

## “Darwin, Lincoln, and Pythons”

by Greg Henkelman

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Why are we here? What's life all about? Is God really real, or is there some doubt? Well, today, we're going to sort it all out, for, today, it's 'The Meaning of Life'. Is life just a game where we make up the rules while we're searching for something to say? Or are we just simply spiralling coils of self-replicating DNA? What is life? What's our fate? Is there a Heaven and Hell? Do we reincarnate? Is mankind evolving, or is it too late? Well, today, here's 'The Meaning of Life'.

For those of you who may think my introduction sounds familiar, you are undoubtedly aware of one of the most anti-establishment, irreverent and non-dogmatic comedy troupes ever assembled: Monty Python. I begin with these slightly modified lyrics from the Python movie, “The Meaning of Life”, because today’s talk actually does relate to big human questions, but, as with the movie, will not seriously answer any of them.

I asked nearly a year ago to speak today because we are on the verge of a momentous event: this Thursday, February 12, marks the 200th birthdays of some very impressive people who tried to address vital human issues. In the words of Robert Ingersoll, a free thinker of the 1890s: “On the 12th of February 1809, two babes were born – one in the woods of Kentucky, amid the hardships of poverty of pioneers; one in England, surrounded by wealth and culture...One associated his name with the emancipation of millions, with the salvation of the republic . He is known to us as Abraham Lincoln. The other broke the chains of superstition and filled the world with intellectual light, and he is known as Charles Darwin.”

For humanists, Lincoln and Darwin have had major effects on the development of ethical values for progressive modern thought. For others, they might just be pictures of people on currency, as Darwin replaced Charles Dickens on the ten pound note in England in 2000 (it's probably because Darwin had a nicer beard).

Yet, while February 12 will be festive for some, others will be decidedly anti-celebratory, at least in Darwin’s case. This made me wonder: why in the year 2009 can we be so excited about the election of an African-American president 200 years after Lincoln’s birth (I must admit, even as a Canadian I was moved by Barack Obama’s acceptance and inauguration speeches), while Darwin and his theory of natural selection still experience such harsh opposition? If I was a member of Monty Python I might even write a skit that explains how, according to current theories of human evolution, Obama is not the first African-American president, since all American presidents evolved from African ancestors! And if that sounds a little risqué, consider that Obama himself once said the policies of his predecessor, Bush Jr., were a form of “social Darwinism”...the mere cheekiness to suggest that Bush is in favour of anything even remotely Darwinistic is oozing with Python wit.

There is no doubt that Darwin’s theory of natural selection is the skeleton which

supports and shapes modern biology and that genetic and molecular systematics have only strengthened its structure. Thus, Darwin remains despite several attempts to offer alternative explanations. Why is his theory still the best? The answer can be found in another Monty Python skit concerning a new "theory" of Brontosaurus (though to palaeontologists in the crowd, you already know that there is no such thing as a Brontosaurus anymore... Apatosaurus is the correct term now):

Q: You say you have a new theory about the Brontosaurus.

A: Can I just say here, Chris, for one moment, that I have a new theory about the Brontosaurus.

Q: Exactly. Well, what is it? ...

A: Oh, what is my theory?

Q: Yes.

A: Oh, what is my theory, that it is. Well, Chris, you may well ask me what is my theory.

Q: I am asking.

A: Good for you. My word, yes. Well, Chris, what is it that it is—this theory of mine. Well, this is what it is—my theory that I have, that is to say, which is mine, is mine.

Q: Yes, I know it's yours. What is it?

A: Where? Oh, what is my theory? This is it. My theory that belongs to me is as follows. This is how it goes. The next thing I'm going to say is my theory. Ready?

Q: Yes.

A: ... This theory goes as follows and begins now. All Brontosauruses are thin at one end; much, much thicker in the middle; and then thin again at the far end.

The point: even though others may claim to have scientific theories that fit and explain the interconnected web of life of which we are a part, only Darwin's theory of natural selection is scientific: it is testable, reproducible, falsifiable, and predictable. Most other theories of how life's diversity came to be, to date, have merely stated that they are different, without offering scientific proof as to why they are better than Darwin's. For example, saying that a complex mechanism appears complex does not tell us how it came to be. And to imply that a supernatural power made it complex by design prohibits a reproducible experiment, rendering such a theory unscientific from the beginning.

However, just because Darwin's theory is scientifically valid doesn't mean everyone will celebrate his birthday.

The last time I spoke on Darwin, I explored his connection to our UU principles, particularly with "...respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part".

But since that talk nearly two years ago, I have continued to be impressed by the fervour that follows the mention of Darwin's name. Some of my own high school students rally behind Darwin as a paragon of atheism, while others see him as an anti-Christian (or anti-Islamic) destroyer of faith. But all these groups of "extreme" students leave my class with puzzled looks on their faces when I don't seem to agree

with any of them: not even the atheists! Other teachers and people I barely know seek me out when they find a new article on Darwin (of which there have been several of late due to the upcoming bicentennial), thrusting them towards me while asking my opinion. And sometimes the debate just gets so funny you have to make fun of it, like in satirical articles such as this (Onion, September 5, 2008), in which “Evolutionists Flock to Darwin-Shaped Wall Stain” (I love the line where Rev. Clement McCoy, a professor at Oral Roberts University and prominent opponent of evolutionary theory says: “It’s a stain on a wall, and nothing more...Anything else is the delusional fantasy of a fanatical evolutionist mindset that sees only what it wishes to see in the hopes of validating a baseless, illogical belief system.”)

I was asked to join a humanist discussion group after my last talk, and perhaps this more than anything else made me ask the question: why do I like Darwin so much? Was humanism the answer I was seeking as I sailed away from dogmatic theology and was Darwin my lighthouse to find this shore? I must say, however, that I choose not to set anchor in humanistic waters and that I am still adrift in my sea of questions, slowly paddling towards a horizon that continues to curve away (darn this spherical planet...).

Don’t get me wrong: I understand and appreciate how humanism would claim both Lincoln and Darwin as two beacons for lighting the still dark future of humanity. I also agree that it is a noble sentiment to strive for a world in which we can all get along. As Barack Obama said, we must never forget that the only reason we are standing here today is because somebody, somewhere stood up for us when it was risky. Stood up when it was hard. Stood up when it wasn’t popular. Our own Rev. Brian Kiely, and other members of this congregation, over the last several months, have described innumerable examples of humanists, atheists, agnostics, and heretics standing up for our freedom to question and explore the meaning of life without a god. But we as Unitarians also have a decidedly spiritual side and, last week, many of us contemplated how a complete lack of religious education would affect our cultural literacy. How do we treat those who were persecuted for their religious faith? Did they not also stand up when it was hard? Perhaps Charles’ grandpa, Erasmus Darwin, was right when he said that: “Unitarianism is a feather bed to catch a falling Christian.” But are we sleeping comfortably? Can we rest our weary minds on Darwin’s theory as an answer to not only how but why we are here?

Would Darwin appreciate being labelled a humanist? In Darwin’s own time, the Victorian age, it was very easy to be racist and to firmly believe in the superiority of humans (particularly of the British variety) over all other life. Such progress had been made that there was no doubt humans would continue to improve the world. Yet, after witnessing first hand a slave market in Brazil, Darwin solidified his position as an abolitionist, which nearly got him thrown overboard by the Beagle’s Captain Fitzroy for his views. And, of course, we know that Darwin not only connected all humans as the same species, but also had the audacity to connect us with other primates. Thus, if Darwinism supports humanism, it will need to be a humanism that requires a considerably less self-centred view of humanity than we as a species have held to date. If Darwin were indeed alive today, with knowledge of the events of the 20th century,

would he still feel that humans deserved their place in Nature? Would he rather call himself a Naturalist, with a capital “N” than a “humanist”?

And what about spirituality? Given our understanding of genetics and connection to all other organisms, are we still able to claim a special privilege of “soul” over other organisms? If so, must we give up Darwinism because it doesn’t provide a mechanism for soul evolution? Or is the “soul” simply the by-product of an evolutionary selection of a primate brain designed to make it easier to delay self-gratification long enough for us get along with each other and further the aims of our whole species, dependant on the promise of a non-existent afterlife that is a chemical hallucination? Ouch...that would be quite a blow to the ego. Would Darwin give up his agnosticism in the face of such speculation and become a full-blown atheist? Of course, if the soul does exist, then it may be as his wife Emma feared and Darwin is unfortunately dreading his decision to actually write the damned (quite literally) book on Origins 150 years ago.

And here is the crux of the issue. As with every incredible thinker/prophet who is no longer “right here” to talk to and who can share their answers with the entire world, we come to rely on the opinions of others, be they religious leaders or scholars and biographers. Imagine if we could get Buddha, Socrates, Jesus, Mohammed, Confucious, Lao Tsu, and Abraham all together on Facebook to answer our questions, directly, with no censorship or middlemen. Just think about it: imagine the clarity of thought that might result. Of course, your list of invitees to this chat session is undoubtedly different than mine (perhaps you would throw L. Ron Hubbard or Elvis into the mix), and that creates another problem in fostering unity, but if we chose the right mix, the question of whether Darwinism is right or wrong would become an immediate non-issue and we could just get on with life.

We could also argue, of course, that we shouldn’t even consider such a thought experiment. Perhaps we should never invoke someone else’s name to justify our beliefs. Perhaps scientists and humanists should just quit talking about Darwin and get on with their own work. Perhaps even my own love of Darwin will pass away like my youthful idolatry of Wayne Gretzky. But, unlike Gretzky before he was traded from Edmonton, at least I know that Darwin was not a god, and so I can see him as a man who had faults, but who still had the courage to write a book that he agonized over for decades. One of my newest favourite stories about Darwin relates to one of his own “heroes”. John Herschel, one of England’s most revered scientists of the 1830’s, posed the “mystery of mysteries”: he openly hoped that a naturalist would one day come forward and explain how similar species come to replace extinct ones in the fossil record. Darwin was excited about this question, and this is clearly stated in a passage in one of his own notebooks. Darwin even met his idol Herschel in Cape Town in 1836 near the end of the Beagle voyage. Darwin admitted using the question to focus his work and hoped his “one long argument” on the origin of species by means of natural selection would answer it. Imagine how Darwin felt when Herschel, upon reading Origins, dismissed Darwin’s theory of natural selection as “the law of higgledy-piggledy”. Probably something like I felt the day Gretzky promised Mess he wouldn’t cry...

So...what can we do with Darwin's "higgledy-piggledy" now? Perhaps we should simply not foist modern humanism on a Victorian scientist. We can, however, and with some certainty, say that Darwin gave us the mechanism to understand a modern fact of connectedness to other organisms on this planet, which has since been verified by an ever-increasing number of experiments. Even the Unitarian Universalist pamphlet on "Science and Religion" states that: "Science has uncovered enough about genetics to show us that we belong together within the human family, among primates, among all living things, among the stars." According to biologist Niles Eldridge, Darwin's work "reforged the emotional and conceptual bonds of humanity with the rest of life". Even Choralis' songs today reflect bonds to nature: where would our memories gain stability if we did not have mountain paths and wild flowers blooming mid sage and cactus in the rocks? Is it not comforting to know that even the pines and willows share with us in the Ashokan farewell? We cannot deny nature's impact on us. Hymn 317, later in the service, uses the analogy of humans as leaves on nature's vine, but says later to give to earth and all things living, not just all things human.

How far we pursue nature worship with humanism is a very personal choice, of course. As an extreme example, another Onion article, from September 9, 2008, entitled: "Brave Mountain Lion Fends Off Group of Hikers", pushes human sensibilities with respect to nature's rights to the extreme. In it, wildlife officials credit "the courageous cougar's quick thinking, catlike reflexes, and 150 pounds of coiled muscle with successfully fending off the human foot travellers...armed with nothing more than four-inch claws, razor-sharp teeth, and a 5.4-metre vertical leap." Would Darwin laugh or cringe at such satire? Perhaps cheering for a cougar victory over humans is taking Darwin's respect of all life a bit too far, beyond the point where many of us find our balance between humanism and naturalism, choosing between our own needs and the health and sanctity of nature. But my young daughter also wrote about cougars, a poem which goes like this: "Cougars are rough and tough and all that stuff as scientists may say. But sometimes if you leave them alone, they'll be OK!" She reminds us that if we learn to respect nature, we can engage with it and rightfully fear it without trying to control it or destroy it.

Darwin's theory returned us to the animal kingdom and put us on one branch of an enormous shrubbery of life. Though some find Darwin's triumph in this task demeaning and scary, potentially savage and even violent, I feel it is a potential source of clarity in much the same way Buddha gained enlightenment by finally experiencing the realities of the world he was first denied by his father. Only by accepting our connection to a struggle for existence can we truly exist in the world.

In the end, of course, we have to let go of Darwin as a symbol of a theory and see him as a fellow human being, with human strengths and weaknesses. On January 11, 2009, in the talk "Out of Darkness", Ann Barker of the Westwood congregation described Rev. Forrest Church's ideals to be who you are, do what you can, and want what you have. I think Darwin lived these ideals in his own way, despite the hardships they entailed. I think that, as a consequence of his courage in breaking with doctrine, a choice opened up for us. We can choose to view ourselves as above all other life and

ignore February 12th as just another day (well, I can't because it is also my older sister's birthday). But, if we choose to accept our place in this world as a part of nature, we can't help but send our best wishes to old Chuck and wish him many more centennials.

As a afterword, the meditation in song this day was: Where do we come from? Who are we? Where are we going? Mystery, mystery, life is a riddle and a mystery.

The spoken meditation: Only Monty Python would think of taking "All things bright and beautiful" and ensuring that we do not forget that Nature also contains less desirable critters...but as you listen to the words, consider how Darwin would react to such creatures: with disgust or fascination?

All things dull and ugly,  
All creatures short and squat,  
All things rude and nasty,  
The Lord God made the lot.

Each little snake that poisons,  
Each little wasp that stings,  
He made their brutish venom.  
He made their horrid wings.

All things sick and cancerous,  
All evil great and small,  
All things foul and dangerous,  
The Lord God made them all.

Each nasty little hornet,  
Each beastly little squid—  
Who made the spikey urchin? Who made the sharks?  
He did!

All things scabbed and ulcerous,  
All pox both great and small,  
Putrid, foul and gangrenous,  
The Lord God made them all.

Amen.

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