

## Darwin's Legacy

Did Darwin do away with God? Some believe the theory of evolution thoroughly defeated any notion of a God who created human beings. Some experience that as a serious come-down. They ask, if we are only evolved like all the other animals, an accident of natural selection and not created by a loving God, what meaning can our lives have? For others, nothing that science has so far discovered rules out the possibility of a God who is beyond time and space, who preceded the big bang, and perhaps, is still creating the universe.

I was talking with my son on Friday night, and, as he sometimes does, he asked what I would be speaking about this Sunday. I replied, "Darwin." And then I asked, "So what shall I tell them?" He said, "Tell them evolution is as solid as gravity." : - ) Because he is in his third year of work toward a PhD in Immunology, I yield to his knowledge in scientific realms as superior to mine. But I suspect there is not one of you in the congregation this morning who would deny the scientific truth of Darwin's theory of natural selection. In that sense, I am probably preaching to the converted.

For me, and perhaps for most religious people, that's not the most interesting question. More interesting is what did Darwin's findings do to our concept of what it means to be human, and what did it do to our concepts of God and reading the Bible? What do we do with Genesis if we believe the theory of evolution?

Charles Darwin, whom we credit with the discovery of natural selection, which led to the theory of evolution, was born on February 12, 1809. Michael Zimmerman, a professor of biology at Butler University, has for several years now encouraged churches and synagogues in the US to devote the weekend nearest Darwin's birthday to a discussion of the relationship between religion and science. A secondary goal is to "demonstrate that religious people of many faiths and locations understand that evolution is sound science and poses no

problems for their faith.”  
([www.butler.edu/clergyproject/rel\\_evolution\\_weekend\\_2009.htm](http://www.butler.edu/clergyproject/rel_evolution_weekend_2009.htm))

Unitarians like to claim Charles Darwin as one of ours, but the depth of his ties to us is dubious. We do know his mother was a Unitarian, and that when he was eight years old, he attended a day school run by the Unitarian minister. Today, a plaque in the church in Shrewsbury, England, says Darwin was a “member in his early life and a constant worshipper.” However, his son seems to dispute that a bit, saying “both he {Charles} and his brother were christened and intended to belong to the Church of England; after his early boyhood he seems usually to have gone to church and not to Mr. Case’s chapel.”

Charles initially thought he would become a surgeon, but found he did not like it, and transferred to Cambridge to study theology. He thought he would become an Anglican priest. But he didn’t like that either and eventually became what we might call a naturalist. He preferred observing nature to speculating theologically, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Although Darwin’s ideas dominate media accounts of the controversy between Creationism or Intelligent Design and the accounts of Genesis, Darwin did not begin the debate on the truth of the Bible versus the truth of science. In the fourth century, both Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine were speculating that not all species had been created at the same time, as a literal reading of Genesis would imply. In his book, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, Augustine cautioned against turning biblical texts into scientific treatises. He wrote,

*"In matters that are so obscure and far beyond our vision, we find in Holy Scripture passages which can be interpreted in very different ways without prejudice to the faith we have received. In such cases, we should not rush in headlong and so firmly take our stand on one side that, if further progress in the search for truth justly undermines this*

*position, we too fall with it.*" (as quoted in *The Language of God*, by Francis Collins, page 83).

Augustine anticipated what later theologians described as the "God of Gaps;" as the gaps get filled, that god shrinks.

Augustine recognized that the Bible has many contradictory passages and that it is not, therefore, logical to accept every word literally. He puzzled over things like how it would have been possible to get all the species of animals into one ark. He thought surely some of them must have come into existence after the flood. He reasoned that God had created some species, "only indirectly, in their potentiality." (*Darwin's Gift to Science and Religion*, by Francisco J Ayala.)

So, very early, although we did not establish the scientific method of discovering truth about the material world until the seventeenth century, there was at least an inkling that truth is multifaceted and there is more than one way to discover or arrive at truth. Without a doubt, science has proven itself superior in ascertaining truth about the material world, but what about the non-material world? Biologist Francis Ayala says he is "astonished" by the "assertion made by some scientists and others that there is no valid knowledge outside science." He quotes a friend who said, "In matters of values, meaning, and purpose, science has all the answers, except the interesting ones." (page 177, *ibid*).

Many scientists agree that science really has nothing to say about the realm of values and purpose and meaning of human life. But isn't it a gray area? While science may not tell us whether or how we should do stem cell research or whether to abort a fetus, it definitely informs our decisions. Science changes what is possible, which often requires new ethics. It is a kind of dance; we need both partners. We need the advances of science and we need the values, meaning and purposes of ethics that are grounded in religious views.

One of my quarrels with religious Humanism over the years is its conclusion that evolution refutes any possibility of a creator God. I agree that evolution thoroughly renders the Genesis account of creation as myth rather than science. Yet I find the concept of a “self-existing” universe unsatisfying. We are left with the question, What came before the Big Bang? Why IS there something rather than nothing? What started it all?

It is interesting that fewer scientists believe in God than the rest of the population. Estimates range from 15 – 40 percent for scientists and approximately 95% for the population at large. The biologist E O Wilson notes that there are 15 million Southern Baptists, but only 5,000 members of the American Humanist Association. Why? Wilson answers, “The human mind evolved to believe in the gods. It did not evolve to believe in biology.” (*Consilience*, page 264) He believes that belief in God and the rituals of religion are the products of evolution. We know that participation in religious rituals confers some advantages for survival. Even today, studies consistently show that people who attend church, temple or mosque regularly are healthier and live longer.

Wilson is firmly in the empiricist camp, believing that science will eventually de-mystify much if not all of what seems so mystifying to us today. And indeed, we are hard at work understanding brain circuitry and the relationship of mind and body, as well as a cosmological Theory of Everything. But we are not there yet.

Somewhat wistfully, Wilson concedes that humans “need a sacred narrative.” Indeed, we “cannot live without them [sacred narratives].” We must “have a sense of larger purpose, in one form or other, however intellectualized.” We will “refuse to yield to the despair of animal mortality. . . continue to plead in company with the psalmist, 'Now Lord, what is my comfort?'" We will “find a way to keep the ancestral spirits alive.” (*Consilience*, 264-5)

Intellectually, I am forever teetering on that line between belief and disbelief, fascinated by the arguments on both sides. Sometimes I am persuaded by one, sometimes by the other. What keeps the matter unsettled for me is not the logic of one argument or the other, it is that neither fully explains my own experience. Are my mystical experiences conjured up by my own brain? Can you figure that out with PET scans? If so, please do. I would love to know the answer. Meanwhile, I have only my own experience and that of others to guide me. I have the testimony of thousands, perhaps millions, of other humans that they too have had experiences in which it seems as though some spirit is speaking to them, guiding them, offering them comfort.

I don't like to define God, because I feel pretty silly, if not hubristic, doing so. The twentieth century theologian Paul Tillich noted that the assertion that God is a person is "not false, just meaningless." I would have to agree. God is not a person to me. It would be more accurate to say that God is a presence to me, a comforting presence which accompanies me through this life. Is she or he or it a figment of my imagination? Perhaps. How else would I know God except through my imagination?

And yet, I'd not like to call it supernatural. I prefer to think of it as non-material; non-material in the same way as many other non-material realities – such as love and trust and patriotism and loyalty and grief and suffering. I would not deny the reality of those. Yet they are not material realities, nor would I think of them as supernatural.

Humanism objects to a "supernatural" God. The dictionary defines supernatural as "relating to an order of existence beyond the visible observable universe; esp: of or relating to God or a god, demigod, spirit, or devil." Science studies phenomena which have physical manifestations, but so much of reality is non-material. Does my saluting the flag constitute a physical manifestation of patriotism? Physical evidence alone cannot answer the question. Patriotism is

more about feeling, and emotion, a commitment of my heart, soul, mind and strength. I will not deny that the day may come that science can figure all that out. But the day is not here yet, and I still make that leap of faith, in much the same way as the late Forrester Church, when he wrote:

*“The power which I cannot explain or know or name I call God. God is not God’s name. God is my name for the mystery that looms within and arches beyond the limits of my being. Life force, spirit of life, ground of being, these too are names for the un-nameable which I am now content to call my God.*

*When I pray to God, God’s answer comes to me from within not beyond. God’s answer is yes, not to the specifics of my prayer but in response to my hunger for meaning and peace. God’s answer is not a what or a how or a when or a why but a yes. Choose life and trust life. Grow in service and love. Take nothing for granted. Be thankful for the gift. Suffer well. Dare to risk much. Consecrate your world with laughter and with tears. And know not what I am or who I am or how I am, know only that I am with you.”* (Everyday Miracles, page 162)

There is no doubt in my mind that Darwin’s legacy changed the way we think about God. The idea of a transcendent, supernatural God who directs the evolution of the universe is impossible for me to embrace at this point in time. Ask me next year; it might change.

For now, this moment, that is not the God I believe in. Some do. Biologist Francis Collins, head of the Human Genome Project, finds his theory of bio-logos or theistic evolution to be a satisfying synthesis of faith and science. While fully accepting the science of evolution, Collins believes that humanity’s seemingly innate understanding of a Moral Law and the fact that humans almost universally search for God, point to a God outside of time and space, and that human evolution expresses the will of God. These are large questions, and we can find towering intellectuals on both sides of the argument.

So, what's a UU to do? I believe that we need to take in all the evidence we can, the knowledge that science, including the social sciences, brings us, the poetry and music and literature of both sacred scripture and secular writings, the testimony of those who have gone before us, and our own experience and then believe what seems most true to us. But, we need to be careful not to do that too soon. I love the Buddhists' admonition to see how far "don't-know" mind can take us. Is the Moral Law inherent in human beings? I don't know. Is the Moral Law a product of human evolution or an expression of divine will? I don't know for sure, but I lean toward the former. Is there life after death? I don't know. Does God exist? I don't know, but I think so. That's a leap of faith. I make it because it's what seems to make the most sense of all that I know and experience.

There is much that I do not understand, and probably won't in this lifetime. I do know, or at least believe, that we humans have some control over the world, that we influence its development. Part of Darwin's legacy is that we will soon be able to make choices about further evolution. We are already able to splice genes and recombine them in ways that will allow us to avoid diseases. We can also, of course, use the same technology to enhance abilities and characteristics that we prefer. Shall we breed a race of beautiful, obedient Stepford wives? Or how about an army of soldiers who feel nothing and therefore do not suffer in war? EO Wilson believes "the prospect of this 'volitional evolution'—a species deciding what to do about its own heredity—will present the most profound intellectual and ethical choices humanity has ever faced." (*Consilience*, 273)

Certainly Darwin's thinking changes our idea of ourselves. Instead of being fully formed by a god, we like the other animals have evolved. Nevertheless, we continue to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge, and become ever more god-like in our power. Whether

Moral Law is the product of evolution or given to us by a transcendent creative God, we will need it to guide this volitional evolution, in order to make decisions that allow for the survival of other species as well as our own.

We now know that many cultures have creation stories, like Genesis. How can we not conclude that these stories were the best thought of the people writing them at the time. Just so, we continue to draw our best conclusions, using the most complete knowledge we have. While Darwin's legacy has changed our ideas of God and humanity, it has not taken wonder from the world. Even Wilson concedes that we need a sacred narrative, a story of how and why the earth and its creatures are sacred. That which is told by the theory of Evolution, says Wilson, is no less grand and wonderful than previous religious cosmologies. He summarizes:

*"The true evolutionary epic, retold as poetry, is as intrinsically ennobling as any religious epic. Material reality discovered by science already possesses more content and grandeur than all religious cosmologies combined. The continuity of the human line has been traced through a period of deep history a thousand times older than that conceived by the Western religions. Its study has brought new revelations of great moral importance. It has made us realize that Homo sapiens is far more than a congeries of tribes and races. We are a single gene pool from which individuals are drawn in each generation and into which they are dissolved the next generation, forever united as a species by heritage and a common future. Such are the conceptions, based on fact, from which new intimations of immortality can be drawn and a new mythos evolved." (Consilience, 265)*

We will always need our Garden of Eden. The Genesis account is myth in the best sense of the word -- not factual, but still a true reflection of human need and longing and experience. When experienced as poetry, it evokes in us a nostalgic longing for its beauty

and its peace. How interesting that science now tells us that the images of the Garden of Eden appeal to us so much because they describe the habitat in which our “genes were assembled.” Our genes prescribe it for our “mental peace.” (278)

Unitarian Universalists are poised to help develop the new evolutionary epic, to re-tell the scientific story of evolution as poetry. Our hymns today reflect in poetic form several post-Darwin theologies which live among us. There are those who can sing of the “God of the earth, sky and sea, maker of all, above below.” Perhaps we, as Stuart Kauffman encourages us in *Reinventing the Sacred*, could “rename God, not as the Generator of the universe, but as the creativity in the universe itself.” There are those who focus on Walt Whitman’s words, “We consider bibles and religions divine – I do not say they are not divine; I say they have all grown out of you, and may grow out of you still.” And thus we “celebrate the web of Life,” seeing “divinity in every living thing,” and find just as much grandeur and nobility in a humanity which evolved from out of the stars as that which might have been created by an anthropomorphic god in the Garden of Eden. There is room for different beliefs, because so much remains in mystery. What is important spiritually is that we not deny any part of ourselves, neither the truths of science, nor the longing of our souls for transcendence and comfort, nor the renewing power of tumultuous moments of awe and wonder.

May we remain open to the mysteries, and grateful for all that has brought us to this moment.

#### Benediction

Now may the love of truth guide you,

The warmth of love hold you

And the spirit of peace bless you,

This day, and the days to come.

Jane Mauldin