

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York
“**Darwin at 200**”

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore February 15, 2009

Spoken Meditation

The Urge to Evolve by Sam Trumbore

Spirit of Life and of Love,
How I long to evolve.
My ancestors crowd every room of my house
They guard the doors of my perception
They monitor the windows of my self-expression.
They stand watch over every vulnerable movement
And censor every kind comment and generous gesture.
My ancient relations knew cruelty, brutality and unfairness.
I am their precious heir, and they demand:
YOU MUST SURVIVE.

Yes, I can listen to them and honor them
AND sense what they never fully understood.

My heart knows I am larger
than their apron strings and stern warnings permit.
Love's passionate risk taking
causes my long dead relatives to quiver with fear.

I am more than a soft, pinkish, fleshy container for
the Spirit of Life and Love
with toenails, tufts of hair, and freckles.
I am more than my encrypted DNA.
I am more than my English-German heritage
and my liberal religious faith.

Not only am I more
but the urge to evolve courses in my veins.
An unknowable intelligence
sets the table before me with a feast of possibility.
The ancestors want to taste test it for safety
but they can't.

Come, eat with me the way, the truth and the light.
Come, drink with me the nectar of the Gods.

Sermon

I must begin by mourning I have but a little time to chronicle the many ways Charles Darwin has shaped contemporary thought and liberal religion. There are so many different directions to go and so much to say that I can only offer you a bare introduction to the man, his message and his legacy for us. So pay close attention and fasten your intellectual safety belts!

My limited time is why I strongly encourage you to come back this afternoon at 1:00pm and get another dose of Darwin. Two learned Darwin scholars, Drs. P. Thomas Carroll and Sherrie Lyons, will be with us at 1:00pm to share their thoughts on his legacy and respond to your questions.

Given the way something called "Darwinism" is still fiercely debated in religious circles, we must begin by looking at what Darwin didn't do. Darwin didn't invent the idea of evolution. Ancient Greek, Roman, Arab and Persian philosophers considered such ideas as common descent and the transmutation of species. Charles's own grandfather, the freethinking Erasmus Darwin, toyed with evolutionary ideas before Charles was born. To understand the sources of what Charles did discover, we must begin with his college education.

Charles's father, a doctor, wanted him to go into medicine and sent him to Edinburgh to train for the profession. During his studies, he was exposed to the French scientist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck. Darwin studied Lamarck because he was one of the first advancers of the cell theory. He also formulated one of the first comprehensive theories of evolution. He thought there was an alchemical force that drove organisms up the ladder of complexity. He argued for a second force that adapted them to their local environments through the "use and disuse" of characteristics.

Charles wasn't cut out for medical school, so his father settled on the gentleman's fall back career, becoming a vicar. Darwin was much more interested in the natural world, enjoying hunting and entomology. He obsessed over beetle collecting, all the rage in those days among his friends. Being a country parson, supported by the state of course, was an occupation that allowed much aristocratic leisure time for the study of nature.

This tranquil plan for an uneventful life was upset when Darwin learned of an opportunity to be Captain Fitzroy's table companion on the Beagle. In Cambridge, Darwin had found himself drawn toward natural history and the new field created by Lamarck called biology. The idea of traveling to collect specimens of birds and other creatures from South America, a little explored part of the world in 1830, filled him with excitement.

Darwin's almost five years on the Beagle from 1831 to 1836 were critical to his later thought. As he began his trip (and suffering horribly from sea sickness) he read the ground breaking first volume of Sir Charles Lyell's book, *Principles of*

Geology, given to him by Captain FitzRoy. Lyell argued from his personal observations, that forces observable today are the **same** forces that have shaped the earth in the past. The earth we see today is the accumulation of small changes over enormously long spans of time, far more than the Bible could account for. During the Beagle's first stop at St. Jago, Darwin saw rock formations "through Lyell's eyes." This stimulated in him a revolutionary insight into geologic history that initiated a new way of perceiving the terrain.

I'd like to highlight three travel experiences that later shaped Darwin's thinking. The first was his Lyell influenced geological observations. Everywhere he went, he looked for the evidence of life in rock outcroppings. It amazed him to find seashells high up in the Andes Mountains. Witnessing a major earthquake and seeing a significant uplift of land convinced him of Lyell's gradual change hypothesis and the very long time horizon for that change to unfold, time for biological evolution to unfold too.

The second was meeting the native inhabitants of Tierra del Fuego. Part of the mission of the Beagle was to return several "civilized" natives from that region to form a Christian mission. When Darwin met a few of these ungroomed, roughly clothed, and inarticulate indigenous people, he saw a race, in his estimation, not much higher than animals. Were Darwin not in the company of civilized natives, he might have wanted to classify them as animals. Later, these encounters would make it easier for him to imagine apes as our ancestors.

The third experience, we're most familiar with, was his visit to the Galapagos Islands. Interestingly, he barely noticed the small variations of the finches and tortoises on the islands at the time. He didn't carefully catalogue the locations of the finches he collected. The crew ate and discarded the shells of the tortoises. Only later reflections of what he had seen, inspired his thinking.

The last key influence on Darwin, I'll mention today, was the dour writings of Thomas Malthus. Malthus wrote at a time of social upheaval created by the rapid advances of the industrial revolution and linked to creating much poverty in London. He wrote about how populations naturally grow at a geometric rate. Unchecked, they quickly outstrip their food supply. What keeps populations in check are: competition for scarce resources, famine, war, pestilence, plague, accidents, old age, infanticide, murder, contraception, homosexuality and, in humanity, maybe, moral restraint.

From Malthus, Darwin got the idea of the survival of the fittest. Instead of the prevailing idea that species had inner regulatory mechanisms to control their population, Darwin recognized that populations always would explode ... if they could. Only natural selection kept them in check. And the ones that survived, were the ones best adapted to their conditions. Species didn't adapt to conditions as Lamarck believed, say a giraffe's neck getting longer to reach higher. Natural variation in neck length itself selected which individuals were more likely to survive and which ones would die off.

Although Darwin didn't know about genetics or DNA, he recognized variation was introduced randomly through reproduction. He saw it in the practice of breeding horses and dogs for certain characteristics like strength and speed. He also saw that selection happened through mate preference, sexual selection, that had its own effects, like the development of peacocks.

To conclude this whirlwind overview, Darwin's core discovery was not evolution but the process of natural and sexual selection driven by small random reproductive variations. How else could we explain useless parts of human anatomy like our coccyx, our vestigial tail?

Many nineteenth century religious leaders were willing to adjust to the idea of the evolution of species. If that is how God wanted to express His omnipotent power, fine. Yes, it did invalidate the seven-day formula for creation, but these religious leaders weren't literalists. They could read the word 'days' metaphorically. Historical, literary and textual criticism of the Bible were already shaking up ideas about scriptural interpretation. Even if Lyell was right that the earth was much, much older than 6,000 years, God was still in His heaven and shaping the world according to His will.

What really upset the apple cart was Darwin's discovery that natural variation is random. Random natural variation appeared to remove God's purposeful guiding hand from the creation process. Enlightenment rationalism, once again, proposed a law that limited God's power to act. Not only that, Darwin argued that God didn't create humanity as a special species. Our ancestors were apes! Darwin pulled the Wizard of Oz's curtain and nobody was there.

Darwin's proposal that randomly driven variations and tiny incremental changes allowed new species to evolve, disposed of Plato's ancient idea of divinely created eternal material forms. Innumerable species had come and gone throughout geologic time leaving only their bones behind for us to ponder. And anomalies like wings on flightless birds, hind leg bones in whales, blind cave dwelling fish, sexual organs in dandelions which clone themselves, male breast tissue and nipples, and of course the appendix are legacies from the past not designs for the future. Looking as we do today at the flotsam in our DNA that seems purposeless, and our many imperfections that make us vulnerable to disease and disability, we know we are far from a perfected species.

So how did Unitarians and Universalists of the nineteenth century respond to Darwin? At first with dis-ease, but later with enthusiastic support once they realized that Darwin affirmed our innovative approach to religion.

One of the first converts to Darwin's ideas was Unitarian minister Francis Ellingwood Abbot. Some of you may remember him from a sermon I did a couple of years ago highlighting the Free Religious Association that Abbot was instrumental in founding. Abbot argued the Deist mechanical vision of a

clockmaker God external to the universe must fall before the emerging organic view leavened by natural selection. Abbot argued equally forcefully against the mystical, intuitive Transcendentalist view that had no real relationship with the scientific truth seeking process of observable phenomenon.

Where Abbot found the greatest repository of truth known to humanity was the organism. From the cellular level to the smartest physicist, the organism expressed intelligence. (Tighten your intellectual safety belt) That intelligence, he argued, didn't arise out of nothingness but rather existed as a primary aspect of being itself. Through the infinite intelligibility of the universe, exemplified and realized by the organism, Abbot articulated a "scientific theism."

Darwin and Abbot corresponded with each other and Darwin subscribed to *the Index*, the journal of the Free Religious Association. Darwin approved of Abbot's ideas and allowed him to publish a letter of support in *the Index*.

While Abbot may not have approved of Transcendentalist idealism, the transcendentalists took Darwin's innovations in stride. They had long ago detached themselves from bonds to any scriptural revelation as they communed inwardly with the divine on spring days walking in the woods.

Many Unitarians and Universalists were influenced by the writings of Geologist Joseph Le Conte. Writing at the end of the nineteenth century ensconced as a professor at UC Berkeley and following contemporary liberal Protestant thinking, Le Conte reconciled the loss of the external, clockmaker God with the view of an internally acting God. Not a far away Deist God who enacted laws and took a vacation, but an immanent God constantly residing in Nature, at all times and in all places. He imagined a pantheistic God in whom all things have their being, in whom all things exist and without whom there would be and could be nothing. The laws of gravity, the wings of a butterfly, the silk of the spider, the stinger of the bee, in sum, all of Nature is the objective expression of the divine will. He wrote:

"Science is the systematic knowledge of these divine thoughts and ways--a rational system of natural theology. In a word, according to this view, there is no real efficient force but spirit, and no real independent existence but God."

This immanent view of God along with Abbot's view of organism and creative intelligence at the center of existence, foreshadowed the birth of the 20th Century Process Theology movement articulated by mathematician, Alfred North Whitehead. Today, Process Theology is quite popular among many UU clergy.

A representative Unitarian minister following Le Conte who enthusiastically embraced evolution was Jabez Sunderland. In his 1902 book, *The Spark in the Clod*, he argued that the theory of evolution does not undermine religion, but rather strengthens it. He argued that evolution was profoundly theistic, "a creator within ... in all things from atom to sun."

The evolutionary development of life, rather than a wretched fall from perfection, fit perfectly with both Unitarian and Universalist views. Sunderland put it this way:

No, it is not a fallen world that we are in, but a rising one. Eden is not behind, but before. Man's great day is coming, not past. There has been no wreck of God's great plan of things, but a steady carrying forward of all the acts of the sublime drama from the beginning until now. And what has been, is a pledge of what will be. (The Spark in the Clod, p. 107)

If you have ever wondered where our optimism about the capabilities of human nature come from, they were powerfully reinforced by this kind of liberal interpretation of evolution. The future is not a preparation for a Day of Judgment but rather an open ended creative journey into an unknown future. We are not pawns in a divine drama rip sawed between God and the Devil. We are free agents responsible for participating in the creation of what will come. Natural variation plays no favorites. Our intelligence, dare I venture, our divine expression of intelligence, is our tool to shape that future toward the good.

Darwin has left a powerful imprint on liberal religion. He exemplified our rational approach to religion using carefully observed experience to reason toward greater truth. While many have interpreted his thinking as atheistic, I do not see the random mechanism of evolution as eliminating the agency of God. The immanent understanding of the divine makes all life the agent of God ... when we use our heads and our hearts.

May we be the intelligent agents of being to shape that future toward the good.

Benediction

Oliver Wendell Holmes asks:

Why is there everywhere such a profound interest in "Evolution?" Because it removes the traditional curse from the helpless infant lying in its mother's arms. Because it removes from mankind responsibility for the fact of death. Because it makes impossible any longer the taunt to woman that she brought down on herself the pangs that make her sex a martyrdom. Because by making development upward the general law of the race, it fills all man's future with hope.

Let us honor Darwin's memory and commit ourselves to being active agents in the evolution of life that we may embody the spirit of life and realize that hope.

Go in peace. Make peace. Be at peace.

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