

Creationism, Darwinism, and Stories

As I said in this month's issue of "Spectacles", there could probably be no greater instance of "preaching to the choir" than a UU minister defending the theory of human evolution, and the findings of Charles Darwin, in front of a UU congregation.

And it's not just UUs. Clear back in 1950 Pope Pius XII issued a decree stating that human evolution was not in conflict with Christian teaching. Every subsequent Pope has agreed. These gentlemen, being Popes after all, do have to leave some room for God, but they all apparently accept the Theory of Evolution.

In this particular case anyway, then, I'm largely on the same page as every Pope for at least the past 70 years. So, where to go from here?

We can begin with a quick pass at Charles Darwin. He was born on February 12, 1809 in Shrewsbury, England; one hundred and eleven years ago this month. Both his family and the family of the woman he married, Emma Wedgwood, had ties to the mid-19th century version of British Unitarianism. Nevertheless, Darwin was baptized into the Anglican Church, attended an Anglican school, and for a brief time considered the Anglican ministry. Ironically, it was his studies for the Anglican ministry that led him to conclude that the Bible was a human document—subject to human flaw and errors—and that no one religion had a corner on the truth. So he moved on to science.

The theological position Darwin held was a form of Deism; that is to say, God as The First Cause, or The Prime Mover, that kicked off all the subsequent workings of our universe—including the evolution of life forms on this particular planet of ours. The idea of simpler life forms slowly evolving into more complex life-forms was consistent, therefore, with Darwin's theology.

But however widely accepted Evolution has come to be, the opposition to, and fear of it, persists. My take is that the opposition to the teaching of evolution, or the counter-move to offer a concept of "Intelligent Design," does not actually come from a blanket, anti-science stance so much as it comes from the fear of losing a story, and the fear of the loss of a uniquely human identity. Put that on the shelf for now; I'll come back to it later.

One of the better known chapters in the Evolution/Creation narrative would be in Dayton, Tennessee in the summer of 1925--the place and date of the Scopes Trial. A 24 year old biology teacher, John Scopes, was indicted for teaching Darwin's Theory of Evolution in the Dayton public schools. Clarence Darrow defended Mr. Scopes. The prosecution team brought in William Jennings Bryan to lead their charge.

William Jennings Bryan was a very complex figure in our nation's history. He was not a backwoods yahoo lawyer, as I feel he was unfairly portrayed by the character based on him, in the play and film about the Scopes trial, *Inherit the Wind*.

Bryan was the Democratic Party's nominee--three times no less--for President of the United States. He ran, and lost each time, on progressive platforms that included his championing the rights of working class men and women, labor reform, and a woman's right to vote. In his day he was on the same side of many of the social justice issues as were our Unitarian and Universalist fore-bearers.

He was Secretary of State under President Woodrow Wilson; and he resigned that position when he could not, in good faith and conscience, support Wilson's decision to take the United States into World War I. Whatever your opinion on *that* matter may be, you have to give Bryan points for personal integrity and courage.

Bryan was also a devout Christian; not quite fundamentalist, but leaning in that direction. He left a little wiggle room on the matter of the Bible's verbal inerrancy. He had two basic reasons for his opposition to the teaching of evolution.

First, he was disturbed about what would happen if Darwin's principle of the "survival of the fittest" came to be applied to social policy. If the true story of life on this planet is that of the stronger and more versatile elements of a species surviving at the expense of the weaker elements, and if that is the true nature of things on this planet, then why even bother with such things as morality and ethics, and caring for those whom Jesus called "the least of these." Did "the least of these" even deserve to live under the principles of evolution? This was a real and troubling question for Mr. Bryan.

This fear of Bryan's has proven to be largely unfounded. While we still debate the extent to which government programs and policies should be geared to assist those in need; our social policy, by and large, is not driven by a rigid kind of social Darwinism, however much some politicians may wish it so.

The other fear Bryan had of evolution, which his spiritual descendents still hold to this day, is the fear of meaninglessness. If the story of life on earth is no more than that of simpler life forms evolving into more complex life forms, with human beings as a part of that process, then isn't our intrinsic worth as human beings no more than that of a mosquito that we reflexively swat out of existence whenever one annoys us? If we are not God's crowning act of creation, as the Book of Genesis teaches, then do our lives have any inherent meaning? Absent a Creator God, are we not adrift in a sea of meaninglessness?

This was the concern of Bryan, and remains that of his religious descendents. And even though it's quite apparent that those who accept the Theory of Evolution, Popes included, live very meaningful lives, this fear persists.

This is what I see as being the issue behind the issue when it comes to evolution and creationism. The issue behind the issue is how do we find meaning in our lives, and what kinds of stories do we tell to help us uncover that meaning. What really fuels this creation/evolution debate is the fear of the loss of a Story. It may not be a rational fear, but it is a real one nonetheless for some.

What do I mean by "Story"? Story in this case with a capital 'S'. A reality of our human existence is that we human beings do not live by scientific principles and theories alone. We cannot, to be sure, live without them in this day and age if we are going to survive, thrive and grow on this planet, but ultimately we live by our stories.

It is the stories we tell that actually guide us in our search for a better understanding of who we are, and why we are here, and what we mean to one another. We tell family stories because being a Smith or a Jones or an Edington means something to the persons who bear those names because of the family narratives that are behind them. Such stories, and the meanings

that emerge from them, go far beyond simply a process of successive procreations over the generations.

What gives the citizens of any country, nation, or culture their identity is the story--or stories--of that country, nation, or culture--which is more than just a recounting of a succession of historical events. Granted much of those stories have a way of getting mythologized—history, legend, and myth often get all mixed together. But we still need such stories.. We human beings, each and all of us, have an inborn need to locate ourselves in some greater narrative that tells us something about who we are in this world in which we live.

Beyond the stories, or narratives, of family or nation or culture--most human beings also seek after a greater Ultimate Narrative, if you will, that gives us our identity as human beings on this planet, and as creatures in a vast and mysterious universe. This is the Story, a variety of Stories actually, that various religions have traditionally provided. So, the issue behind the issue for the creationists is the fear of the loss of an Ultimate Story, with all that such a loss would seemingly portend.

The mistake creationists make is not in wanting an Ultimate Story. In one way or another we all want and need that, I feel. Their mistake is their insisting that such stories be taken literally—rather than being seen and heard and understood in a metaphoric, or allegorical, or poetic way.

Since we now unavoidably live in a scientific era then the creationists are going to fight for their story on the scientific front with such constructs as Scientific Creationism or Intelligent Design. I'm not going to jump into that debate other than to say that the idea that there could be, might be, some kind of a "Creative Intelligence" at work behind the origins and workings of the universe is a very interesting topic for the realms of religion or philosophy or theology or anthropology; and clearly worthy of conversation in those realms. But it is not a replacement for the scientifically based Theory of Evolution.

Rather than pursue any further that issue, however, I'll stay with this idea of an Ultimate Story. In doing so, I'll use a book by Michael Dowd, that first came out about a dozen or so years ago, called *Thank God For Evolution*. Mr. Dowd--make that Reverend Dowd--was originally a conservative evangelist, who was very much opposed to the Theory of Evolution. But the

more he actually studied the theory, in order to oppose it, the more he became convinced of its validity.

Funny how that happens sometimes. It's a bit like Darwin: The more he actually studied the Bible the more skeptical he became of certain parts of it. The more Dowd studied, in his attempts to discredit evolution, the more he became convinced of it.

So Rev. Dowd did a one-eighty and became an evangelist for evolution. He is in the liberal Christian camp, but with Universalist leanings. His idea of God is that of naturalistic theology, which sees God not as a Supreme Being, but as the natural, unfolding process of life itself—the “Spirit of Life” we sing about every Sunday. For Dowd the story of the Universe is what he calls “The Great Story” and we are a part of it. He has spoken at various UU gatherings over the years, including one of our annual General Assemblies.

It's probably folly to try to distill a 400 page book down to a few sentences, I'll go for it anyway with these words of Dowd's: “Humanity is the fruit of 14 billion years of unbroken evolution. When the Bible speaks of God forming us from the dust of the earth, it is absolutely true. We did not come into this world, we grew out of it, just like an apple grows from an apple tree... We are the universe becoming conscious of itself. We are stardust that has begun to contemplate the stars.”

Stay with those last two lines: “We are the universe becoming conscious of itself. We are stardust that has begun to contemplate the stars.” Those two sentences explain why practically every religion that exists, or ever has existed, has a creation story. If we accept the Big Bang which holds that the entire universe burst forth, and continues to expand, from a single entity, then we—our bodies and our brains—are part of the same stuff of the universe itself. We human beings just happen to be a particular “piece” of that stuff that has become aware of both ourselves and of the universe in which we live.

This is what Dowd means when he says “We (we human beings) are the universe become conscious of itself.” We humans are a piece of the universe that has evolved to the point where we want and need to know who we are and where we've come from. In a pre-scientific age we told stories to get at such ultimate questions; now we engage in scientific exploration. And

Dowd's point, which I accept, is that for all of our scientific explorations we still haven't lost our need for a story.

Using Dowd as a jumping off point, then, I'll offer the story I tell myself, and that tells me, in turn, something about my highest identity. I give you my version of what Dowd calls *The Great Story*:

It begins, as already noted, with what is colloquially called "The Big Bang" and focuses in on how at least one planet in this vast universe evolved life forms to the point where they even named themselves, and found a need to tell stories about how they got here. There may be other planets where the same kind of thing happened, but ours is the only one we know of for sure at this point.

So, to play off a line from Humphrey Bogart in *Casablanca*, of all the planets in all the galaxies in all the universe we humans showed up here. Here on a celestial body that has brought forth a creature—though a process of millions of years of evolution—who can step outside of itself and ask questions of itself. This creature has even found a way to get off its home base, and far enough out into space, to take a picture of its own planet: A "Pale Blue Dot" as one of our astronomers, the late Carl Sagan, called it.

Continuing with the story: Once this creature got to the point where it could stand outside itself and look at itself and ask questions of itself it sought answers in part by creating works of art and music and literature—with some such works being better than others. This creature used its powers of thought and imagination to build up tribes and then societies and civilizations. It used these same powers of thought to at least begin to understand the workings of the world and universe in which it was located.

Early on in its collective life, as the Story continues, this creature also discovered that it was capable of doing some pretty horrible and destructive things to itself, to other creatures, and to the planet itself. And it discovered it could also do some great and wonderful and life-enhancing things for itself. The human creature wondered about all this. And it created certain kinds of understandings and agreements among its members that would protect itself from its self-destructive side and enhance its life affirming side.

These agreements became codes of law and morality and ethics and justice. Sometimes those agreements were kept and sometimes they were broken.

Breaking these agreements often cost the human creature dearly; and sometimes, too often in fact, that cost ran up to the point that it included horrible wars and genocides.

But there's another piece to this story: As the creature that called itself human learned more about its own story it came to recognize a relationship. It's a relationship that holds that all the various parts of life on this planet are connected to one another, and that each depends upon the other for its life and livelihood. We still seek to understand the full meaning of this relationship. We still try to learn how we best treat one another as related members of what we have now come to call the human family; and how we best treat, and most meaningfully participate, in the whole chain of life—the whole circle of life—that our planet contains.

This is the spiritual challenge and question that we human beings now have to deal with: How do we connect with, how do we experience, how do we most meaningfully and responsibly live, within this circle of life, within this web of existence, that has brought us to where we now are?

Well, that's the story that gives meaning to the life I'm trying to live. It is not a story that neatly provides answers in some cleanly packaged way. It does not explain some of the terrible personal tragedies that befall us; nor does it explain some of the personal demons that many of our fellow human beings—and even ourselves at times—have to do battle with. It just means that we have to find ways of standing with one another in love and compassion when such tragedies and demons overtake us at times.

Much of this story remains in the realm of mystery and wonder. Whether or not there is some Greater Purpose—with a capital 'G' and a capital 'P' behind this story is part of that same Story's mystery. We cannot know for sure. I remain open to that possibility.

I close by going back to Carl Sagan, and the passage Denise read earlier. To me the most amazing thing, call it miraculous if you will, about the process of human evolution is that it has brought us as a species to the point where we can step back, and see our place in the universe, and use that view to call us to our better selves. As Dr. Sagan put it: "There is perhaps no better documentation of the folly of human conceits than this distant image of our tiny world. To me it underscores our responsibility to deal more kindly with

one another, and to preserve and cherish the pale blue dot, the only home we have ever known.”

At a later point in his essay Sagan has this to say: “A religion that stresses the magnificence of the Universe as revealed by modern science might be able to draw forth reserves of reverence and awe hardly tapped by the conventional faiths.”

I happen to believe that we as Unitarian Universalists are, or can be, that religion; we are, or can be, that faith. So spread the good news here on this “blue boat” that is our home.

Rev. Stephen D. Edington—February 2, 2020