

The Origin of Species, or Can the Universe Be Trusted?

The Origin of Species – The Sermon

Publication

150 years ago on November 24, Charles Darwin published his *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*. This typically Victorian loong title would never fly today - we have shortened it to just The Origin of Species. But the bookstores were not deterred - and bought up the entire first edition in the first day. They knew this would be a hot seller . Darwin's book stands arguably as the book that initiated the greatest change in human history - in culture, science and religion. Darwin sensed this and delayed publication for over 20 years. In my conversations I find that few people recognize the extent of its influence - I certainly did not recognize this until very recently.

And I honor him deeply for his gifts to our culture and to me personally. One of his gifts is my topic for today.

Story of Theodicy

As a psychotherapist, I have seen many folks who have suffered severe losses and have listened to their struggle with why God has done this to them. One dear woman was very close to her daughter and grandchildren who lived close by and would visit her frequently - this was maybe the most important thing in her life.

She woke up one day to the news that her daughter's husband had murdered her daughter and grandchildren. Of course, she was wracked with terrible grief. The act was hideous. Her life would be dominated by the pain. It would never be the same.

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She believed that her god was in control of things and wanted to believe he was loving. She struggled mightily, but could find no way to reconcile what she believed about God and what had happened. She was shaken to the core by the grief AND by what she felt was a betrayal by god. It was unimaginably painful.

This story can be repeated in one degree or another uncountable times. The Old Creation Myth sets up this unsolvable paradox. It has been one of the biggest thorns in the side of those who believe in a supernatural god.

Evolution, as the new Creation Story, offers a deeply satisfying alternative that contains no such paradox. Thank you, Charles Darwin.

The old creation story taught us that Adam & Eve's sin transformed the earth and us and that only God could now be trusted. But what happens if we can't trust god?

Culturally this has left us with significant fears and numerous destructive ways to deal with fear. We have fear when we don't have faith. When we have faith there is a confidence that things will ultimately turn out OK, that we can handle the situation, that we will have help.

Is there a basis for faith? Can we trust the Universe? Can we trust Life? Can we trust our species? Ourselves? Our bodies? Can we trust anything?!

Our culture teaches us to distrust life. We see this expressed so prominently in conventional agriculture and medicine. In agriculture we don't trust the soil and plants and insects to work in harmony to produce enough for all. So instead of

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strengthening the soil and plants we use synthetic fertilizers and pesticides. This has forced a quick yield, but has caused devastation of farmlands around the globe.

And in medicine, we do not trust the body to heal itself by giving it what it needs and working in harmony with it. Instead, we do things TO the body like drugs, surgery, radiation, chemotherapy, etc. which often weaken the body and lead to results worse than the disease.

When you go to your doctor with a complaint, how often do you hear something like, "Before we do drugs or surgery let's see what we can do to strengthen your body so it can heal itself"? How often does that happen to you?

What if there really is a basis for trusting life? For having faith?

Do any of you look at reliability records before you buy a car? Why? Because it tells you something about the nature of the car, how much you can trust it. How is that different from the rest of life? How about ourselves? Do we think we are made of the kind of stuff that can be trusted?

What are we made of? Here is one of the most magnificent gifts of Darwin - the faith that comes when we live in the confidence that the way things are inside and out are up to the challenge.

Ask yourself - "If I really believed I was made of really great stuff and the world around me was also, would I not live my life more boldly, more peacefully, more lovingly, more creatively, more generously? What if I really had that kind of Faith?"

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Foundations for Faith

First, let's look at the foundation for Faith, then let's consider how this can be a part of our lives.

Everything that is, came from a small batch of immense energy that burst forth 13.7 Billion years ago. . Since we all came from the same original stuff, everything that is true of the universe is true of us.

"If a lost child who knew nothing of her background and had been raised by an indifferent family suddenly discovered that she was the direct descendant of an illustrious house traceable back many centuries, her sense of identity would expand momentarily even before anything else changed. How much more expansive will our identity be, when we really get it that our lineage goes back 14 billion years and that our family is the WHOLE UNIVERSE."

We ARE the universe, we (and everything that is) we are cells in this giant body, we grew out of the earth - we were not dropped onto it. Can we really get this? When we see pictures of galaxies and nebulae and supernovae, we are awed. Well, we are made of the same stuff. There is no power or beauty out there that is not in here just as truly.

Here is an amazing claim we can make: Every one of our ancestors was successful! Every one of our ancestors all the way back to the first living organisms. Every one lived to reproduce because they had mastered successful living. We have a proud ancestry - all of us! If this were not true we would not be here.

Let's look at some of our recent proud ancestry. We humans emerged as a distinct species, Homo ergaster, about 2 million years ago in the great rift valley of Africa during a time of highly

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variable weather - from lush times to deep drought. We either had to become highly adaptive or go extinct. Suddenly, we more than doubled our brain size and acquired an amazingly powerful ability to adapt readily to changing circumstances. Amazing!

Let's go back to our earliest grandparents - the first living things. The story I told in the TFAA. This is another example of one of the great principles of evolution: Crises and hardship drive creativity, complexity and cooperation. These single-celled creatures gave up their individuality to become parts of a more complex whole - some became nuclei, some became mitochondria, some became other organelles - all within a more complex single-celled organism with a nucleus. And these are the organisms that are the cells in our bodies and in every living thing.

Through the millennia our ancestors were prolifically creative and developed immense numbers of different creatures that filled every niche and cranny of this vast world. When I study these creatures and what they accomplished and how, I am awestruck - unbelievable complexity and effectiveness and beauty and power. Then I look at myself as a human being - what magnificent creatures we are. Does this amazing fact not inspire confidence in the nature of things?

Given that we have been so successful through the ages, can we not have the faith that we and our world are up to the challenges now?

Identifying With the Whole

When we get it, we see that our identity is not this separate individual that got dropped here and is separate from the world. We are the Universe and the Universe is Grand. When we

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identify with the Whole, we have faith and can take a whole different attitude toward troubles and disappointments. Everything in the universe has troubles and the universe grows from them. That means we can, because we are the universe.

Did any of you see this youtube clip going around called "Everything's amazing and nobody's happy"? It is hilarious, but also spiritually profound. Google it. It spoke to my spoiled bratness. It called me to stay aware of another great evolutionary truth - none of existence is easy, no one has it their way, and at any moment, whatever has gone wrong is tiny compared to what is amazing about everything that is at that moment. "It's all small stuff."

And we can take a different attitude toward our faults and failings. Because of our evolutionary nature, we can't get it wrong! Either we have enjoyed the moment or we have a learning opportunity. The universe has grown as a result of chaos, mistakes, challenges, death and destruction. Whatever happens, we have a choice: In faith, we can experience it as a challenge to grow from and let our great family help us, or without faith, we can experience it as a tragedy.

Someone once said to me about something that happened to them: "It was the worst thing that ever happened to me - it was the best thing that ever happened to me." Challenges bring forth our best. We have some really good stuff inside us that we can call upon.

When I look back I can see that my mistakes and blunders have led me somehow to where I am today and that I have grown from them. This is how the whole universe works - it is our nature. So let's have self-forgiveness ready for every mistake in the future.

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After all, we are much better people when we are in a forgiving place than when we are ashamed and absorbed with how worthless we are.

How do we stay in this awareness?

There are many ways, but I want to emphasize one way now: Direct experience of nature. We used to be in contact with nature all day long. Now we have mainly an artificial environment, and I think we have lost something very important.

When I am in the mountains and dealing with all the elements, I am transformed and often have an experience of being one with nature. My memories of these times feed me. When I can't be there, I watch nature programs and science programs that keep me aware of how magnificent the world is. I have to slow down and open my heart to take in this experience. However, the most powerful experience for me is when I am THERE - sitting beside a placid lake mirroring jagged peaks and glaciers, hiking along beside a rushing creek, feeling the deep moss at the edge of a swamp, listening to a canyon wren's plaintive downward call, watching squirrels at play, touching and examining the side of a cliff, gazing out over a majestic landscape of trees and mountains and clouds. This is my Cathedral - the place where I feel immersed in the Great Mystery. I am sure countless others have had this experience.

When I look at one of her paintings, I am convinced that when Georgia O'Keefe gazed into a flower, every cell in her body was filled with delicious energy, and she could not wait to convey it to the canvas.

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When John Muir walked among the great Sequoia, examined the beetles and mosses of the forest floor, he was ecstatic and was filled with a deep reverence for life.

When Ansel Adams saw the mountains and lakes and canyons and clouds and waterfalls, I feel sure he was filled with wonder and awe and a deep desire to protect this land.

When we immerse ourselves in nature, we get to experience deep in us the beauty and power that is the universe and that is us. We can feel a transforming gratitude for this majestic world - and we are in faith. This experience provides the emotional and spiritual dimension to add to our knowledge that the universe can be trusted.

All this power prepares us for dealing magnificently with life as it is. With Life As It Is. Not meant to be perfect and easy, but as difficult, challenging - making us strong and creative; not meant to be all on our shoulders, but meant to be accomplished as we are held by our beloved community and by The Great Family of the Whole Universe, for we are ONE, all deeply interconnected. This is how everything in the Universe works.

All of our lives can be lived this way with welcoming the new, with a readiness for challenge, with the confidence that we are loved and supported, without all the anxiety that limits our joy and creativity.

We can trust the Universe. We can have faith. We really can.