

“Darwin Pulls Back the Curtain”  
a talk by Rev. Dr. David Breeden  
at First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis  
19 February 2017

## READING

We can now expose perhaps the most common misunderstanding of Darwinism: the idea that Darwin showed that evolution by natural selection is a procedure for producing Us. Ever since Darwin proposed his theory, people have often misguidedly tried to interpret it as showing that we are the destination, the goal, the point of all that winnowing and competition, and our arrival on the scene was guaranteed by the mere holding of the tournament. This confusion has been fostered by evolution’s friends and foes alike, and it is parallel to the confusion of the coin-toss tournament winner who basks in the misconsidered glory of the idea that since the tournament had to have a winner, and since he is the winner, the tournament had to produce him as the winner. Evolution can be an algorithm, and evolution can have produced us by an algorithmic process, without its being true that evolution is an algorithm for producing us.

~Daniel C. Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meaning of Life*

## INTRODUCTION

Sir Boyle Roche was an eighteenth century Irish politician known even today because of his unfortunate turns of phrase.

He was the master of mixed metaphors. He once said, "Mr Speaker, I smell a rat; I see him forming in the air and darkening the sky; but I'll nip him in the bud."

Sir Roche is best known for saying, "Why should we put ourselves out of our way to do anything for posterity, for what has posterity ever done for us?"

Whether they say it aloud or not, politicians too often ask, "What has posterity ever done for us?"

Politicians and politics are too often opportunistic and short-sighted—working for the next election.

All too easily, we ourselves can be lulled into that sort of short-sightedness. "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof," as Jesus said in his Sermon on the Mount, a favorite saying of my cynical grandfather.

Yet getting bogged down in the alligators of today—or nipping in the bud that sky darkening with rats, as Sir Roche would have it, is not a wise way forward.

The answer to Sir Roche's question looks at the problem from the other way round: *we ourselves are posterity*. We are the beneficiaries of humankind's greatest achievement: the ability to pass on vast amounts of information across generations.

Estimates are that since the beginning of our species, something on the order of eighty-five billion people have lived. Homo sapiens has been around for something like seventy-five hundred generations. And there have been something on the order of one-hundred-twenty-five thousand generations since the first differentiation of our species.

Love. Death. Learning. Art. Civilization. Medication. Mourning. Giving birth. Getting sick. Growing old. Imagining solutions to problems . . . It's an amazing story that I for one never tire of learning more about.

We tend to think of history backwards—we think of the ancients as wise people in touch with the earth and the gods and the answers. They weren't. They were our adolescent selves. We—here, today—are the adults. We are the wise ones. We have benefitted from all that has come before. We are posterity, the inheritors of both human folly and human wisdom.

Always there have been the tyrants. And the violent. And the ignorant. And always there have been the loving. And the caring. And those yearning to be free.

That's the call of Humanism:

Everything is connected.  
Everything changes.  
We must care for each other.

ONE

What are we called to do?

I think the answer is what all thinking people through time have been called to do: help humanize humanity. And I think that we—here, now—are in a unique position to do that. We, here, now, are at a tipping point.

As I've said many times, the "Nones"—those who claim no religious affiliation—are now the largest "religious" group in the United States, at 25% of the adult population, followed by Evangelicals at 23%.

Despite all the appearances to the contrary in our present political climate, the question is not “Will the US become a secular nation?” but When? and “What sort of secular nation will the US become?”

For my money, the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor has written the best book on exactly what the religious movements of our time mean. The book’s title is *The Secular Age*.

The central question of “A Secular Age” is this: “Why was it virtually impossible to *not* believe in God in, say, the year 1500 . . . while by the year 2000 many people had found not only that not believing in God is easy, but even inescapable?”

Taylor counters the usual narrative of secularization—that science, medicine, and increasing human knowledge create a rising tide of secularity. Sure, all that contributes, but Taylor thinks increasing secularity is caused mostly by the increasing diversity of what religion means to people.

In the Middle Ages, for example, the Roman Catholic God guaranteed the social structure—God, king, clergy, people—and the relations among people, from peasant to royalty. Everyone had a place and a purpose.

This sort of God was about the larger society and social mores, not the individual. That God wasn’t,

Your own personal Jesus  
Someone to hear your prayers  
Someone who cares

as Depeche Mode sang.

This is exactly the tension that Charles Taylor sees going back and forth since the Middle Ages—sometimes Christianity is about society, sometimes it’s personal. Some people want religion to be about society, some prefer the personal. Is the church enforcing social norms, or is it freeing the individual mind to find God? Is the church the oppressor, or is it siding with the oppressed? The pendulum swings back and forth, creating popular folk movements within Roman Catholicism, and creating Protestantism in all its varieties. Changing, adapting, changing.

But all the while, people find their “own personal Jesus,” if you will, in other things—mysticism, Buddhism, yoga, New Age, reading books . . . but also in *totally* other ways—people finding religious fulfillment in art, music, science, wood carving, hugging trees . . . and on and on. Until societies reach a tipping point, as many nations have, and as it appears is happening in the United States.

At that tipping point, being secular is as easy as belonging to a traditional religion. And people choose secular, or as Charles Taylor calls a slightly more refined movement, “humanism.”

For Taylor, “humanism” is the thoughtful, ethical secular alternative to religion. Humanists believe in modern medicine, modern psychology, contemporary mores, modern science, but mostly Taylor’s humanists believe in and exercise *choice* and believe in extending choice to everyone.

Now, Taylor’s use of the term “humanism” is with a little “h.” It’s not the capital “H” Humanism that we’re about here. Here our Humanism with a capital “H” is about all those things he lists, sure, but it’s also about offering an alternative to the community aspect of religions, and we are offering ways to both examine our ethics and values, and live out our ethics and values. But the focus is on community, and values, and social justice, with some consideration of our own personal Jesus or Buddha or Charles Darwin.

Humanists with a capital “H” believe that human morality and ethics evolve alongside human societies and that the human imagination continues to rethink and reexamine how human beings can treat each other and live on our planet.

That sort of Humanism is a great experiment; and it’s what we have been doing here at First Unitarian Society for a century and more . . . long before the current rise in secular thinking.

That’s why we are prepared to lead.

TWO:

I titled my talk today “Darwin Pulls Back the Curtain” because I want to look closely at what the theory of natural selection can tell us about Humanist ethics and a possible human future. I’d like to take a look at a couple of extracts from Darwin’s writing. The first is from *The Descent of Man*, published in 1871:

As man (*sic*) advances in civilization, and small tribes are united into larger communities, the simplest reason would tell each individual that he ought to extend his social instincts and sympathies to all the members of the same nation, though personally unknown to him.

From tribe to nation. But Darwin looks further down the evolutionary road:

This point being once reached, there is only an artificial barrier to prevent his sympathies extending to the men of all nations and races. If, indeed, such men are separated from him by great differences in appearance or habits, experience

unfortunately shews us how long it is, before we look at them as our fellow-creatures. (*The Descent of Man*, Chapter IV)

This is the place we haven't gone yet, as a species, though some of our species have reached *toward* that goal.

The theory of natural selection, far from exposing the barbarism of *homo sapiens*, points us away from the human mythologies that claimed every tribe and nation was the center of the universe and the special friend of one god or several.

Humanity's *true* origin story does not divide us into the children of Cain or of Ishmael or any "other." Our true origin is as mammals, primates, and one species.

In this case, truth is more hopeful than fiction. Humanity is truly one. We need only get over "differences in appearance or habits." A tall order, but if we can *imagine* it, we can *achieve* it.

But Darwin had already thought even further when he wrote those words. In 1837—a year after arriving back from his fateful journey on HMS Beagle—Darwin wrote in his notebook:

If we choose to let conjecture run wild, then animals, our fellow brethren in pain, diseases, death, suffering and famine—our slaves in the most laborious works, our companions in our amusements—they may partake our origin in one common ancestor—we may be all netted together.

Humanists "choose to let conjecture run wild." We know that "we are all netted together" in the interdependent web of all existence.

This is our true origin story, and one of great wonder and awe: we are "all netted together."

Realizing that truth is our challenge . . . and a worthy goal.

### THREE

The theory of natural selection also teaches us humility as part of a whole.

The cognitive scientist Daniel Dennett is clear about the story that the theory of natural selection tells about our species:

We can now expose perhaps the most common misunderstanding of Darwinism: the idea that Darwin showed that evolution by natural selection is a procedure for producing Us.

None of that “crown of creation” stuff for those who understand the theory of natural selection—Dennett terms natural selection, “complexity without comprehension.”

Daniel Dennett is one of the most profound thinkers of our time. Darwin himself misunderstood the ultimate point of his theory—in fact, where a species is at any given moment is random.

Since our environment is ever-changing, a species well adapted to the present environment may not be prepared for the next change. The adaptation that may make some of the species immune to new environmental problems may save some of that species from extinction. But the adaptation will have occurred randomly.

As is the case of our ability to evolve at all on this particular planet in this particular solar system in this particular galaxy, in the end the conclusion is clear: it just so happened. It didn't have to happen. It just happened. Furthermore, there's no ultimate point to human existence. Even if the cosmos had a purpose, people would surely not be able to comprehend what that purpose was. And the purpose would not be about us.

This is perhaps the greatest discovery of science: there's no ultimate point. It is Darwin's most dangerous idea. It is Edwin Hubble's dangerous idea. It is Harvard physicist Lisa Randall's dangerous idea as she pushes on making discoveries in supersymmetry, cosmological inflation, and dark matter.

Human religions developed origin stories to tell us why we are here—why we exist. Human religions tell the story of a cosmos that exists on a human scale—the gods made it all, we're told, then made us to make sense of it all. We're told that god made an ordered universe, and thus we are to make an ordered society and lead ordered lives.

Origin stories are beautiful myths. But none of them are true. The universe just is. We just are.

This dangerous idea—this is not a place of nihilism and meaninglessness. This is a place of ultimate human purpose and responsibility. We are responsible because we understand.

That is why the theoretical physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer quoted from the the Hindu scripture the *Bhagavad Gita* as the first atomic bomb was denoted, “Now I am become death, destroyer of worlds.”

We are unique on this planet in our awesome ability to create, preserve, and destroy.

Because the cosmos and the earth don't operate on a human scale, because we can't, as the saying goes, “let go and let god,” we must take responsibility for what we do

here—that is the ultimate point of Humanism. We aren't "humanity first" any more than we are "America first." We are "planet first." All of it is our responsibility.

This is the heart of Humanism: we've got to *have* a heart because it's just us huddled together here on this pale blue dot.

As Humanists, we must understand: it is not our inner-lives that are at the center of the cosmos. It is our service to others—other people; other living things; and the planet itself—because there is no "other."

## CONCLUSION

Darwin's dangerous idea tells us that everything is connected—this interconnected web of our existence.

Experience teaches us that everything changes as we join in the line of those eighty-five billion human beings who have lived and died on this planet.

Because of all of that . . . we must care for each other—from one point on our planet to all the others . . . we and all living things are "all netted together" in this marvelous, random, existence.

It's a dangerous idea. Most people aren't ready to see it. But it's as close as we human beings have ever gotten to the truth of our existence.