writes in his blog, "Both sides of his family, the Darwins and the Wedgewoods were all Unitarian. Although it should be noted his grandfather Erasmus was a freethinker, as was, it appears, his father. He was baptized Anglican, but his mother took him to Unitarian services throughout his childhood. At this time admission to Cambridge and Oxford required one to at least nominally conform to the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion, and so like many theological nonconformists, Charles attended the University of Edinburgh, in his case to study medicine. As his interests began to shift his father purchased at auction a living for an Anglican priest ... and for a while Charles undertook theological studies. His interests would shift again and he withdrew from the ordination path."

Indeed that shift would find him sailing halfway around the world on the *HMS Beagle* to the Galapagos Islands, and we know where that got him.

So Darwin, at the very least, was raised in a freethinking household with distinct Unitarian influence. Was this why he was open to new ideas? Particularly the one that changed the world? I would very much like to think so. It certainly can't have hurt.

Working with Don as a Worship Associate is such a gift because so often our discussions end up being a science lesson for me. This time, aside from regaling me with anecdotes about the life of Darwin and his lunatic relatives, the nugget of understanding I came away with was a simple definition of evolution. Biologically or otherwise, evolution is simply change over time.

And time plays a key role in Darwin's great theory. The early naturalists of his day were coming to a new conclusion. Simply by observing the geologic strata and the fossil record of the English landscape, they could see that the earth was far older than generally understood or implied by the Book of Genesis. Such an expanse of time is necessary for natural selection to work. Without understanding geologic time, it probably did make more sense that a god created it all. If indeed the world was created on Oct. 23, 4004 BC as 17th century Anglican Bishop James Ussher calculated, then how else did the abundance of life forms on earth come into being? But if the earth is millions or even billions of years old, then life might have had time to develop its astonishing variety.

The Origin of Species is an odd but fascinating read. As a Victorian man of leisure with time on his hands, Darwin could sift through all the data he meticulously recorded on his voyage on the *Beagle*. He also had time to devote to breeding pigeons and other domestic animals to observe the nature of what we might now call deliberate selection. Darwin had amassed an incredible wealth of information and was waiting till he could pull it all together in one giant tome which elucidated his theory once and for all time, with such a mass of information that it would be irrefutable.

Who knows how Darwin would have fared in the publish-or-perish world of academia today, but then time speeded up for him. He found that another naturalist, Alfred Russell Wallace was about to publish his own essay positing essentially the same theory. So, Darwin's book was "rushed to print."

Reading it today, it seems almost overwhelmingly exhaustive. Darwin clearly has such a wealth of knowledge, and he despairs throughout the book that he simply doesn't have the time to give all the examples he would like to give. I find myself grateful to Wallace for pushing Darwin along, or the book might have been all but impossible to wade through.

Darwin begins by describing the breeding of pigeons, and how, by selecting for certain characteristics, human breeders can very quickly create a practically new species. With the expanse of geologic time, Darwin posited that a natural kind of selection could do the same and bring about life as varied and diverse as we know it.

It is remarkable how incredibly well his original theory stands up. He got very little wrong, and subsequent discoveries – like DNA – only further support it. Indeed, Darwin posited that some mechanism like DNA must exist.

Darwin knew that his theories would shake up the religious world. Still, as the inheritor of a heritage of creative freethinkers and scientists, his own mind knew no fetters, and he pursued the truth as he saw it.

The theory of evolution was controversial from the beginning. Yet there were those who had little trouble adapting their religious views to the theory. Our early Pilgrim forebears knew “that God hath yet more truth and light to break forth from his holy word.” And as their inheritors, Unitarians generally had little struggle to take in this new truth and let it change them.

Indeed, Unitarians have long been fully aware that our own faith is evolving – changing over time. Darwin’s theory, then was not a threat to faith, rather it was almost a confirmation of it. Not to say that everyone was instantly comfortable, still Emerson and Thoreau were among the early-adopters. The Rev. Dr. William R. Murry writes in the most recent issue of the UU World, “In 1874 Minot Savage, a Unitarian minister in New York City, published a book of sermons that became a best seller under the title *The Religion of Evolution*. Noting that religion needs to adapt to the new discoveries of science if it is to remain a vital force, Savage pointed out that Christianity originally opposed other scientific advances that it now accepts and argued that evolution is just such a scientific breakthrough.”

Murry continues, “Darwinian thinking is one of the major reasons most [Unitarian Universalists] are naturalists as opposed to supernaturalists. Although few of us may be aware of it in those terms, most [of us], whether theistic or non-theistic, do not believe in the existence of a supernatural realm, and that is one of the things that makes us unique among Western religions.”

Darwin’s theory wrought a whole new line of theological thinking – albeit heterodox if not outright heretical – from humanism to process theology. Many have used and abused evolution ever since. Social Darwinists used it to justify poverty and racism. Many modern neo-Darwinists have taken evolution to a kind of materialistic, reductionistic extreme.

To my mind, Darwin definitely changed how we can conceive of deity, but didn’t “kill” God as many claim. He did, of course, make certain definitions of God seem pretty ridiculous. Ever since Darwin, theologians have been wrestling with this new sense of deity.

Murry tells us that evolution makes it “now more difficult to think of God as a personal supernatural being who is both all-powerful and all-knowing ... or as the being who brought all things into existence. Instead, many liberal theologians now conceive of God as a power within the natural universe rather than a source outside it. Such a “naturalistic theism” has different expressions but usually affirms that God is not omnipotent. The divine has a power of persuasion rather than coercion, like a magnet that draws us toward love and goodness.”

John F. Haught, a process theologian from Georgetown University, sees God in the spark of novelty which is necessary for natural selection to work. His sense is that God is both within the natural world and still somehow apart from it.

Some – both fundamentalists and neo-Darwinists – say that evolution puts a lie to any sense of purpose and meaning in the universe. That is reduces existence to random chance and chaos. Neo-Darwinists find this liberating. It tightens the more traditionally religious.

Indeed, evolution does take humans out of the top spot in creation. One of Darwin’s “dangerous ideas” Haught writes, “is that all living beings share a common ancestry and are therefore historically and organically interconnected. This vision of a continuum of life seems to challenge the traditional religious sense of sharp ontological discontinuity between humans and

the rest of nature. Evolution blurs the lines of what we used to think of as distinct levels of being, making it more difficult than before to distinguish human from animal and living from the non-living." (p. 26)

For religious liberals this is far more a source of inspiration than a source of fear. For many, the truth that we are a part of something larger, something that makes us feel simultaneously tiny and as large as all creation, is the beginning of our spiritual lives and religious practice.

Writes Murry: "The awareness, rooted in evolutionary biology, of the kinship of all living organisms leads us to regard all human beings as members of one extended family. The spiritual implication of this realization is that we should live together in love and caring, be tolerant of our differences, and take responsibility for one another.

"Darwin's idea also fosters a deeper, nature-centered spirituality by shifting the focus away from the supernatural to nature itself—its amazing fecundity and diversity and the remarkable process Darwin called natural selection and descent with modification. In a post-Darwinian world, emotions such as awe and wonder and reverence evoked by the natural world are often identified as religious emotions. A natural spirituality is the result."

Still, not only are we simply a part of a much larger and wildly interdependent web of existence, there is no particular reason that we exist at all. Evolution was not moving inexorably to human development. Late Darwinist Stephen Jay Gould was fond of saying that if you rewound the tape of the history of the earth back to a point sometime in, say, the late pre-Cambrian era when the fossil record shows that life appeared on earth, and then rolled it forward again, the likelihood that human life would arise is miniscule to the point of impossibility.

Human life was not ordained by God or any other force of nature. Again, I can understand that this might frighten some, but it gives me chills, the good kind. It makes our existence seem all the more miraculous, precious and fragile. Even if science finds a way to explain it all in minute detail, the sheer unlikelihood of my existence – that I am alive and conscious, that I can love and am related to other humans and other beings – is a source of delight and Holy Wonder. It brings me more alive.

Some say this makes life random, chaotic and with no moral order. Yet if it's all random and chaotic, and out of that ooze life arose and rose to human life, my reverence for that life deepens. It makes all life feel even more holy and sacred.

Far from killing a sense of spiritual connection – the theory of evolution can become a source of it. It becomes spiritual inspiration itself.

Haught finds God in this as well. "... it is simply inappropriate to think of God exclusively as a source of order (a distortion shared by much natural theology and scientific skepticism). God is also the source of novelty, that therefore God is also the reason for some disorder – and hence for the possibility of life." (p. 46) For Haught, God is the Life that Maketh All Things New.

Far from taking the mystery, the wonder, the delight out of being alive, it enhances it all for me. It makes all life more precious and meaningful to me. There is still something in the world that I choose to call God, something that I feel a part of and I feel held in. Although not so much held by.

Susan Landis-Steward, who comes to us by way of the Episcopal Church, has said that what she misses in our faith is a central story. Although the central story of Christianity is no longer enough for her, she wonders what ours is. I am increasingly coming to think that our story may be evolution itself. Surely, it is a magnificent creation story.

Murry says this. "Every religion needs a story, and Darwin's idea has given us a place in a new story with multiple layers of meaning. That story, the great epic of cosmic and biological evolution, is a religious story because it calls us out of our little self-centered worlds to see ourselves as part of a great living system. It gives a larger meaning and a broader ethic to our lives. As Darwin wrote at the end of *The Origin of Species*: "There is a grandeur in this view of life."

Unitarians have never felt any particular conflict between science and religion. Indeed, we have long found science an inspiration.

Darwin's so-called "dangerous idea" further confirms in us our sense of the evolving nature of life and spirit, thought and action. We seek a truth that – like life – is always growing and changing. Darwin's idea challenges us to go deeper, pursue truth and understanding, to keep our minds and hearts open. To love life and each other.

And to sing out praises for this grander view.
To sing out praises that we are.