

Brooklyn Hermeneutic Association

An Intersection of Faith & Secular Life

ON THE CONSILIENCE OF VALUES

The Intersection of Sacred Scripture, Contemporary Faith, and Values shared with the insights of Evolution and Adaptation from Charles Darwin ¹



*It is not the strongest of species that survives, nor the most intelligent that survives,
but the one that is most adaptable to change.*

Charles Darwin

Let me set the stage as Rev. Emerick and I begin the dialogue with our own shared values and the values which have been deep in the work of Adam Smith (human economics) and Charles Darwin (theory of evolution). Our desire is to remember the best of their work as it has developed a humane system of economic governance and relational evolution. Bob and I will seek to

¹ Origin of Species (1859) and the Descent of Man (1871)

glean the best of their work to engage in a conversation about values that dig deep into our spiritual tradition as Christians.

I stand before you today as a pastor who is not afraid to remain a person of faith and dedicated to the institutional church despite the dilemma of the church not living up to its mandate to proclaim and teach the gospel by every means possible. Those of us who practice living our faith through a committed faith community called, the church, tend to live through the machinations of doctrine, proper denominational belief systems, rather than the varied nuance found in the Biblical stories surrounding the teaching of Jesus...the profound and troubling storyteller of parables that speak through a spiritually enlightened insight seen through a political observation negotiated through a specific topographical interaction of faith and the public square.

I stand before you also because I serve a congregation that empirically states that “some of us believe some of the time, some believe all the time [Matthew 28.17], and some believe none of the time,” yet we remain part of a ministry of belonging stirred with the radical hospitality shared through the stories of Jesus of Nazareth.

Finally, I stand before you as one who has engaged in theological study, particularly as a marinated, yet not pickled, Lutheran, in biblical study through what my Rabbi Harold Swiss would name “the jacobean lens.” That is, the spiritual ‘way of seeing’ comes through a regular human and environmental experience of question and intellectual curiosity, as well as, divine wrestling. The way of seeing comes through the art of questioning.

To begin let me say, I love the book by Isaiah Berlin called, *The Hedgehog and the Fox*. It is Isaiah’s analysis of Tolstoy’s view of history. To begin the work Mr. Berlin used a line from the Greek poet Archilochus which gave him a picture of two different types of people. One is the hedgehog and the other fox. The poet writes: *The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing.*

I know a little about many things and to that extent represent the fox-type. I’m not foxy. I’m just eager to learn and in love with a lot. By being a fox, however, I can see the interconnect-edness and eventually the concilience of many things. So, I read all the hedgehogs I am able to muster ~ those who know a lot about one big thing.

Today we peek into two hedgehogs. One in economics, Adam Smith. The other, in natural selection, Charles Darwin. I am also part of another hedgehog that expresses itself in the sacred text and the gift of values expressed through the sacred myths in that sacred scripture.

I have three presuppositions in my contribution to this dialogue on Values. First, there are some values that remain deep in the soul force of the best of religion. Second, there are values that have been mistakenly abused due to misinterpretation from those sacred texts. And third, there are values that participate with a concilience of knowledge the more the faith community and the secular community intersect their ideas and experiences.

The deep soul force of values comes to me in the Hebrew and Christian Bibles. The Jew and Christian is trained to see and experience the planet and all living things that mask the divine. That form of sacred pleasure enters our conscience through the biblical lens of the story of beginnings in Genesis 1.1~2.4. There we encounter the myth of what we have called, "creation," through an exchange of the Elohist community who describes God as the mystery who enters the creation through the *tohu va bohu*, the depth veiled in darkness, the sea over which the spirit pulses.² As that God brooded over the waters She dove deep into the *tohu va bohu* (Genesis 1.2) to speak light into the chaos/darkness. The sound of God creates life by spewing light in the midst of darkness. One cannot be without the other. Light cannot be light without darkness. Darkness cannot be darkness without light. In our creation myth, seven times God calls that life good, very good. And ultimately names all of it, gadosh/holy.

In that myth of beginnings we have the values of goodness to all living. It is also curious that the Elohist knew something about what would become evolutionary theory by sharing the story that humankind was the last work of Elohim, on the sixth day. Then, on the seventh day, God did a work stoppage and took a Sabbath rest.

If you read many of the paleontologists (Stephen J. Gould is my favorite) you would notice that each one articulates the fact that humankind enters the created order late. Homo sapiens, the brain species, the wise hominids may have been at work on the planet for only the last milliseconds of geologic time. We are a late arrival. We are a most recent phenomena. We are one of the species that has produced well. What may have started as few as six hundred individuals our tribe, homo sapiens, now accounts for over seven billion.

I do not intend to insult a hedgehog like Charles Darwin and his magnificent work, *The Origin of Species*, by creating brief sound bites of his theory. But as a fox, I give myself permission to sum up much of his theory of evolution and natural selection in terms of working, as he says, "*solely by and for the good of each being. And that all corporeal and mental endowments will tend to progress toward perfection.*"³

² The term is shared in the excellent work by Catherine Keller, *The Face of the Deep, A Theology of Becoming*, Routledge 2003, Chapter 1, page 4.

³ *The Origin of Species*, pg. 913

I see this as the value of belonging. Those values are implicit in the originating myth of beginnings. Since humankind, male and female, were created and as the story goes, were given “dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air and over the cattle and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth” (Genesis 1.26 NRSV). Yet, the word, dominion does not refer to the modernist industrialists approach, that being by force and power over. Rather the dominion shared through the sacred lens of our Genesis myth together with the values which have storied our moral sentiments our task has been, and remains, of being God’s stewards (managers) on earth.

Human dominion is to be specified and limited. The value of our dominion/stewardship is shown by the vegetarian requirement through a fact that there was to be no killing. Human dominion corresponding to God’s rule, is to be benevolent and peaceful. Obviously we have not perfected that gift of management of God’s breathing life into this planet.

The quote at the start of this essay best expresses the values of Darwin’s theory and his articulation of the process of natural selection of all species. *For it is not the strongest of species that survives, nor the most intelligent that survives, but the one that is most adaptable to change.*

The older I get the younger I become. Not physically, but in the matter of the soul. At the age of 71 James Hillman, the marvelous archetypal psychologist, wrote about aging through the lens of maturing at 60 years and beyond. The book is called, *The Force of Character*. Dr. Hillman knows that when one grows what is now called, “young old,” and enters 60 and moves forward in the art of aging, the soul gets occupied in one of two scenarios. Either one turns 60+ and looks to the future with regret as if life is over, and I have to protect what I have gathered under my own roof. One looks to the future alone and is not able to collaborate. Often it becomes a “me against the world” mind set. It tends to be a life which seeks to control political, social, and religious experience. On one level I notice a spiritual dementia.⁴ That is, spiritually one could get stuck in a bygone era. The good old days become present.

The other option when growing old one looks at the future with utter thankfulness. One looks at daily life as one whole *élan vital*. What is important and of true value is one’s relations, one’s commitment, one’s faith, one’s ability to treasure every moment. Everything but value, true value, is forgettable. As they say, *fagettaboutit*.

Old folks joke that we occasionally forget things. However, according to Dr. Hillman, the truth of the matter is that as one ages, one naturally selects what is important. As we near the end of

⁴ I refer to spiritual dementia as a disorder which due to memory loss tends to captivate people in a former era, often in their earliest memory of religious connection.

life one should only remember important things. Vital things are life giving. What is not vital is where you place your keys, the pocketbook, or the grocery bag. In this view of aging, what is vital is whether there will be a true peace in the world. What you leave the earth after you die is important to the way you learn how to grow old and prepare for inevitable. Whether your grandchildren or grand niece and nephews have water and air that is breathable and drinkable. Whether our elected officials can begin talking across the aisle rather than stare angrily at the other talking head. Or whether corporate power may be dismantled to economically level out their greed to a more sensible profit.

I am reminded again and again that *it is not the strongest of species that survives, nor the most intelligent that survives, but the one that is most adaptable to change.*

The force of character means we look to what is truly important. It refers to what is valuable. And because of this desire for value, I remain in solidarity with those contemporary as well as 19th century evolutionists, who have encouraged us to understand a *selection process* that naturally modifies our life for the benefit of our selves and our tribe.

Humankind together with all of life on this watery, blue, *Third Rock from the Sun* understands that natural selection “*almost inevitably causes much extinction of the less improved forms of life, and induces what (Mr. Darwin) called Divergence of Character.*”⁵ Our survival is not guaranteed. Rather, it could be our character that may improve our chances for survival. The variation we have borrowed from our ancestors, and the variation we provide our children and their children’s, children’s, children will make a difference in the modification of life.

This, I believe, is a core insight from our hedgehog Charles Darwin and his theory of evolution. For it remains intimately present for us today, and intimately anticipatory for our offspring that survival refers not to the *battle of the fittest* but to the life forms that learn best to adapt and change. This is fundamental to the insight from Charles Darwin and many other evolutions then and ever since. This marks a divergence from many who, upon his writing in 1859 to the present day, refer solely to the survival of the fittest, and as they say in Hollywood, a “dog eat dog” mentality to our survival.

This principle of adaptation and change refers not to one isolated life form, like me, or my dog, but to the complex community of life species that humankind shares with all life forms on the planet. One’s adaptability affects the other in the same way that one’s inability to adapt to change affects the other. As a biblical theologian it is at the moment of interaction and adaptability that usher in our shared *values* and the divergence of character.

⁵ *Origin of Species, Introduction, Alfred A. Knopf, New York based on the original text from 1859, page 540*

Values refer to the shared accumulation of value through our interaction and contribution to our place in the planet. When the values are cockeyed, off the mark, self centered, autocratic, or even naively simple, our human community suffers with the rest of the species. Understanding of our moral sentiments is increasingly critical as the planet loses species after species, and begins to cook the ozone shield necessary for habitation.

This is the core of what I glean from Darwin's *Origin of Species* and the process of natural selection. The theory of evolution doesn't appear to be about who, or what is independently created, nor who or what may be immutable. But rather, natural selection remains the main, even though, not exclusive means of modification.⁶ And it is modification that Darwin hangs his refined ability to observe the intimacy of life.

It is at this point humankind needs to remember that a belief that we are created special and immutable forfeits the fact that humankind is one of the most recent adaptations to those of our species who have learned to walk upright and use their thumbs. As stated before it is helpful to keep in mind that we are a most recent phenomena in the created order of life. Our specialness has not to do with a special mark from the Holy Mystery who entered that chaos and sent to touch us with the power of love. Humankind has entered deep time rather recently. The idea of our latent arrival does not take away from our specialness. It is Charles Darwin's opportunity to place before society the image that we all are part of this tree of life.

The wonderful metaphor Tree of Life is used by countless of persons. It was used by Charles Darwin as he closes *The Origin of Species*. There he says: *The affinities of all the beings of the same class have sometimes been represented as a great tree. I believe this simile largely speaks the truth.... As buds give rise by growth to fresh buds, and these, if vigorous, branch out and overtop on all sides many a feebler brands, so by generation I believe it has been with the great Tree of Life, which fills with its dead and broken branches the crust of the earth, and covers the surface with its ever branching and beautiful ramifications. ... There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one, and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.*⁷

You remember the fiddler on the roof, and the lead character, Teviah. He was on the roof top and cried out with great joy, *lecheim ~ to life!* He was crying for himself. Yet, he was actually pleading for his entire tribe. Often what is vital to *faith, life*, and the *values we share* is implicit in our living together among the two leggeds, the four leggeds, the winged, and the slithering. How we live together could create a wonderful life...or not.

⁶ *Ibid.* Page 541

⁷ *ibid.* Page 913

Life is about faith, morality, ethics, and whether the family, or the community is living as a whole, not independent, alone, nor selfish. “*Am I my brother’s keeper?*” is a terse, challenging phrase that points an intimate direction to locate our values and evaluate how we behave toward the other while at the same time we are compelled to adapt to our own needs. Values like this have to do with our adaptability to social, economic, and environmental challenges.

In the historic faith of the Jew, Christian, and Muslim, how I care for the sojourner, the immigrant is the mark of virtue and distinction of our value. There are many examples in both the Hebrew Bible, the Christian Testament, and the Koran which describes the role of hospitality to the stranger. One of the best known stories comes from the Hebrew Bible in Genesis 15. There the faith ancestors, Abraham and Sarah, were living in the desert. They noticed three gentlemen coming toward them. In that culture how one treats the stranger is based on this story of beginnings. It was Abraham who passed the test of hospitality by looking into the face of the stranger and see God. Their moral courage overcame their fright. They became enlightened by the care for the stranger who in Jewish, Christian, & Muslim terms has become the moral high-ground.

Today our value in social, political, and religious hospitality is challenged through the thousands of stories of children crossing Mexico from Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala. This dangerous and expensive crossing is due to the fact that their world has become too violent. They look for any place of refuge. One such place is the USA. The questions we need to adapt to is: *Does my well being depend on the well being of these children living a life of fear and trembling? Do I adapt to this catastrophe and thus change enough to let others live?*

On another level of adaptability we are never too far from the present age of climate change. The question goes beyond whether we are our brother’s keeper or not. The question becomes, *Am I the earth’s keeper? Can I adapt enough to give the planet a chance to adapt to the climate change I have already contributed to?*

Those are such questions that seek to talk about when we ask: *what is at stake?* This is why Rev. Emerick and I have begun a conversation with you on the moral sentiments of what we value and how we must needs value our ability to adjust and change for the betterment of our species and the planet itself. The Origin of Species inspires the deep time of evolution as we participate with it in our own ability or lack of ability to change. These sentiments have to do with how we align ourselves with the created order and how we learn how to share our economic resources, and do what is fair.

I am sure you already are fully aware that I am not an expert in the Origin of Species. Nor do I command the language of Charles Darwin. Yet I believe I have attested to the spirit of his magnificent work.

Postscript

You have noticed that I have referred to the values implicit and experienced in an optimistic manner. I am fully aware that this may not be the case. That is, humankind may sustain its greed and lust for ubiquitous usury of all the natural resources thus making the planet inhabitable and unsustainable for human beings and for numerous species which fall victim to our painful ignorance. So to keep honest let me turn to another paleontologist who died in 1978, Loren Eiseley. Dr. Eiseley wrote a book on Charles Darwin analyzing his theories and the other naturalists who contributed to his Origin of Species. The book was published after his death. In the chapter called, The Time of Man, Loren writes:

It is a curious thought that as I sit down to write this essay on the history of our species, I do so in the heightened consciousness that it may never be published: a holocaust may overtake it. Tomorrow I may lie under tons of rubble, precipitated into the street along with the paper on which this history is scribbled. Over the whole earth ~ this infinitely small globe that possesses all we know of sunshine and bird song ~ an unfamiliar blight is creeping: man ~ man, who has become at last a planetary disease and who would, if his technology yet permitted pass this infection to another star. If I write this history in brief compass it is because, on the scale of the universe, it is but an instant, shot with individual glory and unimaginable shame. Man is the only infinitely corruptible as well as infinitely perfectible animal.”⁸

⁸ Darwin and the Mysterious Mr. X, New Light on the Evolutionists, Loren Easily, E.P. Dutton, from the estate of Loren Easily, 1979, page 220