

“DARWIN AND THE SPIRITUALITY OF EVOLUTION”

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Call to Gather: Rev. Roger Bertschausen

I am a third generation member of the Fountain Street Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan. My mom’s parents were members of the church when she was born in 1925.

There are two things you need to know about Fountain Street Church in 1925. The first is that it was a Baptist church. The second is that it dedicated a new, beautiful building that year. The previous building had burned down several years earlier. The new building was a magnificent, traditional looking Romanesque edifice with gorgeous stained glass windows. It’s cathedral-like: the sanctuary seats 1600 people.

The windows, like the building, appear very traditional at first glance. The workshop that created the windows spent a year studying the windows in Chartres Cathedral and modeled Fountain Street Church’s windows after them. Most of the windows portray a variety of scenes from the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament.

Here’s a window that on closer examination depicts something quite different. (See photograph below.) On the upper left it pictures Plato. Immediately below are two small figures: Plato talking with his teacher Socrates. In the lower left Leonardo da Vinci paints a canvas. The apostle of using reason and rationality in religion Erasmus is pictured in the upper right, with Galileo at a telescope just below. And on the lower right is Charles Darwin. (See second stained glass window picture below for close-up of Darwin.)¹

The year the church opened—1925—was the same year as the Scopes Monkey Trial. I’d say this Baptist church was making a statement by including Charles Darwin in its windows! Growing up with Charles Darwin in the stained glass certainly helped shape my spirituality.

Today, we honor Charles Darwin on the occasion of the 205th anniversary of his birthday (on Wednesday).

Sermon

After serving five years as science officer aboard the *Beagle*, Charles Darwin returned to England a famous man. Early in the journey, Darwin spotted some bones on a cliff that turned out to be a fairly complete skeleton of a Megatherium. The Megatherium was an elephant-sized ground sloth that has long been extinct. Darwin sent the bones back a few years before the end of the journey, so they—and he—were already well known by his return.

Darwin spent the next five years in London. Between the hustle and bustle of the big city, all the socializing required of a famous person, and beginning to sort through the massive number of specimens and notes he took on the voyage, Darwin ran himself ragged. During that time he courted and married his first cousin, Emma Wedgwood. And he encountered the

¹ I’m grateful to Tony Kroes, a friend going back to my days in Fountain Street Church’s youth group, for taking and sending me the photos of the window.

beginning of health problems that would plague him the rest of his life. Not surprisingly, he longed to escape with Emma to a quieter existence in the country.

In 1842, Charles and Emma found a somewhat ugly house on the edge of the village of Downe. The house was large enough to suit their needs and, most importantly for Charles, sat on eighteen acres of beautiful land. "The charm of the place to me," Darwin wrote, "is that almost every field is intersected by one or more footpaths—I never saw so many walks in any other country. The country is extraordinarily rural and quiet with narrow lanes and high hedges and hardly any ruts. It is really surprising to think London is only sixteen miles off."² Family wealth—especially on Emma's side—gave them enough money to buy the house and transform it to suit their needs. Shortly after moving, Darwin wrote to the captain of the *Beagle*, "My life goes on like clockwork and I am fixed on the spot where I shall end it."³ And that's exactly what happened: he and Emma lived there for the remaining forty years of his life. Darwin ventured forth from Down House⁴, as they called it, as infrequently as possible.

I had the good fortune of spending an afternoon at Down House during my sabbatical. The way Darwin described the house and area still fits. It took me two hours to get there by public transit. It still feels like it's a long way from London, and it's amazingly peaceful and quiet. (See end pictures for a photograph I took of the front of the house.) The village of Downe just down the road from the house looks much the same as it did in Darwin's day, with the pub he frequented and the quaint flint-stone church Emma and the kids attended still standing. (See photographs at end of pub and church.)

Down House has been transformed into a wonderful museum exploring Darwin's life and achievements. My favorite room was the study. It has mostly original furnishings and appears as it did in Darwin's time. Central in the room is a table cluttered with his books, papers, letters and specimens. There's a high-back chair near the window that Darwin sat in. On the table is a cloth-covered board he rested on the arms of the chair. It's on that board that he wrote *On the Origin of Species* and *The Descent of Man*. Discretely screened off in the corner is a little privy—Darwin had a lot of stomach problems and needed a toilet nearby.

At Down House, I learned several things about Darwin.

The first thing I learned—and you probably already gathered this by seeing the picture of his house—is that he was a man of considerable wealth. His parents were part of the emerging non-nobility upper class, and of course he not only married a Wedgwood (a family made rich by their elegant pottery business) but was himself a Wedgwood. With the wealth also came significant pressure, especially from his father. When Darwin floundered in school because he preferred to spend his time collecting nature specimens and playing with his chemistry set, his father sent him off to study medicine at the university in Edinburgh—at the age of fifteen! Darwin quickly lost interest in his medical studies, so then his dad sent him to Cambridge to prepare for the Anglican ministry. Ministry seemed like a slightly better fit, but it wasn't really what Darwin wanted to do with his life either. Studying nature remained his passion. When the opportunity to join the *Beagle* voyage came along, Darwin's dad flatly said no. Fortunately, an uncle intervened and talked his dad into letting Charles go. Upon his return, the family's wealth gave Darwin not only Down House, but the gift of not having to worry about earning a living. He had the time and space to devote to science.

² English Heritage, *Down House: The Home of Charles Darwin* (St. Ives Westerham Press, 2002), p. 30.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁴ The village of Downe added the "e" to its name shortly after Darwin moved into Down House. He and Emma decided not to change the spelling of Down House.

The second thing I learned about Darwin is that he deeply loved Emma and their children. His and Emma's relationship had a tenderness and passion not typical in that era of arranged marriages. Ever the analytical scientist, there still exists a "balance sheet" Darwin created during his time in London weighing the advantages and disadvantages of marriage. The balance sheet's conclusion: "Marry, marry, marry!"⁵ By this time, he was already deeply attached to his cousin Emma. Evidently, she felt the same way about him. For the rest of their days, they remained steadfastly devoted to one another.

And Darwin was far from the typical distant Victorian father. The kids had free rein of Down House. No matter what he was doing in the study or in the gardens, he'd patiently drop everything whenever they wandered by. As the guidebook about Down House puts it, Darwin "seems to have drawn constant pleasure, comfort and inspiration" from his children.⁶ He encouraged his children to explore nature, too. Here's a picture of the "Worm Stone" that his oldest son used to measure the continuous undermining of soil by earthworms. (See photograph below.)

The third thing I learned at Down House is that Darwin had a variety of ailments that caused him unending problems. There was a hint that maybe he was a bit of a hypochondriac, too. Whatever the cause, illness often ruled his life.

Fourth, I learned about the evolution of Darwin's religious beliefs. As a child, he attended a Unitarian Church. One of his grandfathers evidently wasn't crazy about Unitarianism: he said it was nothing more than "a feather-bed to catch a falling Christian."⁷ (Isn't that a great image?) Through the course of his life, Darwin became even less of a believer. He wrote in his autobiography that "disbelief crept in over me at a very slow rate but was at last complete."⁸

Certainly, his scientific work was one reason for his slow transformation into a non-believer. What distinguished Darwin from most of his scientific predecessors was that he sought to figure out how the world works without any reference to God or miracles. Many of the ideas that formed the basis of his theory of evolution long existed—some even went back to the ancient Greeks. But no one before put it all together and came to the paradigm-busting conclusions he did. A big reason he could put it all together was his stubborn refusal to include anything supernatural in his explanation. No doubt another reason for his becoming a non-believer was the extent to which the church—particularly the Anglican Church in England—attacked him and his theories. And it is thought that the childhood deaths of three of his children caused a crisis in faith. The death of Annie in particular at the age of ten brought anguish to Darwin. He and Annie were especially close.

Darwin's religious beliefs were without a doubt the major source of tension in his marriage. Unlike Darwin, Emma grew up a "high church" Unitarian (yes, there was such a thing in those days). She was a devout Christian. Emma went to the Anglican church in Downe—the only church in town. Darwin typically wandered through the graveyard outside (where Annie was buried) or maybe spent some time in the pub next door during the service. Over the years, Emma became increasingly worried about the eternal fate of her husband's soul.

In an amazing book of poetry about Darwin published a few years ago, Charles' and Emma's great-great granddaughter Ruth Padel tells their story, mostly using their own words.

⁵ English Heritage, pp. 26-27.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁷ Frederic Muir, Preface of *The Whole World Kin: Darwin and the Spirit of Liberal Religion*, edited by Frederic Muir (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2010).

⁸ William R. Murry, "Grandeur in This View" in *The Whole World Kin*.

This poem, "She Writes Him a Note about Salvation," includes words from a letter Emma wrote Charles early in their marriage, when she was pregnant with their first child:

'When I talk to you face to face I cannot say
exactly what I wish.' Her back aches all the time;
she never goes out. His friend's wife has died
in childbirth. 'You say you are uncertain
about Christian Revelation but your opinion
is still not formed.' He's told her his discoveries:

she'd love him to be right in everything. She's very afraid
he's not. 'Faith is beyond our comprehension,
not provable in the scientific way you like.
I believe you sincerely wish to learn the truth.
But there are dangers in giving up Revelation
and Christ's offer of eternal life. And in the sin—

I know you will have patience with your own
dear wife—of ingratitude for His suffering,
casting off what has been done. For you,
for everyone. I do not wish an answer.
It is satisfaction for me just to write. My fear
is for the afterlife. I cannot say how happy

you make me in this one, nor how dearly I love you.
I thank you for all the affection, which makes
my happiness more and more each day.
But everything that concerns you concerns me.
I should be most unhappy if I thought
we would not belong to each other for eternity.'⁹

Darwin left a note on the edge of this letter for Emma to find after he died—some forty-two years later as it turned out. Here's Padel's poem about that note, called "He Leaves a Message on the Edge."

He kept her note (about his salvation) all his life. He must have said
something then, but he wrote to her too
on the outer fold. (No one knows when.
He was maybe quite old. He wasn't blind
to where his thought led, what she thought
she'd lose.) 'When I am dead, know
I have kissed and cried over this many times.'¹⁰

⁹ Ruth Padel, *Darwin: A Life in Poems* (London: Vintage Books, 2009), p. 79.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

The fifth thing I learned about Darwin at Down House was the depth of his love for nature. Living closer to nature was the biggest reason he wanted to move to Downe, even more than fleeing the hustle and bustle and social expectations of London. I can see why. The grounds are kept today much as he kept them. It was a thrill to walk through the beautiful flower and vegetable gardens and his greenhouses. (See picture of garden below.) Best of all was walking on a path he created through a woods. No matter how ill he felt, he walked daily, accompanied by his fox-terrier Polly and often his kids. I retraced the steps of his daily walk. (See pictures of path through the woods below.) During his forty years at Down House, he conducted countless experiments with the immense array of plants and trees on the property. Here's a photo of a space he sectioned off for experimentation. (See picture below of an experimental area he sectioned off.)

It is clear that he was a master of detail. His grand theory of evolution was based on remarkably detailed observations he made—during the *Beagle* voyage and at Down House. That he was smitten with detail is evident from the seven years he spent studying barnacles. Seven years! One of his sons thought studying barnacles was what every dad did. He asked a friend one day, "Where does your father do his barnacles?" Later Darwin dove into studying pigeons in the same way. And the last subject he worked on was worms. His final book was called *The Formation of Vegetable Mould Through the Action of Worms with Observations on Their Habits*. The final passage of the book says it all: "Worms have played a more important part in the history of the world than most persons would at first suppose."¹¹ He was uniquely able to combine decades of incredibly detailed, persistent observation with theories about the big picture of life.

It's impossible to overstate the impact of Darwin's work on the world. Here are some of the spiritual implications of his theory for me.

Like Darwin, I am not interested in trying to understand the natural world by using supernatural explanations. Religion is a distinct but overlapping sphere with science. To me science explores how the world works. Religion explores what it all means. I don't think you can explore what it all means if you don't begin with how the world actually is and how it actually works. That's the starting point of religion for me.

Too many religious folk have had the view that Darwin's work somehow undermines the beauty and majesty of the world. I couldn't disagree more. To me evolution makes the universe even more grand and amazing. Ruth Padel writes a poem using own Darwin's words from *On the Origin of Species*:

There is grandeur, if you look
at every organic being
as the lineal successor of some other form,
now buried under thousands of feet of rock.
Or else as a co-descendant, with that buried form,
from some other inhabitant of this world
more ancient still, now lost.

Out of famine, death and struggle for existence,
comes the most exalted end
we're capable of conceiving: creation

¹¹ English Heritage, p. 46.

of the higher animals!
Our first impulse is to disbelieve—
 how could any secondary law
produce organic beings, infinitely numerous,
characterized by most exquisite
 workmanship and adaptation?
Easier to say, a Creator designed each.
 But there is a simple grandeur in this view—
that life, with its power to grow, to reach, feel,
 reproduce, diverge, was breathed
into matter in a few forms first

and maybe only one. To say that while this planet
 has gone cycling on
according to fixed laws of gravity,
 from so simple an origin, through selection
of infinitesimal varieties, endless forms,
 most beautiful and wonderful
have been, and are being, evolved.¹²

Another important spiritual implication of Darwin's work is the inescapable conclusion that everything is related in this amazing universal dance of evolution. This is an important basis of our Unitarian Universalist affirmation that we are part of an interdependent web of all existence. Darwin's work erased the human-made, false wall that fundamentally separated humans from the rest of creation. This is the crux of so much of the religious opposition to Darwin: like Copernicus and Galileo before him, he challenged the self-centered idea that humanity was somehow special and other, separate from the natural world. Our relationship to other primates blows that view out of the water. We belong to the world. We had better care about the world. Our destiny is wrapped up with the world's destiny. Here's another passage from Darwin put into poetic form by Padel:

'Man thinks himself, in his arrogance, a great work
and worthy of a Deity's glance. More humble—
and true, I'd assert—to think him created, not bandbox new
but slowly. From this. From the animals.
Once you have granted one species may change
to another, the whole fabric totters and falls.'¹³

And what replaces the fabric is the fabric of radical interdependence.

Darwin was not perfect. Neither is his legacy. While you cannot pin all of the terrible uses of his theory on him—any more than you can with the ideas of Jesus or the Buddha—it's important to name the shadow side of his legacy. His theory of evolution has been and continues to be used to justify the survival of the fittest humans and indifference to those among us who struggle. Darwinian science has been (mis)used to prop up eugenics and other horribly racist,

¹² Padel, pp. 92-93.

¹³ Padel, p. 54.

imperialist and classist ideas. A bit closer to home, some in our own Unitarian Universalist ranks embrace a sort of "spiritual selection." We talk and act as if we believe that we are more highly evolved in our liberal faith than our more conservative and orthodox brothers and sisters. Someday, we seem to say, maybe they'll evolve to the advanced state we already occupy.¹⁴

On the whole though, Darwin's legacy continues to shine brightly. He belongs in the stained glass windows of our cathedrals.¹⁵

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¹⁴ For a fascinating exploration of the shadow side of Darwin's legacy, see Naomi King, "An Imperfect Legacy" in *The Whole World Kin*.

¹⁵ The last picture below is a portrait of Darwin as an older man. It hangs in the stairwell at Down House.