

Darwin's Sacred Cause: Evolution and Abolitionism

A sermon by Reverend Lynn Strauss

How are our thoughts and beliefs influenced by the time and culture within which we live?

How are the questions asked by science at any given time influenced by the context of the surrounding culture and current knowledge or assumptions?

From 1825-1827, young Charles Darwin was a student at Edinburgh University, directed by his father, toward the study of medicine, Darwin instead was drawn to a back room in the University Museum...where, as he wrote to his sister, Susan on January 29, 1826, "I am going to learn to stuff birds, from a black, who was servant of Dr. Duncan."

So the almost 17 year old Charles, paid to apprentice himself to a negro. Looking back on this experience as an old man, Darwin recalled " I remember a negro in Edinburgh, who gained his livelihood by stuffing birds, which he did excellently, he gave me lessons for payment and I used to sit with him, for he was a very pleasant and intelligent man."

In 1807, two years before Charles Darwin was born, the slave trade was outlawed in the British dominions, yet abolition of slavery didn't come until 1833.

During his voyage on the Beagle (1831-6) Darwin saw something of the worst excesses of slavery, and was revolted by its "heart-sickening atrocities".

His family's engagement with abolitionism began with his grandfathers, Erasmus Darwin, inventor, poet, and political reformer on one side and the stern Unitarian and industrial potter, Josiah Wedgwood on the other. (Joseph Priestly worked as the pottery factory chemist) Discussions of slave misery and brutality were common within this well educated, well situated family. All in the family were humanitarians, all were devoted to the sacred cause of ending slavery.

One of the most common justifications of slavery rested on the belief that the black slaves were a separately created animal species. A "scientific racism" took shape to support this view. European expansion led to the discovery of far-flung people with more primitive cultures, and there was a growing trend to rank peoples, with some races deemed lower than others.

Phrenology, the notion that skull bumps revealed a person's character, was spreading in popularity at the same time it was being attacked as an absurd hypothesis. Human skulls were collected from around the world for study and debate. There grew an assumption that mental faculties are innate and unchangeable.

These ideas were used to justify a European servant class as well as slavery.

It is within this context that Darwin embarked on his five years of travel on the Beagle. He wrote home to his many cousins and sisters of what he saw as he traveled to South American and other colonial ports where slaves were still being bought and sold.

He witnessed floggings, and the separation of families as they were sold off.

It would appear that Darwins' thinking about species, survival, selection and diversity was influenced by this exposure to the slave trade and his family's leadership in the abolition movement.

Knowledge is built on what has gone before. The scientific method advances with the testing of new ideas, new perceptions. All discoveries and theories arise within a context.

Copernicus, Newton, Einstein, Curie, - all discoveries rest within a cultural moment.

I suggest that part of the purpose of religion is to both influence and reflect the cultural moment in which we find ourselves.

Unitarian Universalism today both affects and is affected by science and philosophy, by psychology and oppressions of war and poverty as well as by systems of racism, classism, sexism, etc, etc. The dominant paradigm or world view of our 21st century western culture, predicts to some extent, how religion and science and technology will unfold in our life time.

Therefore it matters what we hold sacred, what we teach and believe, what trends we resist, what values we uphold.

Our particular power as a religious movement lies in our method, our way of living *from* the questions. Perhaps this is why so many scientists find spiritual sustenance within UU congregations...because our methods of religious exploration are rational and based on observable and measurable experience...a method not so dissimilar from scientific method.

The story is told that when Charles Darwin came to consider marriage, he divided a sheet of paper into two sections, "Marry" and "Not Marry". Under the first heading he noted: " a friend in old age...better than a dog anyhow." In the second he tallied counterarguments: "perhaps quarreling," he fretted and "less money for books".

I wonder how many of us have made similar lists before marrying and other major decisions?

When we question the moral issues of our day, whether torture, abortion, a banking system based on debt, or universal health care, we should be aware of the ways in which our thinking, our perspective are affected by the larger culture.

Are we at a cultural moment of breakthrough in alternative energies, or hybrid agriculture...because science is positioned to respond to a widely held sense of urgency regarding the survival of life on earth?

Do we, as a religious community, have a responsibility to participate in creating the necessary cultural moments to end a war, or free the slaves, or save the earth?

How do we know or choose what matters most? How do we make our lists...Save the Earth/ Don't save the earth? End torture/don't end torture.

There are a few really big ideas. Charles Darwin struggled to a breakthrough on one of them. Where does humanity fit in life on earth?

Does humanity originate and belong to one unitary family?
Are there multiple families of humans? Is there one family of life
on earth to which all plants and animals belong?

Darwin posited and proved one family tree for all life on
earth...with different branches, of course, but one tree.

One hundred and fifty years later, we are still discovering
the impact of evolution's big idea. We still forget the
ramifications of the unity of life...we still imagine we are separate
from one another, separate from the animals and plants,
separate from the stars and the universe. We still forget the role
of co-operation as a necessary survival skill. We forget to live as
if all people are our brothers and our sisters. Look around this
sanctuary, look upon all your brothers and your sisters.

Darwin may well have been influenced by the ideas of the
anti-slavery movement, now it is our turn to ponder anew the
ideas of Darwin's science and respond to the imperatives to which
they might lead.

Now it is our turn to consider our role as free-thinkers in the
dialogue and interplay between culture and science.

The Christian right claimed the cultural moment in the
1990's- perhaps now it is our turn.

So May It Be/ Amen