

*Darwin, History and Evolution*  
Unitarian Universalist Church of Buffalo  
Sunday, February 19, 2012  
Rev. Margret A. O'Neill

Charles Darwin was born on February 12, 1809, on the same day, in the same year as Abraham Lincoln, though of course they came into the world on different continents. Darwin Day is celebrated on the same day each year as Lincoln's birthday, since each man was a pioneer, an explorer, breaking new ground in our understanding of what it means to be human in this world, each in his own way. It is good to celebrate these leaders of the past, to honor their memories as we chart our course into the future.

Young Abe and little Charlie were just seven years old when a Universalist preacher, Rev. Stephen R. Smith, first arrived in Buffalo in the summer of 1816. Rev. Smith was here to share his message of universal salvation, a heresy from the perspective of the accepted Christian doctrines of the time. He found willing audiences here in western New York, Christian folk who were hungry for the good news of his message, a new interpretation of the scriptures that shocked some and encouraged others to walk in a Christian path of hope, love and tolerance, assured of salvation for all.

The message was so well heard that in that same year a small Universalist society was organized here, although it did not long survive, but it planted the roots of what would eventually emerge and grow as a sturdy and persistent Universalist presence in this community. Just a few years later, in 1825, the first Unitarian sermon was delivered here by a visiting preacher, Rev. Pierce, and by 1832 and 1833 both the Universalists and the Unitarians had organized churches in Buffalo, breaking new ground in our understanding of what it means to be human in this world, each in their own way. It is good to celebrate these leaders and institution-builders of the past, to honor their memories as we chart our course into the future.

As I have lingered in recent days over the long, rich history of this Unitarian Universalist church, reviewing the written texts and assembling the history wall you see before you, I have found myself contemplating the notion of evolution – the evolution of life on this planet, the evolution of human societies and cultures over the centuries of recorded history, and the evolution of the institutions that we humans create to express and manifest our values in the world.

One of the tenets of an evolutionary perspective is that each new generation builds on the successes of those who went before, and I want to give full credit to the members of this church's Long Range Planning committee who actually created the yellow history placards you see before you – so that I had only to update them and build a structure to pin them to.

The concept of evolution is credited to Charles Darwin, although he was not the only natural scientist of his time who postulated that life forms develop and adapt gradually over generations – he was, however, the most published and outspoken of those thinkers, men and perhaps women as well, who looked at the evidence and came up with a new conclusion. New conclusions are always called heresy at first, and only gradually do they make their way into the mainstream, whether in science or in religion, or in the place where science and religion intersect.

Darwin observed the fossil record and living creatures in his native England, and on his famous five-year voyage around the world on a ship named the Beagle. He built on ideas about evolution that had been introduced by others, including his own grandfather, and developed an

overarching theory which he came to call “natural selection,” in which it is understood that species develop and change over time through a natural process of trial and error.

Darwin did not understand the genetics behind the process as we do now, but in the overall scheme of things, his ideas have held up remarkably well as the science has advanced. His thesis was that characteristics favorable to survival tend to be passed on through successive generations, eventually resulting in creatures increasingly well adapted to particular environmental niches, changing as those environments change, and continuing to evolve over time.

His subjects were fossils and plants and earthworms, tortoises and finches and mockingbirds, platypuses and something called a rat-kangaroo, whatever that might be. His theories shattered the dominant paradigms of the time, and laid the foundation for the natural sciences as we understand them today. But of course, being an social scientist rather than a natural scientist myself, I think his concept of evolution applies as well to churches as to finches: characteristics of churches that are favorable to survival tend to be passed on through successive generations, eventually resulting in institutions increasingly well adapted to particular environmental niches, changing as those environments change, continuing to evolve over time. Or if they do not adapt, they find themselves diminishing in power and presence, growing weaker and less effective, and eventually becoming extinct.

Oh, did I mention that Charles Darwin was raised a Unitarian – and the woman he married was a Unitarian -- though as do so many of the children raised in our faith tradition, he left the church and as an adult was known to be an unchurched freethinker – so much so that his Unitarian wife worried for the salvation of his soul.

So, we might ask, where does Darwin come into all this with the history wall? How does an evolutionary perspective strengthen our understanding of a church, its development and adaptation through history, and its prospects for success as its environmental niche changes and it finds itself both transforming and transformed? This church has been around going on two centuries now, moving through the various eras of history, through amazing changes in the social and cultural environment. It has adapted to a particular environmental niche -- this space on Elmwood Avenue in the City of Buffalo, this niche in a community that has gone through radical cycles of economic success and distress – and the church has persisted with varying levels of attention to the emerging environment, sometimes changing and sometimes resisting change, experimenting with different genetic adaptations in structure and process, seeking to survive and thrive as the future unfolds around and within it.

A church is not a building but a congregation, and the congregation is its members, those who are seated in this Sanctuary today, building on the foundation of those who have come before, and creating the foundation for those we trust will follow us. What is missing on this history wall of events over the years since 1832 is you, the members who have chosen to be part of this faith community.

On the right-hand inside page of your order of service you will see a yellow post-it note – I placed it there myself when they were printed on Friday. I now invite you to write your name (legibly, please) on the little sticky note, and to come forward to place your name on the time line of the history wall, in the approximate place of your becoming part of this church community. If you do not remember the exact date, that is just fine, because the time line is approximate.

And if moving is difficult for you, you can ask someone to bring up your note – and if you have a family member you want to add to the wall, the ushers have extra notes, as well as some pens you can borrow if you are without a writing implement. Just raise your hand for supplies, and someone will bring you what you need. It will be simplest if you come down over here in the 1800's side of the wall, and walk along it in single file to place your name where it belongs. The history on the wall is fascinating, but if you stop to read it now, this placement of names will take a LONG time, so I hope you will keep moving, and come back at the end of the service if you want to read it. Barbara will play some walking music to keep us moving, as everyone gets a chance to place his or her name, and then return to your seat.

### *Walking music*

So there you see the pattern of church membership, at least among those of you here today. We will be continuing this process next week with a new step, and a chance for anyone who is not here today to add their name on the time line. One thing we know is that a person joins a church because they like how it feels, they like what is happening, and generally, they like the minister who is the spiritual leader of the church at that point in time. You might say that, like ducklings when they hatch, people “imprint” on the church and the minister at the time they join. That is what the church is for them, the church they chose, just as it was when they chose to become part of it.

That phenomenon is quite clear here. I have heard so many comments, particularly about the ministers who were here when various people joined. One of the first things anyone here said to me when I arrived was the member who came up to me to tell me, “I just LOVED Paul Carnes.” And how many times have I heard, “Dan Budd was my minister; his sermons were so interesting,” or “I would not be here if it were not for Joel.” I am sure there are those among you who feel the same way about Glen Pruce, Rudy Gelsey, and Nancy Roemheld, and there will undoubtedly be a few people who feel that way about me. That is the nature of joining. The same goes for everything else about the church – the music, the groups and committees and activities, the way things were done or the way decisions were made – whatever was in place when you joined is likely the way you just think church is, the way it was meant to be.

That is all very well, completely normal and to be expected. However, as we know from the social and natural sciences, everything, including a church, is part of an ongoing evolutionary process, a process of constant change, so that just as you can never step in the same river twice, the church you are part of is never the church you joined – in fact, simply by joining it you have changed it, and it will never be the same. Change occurs internally, when new members enter and start to voice their opinions or bring their skills forward. Change occurs in the external environment as well, as when the culture and technology, the resources and problems and expectations of the society outside the church, evolve and make their influence felt on the evolutionary organism that is the church.

As the Unitarian Universalist Church of Buffalo continues to evolve, responding to its changing internal and external environments, as we move through this intentional time of transformation, jump-starting the development in areas that call for some renewed focus, I invite you to remember that each person around the table chose to join a different church, and may have a different ideal in mind for the church, reflecting the church as it was when they joined. Realizing we all carry a different vision of the ideal church in our heads will help us work together in greater harmony for our shared purpose of evolving into a bright future for this beloved congregation.

I selected today's closing hymn, Forward Through the Ages, to reflect today's theme in a number of ways: First, the hymn itself is a product of intentional evolution, putting a new text, that reflects our liberal non-doctrinal faith tradition, to the tune of Onward Christian Soldiers, a blatantly militaristic doctrinal hymn – we can own this message in a new way. Second, the words themselves reflect what I find best about our evolutionary faith perspective: celebrating our shared commitment while cherishing our diversity of gifts and service; creating an unbroken line that stretches from our rich history into our bright unfolding future, standing together in strength to bring our dreams into reality. So now I invite you, in the spirit of our evolutionary faith, to rise in body or spirit and join in singing number 114 in your hymnal, Forward Through the Ages.

Sources:

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Marlin Lavanhar quote on evolution retrieved 12-17-12 from <http://thegreatstory.org/morequotes.html>