

**“Relative Worth:
A Reflection on Human Self-Image, 150 Years after Darwin”**

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Two hundred years ago this month, Charles Darwin was born. Fifty years later, he published his book *On the Origin of Species*, introducing the world to the theory of evolution. One hundred fifty years on, we are still recovering! Darwin’s theory utterly transformed how we humans see ourselves. In the Judeo-Christian world, for thousands of years we had believed God created all the different plants and animals more or less at the same time, and us too. We had thought everything was created all at once, just as it is today, and not so very long ago at that. And we thought we were created to be in charge of the whole thing, to have dominion, as Genesis puts it, over all other forms of life.

Then along came the theory of evolution, which tells us we human beings and every other kind of life have evolved together over billions of years, going all the way back to the earliest tiny one-celled creatures. And so we learned that every single living thing is related to every other. Evolution means we are literally cousins, however distant, to chimpanzees and cats and dogs, seagulls and lizards and cockroaches and fish, not to mention viruses and bacteria. This isn’t just a metaphor. It is literally true: we are the relatives of every other living thing.

Now, religious liberals are not known for having a problem

with any of this.

We know some religious groups have had a hard time reconciling what they believe about the Bible with what science tells us.

But in this tradition, we've never seen a conflict between science and religion.

We have accepted and even embraced the theory of evolution, right from the beginning.

We have embraced this story of our origins,
out of the stars,
rising from rocks and the sea,
life kindled by sunlight...

We trace our ancestry back to the earliest creatures, so long ago we can hardly fathom it.

We look back even farther to a time when wind swept over the waters of earth and nothing yet lived, and farther still to that unimaginably distant time when earth was still a swirling cloud of dust, and with the poet we *cry wonder* that we are here, living and breathing and understanding.

In our tradition, the story of evolution has become a sacred story in its own right, every bit as wondrous as the old stories of creation in seven days, maybe even more so.

And yet—
and yet—

I wonder, sometimes, if we have yet to fully absorb its message.

Because we're still caught up a little in that older Judeo-Christian story, the version where we have dominion over everything else. In generations past, we took the Bible at its word when it said God had given us the right to rule over all other animals.

Our tradition has moved away
from accepting *this* creation story without question,
but we still want to hang on to the self-image it gave us.
It felt good to believe that we're supposed to be in charge,
that we are the pinnacle of creation,
that other living things exist primarily to serve *us* and our needs.
It felt good to believe we are the one species in all the world
that was created in the image of God.
So we've tried to hang on to that feeling of specialness,
that sense that by rights we have first dibs
on all the world's resources.
And we justify it
with all sorts of arguments about our unique abilities.
We tell ourselves we are special, we have a right to put ourselves first,
because of our brains,
our powers of reason, our intelligence, our creativity,
our ability to imagine the future and understand the past.
And it's true that all these qualities are wonderful and amazing.

Yet I can't help but think,
other species have qualities that are just as amazing.
Think of the sequoias in the mountains
that can survive being burned in a wildfire for hours.
Or how about the monarch butterfly,
which can smell its mate from 5 miles away?¹
Or think of a cockroach.
I learned just the other day that a cockroach could live for a month
even if it got its head cut off.²
Is that not amazing?

And what about the dinosaurs?
We like to say the dinosaurs "ruled the earth" when they were alive.
Back in those days, they might have said about themselves,

¹ See <http://drbenkim.com/amazing-animal-facts.html>.

² See http://www.bio.umass.edu/biology/kunkel/cockroach_faq.html#Q13.

we are the best because we are so big and strong.
Today we laugh at their “brains the size of a walnut,”
and it’s probably true, we’re probably a lot better than they were
at figuring things out,
but back in the day, those very dinosaurs might have laughed at us
for being so small and weak.

I think that old saying “might makes right” applies here.
Those of us who are children of Western culture,
we tend to pick out the qualities we like best about human beings—
like our intelligence, our creativity—
and we set those qualities up
as a universal standard of perfection
designed to prove that humans are the best,
and therefore to prove we are right to put ourselves first
when we make decisions that affect the rest of the living things
on this planet.

But if we could step back and take, as it were,
a God’s-eye view of life on earth,
would we still put ourselves at the top of the heap?
You might remember the words of J. B. S. Haldane,
a British evolutionary biologist who was once asked,
what could we conclude about the nature of God
from the study of biology?
His famous reply was that the Creator must have
“an inordinate fondness for beetles.”

Well, there you go!
Who’s to say all those beetles are any less loved than we are,
or any less important?
And who is to say the life of the turtle,
laying her eggs on the shore of the water,
is any less sacred than our own?

To speak very personally for a moment,
I'm very glad to be a human being myself, I really am,
but sometimes I feel such a longing and a curiosity
to know how it would feel to be in another creature's skin.
Madeleine L'Engle, the fantasy novelist,
wrote something about our five senses that I think is fascinating.
She's imagining what it might be like
if there were people on other planets,
and she writes:

If everybody in the world was born blind,
if there wasn't any such thing as sight,
we wouldn't have the slightest idea what it was.
We couldn't conceive of it even in our wildest dreams.
So maybe on [other planets] there's a new sense,
just as important as sight, or even more important,
but which we can't conceive of now
any more than we could conceive of sight
if we didn't know about it.³

I myself wonder if other creatures right on this planet
have senses, ways of perceiving, ways of knowing and being wise
that are incredibly important but which *we* can't conceive of
because they're so completely out of our experience.
I'd love to know how it feels to be a tree,
rooted so deeply into the ground,
their sense of time so much more spacious than ours.
I sometimes wonder,
what secret wisdom do the trees draw up
through those roots, hidden in the earth?

For that matter, I'd love to know how it feels to be my cat,
jumping up onto a table three times his height, and so easily.
And the hawks that you can see above the fields, gliding so high,

³ Madeleine L'Engle, *Camilla* (New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell, 1982 [1965]), p. 251.

wouldn't it just be amazing to be up there?
When I was a little girl, I read a book once
about a boy who had a magical gift—
he could send his mind into animals' minds
and be with them as they ran through the woods
or soared in the sky.
How I longed for that gift.
And that longing forever convinced me
that although we human beings are wonderful in many ways,
we aren't the be-all and end-all of life.
We are simply a part of the whole.
Life as it is manifested in us
is only a partial revelation of the total life force
that springs forth so abundantly on earth.
Every creature, every plant, every insect, every animal,
teaches us something new and unique about what life is.

So...are human beings the pinnacle of life on earth?
Are we the ultimate destiny of the universe?
I love being alive,
I love all the wonders and the challenges of being human,
but I have to say I don't think any one species is the pinnacle of life,
the best that will ever be...
because it's life as a whole that matters,
not just people,
but life that pulses through every one of us and every creature,
changing and evolving and bringing forth new forms
that we cannot even imagine.

But here we are today,
human beings who are what we are;
we're always trying to be better, but we are who we are,
and we are constantly needing to make very practical decisions
about how we're going to use the resources on this planet.
Human beings are so powerful right now that the choices we make,

for good or ill,
dictate what is going to be left over for every other creature on earth.

And so the question arises:
on what grounds have we been hoarding all the best for ourselves?
On what grounds have we taken over the land for our houses,
the water for our farms?
On what grounds have we altered the very air that we breathe?
Do we have any inherent right to take over to the extent we have?
Imagine if there were some great inter-species court of justice,
all the species of life on earth assembled
to try a great case called Humans vs. The Rest of Existence.
Could we win that case?
Could we defend our habits in any remotely objective manner?
I'm not convinced we could.

And yet, I don't think we're inherently evil,
or even any more greedy than any other species.
We in the West do tend to put ourselves first,
we see ourselves at the center of the universe,
but, then again, probably *all* creatures do.
Actually, contemporary astrophysics tells us—
and this is a mind-blower—
there *is* no center of the universe.
There is no point in the universe more central than any other point.
Wherever you happen to be *looks* like the center of the universe,
but it's actually an illusion; it's a trick of perception.
The way our mind works, the way we perceive things,
the way we're built makes it natural
for us to think we're at the center of things,
the most important thing,
both on the macro-level of the universe itself
and on the micro-level of our home here on earth.

So I don't fault us, I don't say we're horribly bad

for falling prey to a trick of perception.

It's our nature.

We happen to be creatures

whose minds think we're the center of the universe,

creatures who want to *live* and survive.

So we put ourselves first, and the ones we're closest to—
our relatives, our dear friends, our fellow humans.

That's our nature.

It's natural for individuals to be loyal to their own species
and want to consider them most.

It would be natural for a squirrel to put squirrels first,
or an alligator to put alligators first.

Yet, since we do have the powers of mind that we *have*,
let us be mindful of the impact

of this "natural" habit of putting ourselves first.

Squirrels putting squirrels first

is probably not going to do the world any great harm.

As long as we stay out of the alligators' way,
they can do their thing too.

But human beings continuing to put human beings first,
at the expense of so many other creatures,
is *not* working.

The Lakota people have a saying, "All my relatives."

It means we're connected to everything else.

It means exactly what Darwin told us 150 years ago:

all the creatures on this earth *are* our relatives,

our cousins, our brothers and sisters,

relatives of worth and dignity.

Let us embrace them as family and honor them.

Let us make room for them abundantly in the home we share,
our home, the earth.

May it be so. Amen.