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Darwin's Religion: Evolution and Justice
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Opening Words

We are here

like leaves on the tree of life

to worship, to celebrate the wonder of everything,

to face our fears without denial or despair

and welcome unexpected joys with gladness.

Here with song, silence, word and story

we strengthen faithfulness, and restore heart.

And so we pray:

**Living our lives with purpose and gratitude, moved by the beauty of the world
and claiming justice for all who live upon it, we open our hearts to greater loving,
healthier knowledge, deeper compassion and hope of peace.**

Sequence

Leaves fall, branches grow bare.

Football cheers rise, stadiums grow full.

The election arrives, yet Wednesday morning
lies well beyond the line of our sight.

Halloween passes, yet the children in costumes
climb into our secure and smiling memories.

The Ramadam fast ends soon.

The Thanksgiving feast arrives soon.

The moon glows red like a fading autumn ember.

The blue stars of winter appear to climb higher.

The darkness comes sooner.

The daylight dwindles.

The election-signs on lawns slap against weary faces.

Hopes and fears pulse in the heart
with a syncopated beat
I don't seem to be able to dance to gracefully.
All this, and yet I breathe, in and out,
out and in, in and out, out and in.
All this, and yet the earth rotates
majestically round a silent star that sheds light, yes
but knows nothing of leaves, early darkness,
elections, games, fears or flutter.
O Light so far above the commotion, teach me.

silence

O Light of love, so much greater than my own
smaller loves, pour yourself into this moment,
and remind me of how my heart beats in many places and at many times at the same
time as it beats now in this good place... restore now to my imagination the faces, or
to my tender voice, the names, of those whom I love, whom I struggle to love, the
names of those whom I miss, and those whom I welcome into my life....

naming

9 AM O Light of Song, float above the commotion,
over it all like a rainbow, or like an intimation of
forever.

11 AM O Light of Song, source of both power and
proportion, laughter and wisdom, in this season of
jangled nerves and worries, ground us afresh.

*The First Reading this morning comes from Wm. Phipps' book Darwin's Religious
Odyssey, written just two years ago.*

To a German student who inquired about his religious views, Darwin first had a
family member respond, "He considers that the theory of Evolution is quite

compatible with belief in a God; but that you must remember that different persons have different definitions of what they mean by God.”

Darwin’s seasoned religious disposition is well displayed in his response to a Dutch student:

“The impossibility of conceiving that this wondrous universe, with our conscious selves, arose through chance, seems to me the chief argument for the existence of God; but whether this is an argument of real value, I have never been able to decide. I am aware that if we admit a first cause, the *mind* still craves to know whence *it* came, and how *it* arose. Nor can I overlook the (theological) difficulty (posed by) the immense amount of suffering through the world. I am, also, induced to defer to a certain extent to the judgment of many able people who have fully believed in God; but here again I see how poor an argument this is. The safest conclusion seems to be that the whole subject is beyond the scope of human intellect; but we humans *can* still do our duty.”

Stated here is the logical flaw of the first cause argument: namely, if everything has a cause, then what caused God? Also, Darwin shared the problem that both the simple and the wise have always found baffling— how can a good and almighty God permit the innocent to suffer?

The Second Reading is the poem Under One Small Star by my beloved Wislawa Szymborska

My apologies to chance for calling it necessity.

My apologies to necessity just in case I’m mistaken.

Please don’t be angry, happiness, that I claim you as my own.

You who have died before me, be patient with the way my memory sometime flickers.

My apologies to time for all the parts of the world I overlook each and every second.

My apologies to past loves for thinking that the latest is the first.

Forgive me, distant wars, for I keep bringing flowers to my vase back home.

Forgive me, open wounds, for complaining when I merely prick my finger.

I apologize to all those who are convulsed with deep grief for playing my recording of waltzes.

I apologize to those who stay awake in railway stations, waiting, that I will still be asleep in my bed when morning rolls around.

Pardon me, stirring hope, if I stop to laugh now and then.

Forgive me, great desert, for not bringing you at least a spoonful of water.

And you, falcon, unchanging year after year, always in the same cage, your gaze always fixed, forgive me even if it turns out you were stuffed the whole while.

My apologies to the felled tree for the table's four legs.

My apologies to the great questions for my very small answers.

Truth, please do not pay me much attention.

Dignity, please be kind.

Bear with me, o Mystery of Existence, as I pluck the occasional thread from your wide, wide hem.

Soul, please don't take offence that I've only got you now and then.

My apologies to everyone that I can't be everywhere at once.

My apologies to everyone that I can't be each woman and each man.

I know I won't be justified as long as I live,
since I myself stand in my own way.

Don't be blue, o Language, that I borrow all of your weighty words and then work so hard to make them seem light.

Sermon:

Every year, ministers from Ohio, Pennsylvania, Michigan, New York, Illinois and several other states get together for four days to study. As Unitarian Universalist ministers, whose spirituality is fed by scholarship, we want to deepen our lives. We call our group the Ohio River Study Group.

We delve into difficult topics on noble themes with well-researched papers and responses. We worship together twice daily, eat together and enter into many informal conversations on the topic.

In the past, we have looked at the idea of God, explored the idea of Death and Dying, and we have studied Islam. We have delved into post-modern philosophy, the symbolic meanings of food, and read some literary expressions of liberal religion. This year, we studied the relationship of science and religion, with special focus on Darwin and evolution.

This is no esoteric topic. The debate at the famous Scopes Trial down in Kentucky back in the 1920's has never died down in this country. In school boards around the nation, men and women who think that the world was created, *as is*, by God, just 6000 years ago, are running for office, and many of them are being elected, thus creating havoc in our school curricula. Because the science education in United States schools is so notoriously thin, compared to the education offered in Asia and Europe, many well-meaning people are swept up by the arguments of the so-called "creationists." When they start to assert to people that the "second law of thermodynamics" does not support the claims of evolution, or when they bring up holes in the fossil record, many begin to question evolution. And because so many Americans are basically fair-minded, they fall into the trap of thinking that there is a theory of creation, and a theory of evolution, and that both theories are somehow of equal merit because they are dealing with events associated with the far past.

And so here in the United States, land of Harvard and Yale, OSU and MIT, there are even men and women of science who accept the creation accounts of Genesis as authentic revelations from the God of the Universe to mortals on earth. And there are millions of children attending one of the new conservative evangelical Christian schools who are told that the creation story is absolutely true, and that "science" supports Genesis. They are also taught that there are people out there in the world who propose the false claim of evolution. The idea of evolution, they teach, is not just an example of irresponsible science, but the root source of many modern practices. The teaching of evolution is responsible, they say, for all that death-with-dignity legislation coming out of Oregon. It's responsible for crime on our streets, and the reshaping of the modern family. It's responsible for modern forms of racism, and for modern trends in violence, such as high school shootings. House Majority Leader Tom Delay assures us that the shootings in Columbine, for example, took place (and I quote) "because our school systems teach our people that they are nothing but glorified apes who have evolutionized out of some primordial mud. Guns don't kill people... Charles Darwin kills people."

This is the kind of exasperating rhetoric that dominates our age just one hundred and twenty-two years since Darwin's death. *Never mind* that, in the perfectly good Christian school I attended as a boy, evolution was taught as a fact, without any hemming and hawing. *Never mind* that one of the most respected scientists of the twentieth century, Stephen Jay Gould, wrote these amazing lines just a few years ago:

“Evolution is as well documented as any phenomenon in science, as strongly as the earth's revolution around the sun rather than vice versa. In this sense, we can call evolution a "fact." (Science does not deal in certainty, so "fact" can only mean a proposition affirmed to such a high degree that it would be perverse to withhold one's provisional assent.”)

Never mind that the latest issue of so-esteemed and beloved a journal as *National Geographic* has devoted their most recent issue to the question “Was Darwin right?” answering a resounding YES all the way through with delightfully clear evidence and support.

Never mind all that. Charles Darwin, according to a leading spokesman for political conservatism in the United States, is simply the devil.

Actually, the evidence shows Charles Darwin was an amazing, richly textured, thoughtful, shy, reserved, loving, and self-effacing human being. Despite his famous travels down to the Galapagos, he was hardly robust, suffering terribly from gastrointestinal illnesses all of his life, but rarely complaining. He was slow to decide on issues, mulling things through carefully, going back and forth, back and forth, often tormented with indecision. He grew deeper all of his life, never bowing to mere impulse or trend.

He was a devoted husband to Emma Wedgwood Darwin, of the famous Unitarian Wedgwood family in England. (Some of you will recognize that name from the beloved pottery line). Darwin was also the very devoted father of eight children: William, Anne, Mary, Henrietta, George, Francis, Leonard and Charles. Two of them, sadly, did not make it to adulthood. Their last born, Charles, lived just past his second year. Their second born, Annie Darwin, whose portrait you find on the cover of your “orders,” died of consumption, that is, tuberculosis, when she was but ten years old.

Anne was the apple of Charles Darwin’s eye. He wrote to his friend William Fox, at the time of her death, “She was my favorite child. Her cordiality, openness, buoyant joyousness and strong affections made her most lovable.” Twelve years after her death, he still spoke of his “unutterable bitterness” and he confessed at the end of his life that he still wept frequently over her loss.

This powerful grief hardly surprises me, especially as a parish minister for over 25 years who has lived in witness of many such events. The loss of a child is simply intolerable.

Darwin clearly notes that his rejection of the Christian theology of Providence commenced with her death. There was no justice in such a death, no fairness, no kindness nor any love. To ascribe to God merely a capricious power to do as He pleases was to call into question the very idea of such a God, reducing divinity to the exact theological equivalent of blind chance, or frivolous luck, but with a omniscient mind, a most terrible concept.

Darwin wasn't just blowing smoke rings. He knew his theology very well. He had, after all, studied for the Anglican priesthood for a time. And he was hardly naïve about the caprice of human illness too, both because of his own suffering, and because he had pursued medicine as a career for a time as well.

But his daughter's death outraged his sense of justice. As he wrote to the Dutch student, as recorded in the first reading, "Nor can I overlook the (theological) difficulty (posed by) the immense amount of suffering through the world." The suffering he refers to was no mere theory, but his own wretched experience, the experience of a completely bereft father.

Oh, he well understood the other theological questions too, like the "first cause" argument, for example. Yet for most of the length of his life, the idea of a creative God was actually an important part of his take on the world. Only toward the very end of his life did he finally say "I am an agnostic" about such a grand idea.

About less grand ideas, such as the specific Christian concept of Hell, he was most vehement and clear. He regarded the whole concept as utterly terrible and cruel, a blot on the very idea of religion. But it's fair to say that, since so many other English Victorians felt the same way, we can't tout him as leading the pack theologically here.

But after all is said and done, the theological issue that confronted his heart, and changed it the most, was the issue of justice. If God is loving, and also all powerful, how can children die? Or any innocent creature for that matter? Darwin, you see, was horrified by *any* suffering he encountered; but the suffering of children and animals *really* tied his stomach in knots. He contributed generously to the Society

for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, for example, and expressed furious outrage over the condition of enslaved and tortured children in Brazil, when he heard about it.

It's clear that Darwin was an extremely sensitive, kind man. He adored his children, played with them liberally, and was slow to scold. He did not mind their noisy interruptions...he tenderly would pick them up in his arms and embrace them.

And, sensitive fellow that he was, he was sometimes genuinely *nauseated* by the very reality that he articulated in his book *Origin of Species*...to wit, the great procession of life *evolving* over millions of years through the blind happenstance of natural selection. In his words, a “dreadful but quiet *war* of organic beings,” had been going on for millions of years in every “peaceful wood and smiling field.” Natural selection *was* brutal, by a sensitive man's standards. Whole species perished over the eons, millions upon billions of creatures suffered in the great march of life. But still, because nature itself is not alive, not conscious and caring, such realities are at least not unjust. They would be, he decided, if directed by the same Providence or Almighty God whom theologians claimed snatched his beloved daughter from him.

Thus, for Darwin, evolution was not the creation of injustice, as Tom Delay seems to think, but rather, *preserves* Justice as the proper expression of the evolved human heart.

Ginko trees don't express a sense of fairness. Human beings do. Perch do not write love sonnets, storks do not express compassion, eels do not wriggle in tenderness when their children laugh. The natural world outside humankind has instinct, and the higher mammals even express elementary forms of love, but the grand ideas of justice and compassion evolved for the first time with clarity within the *human* heart.

Does this make us the high point of evolution? No way to say so...in a billion years, we, or the creatures who dig us up, might be able to *begin* to make such an evaluation. I just know that Darwin's sensitivity and sense of Justice, his willingness to let go of even the comforting ideas of an omniscient providential God with which he was raised, is a sign of how, well, *evolved* he was. Justice first, doctrine second. Love first, philosophical certainty second.

In short, Darwin understood, in the midst of his life what Szymborska makes so clear in her poem... although we are the result of a billion years of evolution, we are not

that evolution...we are just who we are now. We are not every man and every woman. We cannot be everywhere at once. We can't, as individuals, save the desert or the forest, which we cut down for furniture.

We cannot see everything, notice everything, be up on everything, be completely flattened emotionally by every disaster that we hear of, so that we can't even pick flowers for our table without convulsive guilt. We cannot feel every wound in the world equally, every grief in the world equally. We cannot compare the past with the present, and the present with the future...all we can do is live under our own small star in our corner of the universe, in our corner of our life, focusing on making the world a bit more just, a bit more fair, a bit more kind, a bit more tender, a bit more loving. We can, yes, band together to make some greater changes over the years, but, in the grand scheme of evolution's billion years, every human project, however noble, is just for a second, just for an instant, the snap of a finger, the blink of an eye, and it's gone.

So much, wrote Darwin, is beyond our scope, beyond our limited intellects. Yet our duty, wrote Darwin, as human beings, is still clear. And Darwin made that duty clear, not in his theological utterances, nor even most in his intense study of the natural world around him, but in his fierce loyalty to justice, his tenderness, honesty, and love.

Tom Delay and his ilk would like to make their way the nation's way. In Columbine, because of what Delay said, thousands of books have been distributed by a group of "creationists" calling themselves the Columbine Redemption Society. They are trying to demonstrate that only evil and cruelty can come out of Darwin's teaching on evolution. Only evil and cruelty. And that it was Darwin who really pulled the trigger on the guns that terrible day.

But this morning, I would lift up Darwin. And to do this, I must turn from Delay, with eagerness and gladness. For I assure you, blaming a dead man for present day violence, using bullying methods, and touting ignorance of science as praise for God, these Delay values are values which, for me, have no value. *No value at all.*

But the sight of Darwin holding his children in the crook of his arm; the sight of his tears when he thought of his beloved daughter Annie; the tender gestures of devotion to his wife; the patient writer of kind letters, even to those who wrote him with ignorance or hatred; the indecisive thinker, always searching for the deeper answer,

the more humane duty; and yes, the scientist faithful to truthfulness, no matter how inconvenient the result...*these* are the values which, for me, make the whole parade of evolution begin to glow here and now with a steady light. Especially from that February day in 1809 when Charles Darwin first opened his newborn eyes and looked upon the world which had been moving toward him for a billion years.

I am especially grateful for the work of my study group this year. I went to learn more about science and evolution and Darwin. And I did. But I left with a sense of a Darwin, not as a scientist alone, but as a spiritual teacher. And I am glad to pass that gift on to you this beautiful morning.

Offertory:

This congregation has evolved too, from fifteen people meeting in a house down near the campus, to fifty people worshipping in a cinder block room near the campus, to a hundred and fifty worshipping in the white room we now call the Fellowship Hall, to four hundred and fifty human beings in Clintonville celebrating in this great room and in our classrooms over two services. All of this has happened because of the generosity of all those who came before us, and our own generosity. The evolution of a great congregation continues, with this, our giving and receiving of gifts and pledges...

Prayer: Laudamus Te, Arbor Vitae

We praise you, o tree of life!
We praise you with acts of justice, the hand of compassion and words of beauty.
We praise you, we the wild blossoms of your reaching,
the first fruits of your ripening,
but by no means the last.
In each of your leaves, a million, million years
are curled in genetic memory.
In your sap, the flow of ancient blood lines
which perished in the fall of comets.
In your wood, the fossil bones of creatures
strange and more than strange.
The grains of sand at your root...
the dust of a million, million stars.

A whole world grew from those grains of sand,
just as this song, and our lives, grow from this
brief, swift, minor and twinkling moment...

#398 To See the World In A Grain of Sand....