

The Voyage That Changed Who We Thought We Were

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Meditation

Here we sit.

In this ancient house.

On this yet more ancient hillside.

On this good earth we share with the family of life.

Circling the sun, circling the galaxy...
journeying through cosmos.

Yes, here we sit.

May we find our center, the calm center
in the midst of our shared journey.

From which the blessings of our lives overflow to bless
Other lives, to bless the world.

Reading – by Rabindranath Tagore

The same stream of life that runs through my veins night and day runs through the world and dances in rhythmic measures. It is the same life that shoots in joy through the dust of the earth in numberless blades of grass and breaks into tumultuous waves of leaves and flowers. It is the same life that is rocked in the ocean-cradle of birth and death, in ebb and flow. I feel my limbs are made glorious by the touch of this world of life. And my pride is from the life-throb of ages dancing in my blood this moment.

Reading – from *Voyage of the Beagle* by Charles Darwin

Our Voyage having come to an end, I will take a short retrospect of the advantages and disadvantages, the pains and pleasures, of our circumnavigation of the world. If a person asked my advice, before undertaking a long voyage, my answer would depend upon his possessing a decided taste for some branch of knowledge, which could by this means be advanced. No doubt it is a high satisfaction to behold various countries and the many races of mankind, but the pleasures gained at the time do not counterbalance the evils. It is necessary to look forward to a harvest, however distant that may be, when some fruit will be reaped, some good effected.

...I have too deeply enjoyed the voyage, not to recommend any naturalist, although he must not expect to be so fortunate in his companions as I have been, to take all chances, and to start, on travels by land if possible, if otherwise, on a long voyage. He may feel assured, he will meet with no difficulties or dangers, excepting in rare cases, nearly so bad as he beforehand anticipates. In a moral point of view, the effect ought to be, to teach him good-humoured patience, freedom from selfishness, the habit of acting for himself, and of making the best of every occurrence. In short, he ought to partake of the characteristic qualities of

most sailors. Travelling ought also to teach him distrust; but at the same time he will discover, how many truly kind-hearted people there are, with whom he never before had, or ever again will have any further communication, who yet are ready to offer him the most disinterested assistance.

Sermon

It *should* be clear that one *can* be a religious person and also embrace the scientific story of evolution. There are millions who are and who do. Did you know, by the way, that this weekend is “Evolution Weekend”? It is a celebration begun just a few years ago by someone named Michael Zimmermann, to encourage conversation concerning the compatibility of science and religion particularly as it relates to evolution. Unitarian Universalists might consider this to be the proverbial “no-brainer,” but this isn’t so for many others – yet the good news is that clergy from many faiths have signed on to the project.

And *this* Evolution Weekend in particular we have Charles Darwin’s 200th birthday to celebrate.

For Darwin was born on February 12, 1809, precisely the same day as Abraham Lincoln, two hundred years ago.

He came from quite different social circumstances, however, the son of a wealthy physician and financier, Robert Darwin. His family was – not incidentally for us – Unitarian.

Well, as young Charles approached adulthood, it was expected that he would follow in the footsteps of his physician father. But apparently he found medical studies boring. So his father sent him instead to Christ College in Cambridge, with the expectation that this route would lead Darwin into the ministry, another respectable profession for someone of Darwin’s family’s class and position.

This, too, did not take.

For all along Charles had more interest in rocks, fossils, and beetles than in either medicine or ministry. And so, when offered the opportunity to go aboard the HMS Beagle as a kind of gentleman naturalist on its voyage to chart the coastline of South America, he leapt at the chance, in spite of his father’s objections.

Well, the voyage of two years became five years, and upon Darwin’s return he was already well-known and respected, based on the reports and samples he had sent back to England along the way. In short, his career as the Charles Darwin we know had begun.

Think of it. This young amateur naturalist (they were all “amateurs” in those days), embarked on what turned out to be a five year voyage purely out of curiosity... and in the end revolutionized the way we understand the natural world and our place in it!

Interestingly, we are told that Darwin was by nature a shy man... who didn’t like controversy. Yet, intensely curious and honest... he followed the facts along with the questions and conundrums posed by those facts, in the end elaborating a theory that led him to become a most public man who sparked scientific and religious controversies that, as we well know, persist to this day.

Now, a few preliminary points about Darwin and his theory of evolution by natural selection.

First, he did not invent these ideas. Rather, he made huge advances in our understanding of how natural processes *actually work*. He *discovered* the principles of evolution, he did not invent them.

Nor did his theories and ideas spring from nowhere. By the time Darwin embarked with the HMS Beagle, it was becoming clear from the work of other naturalists as well as geologists that the age of the earth was far greater than traditionally had been thought, that geological formations were not fixed but had changed over long stretches of time, and that even natural life forms had evolved over those same long stretches of time.

So... it was by building on these ideas already “in the air,” as well as learning from the huge collection of fossil and live specimens he had collected on the voyage of the Beagle, and finally reflecting, pondering, musing for twenty years following the voyage, that Darwin was able to formulate his theory of evolution by means of natural selection.

Yet finally, it must also be said that even the idea of natural selection in the midst of the struggle for survival was not Darwin’s alone. This idea too was in the air, as we know in particular from Alfred Russell Wallace’s work at about the same time as Darwin’s.

All this said, Darwin’s genius was to pull all of this together into a cogent book length argument (*The Origin of Species*) as it has sometimes been described, demonstrating evolution by natural selection. And though we are told that Darwin knew only 10% of what evolutionary biologists now know, it is, we are also told, the most important 10%, upon which everything else is based.

Extraordinary.

Particularly when we learn that in spite of the way in which Darwin drew from current ideas to create his theory, as Nicholas Wade points out (writing recently in the New York Times) Darwin’s ideas were actually not widely accepted even by biologists for many decades.

How was it that Darwin managed to be so far ahead of his time? Among other things, as Wade suggests, he had the leisure to develop his thought over the course of twenty years – the time from his return from the voyage of the Beagle until his publishing of *The Origin of Species* – with no pressure to publish or perish, no need to write research grants. He could simply analyze his data, think, reflect, ponder, and carefully develop and formulate his ideas.

When you think about it, then, Darwin took *two* voyages. The first was the actual five year physical voyage of the Beagle, during which he collected his reams of data and crates full of specimens. The second was his twenty year voyage of intellectual analysis and discovery – in many ways at least as adventurous as the first voyage. (And with no danger of shipwreck, which they had avoided, or seasickness, which plagued him throughout.)

And at the end of Darwin’s journeys? At the end of his two voyages, the one at sea and the one in his mind, Darwin, as Wade puts it “saw deep into the strange workings of the evolutionary mechanism, an insight not really exceeded until a century after his great work of synthesis.”

And as we also know, not only was Darwin’s a “great work of synthesis,” it marked a turning point in our view of who we are as human beings in the great family tree and journey of life. What a change has been wrought in a relatively brief period of time (as compared with the whole of history, not to mention the span of human existence or of the existence of the earth... or the universe for that matter)... what a change in our idea of who we are!

For whether our creation story had been the story in the biblical book of Genesis or one of the innumerable other creation myths of the peoples of every inhabited continent, that story could no longer be accepted as literal truth, but had either to be discarded or understood in metaphorical, symbolic, and/or psychological terms.

No longer could we rationally assert, for example, that we humans were specially created 5,000 or so years ago by a divine hand, each species created once and for all in seven days.

Instead, as we come to know the whole of the story, we discover that we are stardust, evolved not only from the first forms of life on the planet, but from the very beginnings of the universe in the so-called “big bang” billions of years ago. We are stardust. Stardust now singing opera and the blues, painting, dancing, inventing, building, loving. Stardust all of us, sharing common descent not only with one another but with all life, indeed with all that is.

I say this, all the while knowing that quite a substantial portion of the American population and probably a good part of the human race still affirm the old stories as literal explanations for how we got here and who we are... in flat out contradiction to all the scientific evidence.

But... are the discoveries of evolution good news? Bad news? Indifferent news? Well, I suppose we can take it as we choose, but take it we must. Some certainly do see it as a come down from the portrayals in the old stories, a demotion of the human from the pinnacle of creation, the whole point of God’s plan... to a place as just one among other species co-evolved in the family of life.

But much hinges on how we tell the tale.

Darwin himself concluded his work *On the Origin of Species* with these words:

Thus, from the war of nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of the higher animals, directly follows. 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 simply a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.

“There is grandeur in this view of life,” he wrote.

Do we believe it to be so?

What is *your* experience and understanding of the story of evolution? How does it influence (or does it) your spirituality, theology, religious views?

It seems to me that, however else the theory of evolution might affect our understanding of who we are, this true story of evolution has the potential to unify humanity and to draw us closer in sympathy to the rest of the family of life as well. After all, we discover through this true story of life that we really are all in this together – one journey, one world, one cosmos!

Should this surprise us? You know, someone from another planet who didn’t speak any human language, observing our many cultures and traditions – would actually notice far more similarity than difference among us. The differences about which we fight are mostly trivial. Even looking at our religious lives: We gather, we talk, we sing, we perhaps share a meal... that outsider would discern only outward superficial differences in dress and architecture – it would look as though we were doing pretty much the same things.

One journey, one world, one cosmos.

We human beings are born, we live, we grow food, we make things, we share meals, many of us have children, we get sick, we take care of each other, we die... all on this one planet... part of the one (ONE) story of evolution, yes so multiply varied, but all one, interwoven story, all life related, however much we might try to separate ourselves from one another and from the rest of creation.

To me this is a deeply spiritual, if not religious, view and experience of the world – only reinforced, not by any means contradicted, by the scientific story of life and evolution.

One of Darwin's personal motives, by the way, for pursuing his studies and the development of his theories had to do with his early conviction based on moral principle that the human family is one family, that the so-called races are trivial distinctions as compared with our common humanity and, as he believed and set out to prove, our common descent. On the voyage of the Beagle he observed firsthand and with revulsion and distress the institution of slavery in Brazil. He could not bear the sight of the treatment of slaves, the beating, the separation of families. One of his hopes was that if he could prove our common descent, this would help to make the institution of slavery (based as it was in the Americas in good measure on the notion of the inferiority of the African, darker-skinned peoples) an anachronistic thing of the past.

To draw to a close:

Of course Darwin does not give us final answers about the nature of our journey of life in the cosmos. Indeed, 150 years of further scientific research and advance gets us not much closer to answers either. If anything, Darwin and all the science since Darwin is revelatory of far more mystery than of final answers. So if you want final and supposedly definitive answers, return to the old religious myths as if they are to be understood not as myth and metaphor but as literal truth. Then you will be able to avoid the toil of thinking for yourself and the challenge of living with uncertainty in the face of the biggest of questions: Why are we living in the midst of these large and embracing mysteries of our lives? What is the purpose of it all?

Though there are moments when I could be tempted by the apparent certainty of the old stories... there is no going back on *this* voyage – our continuing voyage of discovery, our continuing voyage of learning and growing, our small part in the continuing voyage of life's story, of the universe story itself.

No going back. (At least I hope not!) And of course one can be a religious or spiritual person and also embrace the scientific story of evolution. And whatever else we know or don't know, whatever else we might believe or not believe, there most certainly is, as Darwin beautifully wrote, "grandeur in this view of life" – whether understood with or without faith in a larger purpose, or in God however one might understand God. Grandeur in this view of the continuing unfolding life.

And comfort too, knowing we are *all* – truly *all* – family. And that in spite of our current challenges and struggles, life has always grown from challenge and struggle, the story has always continued.

So may it always be.

Benediction

And now we continue on our journey...

Each on our own paths...

Yet together on our shared path of life, love... and mystery...

In this ever-evolving universe, our home...

May we share generously our gifts of mind and heart along our ways...

So may it be.