

Where Do We Come From? ©

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

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Next Sunday, February 12th, is Charles Darwin's birthday. Some of you may not know that as a young child he regularly attended a Unitarian Church with his mother. After her untimely death when he was only eight he began attending, and resided at, an Anglican school. Because of his involvement at a Unitarian church during his childhood, some Unitarian Universalists claim Darwin as one of our flock. This is understandable when you consider some of his characteristics—things such as his openness to new ideas, his affinity for science, and his willingness to challenge established beliefs, including religious beliefs. These are characteristics we UU's tend to admire and often seek to live out. Whether he should be considered one of our flock is debatable. What isn't debatable is whether he influenced the way we understand the world and how things are the way they are today. He had a significant influence on our understanding of how we humans came to be. It is clear that he challenged and changed the creation story that was dominant in his culture and ours.

His work was important partly because creation stories, whether we realize it or not, influence our lives. I would go even further to propose that both of the creation stories I just read influence each of us. I say this knowing that many of us here don't believe that everything that exists came to be in the manner described in the Genesis reading. In spite of this lack of belief, I would assert that these two creation stories probably influence us in ways that we don't even realize. Now I recognize that some of you may question, doubt, or even strongly disagree with what I am suggesting here. I am grateful that this is so. If Charles Darwin hadn't been willing to question, doubt and then disagree with the perspectives that were present during his time, the story of creation he made famous may have taken significantly longer to become known and gain acceptance. Questioning, doubting and disagreeing are each important elements of our Unitarian Universalist faith tradition. When we are able to question, doubt and disagree in ways that are open, respectful, and considerate, we have the opportunity to expand our knowledge and understanding. We also have the chance to explore and accept beliefs and perspectives that are different than those we hold. So let's explore these two stories and notice what we find.

It might be helpful for you to know that in selecting these stories I started with this question, "What are some of the important concepts each contains?" It seems to me that in the Genesis story a very significant concept involves how humans are to act. The story tells us that humans were instructed to "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." I would say that, for centuries, the human race has, to one degree or another, been fulfilling the three components contained in this part of the story. The components to which I am referring here are to multiply, to subdue, and to have dominion over. It also seems to me that these three concepts have relatively broad acceptance in our culture.

The creation story that Darwin tells holds some ideas that are different from, but not completely at odds with, what is found in Genesis. Darwin suggests, although he doesn't specifically state, that humans are the result of a long progression in the development of life on our planet. This fits into the "be fruitful and multiply" part of the

Genesis story. Be fruitful and multiply is what life has been doing on this planet for a very long time. He states, "I am convinced that natural selection has been the most important, but not the exclusive, means of modification." In this quote and throughout the earliest editions of *On the Origin of Species* Darwin mentions "natural selection." Beginning with the fifth edition he included the phrase "survival of the fittest." This phrase and concept was first asserted by his contemporary, Herbert Spencer. To Darwin, the phrase meant "better designed for the immediate, local environment." Later, however, some people began to assert that "survival of the fittest" meant that humans, or even specific groups of humans, were inherently superior. This fits with the "dominion over" portion of the Genesis story. From this position of superiority, these groups claimed the right to subdue and have dominion over other beings, including other humans. The ideas known as "social Darwinism," have been espoused by some very influential people including academics, politicians, and successful business people, including some noted Unitarians. Social Darwinism found a way to take concepts contained in the Genesis story and insert them into the creation story that Darwin described. It would appear that concepts, like individual species of living beings, morph and adapt in order to live on from generation to generation.

Another concept contained in the reading by Darwin also deserves mention. He proposes that humans and all other living beings "descend from some one prototype," and further that "all living things have much in common." In these short statements Darwin is expressing the very essence of what we now call the "theory of evolution." I would propose that in these statements Darwin is speaking to a concept that is contained in our Seventh Principle, "the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part." He is also stating something that was well known and accepted by many of the native peoples of this continent long before he was born.

Some Native American creation stories tell of animals transforming to become the very first human beings. It would appear that an important difference between Darwin's creation story and that of the native peoples of this continent involves the way humans view and relate to other living beings. In many of the stories of tribes such as the Cheyenne and the Sioux, animals are frequently referred to with terms that our culture typically uses only for family members—terms such as brother, sister, grandfather or grandmother. The Sioux elders who taught me the sacred ways of their religious tradition often encouraged me to learn what brother fox, grandfather eagle or grandmother owl had to teach me. Many eastern tribes tell the story of the three sisters—corn, beans and squash. These three plants play an important role in the traditional creation story of the Iroquois. These plants are viewed as sacred because they ensured the survival of the Iroquois people.

Any of you who have read *On the Origin of Species* know that Darwin's writing is quite analytical and detached. He doesn't seem to hold any of the living beings he studied as sacred. He didn't use words such as brother, sister, mother, father, grandmother or grandfather in reference to any of the plants or animals he observed and collected. And yet, if you agree with his logic and his conclusion, it is clear that every living thing on this planet is related. We are all part of one big family—a family that is part of the much larger interconnected web of all existence.

So what, you might ask, if Darwin doesn't use familial terms? Does it really make any difference? I believe it does. I hold this belief because I know that the language we

use affects not only how we think but also how we feel and act. When I refer to someone as father, brother, sister, mother, grandfather or grandmother, it changes how I see that person and feel about them. When I use or even think of such family language I am reminded of my attachment to and my respect for who I am involved with. I seem to automatically and almost instantaneously shift from relating to another from my head and instead relate with that person from my heart. When I use the language of family I find it much more difficult to respond to another from a one up or one over perspective. Instead I find myself feeling one with whoever or whatever I am encountering. In my experience that is a very significant difference.

As we think of the world we live in, a world that has more trouble and suffering than any of us would wish—a world that is threatened by the way we humans live on and relate to the earth and many other living beings we share it with, I would suggest it would be beneficial for us to seriously consider our perspectives and our actions. I would suggest that we take the time to examine the stories that may influence how we think and act, even if we don't realize these stories may affect our lives. As I mentioned earlier, concepts from ancient stories, like species of living creatures, may adapt over time and continue on from one generation to the next and to the next.

So as we examine the stories that have been passed down from generation to generation I would encourage us to be open to recognizing how the concepts in the stories may be at play in our own lives and the lives of those around us. And, like Darwin, it could be beneficial for us to be willing to consider a new perspective on the world—even if that new perspective is quite different than what is accepted within our culture. My hope then, is that the human race may yet come to adopt a perspective that is more humble—more humble in regards to who we are and where we fit in the interdependent web of all existence—and especially more humble in regards to where we fit in the web of life here on planet Earth.

As we go forth today may we seek to learn more about how we currently fit in the web and how we may change our perspectives and our behaviors to fit more respectfully and responsibly into the web that surrounds us. May we come to recognize that we are indebted and related to every other living thing. And may we come to honor the life that surrounds us as the great family of life that it is and that we are part and parcel of.

May it be so