

“Beyond Idolatries”
(The Sources of Our Faith: Humanist Teachings)

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June 13, 2010

Charles Darwin had a problem.
He was living in a society where most people believed
the God of the Judeo-Christian Bible
was the Creator of everything in the world.
Most people believed this God was omniscient,
knowing everything there is to know,
They believed God was omnipotent, all-powerful,
able to do anything.
And they believed God was perfectly good.
A perfectly good God who knows everything, and can do anything.
And this was Darwin’s problem.
Actually, it was more than a problem. It was a crisis of faith,
a spiritual crisis. Because he looked around at the world he knew,
and he could not figure out how such a God
could allow so much suffering.

He didn’t get to that point right away.
As a young man, Darwin was fairly traditional in his religious beliefs.
Most of his relatives were Unitarian,
but Unitarians in those days pretty much accepted this view of God
as all-good, all-powerful, and all-knowing.
The question of suffering didn’t bother them too much,
because they believed when they suffered,
that was one of God’s ways of teaching them
and helping them become better people.
So Darwin’s Unitarian background really was not all that radical,
at least in that way.
He also went to an Anglican boarding-school,

and actually he considered becoming an Anglican priest
as a young man.
But he didn't. He became a scientist, a specialist in natural history.

And at this point, you might be thinking,
yeah, yeah, we know all that;
he came up with the theory of evolution
and natural selection, yada, yada,
but there is something really interesting to know
about the early part of his career, as he was just getting going.
His training was among natural historians
who believed what they were studying
was how God worked in the world.
They fully believed in the God of the Bible,
a God who chose to work through the laws of nature,
but a perfectly good and all-powerful God just the same.
Darwin believed in that God too.
He started out his career wanting to glorify God through science.
It was only later that he came to doubt
whether that God existed at all.

So what made him doubt?
What makes any of us question what we thought we knew?
Life happens to us.
We learn things that don't match what we think we know.
We see, we observe things that don't fit so easily into our beliefs
about how the world works.
And we experience things,
we suffer, we laugh, we get excited,
we get transformed by experiences
that don't fit into what we thought we knew,
who we thought we were.
We are stretched and pulled and transformed by life.

And that's what happened to Darwin too.

At age 42 something terrible happened to his family.
He and his wife lost a child.
Their daughter Annie died after a long illness,
just after her 10th birthday.
Darwin was heartbroken.
His little girl was gone,
and his religion brought him no comfort.
He had been brought up to believe suffering
is one of the tools God uses to teach us and help us grow.
For some people, that belief is what helps them survive
and heal from their suffering.
For some people, it is literally a life-saver.
Probably all of us can all look back
on some of our struggles
and find some good that came out of them.
But Darwin wrestled with the death of his daughter
and felt only pain and grief that made no sense.
In the greatest crisis of his life,
he turned to the God he thought he had known
and found only emptiness.¹

From then on, Darwin found he could no longer be a Christian.
He found it harder and harder to ignore the suffering of the world.
He didn't know how to tune it out any more,
or rationalize it as part of God's plan.
As a scholar, he was studying all sorts of non-human creatures,
and he started asking himself, what purpose could possibly be served
by the suffering of other animals
over thousands and millions of years?
We could ask the same questions today each day we hear the news.
I think of all those sea birds covered in oil down in the Gulf,
and if I were to tell you that somehow their suffering
is for their moral benefit—that would be obscene,

¹ See Adam Gopnik, "Rewriting Nature: Charles Darwin, Natural Novelist," *New Yorker* October 23, 2006, p. 58.

it would be outrageous, it would make no sense whatsoever.
And yet they do suffer; they are suffering;
and countless millions on millions of creatures
have been suffering through time
on a scale that we can hardly imagine, and where is God in that?
Where is the benevolent, loving purpose in that?
The very nature of Darwin's work, which he had undertaken
as a way of joyfully showing forth the glory of God,
had led him into the heart of darkness
at the center of the interdependent web,
the terrible mystery that life must feed on life to survive,
and death comes for us all.

And so Darwin's personal experience of great suffering,
combined with his professional work as a natural historian,
devoted to the path of reason and science,
led him to see the cracks in his society's portrait of God.
He could no longer believe in a God who was all-good
and all-knowing and all-powerful.
For Darwin, all the old defenses of God's goodness crumbled
under the weight of suffering that made no sense,
suffering that was both deeply personal
and on such a vast scale that our minds even now
can hardly fathom it.
For Darwin, facing the question of God,
the only honest response left was to throw up his hands
and say, "I don't know. I just don't know."

But abandoning God did not mean abandoning life and hope.
Darwin gave to us the immeasurable gift of self-knowledge,
the theory of evolution and natural selection
which has absolutely transformed our understanding of ourselves.
He gave us a new way to understand what it means to be alive,

part of a great sweeping story of life out of stardust,
constantly changing and transforming,
bringing forth endlessly fresh and beautiful new manifestations
of life in this world.

He gave us a new story to hold onto
as the old story of traditional Christianity was crumbling away.
He gave us this new universe story as the foundation
for new forms of faith, which, like life itself,
have continued to evolve and strengthen us for our own struggles.

For Unitarian Universalists, probably the most influential
of those new forms of faith has been the humanist tradition
that grew up starting at the beginning of the 20th century—
that path that affirms life is good and people matter,
and no matter what comes after we die, or doesn't,
we are alive now and we all have a responsibility to contribute
to life on earth, here and now.

Our association's bylaws contain a very beautiful statement
about this tradition. They remind us that our living tradition
“draws from many sources,” including “Humanist teachings
which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason
and the results of science,
and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.”

*To heed the guidance of reason and the results of science,
and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.*

I'm not going to say too much more about reason and science
right now, or the classical principles of humanism.

In just a couple of weeks, Art Cofod from our Worship Associates
group is going to be presenting a service about classical humanism
as it's been expressed in this congregation, and I encourage you
to be there and enjoy that.

What I find myself especially drawn to today,
as we celebrate our flower ceremony
and ponder Darwin's story and what it has to do with humanism,

is this idea of *resisting idolatries of the mind and spirit*,
and I want to talk just a little about that
and try to bring all these strands together for us.

So first we need to understand what idolatry is.
Basically idolatry is worshipping someone or something
as if it were the only thing worthy of our worship,
when it's really not.

Idolatry is when you think you know
exactly what God or the sacred is,
you think you understand the mystery,
only in fact what you think you know is incomplete.

It's when you have a piece of the truth
and you think it's the whole truth.

It's a state of rigidity, too much certainty,
and it blinds you to everything you don't know yet.

You can't see the truths other people see,
because you're clinging so tightly and focused so narrowly
on what you think you know.

That's idolatry.

And it can happen to all of us—not just individuals,
but entire societies.

In fact, I would even say it does happen, very predictably,
to just about every generation in every society.

Each generation in every place has to find a story to hold onto,
a way of making sense of our lives,
something that gives us purpose and meaning;
that helps us go on and survive our suffering
and be happy and joyful and strong and compassionate;
that inspires us to live as well as we can
and make a difference in this world.

And when we find that faith-story for ourselves, it feels so good
and it matters so much to us,
it's just a tiny leap to think our story

has got to be the right one for everybody else too.
It's just the tiniest little leap to think we've got the Truth
with a capital T.

But the thing is, those great stories of faith and meaning
are like life itself. They are always changing
because the conditions of life are always changing.
The faith-story that spoke to our grandparents or even our parents
with a life-saving word
may not be what *we* need to keep our hope alive.
The faith-story that speaks so powerfully to us
may not be what our children and grandchildren will need
to keep hope alive in their world.
None of our stories, not even our most cherished,
is True with a capital T for all times and all people.

And what I believe is that each new generation
is going to discover the idolatries that are latent
in the beliefs and stories of the generations that come before them.
Each new generation sees with a lens that's a little different
from what came before,
and so they can start to see the cracks in the stories they inherit.
They can see the limitations and the gaps
in what their society thought it knew.
And that is the *good news*,
because, as Darwin taught us, the very nature of life
is for forms to arise and serve a purpose for a time,
and then to *change* as circumstances change.

Darwin knew that when he published his theories,
it would profoundly shake his society's faith
in the benevolent God of the Bible.
He wrote to a friend in 1844 that he was afraid to publish

because it felt “like confessing a murder!”²
And for many people, the theory of evolution
did destroy their faith in the God they thought they knew.
But faith itself was not destroyed. It found new forms.
Because the mystery we have called God
is infinitely bigger than all our names for it,
all our ideas about what it might be.

Likewise, in our contemporary Unitarian Universalist world,
many of our younger UUs are coming to intuit
that the rejection of God
which was so characteristic of our faith in the ‘60s and ‘70s
may have based on an inadequate conception
of who or what that which we have called God might be.
And no doubt their vision will be questioned and reshaped and recast
by the younger generations still to come.
Because faith moves. Our vision is partial
and each generation can see new and different pieces of the truth.

I invite you to look at the flowers you have given and received
one more time.
Imagine that each flower represents a different story of faith
told by our brothers and sisters on this planet.
Each story is born because it is beautiful and necessary
to a particular people at a particular time.
Each of our stories of faith is adapted to the needs of the people
just as these flowers are adapted to their environment.
It wouldn’t make any sense to say
one flower is more true than another flower.
The flowers exist because life has called them into being,
beyond right and wrong, truth and untruth.
They exist in a delicate balance with the sun and the soil,
the grass and the bees and the rain.

² Charles Darwin, letter to Joseph Hooker, January 14, 1844, quoted at
<http://speakingoffaith.publicradio.org/programs/2009/darwin/particulars.shtml>.

There was a time when they did not exist,
and there will be a time when new forms emerge to take their place.
But life itself endures.
The mystery behind it endures.

So our stories of faith exist
because the stories of our lives call them into being,
because we need to believe our lives have meaning even in suffering
and what we do matters
and we are right to hope.
Innumerable stories have sprung up out of the soil of our humanity,
time out of time.
The details, the faces blur and change,
but the hope endures.
Each new generation lifts its eyes to the sun
and awakens to the wonder of being here, alive, miraculously here.
Each new generation passes through the mystery of death
into we know not what.
The hope endures
even as all our stories, all our knowledge pass away.

May it be given to us to bless this life
even in the midst of suffering.
May the force of truth and wisdom and spirit,
rooted in the earth, wide as the sky,
spring up in each new generation of heretics and seekers.
May the Spirit of Life be within us always,
fearless and fresh and free.

Amen.