



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
Spirituality · Community · Justice

How Darwin Changed America

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10 February 2019

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Charles Darwin was born two hundred and ten years ago this Tuesday on February 12, 1809. And in recent years his birthday has been celebrated as [International Darwin Day](#), an annual opportunity to celebrate the principles that guided his life: “perpetual curiosity, scientific thinking, and hunger for truth.” These values resonate with our UU [Fourth Principle](#) of “A free and responsible search for truth and meaning” and our [Fifth Source](#) of “reason and the results of science.”

A related tragedy of the ongoing “Creation vs. Evolution” debate is that coming to terms with Darwin’s theories of natural selection and common descent were among the greatest intellectual challenges of the late nineteenth century. But we live in the early twenty-first century, long past the point at which the tenets of evolution became basic science.

One reason it is significant to celebrate Darwin Day in UU congregations is that both sides of Darwin’s family were “[largely Unitarian](#).” And while it is true that Darwin was baptized in an Anglican Church, attended an Anglican boarding school, and was married by an Anglican priest—it is also the case that growing up, both “Charles and his

siblings attended the Unitarian chapel with their mother,” and the liturgy used in his wedding to Emma Wedgwood was adapted to “suit the Unitarians” ([Desmond & Moore, 279](#)).

And some of our Unitarian and Universalist forebears were among the earliest religious leaders to embrace the paradigm-shifting implications of Darwin’s discoveries that we humans are not a little lower than the angels, but rather “a little higher than the apes” with whom we share a common ancestor. We now know that at the DNA level there is only a [1.23 percent difference between humans and chimpanzees](#). We humans are not uniquely special creations. We are one species among many within the Animal Kingdom, deeply interconnected with the other forms of life and the varied ecosystems on this planet. As our UU [Seventh Principle](#) affirms, we are called to practice “Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.”

This year’s Darwin Day sermon is inspired by a book published last year by Randall Fuller, a distinguished professor of American Literature at the University of Kansas, titled [The Book That Changed America](#) (Viking 2017). Fuller explores the history of how Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* was interpreted by some of its earliest readers, particularly our Transcendentalist forebears such as Bronson Alcott, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, the child welfare reformer Charles Brace, and the abolitionist Franklin Sanborn—all of whom have strong Unitarian roots.

But let me first set the stage a little for what was happening around November 24, 1859 when Charles Darwin published his landmark book, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*. For some points of comparison, 1859 was also the year that Charles Dickens (also a Unitarian) released *A Tale of Two Cities* in a serialized

weekly format, George Eliot's first novel *Adam Bede* came out, and John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* was published (8-9).

Politically, in late 1859, keep in mind that the U.S. was only a little more than year away from the opening shots of our Civil War on April 12, 1861 (ix). Part of why that matters for our story today is that all of the Unitarian forebears we will be reflecting on today were involved in the abolitionist movement for the end of slavery. For instance, of the "Secret Six," who helped fund and supply John Brown's raid on the federal armory Harpers' Ferry, five were Unitarians, two were Unitarian ministers.

John Brown's raid happened in mid-October 1859, and Darwin's book was published in a little more than a month later in late November. Keep those two dates in mind when I tell you soon of a New Year's Day gathering at Franklin Sanborn's house. There, a copy of Darwin's latest book, borrowed by Charles Brace, was introduced to Sanborn and the other two guests, Alcott and Thoreau. All four strongly supported John Brown. Sanborn was both one of the Secret Six and "had introduced Brown to Alcott and Thoreau a year earlier." Brown had been hanged just less than a month earlier on December 2, 1859. So the struggle for racial justice was at the forefront of their minds, and served as a powerful lens through which they reflected on Darwin's ideas (6-7).

If you read *Origin* closely, Darwin focused on plants and animals, which was controversial enough. Only in a single place at the end does he gesture toward the implications for human beings: "In the distant future I see open fields for far more important researches.... Light will be thrown on the origin of man and his history" (38). But for anti-slavery activists, the implications were clear: "By hinting that all humans are biologically related, Darwin's work seemed to refute once and for all the idea that

African American slaves were a separate, inferior species” (x). They embraced this scientific support that we are all part of the same human family. But as they reflected further on Darwin’s work, they also realized a more discomfiting truth that Darwin’s theories “also posed enormous threats to their faith in God and their trust that America was a country divinely chosen for the regeneration of the world” (x).

To consider how radical ideas like Darwin’s begin to spread even today, in this particular case, one copy of Darwin’s book had an unusually large impact on multiple cultural influencers. This copy of Darwin’s book is housed today at Harvard University. And Darwin himself sent it to Asa Gray (1810 - 1888), a Harvard professor who is considered the most important American botanist of the nineteenth century. Dr. Gray lent that copy—which he had immediately read and heavily annotated—to Charles Brace, one of the Unitarian abolitionists I mentioned earlier, who also happened to be a cousin of Gray’s wife. Brace brought that copy to the New Year’s Day party at Sanborn’s house, where Bronson Alcott and Thoreau were also guests (ix).

Thoreau’s *Walden* had been published in 1854, almost six years before that night. And one of my favorite anecdotes for why Thoreau attended that evening in 1860 is that, “He came because he had nothing better to do. He came because he liked to banter with Alcott and play the wise counselor to Sanborn. He came because he was hungry” (5).

To share with you some of their reactions to these new ideas, Sanborn was appreciative of Darwin’s ideas—especially the implications for abolitionism—and within hours he had written an enthusiastic letter about Darwin to the renowned Unitarian minister Theodore Parker. Brace responded to the book on a whole other level, “soon

claiming to have read the book thirteen times.” He latched on to Darwin’s teachings about the role one’s environment plays and found in it further support for his work with the Children’s Aid Society to improve societal conditions for all (11).

Thoreau was still further impacted. He was already a fan of Darwin’s, stretching back almost two decades earlier to reading Darwin’s travelogue, *The Voyage of the Beagle*. And in 1860, Thoreau “would grapple with the *Origin*’s ideas as thoroughly and insightfully as any American of the period. By the end of January, when pirated editions of the book became available in New England, he secured a copy from the Concord Library and began taking copious notes” (11).

Thoreau and Darwin approached nature in similar ways. They both spent hours observing nature closely, as well as recording and tracking those observations over time. “Reading *Origin*, Thoreau discovered someone else who understood nature as he did: abounding and vibrant, each niche swarming, each interstice filled with life, each living thing a small part of constant change, a participant in struggle and development, brimming with potential and significance” (145). The specificity of their writing reminds me of Mary Oliver’s poetry—perhaps most famously in her poem *The Summer Day*. She did not write abstractly about insects in general; rather, her poetry emerged from being enraptured by the particular. In her words:

Who made the grasshopper?

This grasshopper, I mean-

the one who has flung herself out of the grass,

the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,

who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down-

who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.

Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.

Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.

Along those lines, I should add that as much as Thoreau's writing overflows with an ebullient celebration of nature's beauty, Thoreau also appreciated the honesty of Darwin's observations about nature. Darwin's insights were transparent—that nature also included an often violent “struggle among species as an engine of creation”—what Tennyson called “Nature, red in tooth and claw.” That truth resonated with Thoreau as being accurate about nature as he observed it, in contrast to the often lofty, one-sidedly romantic, literary ideas about the beauty of nature often emphasized by some Transcendentalists in indoor parlors (137-138).

Emerson, by comparison, did not study Darwin's writings as thoroughly as Thoreau, nor did he fully accept the full implications of the Darwinian paradigm shift. Instead, Emerson read Darwin as he read most other authors: “dipping into the book... like a bee collecting pollen, flipping pages back and forth, seeking inspiration for his own essays” (147).

I should also add that by no means were all of our Unitarian and Universalist forebears supporters of Darwin. Of the four Unitarians present that first New Year's evening in 1860, Bronson Alcott was the most negative. As Alcott understood it, Darwin's proposals “reduced human life to chemistry, to mechanical processes, to vulgar materialism. They portrayed a world destitute of spirit. Darwin began with plants and animals, which in Alcott's opinion was precisely the wrong approach. All questions of existence were to start from above, with God and the ideal” (10).

But that was not the only way of understanding Darwin, as we have already seen reflected in Thoreau's writings. To say a bit more, allow me to return full circle to Dr. Asa Gray, the Harvard botany professor to whom Darwin personally mailed a copy of his book—the same book lent to his wife's cousin Charles Brace, who brought it to that fateful New Year's Day party. "Gray was almost certainly the first American to read Darwin's *Origin* in its entirety" (13). In reviewing Darwin's book, he emphasized how grateful he was for Darwin's work. Even as Darwin's ideas challenged Gray's Episcopal faith, he appreciated how Darwin "seemed to bring the world to life, to make it pulse with meaning and significance" (129) Darwin demonstrated with scientific rigor that the world was not magically created one day. As we know even more so today, we are part of a 13.7 billion-year-old universe story that is continuing to evolve.

In that spirit, I will conclude with the final paragraph of Darwin's 1859 book *On the Origin of Species*. Whereas many scientific texts are often not well written and become obsolete after new discoveries are made, Darwin's books have been widely praised for both the beauty of his prose and for being well worth revisiting even many years later. So, I invite you to consider anew these words from the conclusion to *Origin*. Note that Darwin begins by naming things we often perceive to be solely negative—then shows how those things are part of the engine of evolution. In Darwin's words:

from the war of nature,

from famine and death,

the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving...

the production of the higher animals,

directly follows.

There is grandeur in this view of life...; and
whilst this planet has gone cycling on
 according to the fixed law of gravity,
from so simple a beginning
 endless forms
most beautiful and
most wonderful
have been,
 and are being,
evolved.