

The Reverend Maddie Sifantus
Unitarian Universalist Church of Wakefeild
508-358-7091 (home office)
msifantus@uuma.org ~ www.maddiesifantus.com

“Charles Darwin and Religion”
Sunday, April 19, 2009

READING To Show Them How a Worm Could Work Ann Bryan

To show them how a worm could work, he'd delve into their muddy world,
and quiz all aspects of their lives.

He watched them hook their mouths on leaves, prefer the cherry over lime,
assess the shape and grasp the point.

Worms deaf to whistle and bassoon when placed along the piano
were moved by music Emma played.

No eyes, yet they retreat in light, except when sexual passion wrapped
their senses in oblivion.

Stonehenge, that day, no time to muse on mental qualities of worms,
he measured slow subsiding stones.

Small tunnellings for countless years might undermine a monolith,
and wormy burrows tip the balance -

topple stones that reach for heaven, those monstrous testimonials
to awesome long dead engineers.

Designs long sunk in mysteries still echoed in the modern air,
when, faint with heat on Salisbury plain,

old Darwin understood that soon he'd lie, a fallen monument,
a work for churchyard worms.

He thought the village carpenter would frame a simple box for him,
and he'd repose in homely earth.

Westminster's pomp would claim him in the end, but Emma said,
'I'm closer to him here'

as she walked into the garden in her faded cotton dress
along the paths her husband walked

as he wondered at the worms, as he tunnelled for the truth, and found
how much their modest power could move.

Here Darwin, like a lover, uncovered Gaia's body, gazed
upon her marvellous supple skin -

and revealed the way it's finely moulded and continually renewed -
through the guts of endless worms.

SERMON "Charles Darwin and Religion"

Sunday, April 19, 2009

Unitarian Universalist Church of Wakefield

Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going? Those are the questions of life. Those are the questions that lay underneath what we do here, week after week, year after year. How each of us may answer them may differ—that's the beauty of our liberal faith. How each of us may answer them may differ when we are at different times of our life—that is the arc of our lifetimes.

Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going? These are the questions scientists ask—the same questions the theologians and the philosophers ask. These questions lie beneath all research, the scientific method, and the theories. Are the answers these professionals find in contradiction to the answers we find here at 326 Main Street? Are there different answers in the biology laboratories at Harvard University than down around the corner at the Harvard Divinity School? What are we to make of all this, especially in this year of the 200th anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin and the 150th anniversary of the publishing of his seminal and often found controversial work, *The Origin of the Species*? Are religion and science mutually exclusive, as some seem to think? Is the theory that Darwin revealed just that—a theory? Or is it a fact, as demonstrated by countless scientific studies in the 150 years since Darwin published it to the world? Can one honestly say, as our former President George W. Bush did several years ago that the "jury is still out"?¹

In this year of the 200th anniversary of Darwin's birth, you may have seen multiple articles or television programs about Darwin, the controversies associated with him, the theory of evolution and so on. Many of our congregations marked the actual anniversary in February. Here is what one of my colleagues, the Reverend Margaret Keip said to her congregation at the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Grants Pass:

¹ Wilson, David Sloan (2007). *Evolution for Everyone: How Darwin's Theory Can Change the Way We Think about Our Lives*. NY: Delta Trade Paperbacks, 22.

Evolution has remained the prime battleground of a perennial (and grievously misguided) war between science and faith for 150 years. ...

Glimpsing humans as small moving parts of such vast and intricate wholeness stuns me into silence. ... Survival mechanisms abound, which beggar the limits of trial and error; innovations that had to be right the first time; interdependent systems that must be complete and simultaneous to be functional at all. And elegance abounds, in such complex detail as the sequence of differentially marked feathers that create a single stripe on the brow of a warbler. ... Evolution sets us within the flow of Life, in which we are both a part and, however small, a creative partner.

We here at the UU Church of Wakefield are just getting to Darwin now, as spring unfolds around us and our thoughts turn toward nature and human nature. And this week on Wednesday is when our country marks Earth Day. So we are grappling this morning with Charles Darwin, the man and his legacy and how his theory has profoundly changed the way we think about our world. Since Darwin, our view of the universe and our place in it has taken a fundamental shift. As Keip says, “evolution sets us within the flow of Life, in which we are both a part and, however small, a creative partner.” It can be hard to get our brains around. After all, Darwin himself said in one of his many letters, “I feel most deeply that the whole subject is too profound for the human intellect; a dog might as well speculate on the mind of Newton.”

I have been attempting this last week to get my brain around Darwin, and, as such research often is, I have realized that the subject of Darwin is HUGE. For one thing, Darwin had such an insatiable curiosity for study and for this world of ours that one could spend a lifetime trying to understand everything he touched upon. He was a generalist of great depth, an interdisciplinary investigator before anyone used that term. Richard Leakey says in his Acknowledgments in front of *The Illustrated Origin of the Species* that “one cannot fail to be struck by the enormous range of subjects Darwin traversed in search of evidence for his theories.” Leakey goes on to comment that “today it is impossible for one (person) to be fully acquainted with all the relevant details of such diverse subjects.”²

The Origin of the Species scandalized the world of his day, especially the religious world, by claiming that life as we knew it took millions of years to reach its present state of development through a slow process of natural selection and adaptation. Darwin didn't totally invent the idea; in fact his grandfather Erasmus Darwin had published earlier work that points to Charles' later theory, as did others. But this single idea overturned for many people the widely

² Darwin, Charles (1979). *The Illustrated Origin of the Species*. NY: Hill and Wang, 7.

held belief, based on the creation stories in Genesis in the Hebrew Bible, that God created the earth and all its inhabitants in seven days. Our debates range today, between the teaching of the so-called “intelligent design” and creationism in schools to, and, I quote the Darwin Correspondence Project here, to “questions of free will and human values in light of modern research in genetics, (which) have deep roots in the nineteenth-century controversies surrounding Darwin’s work on evolution. Yet Darwin is most often used in ways that distort or oversimplify his views. He is misquoted or misrepresented in order to support a particular position.” The Project goes on to ask “Whose Darwin is the real Darwin, and what are the implications of his theory for the present?”³

Charles Robert Darwin was an English Naturalist. As a child he attended an Anglican school, despite his non-conformist religious background. His mother was in fact Unitarian. He abandoned his studies of medicine to study theology at the University of Cambridge, but, when he was 22 years old, he joined a voyage around the world on the ship, the Beagle. This voyage lasted five years, and he observed and collected hundreds of different types of plants, animals, fossils and rocks. Upon his return, he spent the rest of his life carefully studying and interpreting what he had seen. Darwin was fascinated by the variety of living things, and he came up with his explanation for that variety with his theory of evolution shortly after his return from his years on the Beagle. But it was many years before he had accumulated enough evidence to publish his work.

As Glenn C. Altschuler says in his March review in the Boston Globe of the book by Adam Gopnik, *Angels and Ages: A Short Book about Darwin, Lincoln and Modern Life*, “...Darwin was sensitive, intellectually curious, and unafraid to ask questions that might seem simple-minded. Darwin had the patience to measure and measure again; a zeal to put things in order; the ability to break down general propositions into specific instances and combine specific instance into general proposition; and a gift for storytelling.”⁴

And many stories have been told about his life. I think this story of Darwin and worms is particularly telling and inspired the poem we read earlier:

Darwin had been interested in worms all his life. He thought they were important but people laughed at this idea. He wrote his book on worms when he was over seventy and in poor health, but he investigated worms with the curiosity of a child. Do worms hear? He persuaded his wife

³ <http://www.darwinproject.ac.uk.content>

⁴ Boston Sunday Globe, March 15, 2009, C7.

and son to play the piano and the bassoon to them and watched the worm's reactions. Do worms pull leaves into their burrows by grasping the end or the base of the leaf? Do they find some leaves more attractive than others? He stayed up at night to watch them. He noticed that worm casts gradually bury the foundations of old buildings. Could they affect large ancient monuments? He went to Stonehenge to look for evidence of worm activity.⁵

So we see a glimpse into the meticulous curiosity of Darwin the scientist. But even as we are in awe of Darwin's collection of data on the lowly earthworm and the comprehensiveness of his research, we are aware that there are many ready to discredit his contributions. I suspect that some Wakefield folks frowned at the signboard out in front of the church, announcing that today I would be speaking about Darwin and religion. Folks are still fighting over this 150 year old book. The Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion and Public Life has found that challenges to the Darwinian theory of evolution have substantial support among the American people. The result of their polling may surprise you, as it did me. They have found that 63% of Americans believe that humans and other animals have always existed in their present form or have evolved over time under the guidance of a supreme being. Only 26% say that life evolved only through processes such as natural selection. A similar Pew Research Center poll, released in 2005, found that 64% of Americans support teaching creationism alongside evolution in the classroom.⁶ Wow. How can that be? Our scientists contend that "evolution is a well-established scientific theory that convincingly explains the origins and development of life on earth....A scientific theory is not a hunch or a guess but is instead an established explanation for a natural phenomenon, like gravity, that has been repeatedly tested through observation and experimentation."⁷ Staying up all night to watch the earthworms.

I suspect that most UUs are amongst the 26% that believe in Darwin's theory. We honor the science and respect the research on evolution without feeling that our faith is compromised, since our UU faith has also evolved over that same 150 years, incorporating new information into our world view. And we are not alone. The Clergy Letter Project at Butler University has collected letters and signatures from leaders of many faith traditions like this one from UU Clergy:

– An Open Letter Concerning Religion and Science

⁵ <http://www.strange-attractor.co.uk/darworms.htm>.

⁶ <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1105/darwin-debate-religion-evolution>.

⁷ Ibid.

As Unitarian Universalists, we draw from many sources, including "Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life," and "Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit." While most Unitarian Universalists believe that many sacred scriptures convey timeless truths about humans and our relationship to the sacred, we stand in solidarity with our Christian and Jewish brothers and sisters who do not read the Bible literally, as they would a science textbook. We believe that religious truth is of a different order from scientific truth. Its purpose is not to convey scientific information but to transform hearts.

Fundamentalists of various traditions, who perceive the science of evolution to be in conflict with their personal religious beliefs, are seeking to influence public school boards to authorize the teaching of creationism. We see this as a breach in the separation of church and state. Those who believe in a literal interpretation of the Biblical account of creation are free to teach their perspective in their homes, religious institutions and parochial schools. To teach it in the public schools would be to assert a particular religious perspective in an environment which is supposed to be free of such indoctrination.

We the undersigned, Unitarian Universalist clergy, believe that the timeless truths of the Bible and other scriptures may comfortably coexist with the discoveries of modern science. We believe that the theory of evolution is a foundational scientific truth, one that has stood up to rigorous scrutiny and upon which much of human knowledge and achievement rests. To reject this truth or to treat it as "one theory among others" is to deliberately embrace scientific ignorance and transmit such ignorance to our children.

We urge school board members to preserve the integrity of the science curriculum by affirming the teaching of the theory of evolution as a core component of human knowledge. We ask that science remain science and that religion remain religion, two very different, but complementary, forms of truth including of the theory of evolution as

a core component of human knowledge. We ask that science remain science and that religion remain religion, two very different, but complementary, forms of truth.⁸

Now that's a letter I could sign, as I suspect many of you could as well. The truth of religion *is* transformative, as the letter says. Lives are transformed by being in community with one another, respecting the inherent worth and dignity of each individual and our search for meaning. I don't think that Darwin's theory and a spiritual life contradict each other at all, especially for us as UUs. Evolutionist David Sloan Wilson has written two fascinating books which can help us think about Darwin and religion. His very academic tome is *Darwin's Cathedral: Evolution, Religion, and the Nature of Society*. In it Wilson confronts that evolution and religion have been considered contending, irreconcilable theories of origin and existence, answering those questions each in their own way that we posed musically earlier: "Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?" Sloan says in *Darwin's Cathedral*: "One of the joys of studying evolution is that it provides a passport to so many subjects. The same theory that explains the pageant of life on earth also helps to explain the pageant of human life." He believes in the "practical wisdom of religion and spirituality which science can help to enlighten rather than oppose."⁹ Sloan uses evolution to look at society and the faith community as an organism that evolved to benefit its members, one in which morality and religion are adaptations that allow groups to function as a coherent whole. Wilson's second book on the subject is the very engaging *Evolution for Everyone: How Darwin's Theory Can Change the Way We Think About Our Lives*. Wilson explains that "evolution...is not just about dinosaurs and human origins, but about why all species behave as they do—from beetles that devour their own young, to bees that function as a collective brain, to dogs that are smarter in some respects than our closest ape relatives."¹⁰

Another one of our principles—our Seventh Principle—"Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part" that deals with all those species—should be particularly on our minds this week of Earth Day. We might be interested in the scientist Darwin's poetic words from *The Origin of the Species*:

⁸ http://www.butler.edu/clergyproject/Unitarian_Universalists/UnivUnitarianClergyLtr.htm

⁹ Wilson, David Sloan (2002). *Darwin's Cathedral: Evolution, Religion, and the Nature of Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 259-260.

¹⁰ Wilson, David Sloan, *Evolution for Everyone: How Darwin's Theory Can Change the Way We Think About Our Lives*, back cover.

"There is 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."

Darwin was aware of the conundrum his theory caused, upsetting the proverbial applecart of the prevailing world view. An article I read from The International Society for Science and Religion (Charles Darwin on Religion) concludes:

Darwin ...displayed an impressive honesty in his rhetoric, conceding the difficulties surrounding his theory as well as underlining its strengths. One of his grievances against the evolutionary biologist George Mivart was that, in a severe critique of Darwin's dependence on natural selection, Mivart dwelled only on the difficulties, disregarding the strengths. Mivart was a convert both to evolutionary thought and to Roman Catholicism, making it easy for Darwin ... to impute a religious motivation to his critique. There were other qualities in Darwin that are often lacking among contemporary antagonists. He knew where to draw the lines on the limitations of his science, recognizing that the future would bring fresh insights and a deeper understanding of the processes he sought to understand. Two presuppositions characterize much of his thinking on questions of science and religion. One was that it would be sacrilegious to suggest that the deity was incapable of achieving its creative purposes through natural causes. The other, associated with his agnosticism, was an attitude of tolerance to those whose intimate beliefs he did not share. In so far as he had a creed at the end of his life, it was that each (person) should hope and believe what (he or she)can.¹¹

So we celebrate this year the 200th anniversary of a man who left us with his scientific contributions, but also the strength of character that allowed for tolerance and compassion. Would that we also have his strength of character that allows for tolerance and compassion, as well as the deep knowing that we are one with all of nature and that we have a moral responsibility to care for our Earth. May we this week be aware of that responsibility and work in those ways needed to evolve our behaviors so that we can live harmoniously on our planet and with each other. May it be so. Blessed be. Amen.

¹¹ <http://issr.org.uk/darwin-religion.asp>, "Charles Darwin on Religion"