

Evolution Sunday

Rev. Peggy Meeker, 2/11/18

Reading: Responsive Reading #530, “Out of the Stars,” by Robert T. Weston [*Singing the Living Tradition*, Beacon Press, 1993]

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Where do we come from? What are we? And where are we going? Part of me wants to just throw up my hands in the admission that if scientists ever do find final answers to these questions, I, for one, won't be able to understand them. What on earth does it mean that the fundamental particles of nature are strings, or that our universe might be just one in a perhaps infinite number of universes called the multiverse? I will probably never know. But I do have enough understanding of 19th- and 20th-century science to realize that Charles Darwin, born a little over 200 years ago tomorrow—February 12th, 1809, to be precise—changed the world when he gave us the idea of evolution through natural selection: organisms that are better adapted to their environment tend to have better rates of survival and reproduction, thus passing on their adaptation to their offspring. Michael Dowd, who wrote a book called *Thank God for Evolution!*, describes natural selection this way: “the sum total of living and nonliving pressures in the natural world . . . , in effect, ‘select’ among variations that from time to time naturally occur within species” [M. Dowd, “A Story Big Enough to Hold Us All,” p. 16, *The Whole World Kin: Darwin and the Spirit of Liberal Religion*, ed. F. Muir, Skinner House, 2010]. Darwin totally rewrote the story of the world and the origin of everything. Scientists had been talking about evolution for half a century, but they didn't know how it might work. And theologians were still struggling to account for the knowledge that the earth wasn't 6,000 years old, as had been calculated from the Bible, but millions or even billions of years old.

And I know that these questions—Where do we come from? What are we? And where are we going?—are both scientific and religious. In fact, these questions are the title of a painting by the French artist Paul Gauguin, who encountered them as a schoolboy in France, in a catechism written by the local bishop that included these questions as fundamental: “Where does humanity come from? Where is it going to?” And “How does humanity proceed?” The painting seems to depict childhood, adulthood, old age, and what Gauguin called “the Beyond.” Gauguin considered it his greatest masterpiece and the culmination of his thoughts. But it doesn't answer the questions as much as it invites the viewer to contemplate the meaning and the journey of life.

A recent best-selling novel, Dan Brown's *Origin*, also tackles these questions. I don't want to give away the ending, because it's a great page-turner, but one issue it raises is the question of whether humanity needs the idea of a creator God in order to live up to its potential. One of the major characters, a Catholic Bishop, worries that if it were scientifically proven that life arose without God, "it would have a ruinous effect on the human desire to aspire to a higher ideal and emulate the God who created us in His image" [p. 401, Doubleday, 2017].

Well, we've been having that debate for about 150 years now. Unitarian Universalists side firmly with science and reason. Our children are working with our 4th principle this month: we search for what is true; or in the "adult" version, we affirm and promote a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. Our Sources speak of heeding the guidance of reason and the results of science. Most of us would agree that human morality and aspiration do not require any sort of belief in God. We would probably also agree that belief in God needn't be destroyed by any scientific discovery, though new knowledge does change our ideas about God. For the last few years, my favorite name for God has been "the Great Unfolding." To me that means that the Whole of Reality, including the arc of my own life, and including whatever gods there may be, is always in process, always changing, moving toward new life. And this week, I've come to realize that that conception of reality was made possible by the theory of evolution. Many theologians see God in the unfolding of evolution, understanding God less as Creator and more as Creativity, less as supernatural and more as a natural power and presence within the universe.

Charles Darwin was slated to be a doctor, like his father, but he neglected his medical studies in favor of natural history. His father then sent him to Christ's College, Cambridge, to study for the Anglican priesthood (though much of the family were Unitarians and Freethinkers), but Darwin was drawn more and more to the study of insects and plants, and eventually to the idea of science as a kind of natural theology, and soon after his graduation, in 1831, he was offered a place as a naturalist on the HMS Beagle. According to Wikipedia, the five-year voyage "established him as an eminent geologist ... and [the] publication of his journal of the voyage made him famous as a popular author." By 1837, Darwin was considering the idea that one species might change into another—transmutation—and for the next twenty years he worked on that idea and the observations that eventually led to the publication of *On the Origin of Species* in 1859. Darwin's discovery, says Wikipedia, is the unifying theory of the life sciences. Fun fact: Darwin's final book, in 1881, was *The Formation of Vegetable Mould, through the Actions of Worms*. A wide-ranging thinker.

About two weeks ago, I saw an article in the *New York Times* that helped me understand the kind of timeline with which Darwin was occupied. The article, "Rambling Through Time," is about the brevity of humankind's story on earth—so far, at least—compared with the whole story of earth. Apparently there's a seafloor in New York City's Central Park that was laid down about

half a billion years ago. The earth is more like 4½ billion years old, but even half a billion years is hard to imagine, so this article illustrates the concept. If you were to walk west from the Upper West Side, from the Hayden Planetarium, and if each step represented going back a century in time, and if you kept walking all the way across the country to San Francisco, you would still need to go another hundred miles or so into the Pacific in order to go as far back as the time of that ocean in Central Park. In comparison, the author says “we can’t even get [from the Planetarium] to the sidewalk before all of recorded history—all of the empires, the holy books, agriculture, ~~the~~ architecture, *all of it*—is behind us” [Peter Brannen, 1/27/2018]. That’s hard to imagine. The dinosaurs, in comparison to us, would range from somewhere in Ohio all the way across Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, and into Nebraska, where they first appeared some 235 million years ago. “Some humility is in order,” was one of the author’s conclusion. Some humility and some awe.

I want to share a story from UU minister Mark Belletini, who wrote in the journal *Religious Humanism* a few years ago about the first time he “REALLY saw the stars” [“The Cosmic Theology of Carl Sagan, p. 10-11, *Religious Humanism* xliii, 2, Spring 2013].” He was a senior in high school when he drove with some friends from Detroit into Canada and around the north shore of Lake Erie to Pt. Pelee, a peninsula that extends south into the lake and is well-known to bird-watchers as a spot that birds head for during the spring migration. Mark probably didn’t know that; he and his friends just thought it looked on the map like the southernmost tip of Canada and would be cool to see. It was dark when they got there. They followed a path through the woods that brought them out onto a beach. They were remarking on how dark it was, so far from the city lights, when, in Mark’s words,

Suddenly, someone, I forget who, said quietly “Look up! My God!” We all tilted our heads heavenward. I was immediately bowled over. It looked to me as if the glittering stars covered more area than the black background holding them. I saw the Milky Way for the first time in my life, that night ... clear as a path on [land] in daylight. The small cluster of stars called the Pleiades was so vivid I felt as if they were only the width of a face apart from my own. Near my house on Detroit’s East Side, I was able to pick out a few constellations ... the Dipper, the huge W of Cassiopeia. But here at Pt. Pelee, I couldn’t find them. The stars and the planets among them formed a whole for the first time. No patterns, no shapes, no fabled Greek stories across the heavens, each hidden in the true sparkling nature of the vastness of the abyss.

And within me, but for a moment, I felt transported beyond my own little life. I felt I understood in my whole being that I was on a small planet at the edge of things, suspended over an infinite abyss of both beauty and coldness; I suddenly could feel as if my skin was no longer a boundary between the inside and my outside, and I realized that

the stars, the abyss, the small rocky planet of I was standing on, my friends next to me, the waters of the lake, the sand on the beach made up but one indivisible Reality, one awesome-ness that transcended my capacity to speak of it, but which called forth my deepest wonder, respect, honor and gratitude for everything around me. I did not tell my friends what I was feeling. They were mostly silent too on the way home ... perhaps they were just as “blown away” as I was.

Where do we come from? From nature; from a Mitochondrial Eve who lived somewhere in Africa 200,000 years or so ago; from another Eve further back who was mother to both humans and chimpanzees; from water and dirt; from stardust. We are reworked stardust [term from Harvard biologist Edward O. Wilson]. Maybe that’s a little of what we feel sometimes when we gaze up at the stars.

What are we? We are specks in the cosmos; we are unique, amazingly complex beings of inherent worth and dignity; we are an integral part of an incredibly varied and continually changing Whole, intimately connected and interdependent with All; we are part of an ongoing existence that is bigger than we are and that is both infinitely knowable and infinitely mysterious; we are creatures that love; we are the earth knowing itself.

Where are we going? Well, that part of the story isn’t written yet, but evolution seems trustworthy. It keeps moving toward greater adaptability, complexity, diversity, and awareness. It can take what seems to be bad news, like a meteor hitting the earth, and turn it into new life [idea from M. Dowd, *Thank God for Evolution!*, Council Oak Books, 2007]. And it is at work still, throughout all of creation, including us, and we are partners in creativity with it. Who knows what simple or amazing thing any one of us might do that could launch the evolutionary story across its next threshold? [idea from M. Dowd, p. 23, Muir].

Evolution is our story, our creation story, a sacred story, and it is mystery. What do we not yet know? What other stories might still lie ahead of us?

“Out of the stars have we come,” says Robert Weston, “up from time; ... [and] This is the wonder of time; this is the marvel of space; out of the stars swung the earth; life upon earth rose to love. ... Out of your heart, cry wonder: sing that we live.”—that we are here at all—and that we love. Amen.