Evolution Weekend 2015
Denying Evolution and Global Warming

How Evolution Weekend Began – Defending Evolutionary Theory against Fundamentalism

How we had been doing a Darwin Day talk even before that
(at least 2003) – Bill Cale, Jerry Pickering

So we've dealt with a number of different approaches, because it didn't seem as if we had to just reaffirm every year that our religious beliefs don't lead us to deny the evidence of science.

During the past decade, we've seen an increase in another form of denial of the evidence of science, the denial of global warming, or climate change, if you prefer (why I think we should say global warming), or global weirding, as Tom Freidman suggested.

There seems to be a pretty strong overlap between the two populations of evolution deniers and global warming deniers, so maybe it makes sense to think and talk about them under one umbrella.

As disturbing as the denial of the reality of evolution is, the major consequences are intellectual and educational. If public school students

don't get a realistic science education, their future ability to do science and understand scientific theory is undoubtedly compromised. However, that isn't, in most cases, as immediately problematic as the denial of the reality of global warming, which is already beginning to be demonstrated in changes in the weather, in agriculture, and in the ecology of large areas of our earth. If we need to respond to this reality, both in terms of being ready to deal with the consequences and to try to reduce the intensity of future change, we as a society need to recognize what is happening.

Most of us who think that global warming is a real phenomenon and that we need to change our society's economy and ecology to reduce our impact on the world's ecology find the resistance to that idea almost baffling, since we see the science of climatology as consistent and convincing.

The very sizable population of people who resist that idea don't see it that way. Much of this resistance is expressed as assertions that phenomena that don't immediately look like the result of global warming must disprove the idea that it is happening ("Look! It's snowing."). Much the same strategy is used by those who want to deny the reality of evolution.

As a result, we who agree with these ideas find ourselves, often, arguing about one or a few aspects of the larger theory. We assume

that the presentation of a sufficient number of facts, set in an appropriate theoretical context, will convince our listeners. When this doesn't happen, which is quite often the case, we conclude that our opponents are stupid, or even malicious.

I would like to suggest that that is not a useful point of view. When I began preparing for this service, I happened across a book by Philip Kitcher, a philosopher at Columbia. The book, "Living with Darwin," is mostly devoted to a refutation of fundamentalist ideas, primarily from a philosophical perspective, but the part I found most useful in thinking about my subject for today was Kitcher's discussion of why academics and some others may find evolution and global warming acceptable ideas even though they are also quite disturbing in their complete lack of reassurance about human lives and the future of humanity. He suggested that part of the ability to accept such ideas is based in the listener's personal sense of security and of agency in the world. People who believe that they are in control of their lives, and whose lives are generally satisfactory, he wrote, are more likely to be comfortable with inherently uncomfortable ideas.

I think that this applies to the idea of global warming as well as to evolution. The theory of evolution and fundamentalist beliefs are more directly in conflict, but as I said earlier, there is a significant overlap between people who deny evolution and people who deny global warming, and I think the underlying reasons are similar.

In both cases, people are being asked to accept a reality in which there is no benevolent force working on behalf of humanity. Indeed, in accepting the idea of human-caused global warming we admit that the problem is our responsibility and so is solving it.

Little as we might like to recognize it, many Americans are not comfortable with the life they have, and they have reason to be. Since the 1980s, the middle class has been steadily eroding. In addition, a series of economic shocks, culminating in the Great Recession, has further reduced the sense of security that many people expected. Political events, including the 9/11 attacks and the long wars, have created a sense of anxiety that is only exacerbated by the prevalence of the news, most of which is bad.

Perhaps it is not surprising at all that many of us want to believe that there are some things that are safe and trustworthy, even if the evidence is not as strong as we might hope, and that we do not have to face making our lives even more difficult in order, not to make things better, but simply to prevent them getting worse.

So how do those of us who want to convince our fellow Americans that global warming is real and needs to be addressed begin? Recent studies of the ways in which people respond to information indicate that facts alone are not going to work.

We humans generally seem to start with opinions, and those shape the way we assimilate facts. Note that New Englanders are more likely than other Americans to believe that Tom Brady had nothing to do with any problems with the footballs in the Patriots' playoff game.

Our opinions are also clearly shaped by the attitude we have toward people who are trying to influence those opinions, which brings me to the conclusion that if we want to change peoples' opinions, we have to start by trying to understand where they are to begin with, and why.

Usually when I talk on Evolution Weekend, I refer to the seventh and fifth principles of UUism, the interdependent web of life and the free and independent search for truth and meaning. In this case, I think we need to concentrate on our first and second principles, the inherent worth and dignity of every person, and justice, equity, and compassion in human relations. When I see some of the comments posted on FB about quotes from global warming deniers, I have to conclude that the commenters have given up on changing minds and are enjoying the sense of community that comes from attacking those people we don't agree with.

Difficult as it may be, I think we need to move toward respecting the people we want to change and engaging with them. The stakes are too high for us to remain comfortably surrounded by people we share opinions with. We must make the effort; the world depends on us.