

## **“Endless Forms Most Beautiful”**

Darwin Day, Feb. 11, 2007

For millennia, people have found spiritual and religious meanings in nature. For many cultures, the lesson absorbed was that humans are a part of what we UU's call “the interdependent web of life.” In the Judeo-Christian tradition, however, that lesson was overshadowed by the perception that humans were the product of a special creation and, because of Original Sin, a special dispensation, and that we were uniquely different from all other living beings.

The publication of Darwin's great book, *The Origin of Species*, followed by the even more controversial volume, *The Descent of Man*, cast that uniqueness into question. Indeed, for a large and vocal segment of the British and American public, the acceptance of the theory of evolution meant the devaluation, and even the degradation, of humanity.

More than 150 years later, some people still feel that way, but many mainstream Christian and Jewish denominations, including Roman Catholicism, the Anglican Communion, Reform Judaism, and the Lutheran church, assert that there is no inherent contradiction between accepting the validity of evolutionary theory and believing in Christian or Jewish theology. In fact, in more than 500 churches and synagogues today, sermons reconciling evolutionary theory and Christian or Jewish beliefs are being given.

What I want to assert here today, however, is that we do not necessarily need to reconcile our beliefs as Unitarians with evolutionary theory. Rather, we should rejoice in the facts of evolution through natural selection and the way in

which the story of evolution can enrich our spiritual lives through the experience of what can be called humanistic religious naturalism.

As I said earlier, millions of people in hundreds of different cultures have found spiritual meaning in the natural world. Chief Dan George wrote “The summit of the mountain, the thunder of the sky, the rhythm of the sea, speaks to me.” According to Eihei Dogen, “You should entreat trees and rocks to preach the Dharma, and you should ask rice fields and gardens for the truth. Did not the great god Indra honor a wild fox as his own master, calling him ‘Bodhisattva’?” And a fishermen’s song from the Phillipines runs, “Brothers of the sea, look at the stars, look at the deep blue and set the world free.”

But the natural world by itself is not, for most people, a sufficient source of religious meaning because nature – and evolution – are not moral in any real sense. What the study of evolution tells us is that we are the fortuitous result of randomness, not the beneficiaries of some cosmic plan.

Humanism, with its emphasis on the worth and dignity of every person and the responsibility of humans to care for themselves and the world, literally humanizes religious naturalism. But equally, the contemplation of the natural world and the incorporation of the story of evolution as part of one’s worldview corrects the excessive anthropocentrism that limits humanism.

Adam Gopnik, in an essay in *The New Yorker* about Darwin and his writing, draws a contrast between a Renaissance version of humanism – the idea that man is the measure of all things – and the more recent Enlightenment version – the idea that all things can be measured by man,

and that this capacity for understanding our environment and deliberately acting within and upon it is what makes us unique. It is the dynamic tension between this humanism and the evolutionarily-determined richness of the world around us that energizes the spiritual force of humanistic religious naturalism, as expressed in this brief essay by Susan Griffin.

“We know ourselves to be made from this earth. We know this earth is made from our bodies. For we see ourselves. And we are nature. We are nature seeing nature. Nature weeping. Nature speaking of nature to nature.

The red-winged blackbird flies in us, in our inner sight. We see the arc of her flight. We measure the ellipse. We predict its climax. We are amazed. We are moved. We fly. We watch her wings negotiate the wind, the substance of the air, its elements and the elements of those elements, and count those elements found in other beings, the sea urchin’s sting, ink, this paper, our bones, the flesh of our tongues with which we make the sound “blackbird,” the ear with which we hear, the eye which travels the arc of her flight. And yet the blackbird does not fly in us but in somewhere else free of our own minds, and now even free of our sight, flying in the path of her own will.”

The story of our evolution is, in fact, a wonderful story *because* it contradicts the story of special creation. It affirms that we are an integral part of nature, and that is a cause for joy. If you were watching TV late at night a week or two ago, perhaps you saw *The Daily Show*. Jon Stewart had an unusual guest, Neil deGrasse Tyson, an astrophysicist who has a new book out, and in the course of the interview, Tyson said, with the most obvious sense of delight, “What

this (the story of the evolution of the universe) tells us is, the same elements that are in the farthest stars are in us. The universe is in us!”

And the corollary is, that we are in this universe and that, because we have powers, we also have responsibilities. We must be the stewards of the earth, because we can be. And that is also a joy.

In closing, I’m again going to make use of another’s words, because this reading by John Seed so well expresses the dualism of humanistic religious naturalism, the spiritual sense that we are utterly and joyously in this world, but that we are also unique beings with a unique role to play.

“We call upon the spirit of evolution, the miraculous force that inspired rocks and dust to weave themselves into biology. You have stood by us for millions and billions of years; do not forsake us now. Empower us and awaken in us pure and dazzling creativity. You that can turn scales into feathers, seawater to blood, caterpillars to butterflies, metamorphose our species, awaken in us the powers that we need to survive the present crisis and evolve into more aeons of our solar journey.

Awaken in us a sense of who we truly are: tiny ephemeral blossoms on the Tree of Life. Make the purposes and destiny of that tree our own purpose and destiny.

Fill each of us with love for our true self, which includes all of the creatures and plants and landscapes of the world. Fill us with a powerful urge for the well being and continual unfolding of this self.

May we speak in all human councils on behalf of the animals and plants and landscapes of the Earth.

May we shine with a pure inner passion that will spread through these leaden times.

May we all awaken to our true and only nature – none other than the nature of Gaia, this living planet Earth.

We call upon the power which sustains the planets in their orbits, that wheels the Milky Way in its 200-million-year spiral, to imbue our personalities and our relationships with harmony, endurance, and joy. Fill us with a sense of immense time so that our brief, flickering lives may truly reflect the work of vast ages past and also the millions of years of evolution whose potential lies in our trembling hands.

O stars, lend us your burning passion.

O silence, give weight to our voice.

We ask for the presence of the spirit of Gaia.”