The Tribes of Darwin

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Reading – “post truth”

“Every one of us is vulnerable to thinking that the ideas we hold dear are reasoned or principled positions. But how many of our ideas are adopted and defended as part of our tribal identity?

Today, in the challenge-free spaces and echo-chambers of our social media feeds, we are arguably becoming ever more vulnerable to tribal convictions. [Almost half of us](http://www.journalism.org/2016/05/26/news-use-across-social-media-platforms-2016/) now get all our news from Facebook, for example; information that is digitally targeted to align with our interests. As a consequence, that “information” reflects, and so reinforces, our biases far more than it informs.

In this atmosphere, it takes a special kind of intellectual honesty to interrogate our own ideas as rigorously as we do other people’s, to listen to other arguments, and to discard our own bad ideas. But this is the only way to break the self-reinforcing binds between tribal identity and conviction.”

This year’s Darwin Day sermon was going to be on sexual selection. I had a dramatic entry, but you’ll have to wait to see it – maybe next year. Trust me, “It’s gonna be great!”

The shift in topic and direction is the fault of Michael Zimmerman.

Michael is the former Dean of the College of Letters and Sciences at UW Oshkosh. I met him at a statewide meeting of faculty early in my career.

Michael was a colleague who also taught evolution, and also struggled with misinformation and constant interference by the creationist movement that we all deal/dealt with. But Michael decided to turn his frustration to action and create a movement.

Michael took his belief that science and religion do not have to be in conflict and founded something called The Clergy Letter Project. He called upon clergy from all denominations to sign this letter stating in part:

We the undersigned, Christian clergy from many different traditions, believe that the timeless truths of the Bible and the discoveries of modern science may comfortably coexist. We believe that the theory of evolution is a foundational scientific truth, one that has stood up to rigorous scrutiny and upon which much of human knowledge and achievement rests. To reject this truth or to treat it as “one theory among others” is to deliberately embrace scientific ignorance and transmit such ignorance to our children. We believe that among God’s good gifts are human minds capable of critical thought and that the failure to fully employ this gift is a rejection of the will of our Creator.

The current signatories number 13,432 as of 1/24/17.

The “debate” between creationism and evolution is manufactured through the use of false equivalencies. The dichotomy is NOT scientific. But it is also NOT dominantly religious.

An outgrowth of this was Evolution Weekend, an event to which many of you have been repeatedly subjected – hopefully mostly voluntarily.

Michael is also a member of my tribe.

This year in his annual call for Darwin Day participants, he issued an unusual appeal: this activist whose cause is predicated on promoting conciliation between opposing viewpoints first stated:

“Evolutionary theory teaches a critical lesson. Genetically, we are remarkably similar to one another. Indeed, the concept of race in humans is mostly a social rather than a biological construct. From this perspective, it makes very little sense to draw many of the lines we have seen being drawn separating groups from one another. The fact that some of us might look different from others or accept ideas that others might not embrace is not a reason to stigmatize and hate. I hasten to add that this perspective is fully in keeping with the teachings all of the world's major religions.”

Then asked his tribe the following:

“Simply put, I fear that if we allow hatred to grow and manifest itself widely in society, we will find ourselves living in an environment that runs counter to many of our most cherished beliefs. Do you agree? Can we, The Clergy Letter Project, make a statement about the unity of humanity and push back against bigotry?”

Tribalism is in our genes. Our species likely originated – as with many of our primate cousins – as bands of mostly related members, with some outsiders who were selected to join.

Tribalism remains with me today. Frequently on my daily commute, I am reminded of the words of George Carlin – “Have you ever noticed that anybody driving slower than you is an idiot, and anyone going faster than you is a maniac?.”

Three tribes. You, the idiot, and the maniac.

Tribes are also highly contextual. If every one of those fellow drivers of mine were known to me, and we were all, say, Knights Templar, then we’d all be members of the same tribe.

I am sometimes reminded of this when I attend my professional conferences. If I would meet someone who was a fellow botanist in a coffee shop in EC, it would be cause for immediate tribal identification. But when I am on my way to my conference where I will ultimately be surrounded by botanists, my tribal recognition software begins to adjust its algorithm. By the time I am at the conference, only paleobotanists who work on lower Paleozoic spores feel like family.

But tribalism has really bitten us in the butt, now.

Six years ago, one tribe – who believes in smaller government, limited regulations, and the power of unfettered capitalism to fix all of our problems, took over state government in Wisconsin.

Now, we face a similar situation in our entire country.

This is a religious institution, so I’ll make no judgments, but there is a bigger story that relates to my theme. The answer to the multiple choice question in the program is c – an appeal to rationality. Of course, this is a very friendly audience. This rationality is rooted in our 4th principle – “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.”

We are in the “post truth” world – reinforced by the recent recognition by the OED of this term as the word of the year for 2016.

Meaning: “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.”

Things that may be guiding principles in the upcoming administration:

Climate change is not real, or at least is not caused by human activities

That trickle down economics works, despite every study and historical attempt that clearly indicates just the contrary.

That unfettered capitalism is the One True Solution to all of our woes.

I haven’t had the nerve to look up what Betsy DeVos thinks about evolution.

This is going to be hard to live through.

There will be many tribes, and much frustration, and possibly rapid changes. One tribe will think that they are for the better. I hope other tribes who are affected elect to do something about it

Right after the election, I went to visit my relatives in Los Angeles. I was tense about it b/c I knew that my brother with whom I stay was deeply upset about the election results. I also knew that my 90-year old aunt with whom we spend the T’giving meal is a big Trump supporter, despite being a lifelong Democrat. The meal went swimmingly with everyone on their best behavior. Unfortunately, the evening ended with my cousin “confessing” around the fire pit that he - also a lifelong Democrat – had voted for Trump. He is also a high-powered attorney and is wealthy. Despite that, I was happy that my family could have such a lovely holiday in close quarters. We don’t have to agree to be civil to one another.

BUT I firmly believe that a major reason why tribalism is so persistent in our species is that as our small groups got bigger and bigger, and as resources became scarce, it was crucial to be able to identify who was in our group, and who was not. And I think throughout history, the more aggressive and even the more violent tribes were most successful. Does this mean I think humans are an inherently violent species? Usually, yes.

Now you’re thinking, jeez, how much darker could this get? He’s usually funny!

In many ways, these are not funny times. That doesn’t mean I’ve lost my sense of humor.

One of the things I have always liked about UUism is the relentless positivity, and persistent complimentary view of humanity (is this part of humanism?). It often makes me squirm just a bit b/c I think it’s somewhere between naïve and downright Pollyannaish. But that is also what I appreciate about it. It at least exposes me to a perspective that is counter to my natural one – and on good days it is an aspirational target.

Despite politics, despite my often misanthropic view of humanity, despite the daily horrors it’s possible to hear on every news network, I find it comforting to realize two things:

1) Young people voted dominantly for acceptance and compassion. About five out of the eight who voted – not enough of them (46%), but if they do begin to mature and realize their collective influence, it will make a difference in the direction of our society.

And

These are my props for today. The first inductees to my shelf entitled

“Ponderous Books I Want to Say I’ve Read.”

Wealth of Nations which lays out capitalism in excruciating detail, but which also cautions that it will not work without government keeping human greed in check. People ignore that bit.

War and Peace

And the latest inductee, which I had in my hand in a book store in London in December, but which was just too darned heavy to transport back in my luggage. Angels of our Better Selves by Stephen Pinker.

2) He builds a compelling case for the fact that this is the least violent time in all of human history.

Tribalism will never leave us, but I think that we are headed the right direction, and society can tame it.