

EVOLUTION DAY and DARWIN DAY

As a regular attendee at Sunday School and Church, I probably was at least somewhat more aware of religion before I learned very much about Darwin and evolution. My first clear awareness about Darwinian evolution goes back to a field trip of my Cub Scout Pack, which was incidentally, sponsored by my church. We had gone to visit the Lizzadro Museum of Lapidary Arts in Elmhurst, where we saw a lot of pretty rocks and fossils and watched a movie about Darwin and science. I won a year's subscription to some scientific art program that sent me monthly project packs from around the world by remembering something about Darwin. I had probably already been hooked by the quest to know how things work and the why of things, but that certainly helped to encourage me to think about science.

Throughout my formative years, science remained a passion, though by high school I had progressed to asking metaphysical questions and exploring theological problems among the big questions of life. I remember my physics teacher telling me that the sciences couldn't answer a number of the questions I was asking, which probably did as much as anything to propel me toward philosophy and theology. During my first year at the University of Illinois, when the professor of a 300 level Introduction to Modern Philosophy, my first Philosophy class, told me that I had taken too much Philosophy, that probably completed the push toward religious and theological studies! That process describes my personal early evolution, but I digress!

The sciences and religion have often been at odds explaining both the how and why of things, with religion too often going beyond its area of expertise by trying to explain the how, and science going beyond what it can test empirically by attempting to answer why! Darwinian Evolution did a much better job of explaining how life had changed over time than even the most generous readings of sacred scriptures. Darwin himself was essentially agnostic, believing it possible that a Divine Being could still have created the laws and set it all in motion.

The results of Darwin's work have continued to reverberate through the halls of science, though the reality of evolution continues to be denied by some young earth religious fundamentalists. Since religious fundamentalists are pretty scarce among Unitarian Universalists (though some secular humanist atheists can sound pretty dogmatic at times) I will not waste many words or much breath here on arguments against the evolution-deniers!

Though nominally Anglican in respect for his wife Emma, Darwin, born on February 12, 1809, had connections to Unitarianism especially from his mother's family, so our movement has long claimed him to be one of our own even if science interested him far more than religion. Darwin hardly set out to challenge religion, he merely followed the logical extension of his observations beginning with his voyage as Naturalist on the H.M.S. Beagle from 1831-36. Darwin had begun studies for the ministry at Cambridge after failing in studies for medicine. He was born to wealth, his father a wealthy physician and his mother the daughter of Josiah Wedgwood, the potter.

Darwin became a controversial figure because he asked questions, observed carefully, and put forth a cogent theory of how change happens in the biological world. We know so much more now about the mechanisms by which biological evolution occurs, through changes in strands of DNA, than Darwin could ever have discovered with the science of his time. Yet Darwin stands out as a singularly important figure because he dared to challenge the beliefs of his day. Other gentleman scientists were discovering the same things that he discovered, but he dared to present his findings to the public. Even today Darwin remains notorious to some religious groups for daring to challenge the notion that God has personally made every change and created everything visible throughout the universe. And yet Darwin never saw himself as an atheist, nor through much of his life as even agnostic. He always allowed for the possibility of at least a deistic kind of God who had set all in motion according to some magnificent set of universal laws.

Knowing that his findings would be controversial, Darwin did not rush to publish his work. He probably would have hesitated even longer were not others preparing to put their evolutionary ideas into print. He separated out his work on the evolution of humans, giving only a few hints about it in *The*

Origin of Species, published in 1859. He waited another dozen years before publishing his observations on sexual selection and the evolution of humans in the two volumes of *The Descent of Man*, first published in 1871.

Though it is hard to deny the impact of modern science and the influence of Darwin in shaping empirical scientific studies, even today, a significant percentage of those polled in this country deny believing in evolution. Surprisingly, the battle continues between the newest versions of creationism, now called Intelligent Design, and evolutionary science. In Texas and Kansas, Intelligent Design has been taught as an alternative to evolution. Perhaps some of those folks have gotten too much Sun, for there sure isn't much shade in either of those states, but, really? Even in Arkansas, too many big evangelical fundamentalist churches were preaching against evolution, and a former Republican Governor with Presidential aspirations was right there with them. It made me appreciate all the bumper stickers which said, I miss Bill!

Where humanity goes from here is up to all of us. The earth may survive without us, in fact a number of theories have been ventured that suggest the earth is ready to shrug off the human experiment. We don't yet have a model of whole earth evolution, though geologists, biologists, climatologists, archaeologists, and anthropologists have discovered lots of interesting patterns in the layers of earth that can be explored. A number of ancient species ruled the earth before us. The dinosaurs and the mastodons are long since extinct. Are we nearing the end of our run, or will we get a few more years to figure out how to manage ourselves more effectively on earth and perhaps last a few million years like the dinosaurs?

Even today, there are many people who insist that human beings are a separate creation from the rest of the natural world. Darwin may not have understood all the mechanisms by which genetic characteristics are passed down, but today we know that we share 98% of our DNA with Chimps. We also share about 35% of our DNA with daffodils. The lessons of genetics make it harder and harder for us to see ourselves as anything but a part of the natural world. It is more than time that humans evolve a greater self and other awareness for the good of the entire planet!

Though I have often heard criticism of Darwin and Evolution, they have been background premises throughout my life. Growing up in a scientifically oriented family and a progressive church, it never really occurred to me in my early years that religious beliefs and scientific discoveries could be incompatible. I was neither taught that scriptures were to be taken literally, nor did I find cause to believe that the stories in the Bible were even concerned about the empirically proven facts about the world. I remember having that flash of enlightenment on the way to school one day that the “days” of creation could well be the eras and ages discovered by scientists. I did not want to discard religion, but it had to make sense, to be compatible with the world that I was learning so much about through the sciences. I could have easily been a Unitarian Universalist much earlier had I only known something about UUism.

Darwin was not the first to hold an evolutionary understanding of the natural world, but his writings were among the first to present a cogent view to challenge the then dominant creationist religious and scientific views, not much different from today’s ‘Intelligent Design.’ Darwin never considered himself an atheist, but went through stages of Deism and agnosticism. He dared to follow the science as well as he could, though his anti-slavery and anti-racist beliefs also helped to shape the direction of his scientific exploration. I am proud to include Charles Robert Darwin among our Unitarian heroes and as one of my personal heroes in the ongoing evolution of human knowledge and society. His work helped to reshape our understanding of humanity and the natural world. He remains a target for the part of the religious right wing which prefers an unchanging God, fallen humanity, and the effort of human progress as being opposed to God’s will. I believe in human progress, natural and societal evolution, and the free will of humans to create a better world, or not.

The evolutionary process created the possibility for human beings to develop higher thought patterns and self-awareness. Over the centuries, many of us have utilized that opportunity and have continued to develop throughout our lives and throughout human generations. It has not always been a smooth progression, either in religious awareness or in scientific and technological development. Within the lifetimes of many of us, we have not only watched

automobiles and commuter jets proliferate, but have watched space travel become possible and have seen computers expand exponentially in power while decreasing from room-sized machines to pocket-sized smart phones. We have also watched the proliferation of weapon systems, the pollution of ecosystems and the decimation of populations of people, trees, and other creatures.

Theologically we have come to know far more about religious traditions that seemingly have less and less to say to the modern world. We have progressed far beyond the strange new world foreseen by many futurists, but we live in a world still beset by war, conflict, poverty, inequalities of many kinds, and disease. The expansion of human populations made possible by the advances in medicine, agricultural production and food distribution have reshaped the world to spread human settlements around the globe, often at the expense of other creatures and the natural world. Global resources of water, air, forests, minerals, and fuels have been tapped, exploited and depleted to dangerous levels.

The knowledge acquired through scientific advances has taken us far beyond simple questions of good and evil. We have not merely eaten from the tree, we have devoured it and paved over the garden. More than half a century and at least two generations ago, humanity discovered how to not only destroy itself but to denude the earth for thousands of years. Often during the years since, we have seemed to be walking a tightrope, only a moment away from nuclear destruction, even as we have found more malevolent ways to foul the water, air and land. The global cost for the knowledge unleashed by modern science has been immense, and science remains a dual edged sword. The power to fix many if not all the problems of the world is also potentially present in the scientific endeavor. Nobody knows whether the next advance will create a warp drive allowing humans to colonize the universe, cure cancer or unleash a plague that will destroy every living thing. Before the creation of the Atom bomb, humanity could always look forward to some kind of future, but since the 1940s the future has been a question mark.

Fortunately, we are the people of the question mark! We are those who can tolerate the ambiguity of our lives and this time! We have lived with and embraced evolution as individuals and as a movement.

Our continuing challenge is to discover the future for our religious tradition and the ways that it can positively influence our evolving world. Many of us continue to believe that the major tenets of our religion must be rational and in harmony with the best understanding of the universe gleaned from modern science. We also recognize the need to offer teachings that help to make sense of the swiftly changing world in which we live. We have many different views about religion and divine beings and their influence in our world. We mostly share an optimistic view of humanity, a commitment to justice and the hope that humanity will grow in wisdom, knowledge, and compassion, evolving in a positive direction!

In this amazing and wondrous expanding universe, may we continue to learn from the evolutionary understanding of science and society!

Live long and prosper, and may the force be with you!