

Evolution Sunday: Darwin and the Seventh Principle  
Sunday, February 10, 2008  
Big Sky Unitarian Universalist Fellowship  
Led by Joyce Kronholm

This morning our service is dedicated to Charles Darwin's theory of evolution and our Seventh Principle. In doing this we are joining more than 800 congregations in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and nine countries in celebrating Evolution Weekend. Today we are all hearing a message voicing the compatibility of science and religion.

Here in Montana we are one of eight congregations. They include the Billings Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, the Disciples of Christ in Polson, the United Church of Christ in Red Lodge, and the Methodist Churches in Kevin, Sunburst, Sweetgrass, and Valier. In all, 11,000 Christian and Jewish clergy have endorsed the Clergy Letter Project, part of it which says, "the timeless truths of the Bible and the discoveries of modern science may comfortably coexist."

Why are the truths of science so frightening to so many?

Perhaps because in the fierce cultural war surrounding evolution, those who accept evolution have been branded by anti-evolution types as godless atheists, a label that has become almost as much an insult as being called ... well, liberal ... and anti-evolution types have identified themselves as the ones who are religious. Evolution has been set up as immoral, non-religious, coldly scientific.

But there's something wrong with this.

First is the assumption that anyone who believes in evolution can't possibly believe in God. It's simply not true. Many theists and Christians have no problem reconciling evolution with their faith. Neither is it true that you have to believe in God to be a moral person. You can be an atheist and be deeply spiritual and deeply moral.

I think perhaps we Unitarian Universalists get this on a deep gut level in a way that many others do not. In fact, we get many things. Some people in this room have a God that you pray to, that you have a personal relationship with, and you are deeply spiritual people.

Some of you hope desperately that there is a God somewhere, and you are deeply moral people. Some of you believe that if there is a God, he lives in your heart and in your actions instead of someplace called heaven. And you are deeply moral people. Some of you simply don't know and you are deeply moral

people. And some of you believe there is no God except in the human imagination. And you are also deeply moral people.

We are in a religious tradition that provides for all these possibilities, and more. In fact, we know that these possibilities not only exist, they can and must co-exist. There are many paths to truth and heaven help the person who is arrogant enough to think they have figured it all out.

In Darwin's day, this idea of many paths to one truth was less accepted. Throughout European history, whenever new ideas threatened established truths, the reaction was severe and swift. When Protestantism emerged in the late 1400s, the burnings began. When Galileo discovered that the earth was round in the 1630s, he was cruelly pressured until he recanted.

But by the late 1700s, you just couldn't ignore the fact that discoveries left, right and center were challenging the very bedrock of the western world. One significant development was the discipline of Biblical criticism. This was the process of questioning the origins of the Bible and exploring how it was written. Many scientific discoveries, archeological explorations, and literary studies of original scripture were unearthing new truths that challenged the way we understood the Bible, and the ripple effects spread throughout the western world.

In fact, both Unitarianism and Universalism emerged in the United States in the late 1700s and early 1800s as part of the growth of Biblical criticism. We were some of the first to question the literal truth of the Bible. As you can imagine, though, others were incredibly threatened by this. In fact, the great majority of people were. In general society, there was little room for the idea that there are many paths to truth. The Bible was for the most part understood quite literally and held to be definitive in matters like how the earth was created.

Religiously Charles Darwin had a Unitarian background, having learned from his grandfather Erasmus Darwin that "Unitarianism is a featherbed to catch a falling Christian." Theologically Darwin preferred being called a Deist, or an Agnostic. He had never been an atheist in the sense of denying the existence of God, he wrote.

When Darwin published *On the Origin of Species* in 1860, is it any wonder that the outcry was fierce and sustained? The Genesis creation stories put humankind at the pinnacle of creation. We are IT. The highest form of life. And whether we are to dominate the earth or be its custodians, we are in charge.

Darwin's theory of evolution, which states that natural selection and environmental factors combine to explain the diversity of life we see on earth, took humanity off the pedestal we had built for ourselves. And the resistance began. The idea that humankind could have evolved from another species, like the monkey or the ape, seemed to cross the line that separated us from the

animals. There was a certain morality attached to that separation, a morality that needed to keep us pure from what many considered an evil and fallen world. This outrage was often expressed in political cartoons. One that seemed to embody the crux of the outrage against him, was a drawing of Darwin's head affixed to the body of a monkey.

I don't know what was more threatening -- the idea that the Bible might not be literally true, or the idea that we are not some special species created and anointed to the rule the world. Suddenly, we were of the same stuff as animals, and it was natural selection and environmental changes taking place over millions of years, not creation by an intervening God in one day, that led to the development of humanity.

I first learned about the so-called Scopes Monkey Trial in my U.S. History class in high school. In 1925 the legislature of Tennessee passed a law making it unlawful for any teacher in a public school to teach the theory that denies the story of the divine creation of man as taught in the Bible, and to teach instead that man has descended from a lower order of animals. I understood immediately why the teaching of evolution was so threatening to the people of Tennessee and the South.

John Scopes, a mathematics teacher, was asked to teach evolution in a biology class to set up a test case of the law in the town of Dayton, Tennessee. At his trial he was defended by Clarence Darrow, a prominent defense lawyer of the day – and a Unitarian. The special prosecutor was Williams Jennings Bryan, a famous orator and evangelical Christian who has been described as the Billy Graham of his day.

Scopes was convicted after the judge refused to let the jury hear any evidence about either the merits of the theory of evolution or the historical accuracy of the Bible. But out of the jury's presence, the trial was electrified by Darrow's cross-examination of Bryan, challenging the notion of Bible literalism.

The exchange was dramatically portrayed in the 1960 movie "Inherit the Wind," though journalist Gregg Easterbrook has written that the movie took serious liberties with the truth in order to make it more dramatic. Scopes' conviction, by the way, was later overturned based on an unrelated technicality.

Darwin's theory of evolution was so threatening not only because it crossed the line that had been drawn between humanity and animals. It threatened the line between black and white, because for centuries whites had associated blacks with animals, and that allowed whites to justify slavery and segregation. The theory of evolution said that the human race evolved from animals, erasing that line and putting whites in the same place that whites had been putting blacks for centuries. Right in the heart of the animal kingdom. Which meant we share the same biological heritage. We are all caught up in the

same interconnected web of all existence. We are all caught up in the same evolutionary process.

As Unitarian Universalists we affirm and promote the interconnected web of all existence. That is our cosmology – that of the world as an organized whole. We really are one. And that is not just an abstract concept or a feel good philosophy. It is grounded in a deep understanding that we are interconnected in this physical world. And when you instill that understanding deep in your consciousness, you can never be the same again.

There is a reason why many people continue to be terribly threatened by Darwin's theory of evolution. It's not just because it runs counter to a literal understanding of the Bible. Evolution is threatening because when you truly approach the reality of how interconnected we are, all those cosmologies rooted in control and dominance have no moral or scientific justification. It threatens the way we do government, the way we do business, the way we do education, the way we do family, the way we do justice, and the way we do life itself. That is the real threat here.

The Unitarian Universalist cosmology of interconnection has had a strong impact on our moral values. We have consistently worked to break down barriers that separate us from other humans and the earth. Unitarians and Universalists were in the forefront of the movement to abolish slavery. A century later many Unitarian Universalist ministers and laypeople supported the Civil Rights Movement. Unitarians and Universalists have been at the forefront of gender equity. We were the first in North America to ordain women. Prominent Unitarian and Universalist women activists worked to secure access to education, to the vote, and to the workforce. We were in the forefront of legalizing birth control.

In the 1960s concern for the environment entered our consciousness, and many Unitarian Universalists have come to understand environmental justice as a deep spiritual practice, and consciously restructure their lives to have a smaller footprint on the earth. And since the dawn of the Cold War, many Unitarian Universalists have been in the peace movement, which calls for a dramatic reshaping of how we understand safety, security, and otherness.

All of this is part of the same battle, just on different fronts. And that is why it is important for us to have this reminder today, to recognize Evolution Sunday. It's easy to move on to fresh new causes, to address new challenges. But we cannot forget that some concepts we have taken as faith for more than a century must still be defended against those who are threatened by science. While we attempt to move the clock forward, we must remain alert to those who want to turn it back. For the good of all of our fellow creatures in the interdependent web of existence, may we all stand firm.

