

Darwin Day
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02/15/09

Sermon

Happy Darwin Day! Happy Evolution Sunday!

And, as we celebrate, I thought it would be worth taking a few moments to look at what exactly it is that we are celebrating.

Just as we marked the 200th anniversary of Abraham Lincoln's birth this last Thursday, on February 12th, that very same date also marked the 200th anniversary of Charles Darwin's birth.

Celebrate Abraham Lincoln?—yes, of course. Lincoln, we know, was President of the United States in the period during the Civil War. He managed to preserve the unity of these United States in spite of the brutal divisions that had arisen within the country; he helped to end slavery; he revived and renewed the powerful words and thoughts of the Declaration of Independence for a new age, and delivered his own powerful and prophetic words in speeches such as the Gettysburg Address and his Second Inaugural Address.

And Charles Darwin?...well, he wrote a book. He wrote many books on science, but one book in particular, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection or The Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*, that revolutionized our understanding of how life came to be. Natural selection is the process in nature first described by Darwin in which creatures best adapted to their environments survive in greater numbers to pass along those adaptations and traits to their offspring.

Not only do we celebrate the 200th anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin this year, but we also celebrate the 150th anniversary of the publication of that book that started it all: *On the Origin of Species*.

Biologist E.O. Wilson calls it “the greatest scientific book of all time.” The theory of evolution which arose from this book came to be the groundwork for understanding the origin and progression of life on Earth, leading geneticist and biologist Theodosius Dobzhansky to write in a 1973 edition of “American Biology Teacher” that “nothing in biology makes sense except in the light of evolution.”

So that's something to celebrate, right? Evolution Sunday! We celebrate the man, Charles Darwin, because of the great gift that he offered the world in the form of a wider, deeper, eminently vaster understanding of life itself: evolution.

However, before we put on our party hats, we should realize that the celebration is not universal. There are those who will not be attending the party, who indeed see evolution as a cause for anger and protest rather than celebration and Darwin as a vile blasphemer rather than a hero.

Creationist Henry Morris wrote, “Evolution is the root of atheism, of communism, Nazism, behaviorism, racism, economic imperialism, militarism, libertinism, anarchism, and all manner of anti-Christian systems of belief and practice” ([*The Remarkable Birth of Planet Earth*](#), pg. 75). Now that is an

impressive list to drop at the feet of Darwin, but no matter how you feel about the mixture of individual items on it, you must know that, for Morris, these were all terrible things and, most importantly, anti-Christian things. He was one of the founders of what became known as “Creation Science”—though many would question its classification as science—which began with the premise that the Creation story in Genesis was literally true and then carefully highlighted selected information that would support that premise.

More recently, opponents of the teaching of evolution have organized around what is called “Intelligent Design” Theory, which has been touted by its followers as a strictly scientific alternative to the theory of evolution. Intelligent design is the assertion that “certain features of the universe and of living things are best explained by an intelligent cause, not an undirected process such as natural selection.”

Kenneth Millar, professor of biology at Brown University and an expert witness at the Dover, PA trial in which the case for teaching Intelligent Design was defeated, writes:

“If I had to give a prize for the best idea that anyone in the antievolution movement has ever had, I’d award it to whomever came up with the term ‘intelligent design.’ Over the years the old standbys of ‘creationism’ and ‘creation science’ have served their purposes, but they’ve always had the weakness of revealing their religious nature too directly...The word ‘design,’ in contrast, doesn’t sound religious and seems to take no position on the age of the earth, while the adjective ‘intelligent’ appeals directly to our notions of purpose and meaning in the world around us” ([Only a Theory](#), pg. 11)

It is clear that, though we may be *celebrating* Darwin and his understanding of evolution, supplemented and supported over these 150 years with mountains of corroborating evidence and insightful additions, there are those who see it as a threat—to the very meaning of life, a threat to the perceived purpose of existence. Natural selection, they say, cannot really substitute for—is indeed, a refutation of—Divine Providence. The answers it provides for those all-important questions—Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?—the answers that evolution suggests for those questions are unsatisfactory to those seeking a more orderly and purposeful response. Unsatisfactory and thus deemed unacceptable.

And before we simply write these critics off as religious fanatics or science-phobic activists, we should note that even those who accept the theory of evolution have some problems celebrating what they see as its sobering ramifications.

John Updike says “we shrink from what [science] has to tell us of our perilous and insignificant place in the cosmos...Our century’s revelations of unthinkable largeness and unimaginably smallness, of abysmal stretches of geological time when we were nothing, of supernumerary galaxies and indeterminate subatomic behavior, of a kind of mad mathematical violence at the heart of matter have scorched us deeper than we know” ([John Updike, From our Pages, “Picked-up Pieces,” The New Yorker, February 9, 2009, p. 64](#))

So the question remains—taking all this into account—for those of us who are celebrating today, the questions returns to us: *what exactly are we celebrating?* The absence of God? The loss of purpose? Our perilous and insignificant place in the cosmos? What do we celebrate on Darwin Day?

We celebrate the courageous search for truth; the acceptance of that truth; and the incorporation of that truth, as best we can, into our lives.

[Peter Boyd, Collections Manager](#) at Shrewsbury museums (Shrewsbury is Darwin's birthplace), suggests that Charles Darwin's openness to new ideas could be at least partially traced to his Unitarian roots. Though he was christened in the Anglican church, his mother took him to a Unitarian church as a young child and the Unitarians, says Boyd, "were much freer thinkers." Now Charles' father did not have a high opinion of Unitarians. They were so "low-church," he said, they were almost "no-church;" "a mere featherbed to catch a falling Christian." But for we who seek to keep this tradition alive, it is heartening to think that this early Unitarian influence made a favorable impression on Charles and may have contributed in some small way to his later discoveries.

And for all that folks like Creationist Henry Morris may have wanted to paint Darwin as the Antichrist, we have to remember that Darwin grew up with the understanding that God created the Earth and everything in it; he studied to become a minister; he had no particular complaint against the church nor is there anything to indicate that he relished inciting controversy on theological matters. He was passionate about observing and recording the truth, but he was cautious and careful in communicating his findings and mindful of its possible effects on those around him.

He agonized over the ramifications of his work on the faith of his wife, Emma; he wrestled with the loss of his own faith as he mourned the loss of his young daughter; the details of his life point to a responsible, compassionate, thoughtful man. Though he did not share his wife's faith, he respected it. Though he honored his own commitment to truth by publishing *On the Origin of Species* some thirty years after he first began articulating the ideas within it, he took no pleasure in the prospect of pulling the theological rug out from under those seeking spiritual comfort. We celebrate the theory of Evolution itself, in the way that it has shed light on the origin of all life and our own place within it...but there is also something about the man, Charles Darwin, that is worth remembering and celebrating:

Evolutionary biologist, paleontologist, and science historian, Stephen Jay Gould writes in [The Structure of Evolutionary Theory](#) (2002, pg. 1342):

I will grant...that if Charles Darwin had never been born, a well-prepared and waiting scientific world...would still have...won general acceptance for evolution in the mid 19th century...So why fret and care that the actual version of the destined deed was done by an upper class English gentleman who had circumnavigated the globe as a vigorous youth, lost his dearest daughter and his waning faith as the same time, wrote the greatest treatise ever composed on the taxonomy of barnacles, and eventually grew a white beard, lived as a country squire just south of London, and never again traveled far enough even to cross the English Channel? We care for the same reason that we love okapis, delight in the fossil evidence of trilobites, and mourn the passage of the dodo. We care because the broad events that had to happen, happened to happen in a certain particular way. And something almost unspeakably holy...underlies our discovery and confirmation of the actual details that made our world and also assured the minutiae of its construction in the manner we know, and not in any one of a trillion other ways, nearly all of which would not have included the evolution of a scribe to record the beauty, the cruelty, the fascination, and the mystery.

There is something almost unspeakably holy that underlies our discovery and confirmation of the actual details that made our world and also assured the minutiae of its construction in the manner we know.

Slavery in this country would eventually have ended without Lincoln; the theory of evolution through natural selection would most assuredly have been discovered without Darwin; the earth itself and all of life upon it will continue to evolve according to its own laws whether we accept the truth of those

processes or not; but there is something almost unspeakably holy that underlies our discovery and confirmation of the actual details. There is something almost unspeakably holy in recognizing that what has happened has happened in a particular way and through particular individuals who may inspire us with their examples.

“[T]he most important thing about studying evolution is...that the endeavor contains a profound optimism,” [writes Olivia Judson](#). “It means that when we encounter something in nature that is complicated or mysterious, such as the flagellum of a bacteria or the light made by a firefly, we don’t have to shrug our shoulders in bewilderment. Instead, we can ask how it got to be that way.”

There is something in the details...something about noticing...something about asking questions—Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?—and searching out the answers...something about understanding and accepting what *is*; not what we would like; not what we wish; not what we’ve been told; not what we fear, not what we think should be, but what is, in all of its previously unimaginable intricacy...

Though I am always pleased to find a Unitarian or Universalist connection with important people in history, I am less concerned with what Unitarianism may have meant to Darwin than what Darwin means to the Unitarian Universalism of today. He models the “free and responsible search for truth and meaning” that we covenant to affirm and promote in our Principles. He has shown a brighter light than had ever been shown before on the “interdependent web of all life” that we pledge to respect. He is our faithful companion as we strive to understand ourselves and our earthly home. As a religious tradition that heeds the guidance of reason and the results of science, we have no choice but to follow Darwin on his search for truth, hoping for some small measure of the courage and compassion that he himself displayed in his work and his life. There is grandeur in this view of life, said Darwin, to imagine that from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been and are being evolved...There *is* grandeur here...and that’s worth celebrating.

Many thanks to Janet Browne for [Darwin’s Origin of Species: Books that Changed the World](#) for much of the biographical material included here.