



# UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK

**Celebrating Darwin Day:  
“Perpetual Curiosity, Scientific Thinking, & Hunger for Truth”**

**The Rev. Dr. J. Carl Gregg**

14 February 2016

[frederickuu.org](http://frederickuu.org)

Charles Darwin was born on February 12, 1809. In recent years, his birthday has become known as **International Darwin Day**, an annual opportunity to remember his life and be inspired to act on the principles of “perpetual curiosity, scientific thinking, and hunger for truth” that he represents. But even more than 150 years after the publication of Darwin’s landmark book On the Origin of Species, there remain large parts of humanity unconvinced of Darwin’s genius. Polls here in the U.S. consistently show that, **“65% of adults say that humans and other living things have evolved, while 31% say humans and other living things have existed in their present form since the beginning of time.”**

The tragedy of “Creationism vs. Evolution” debates today is that coming to terms with Darwin’s theories of evolution, natural selection, and common descent were among the greatest intellectual challenges of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. But we live in the early *twenty-first* century in which we are long past the point at which Evolution became settled science. Indeed, we’re less than a decade away from the 100th anniversary of the 1925 Scopes Monkey Trial.

As Unitarian Universalists, our forbears were among the earliest religious leaders to accept the paradigm-shifting implications of Evolution: 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 at the DNA level that **there is only a 1.23 percent difference between**

**humans and chimpanzees.** We humans are not uniquely special creations, but are instead deeply interconnected with the other forms of life and ecosystems on this Earth. 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.”

Some of you may recall last Sunday when I said that Unitarian Universalism is part of what is known as the **Liberal Turn in Religion**, which—let me hasten to add—is *not* a reference to the Democratic Party. It is a reference to classic Liberalism (more akin to contemporary Libertarianism) from the Latin root *liber*, meaning “free.” Thus, the Liberal Turn in Religion is a move toward *freedom* in religion. It is a shift *from* authority grounded in community, hierarchy, and tradition *to* authority grounded in *reason* (what is logical) and *experience* (what one knows firsthand either from one’s personal experience or what can be proven through the scientific method).

And that shift toward being a free religion matters when new ideas emerge like Darwin’s theory of evolution by natural selection. What did Darwin mean by natural selection? Here’s just one passage from *Origin of Species*:

Owing to this struggle of life, any variation, however slight and from whatever cause proceeding, if it be in any degree profitable to an individual of any species, in its infinitely complete relations to other organic beings and to external nature, will tend to the preservation of that individual, and will generally be inherited by its offspring. (148)

After Darwin, traditional religious claims were increasingly challenged by scientific evidence that complex life originated, not through one divine act of special creation a few thousand years ago, but through *billions* of years of evolution. Many of our Unitarian and Universalist forebears had an openness to such new ideas because they had been deeply influenced by the European Enlightenment. As Immanuel Kant wrote in his essay “What Is Enlightenment?,” which was published in 1784 only a few decades before Darwin’s birth, “Enlightenment is man’s exit from his self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to make use of one’s intellect without the direction of another. . . . **Dare to Know!**” On the other side of the Liberal Turn in Religion,

Unitarian Universalism is one among many progressive religious traditions in our world today that seeks to continue in the spirit of that Enlightenment project: “Dare to Know!”

If you are interested in reflecting further on how Darwin and other paradigm-shifting thinkers helped lay the groundwork for the modern world as we know it, the best overview I have found came out last year and is titled **The Shape of the New: Four Big Idea and How They Made the Modern World** by Scott Montgomery and Daniel Chirot (Princeton University Press). The authors take Adam Smith, Karl Marx, Charles Darwin, and Thomas Jefferson / Alexander Hamilton and reflect on how their big ideas (Capitalism, Socialism, Evolution, and Liberal Democracy) continue to influence us today.

But for this morning, two days after Darwin’s birthday (“International Darwin Day”), I would like to focus on Charles Darwin (1809 - 1882). As I do so, **how might his “perpetual curiosity, scientific thinking, and hunger for truth” inspire you today. What might you dare to know?** Or how might you inspire others to “dare to know?”

As we begin to reflect on the person behind the revolutionary idea that species originated not through special creation, but by means of natural selection, it is interesting to note that Darwin’s life was nowhere near as radical as his thought. Quite the opposite, Charles Darwin was a

**conventional and kindly Victorian gentleman**, often ill and confined to bed, married his [first] cousin and retired at an early age to a country home near London, where he lived with his family and worked with the most unthreatening of creatures imaginable: pigeons and barnacles, earthworms and bees.... He was a modest person who lived quietly, attended the occasional scientific meeting, and shunned public debate. (148)

Indeed, he held back on publishing *On the Origin of Species* for two decades, partially because he was a perfectionist, but also because of his concern over its potential impact—finally publishing so as not to be scooped by another scientist working in the same area. Tragically, **Darwin himself was not present when his theory was presented publicly because he was “mourning the death of his two-year-old son, Charles, Jr., from scarlet fever”** (149).

But even with the publication of *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, Darwin still held back.

He did not discuss the implications of his theories for us humans because he knew how controversial it would likely be to the public. He was right to be concerned: as we noted earlier, even today one-third of the U.S. denies the scientific evidence of evolution. Nevertheless, after little more than a decade, **Darwin did make explicit that humans were included in his theory of evolution in his 1871 book *The Descent of Man* and his 1872 book *The Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals* (151).**

To briefly consider the context in which Darwin was writing, it is fascinating to note that in 1859, **Darwin's main competition for *On the Origin of Species* was a book published that same year: *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens** (152). I also bring up Dickens because so many of his novels relate thematically to the Industrial Revolution, and the cultural changes related to the Industrial Revolution were happening all around Darwin. Keep in mind that,

**When Darwin was born [in 1809], most people still lived in towns and hamlets, worked in fields, cooked over open fireplaces, and did not travel. A half century later, by 1859, when *Origin* appeared, British cities were teeming, mills were working day and night, coal ovens were common, and trips through the countryside in comfortable trains were common fare for those with means. Thousands of miles of railroads now crossed the country, knitting it together as never before, circulating its goods, its influences, and its citizens. (153)**

So while Darwin's ideas changed the world and helped push us over the threshold from the premodern to the modern world, there were also many other influences ushering in modernity (150).

And, as I said earlier, from our twenty-first century perspective, Darwin's birthday ("International Darwin Day") is an annual invitation to remember Darwin's life and his example of "perpetual curiosity, scientific thinking, and hunger for truth." And in reflecting on his life, it is significant that, **"he did not begin calling himself an 'agnostic' until well after the crushing death of his favored child, Annie, in 1851.... He stopped all churchgoing and religious participation after the funeral"** (163). This part of Darwin's life is a challenge to find a way of being religious (of finding meaning and creating community) that honors both what we know to be true in our own firsthand experience and what we know through reason.

In contrast to the invitation of Darwin Day, growing up in a theologically conservative environment, I was not taught “intellectual bravery.” And there were times when I felt, as Darwin did, that I could *either* be true to my reason and experience *or* I could be true to the religious traditions and religious authorities I was being taught to follow, but **I did not have any good examples of how to have both: science *and* spirituality, reason *and* religion, head *and* heart.**

There were many kind and compassionate people in the church of my childhood, who taught me valuable lessons, but there was always a sense in which I felt like I had to check my brain at the door of the church. The implicit message I received was that **it was okay to ask questions (but not too many questions).** And regardless of what questions you asked, you were expected to arrive fairly quickly at the **pre-determined “right answers.”**

I remember going to conferences in which t-shirts were sold that said, “I believe in the Big Bang: God spoke and bang—it was!” There was a lot of fear and anxiety about students learning in public school science classrooms about Darwin’s theory of evolution, natural selection, and common descent—and then beginning to question the traditional beliefs they had been taught. And here’s the rub: in a sense, they were right to worry. As the saying goes, **“It’s not paranoid if they really are after you.”**

But here’s the other side of that dynamic. Darwin wasn’t targeting traditional religion. His goal was simply to better, more accurately, and more fully understand this incredible world in which we find ourselves. He was practicing what we UUs call our Fourth Principle: **“A free and responsible search for truth and meaning.”** And that’s one of many reasons why I am committed to this religious movement called Unitarian Universalism. We do not have all the answers. But **we are committed to being a beloved community for one another as we “live the questions.”**

For now, I will conclude with the final paragraph of Darwin’s 1859 book *On the Origin of Species*. Whereas many scientific texts are often not particularly well written (as far as the beauty of their prose) and become obsolete after new discoveries are made, Darwin’s books have been widely praised for both the writing style and for being well worth revisiting even many years later. So, I invite you to consider anew these words from the conclusion to Darwin’s landmark book:

Thus, from the war of nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of the higher animals, directly follows. **There is grandeur in this view of life**, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, 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. (170)

In my childhood, Darwin was a boogeyman. But I invite you either now or in the future (if you haven't already), to spend some time encountering Darwin's ideas firsthand for yourself—perhaps at first through a secondary source like The Shape of the New and then on to the primary sources (such as The Origin of Species and the also excellent The Voyage of the Beagle) as an inspiration for navigating through the promises and perils of embracing the best of both spirituality and science—of reason *and* religion—here in the twenty-first century.