



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK

“Do You Really Want to Know?” Copernicus, Darwin, and Marx

The Rev. Dr. J. Carl Gregg

27 September 2015

Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Frederick, Maryland

frederickuu.org

Peter Mayer’s song, “Do You Really Want to Know” traces two monumental paradigm shifts in how we humans understand ourselves. The first was the Copernican Revolution in the wake of astronomer Nicolai Copernicus’ 1543 book, *On the Revolutions of the Celestial Spheres*, which demonstrated that our planet is not the center of the universe. The sun, moon, and stars do not revolve around us; we are merely the third rock from the sun. And I love Peter’s lyrically imagined conversation between Pope Paul V and the Italian astronomer Galileo Galilei (1564 - 1642), who was born a few decades after Copernicus. **Peter imagines the scientist telling the pope, “It’s really quite amazing / Entirely life-changing / So let me ask before I show you— / Do you really want to know?”**

And although it is almost impossible to rival the discovery that we are *incredibly peripheral* among the more than 100 billion galaxies in the Universe, another paradigm shift that has come closest to the significance of the Copernican Revolution is the English naturalist Charles Darwin's 1859 book, *On the Origin of the Species by Means of Natural Selection*. Darwin’s meticulous observations of the natural world demonstrated that human beings did not originate from a special, one-time act of divine intervention. We evolved through an eons-long process of natural selection just like every other species. And as with the warning before looking through Galileo’s telescope, **I love Peter’s imagined conversation for those who would**

consider reading Darwin’s books: “It’s really quite amazing / Entirely life-changing / So let me ask before I show you— / Do you really want to know?”

One of the major reasons that I am a Unitarian Universalist is that for the most part, people drawn to our movement really do want to know. They really do want to be part of a community based around what our 4th Principle calls **“A free and responsible search for truth and meaning.”** Even more importantly, we seek not only to *think* differently, but also to *live* differently as a result of new findings, insights, and discoveries about ourselves and the world. As the sayings go, “We believe in deeds not creeds” — and that, much more than mere words, “Behavior is believable.”

Both the Unitarian and the Universalist halves of our heritage evolved over time to increasingly emphasize not an afterlife or other-worldly beliefs, but rather, living an ethical life here and now on this Earth. In that spirit of noticing the sacredness of this life and the holiness of this planet, Peter has a song titled “Church of the Earth” on his album Heaven Below that includes these lyrics:

The heaven we seek
Here at our feet
Here in this sunrise
In this heartbeat

And as we continue to reflect on this “Church of the Earth,” I invite you to hear another song from Peter that describes the ways that even amidst all our diversity and differences, there are also vital ways in which we must come to see our deep *connection* and *interdependence* with one another and with this planet” — the ways in which **“All the World is One”**

~~~~~

I invite you to consider that **this movement toward “The Church of the Earth” — of opening our hearts and minds to *this* world and to one another, *here and now* — is part of the attraction many people feel toward Pope Francis.** And although there are significant areas in which I strongly disagree with the Pope — including birth control, women’s equality, and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender rights (basically the “below the belt issues”) — I also think it is vital to work together with other religious and secular groups on common causes.

While acknowledging my significant disagreements with the antiquated Roman Catholic dogma on gender and sexuality, I also think we should celebrate opportunities to partner with Roman Catholics and other groups on immigration justice, environmental justice, and economic justice. Not only are we stronger together, but also it is important for us to admit that **there are approximately 800,000 Unitarian Universalists worldwide (less than 1 million), whereas Pope Francis is the leader of 1.2 billion Roman Catholic Christians.** In recent years, we UUs have passed a significant Statement of Conscience (2006) and Action of Immediate Witness (2015) regarding climate change at recent General Assemblies; however, it is not UUA President Peter Morales, but Pope Francis who has received wall-to-wall media coverage this past week.

And regarding the “Church of the Earth,” the subtitle of Pope Francis’s recent encyclical is “On Care for Our Common Home” — themes of which he reiterated in a speech to a Joint Session of Congress, which included some remarkable passages, including the following:

Business is a noble vocation, directed to producing wealth and improving the world. It can be a fruitful source of prosperity for the area in which it operates, especially if it sees the creation of jobs as an essential part of its service to the **common good**” (129). This common good also includes the Earth...“our common home” (3). “We need a conversation which includes everyone, since the environmental challenge we are undergoing, and its **human roots**, concern and affect us all” (14). ...I call for a courageous and responsible effort to “redirect our steps” (61), and to avert the most serious effects of the environmental deterioration caused by **human activity**.

In a way that honors the Pope’s namesake St. Francis of Assisi, who cared deeply about both nature and the poor, what I hear Pope Francis calling for is, to replace the false myth that the “bottom line” is profit alone, with laws that hold everyone accountable, including businesses, for the **true “triple bottom line” that balances people, planet, and profit.**

To consider the socio-economic implications of what that might mean, I find myself saying along with Galileo and Darwin,

*It’s really quite amazing*

*Entirely life-changing*

*So let me ask before I show you—*

*Do you really want to know?*

Pope Francis is explicit that major changes are needed that are far beyond half measures such as “Carbon Credits” or “Cap and Trade” programs (83-84).

And one of the most compelling characteristics of Pope Francis is that he has done more than call for systemic change in the world. He began by making changes to the Vatican (weeding out some of the corruption) and by making even more radical changes to himself through living with far more humility, generosity, and simplicity than any pope in recent memory. Before becoming Pope Francis I, he was a priest, then archbishop, then cardinal in Latin America, where he was steeped in a movement within Christianity called Liberation Theology, a central tenet of which is “**a preferential option for the poor.**” One quote from a Liberation theologian that has always stuck with me is from Dom Hélder Câmara (1909-1999), a former Archbishop in Brazil, who said, “**When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist.**”

It is at this point that the question arises again of “*Do we really want to know?*” I invite you to consider that **if you really do want to know, then one neglected guide is the philosopher and revolutionary Karl Marx** (1818 - 1883). That being said, I am not suggesting that we follow Marx’s nineteenth-century economic theory to the letter, any more than I would suggest that contemporary astronomers limit themselves to Copernicus alone or that biologists limit themselves to Darwin alone. We have learned a lot since each of these world-historical figures were originally writing. But there are relevant insights in Marx’s writings that can help our self-interested, capitalist system become more balanced with the *common good*, what Pope Francis calls the “Care for Our Common Home.” I am *not* advocating we should shift from one extreme to the other, dissolve private property, and have state ownership of everything. We know that profit-motive is a powerful force and there are times when market forces are extremely productive; but our world is currently in thrall to the extremes of a barely-regulated capitalism that is increasing profit through the exploitation of people and planet — and neither the 99% nor the climate can withstand more abuse.

To quote two scholars who have tried to think through what a twenty-first century,

postmodern — what they call “**Organic Marxism**” — might look like, they start by looking at the past:

**The greatest move toward a “mixed” capitalist/socialist economy in the United States occurred during the Great Depression**, after the crash of the markets and the bankruptcy of many financial institutions.... In response to the excesses of capitalist speculation, President Franklin D. Roosevelt began a series of social reforms known collectively as the “**New Deal.**” His Social Security program, for example, represented the first government-sponsored insurance programs of elderly, unemployed, and sick Americans. The Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 set maximum hours and minimum wages for most categories of works. These and other measures protecting workers and the public came to be known as the **social “safety net.”** (38)

**All we are talking about is reintroducing a concern for *people and planet* back into the equation instead of the rapaciousness of profit alone** — ensuring that *everyone has at least a decent minimum* rather than a few having an obscene amount while billions do not have enough food, access to clean water, safe shelter, affordable health care, or quality education. As Pope Francis said in his speech Friday to the United Nations:

**government leaders must do everything possible to ensure that all can have the minimum spiritual and material means needed to live in dignity....** In practical terms, this absolute minimum has three names: **lodging, labor, and land**; and one spiritual name: **spiritual freedom**, which includes religious freedom, the right to education and other civil rights.

My hope is that we really do want to know — and that we will join with others to work for the common good of all people on this planet, our common home.

For now, I will conclude with this excerpt from “You Were Made For This” by Clarissa Pinkola Estés:

I have heard from so many recently who are deeply and properly bewildered.... Ours is a time of almost daily astonishment and often righteous rage over the latest degradations of what matters most to civilized, visionary people.... The

lustre and hubris some have aspired to while endorsing acts so heinous against children, elders, everyday people, the poor, the unguarded, the helpless, is breathtaking. Yet, I urge you...not [to] spend your spirit dry by bewailing these difficult times.... Regarding awakened souls, there have never been more able vessels in the waters than there are right now across the world. And they are fully provisioned and able to signal one another as never before in the history of humankind. Look out over the prow; there are millions of boats of righteous souls on the waters with you.... And though we will meet resistance, we more so will meet great souls who will hail us, love us and guide us, and we will know them when they appear.... Ours is not the task of fixing the entire world all at once, but of stretching out to mend the part of the world that is within our reach.... It does not take everyone on Earth to bring justice and peace, but only a...determined group who will not give up during the first, second, or hundredth gale.... I hope you will write this on your wall: When a great ship is in harbor and moored, it is safe. But **that is not what great ships are built for.**

We are great ships, sailing on this one planet. In the spirit of solidarity, may we take the risk of leaving safe harbor to enter into the struggle for peace and justice for all people on this planet, our common home.