

EVOLUTION SUNDAY 2015

For several years now Poplar Ridge Meeting has participated in Evolution Weekend, along with hundreds of other congregations of many denominations around the country. It is an observance organized by Michael Zimmerman, a biologist at the University of Indiana, to affirm the principal that religion and science need not be in conflict, that they can co-exist as two different ways of addressing what is going on in the universe. To be honest, there was an element of conflict involved in the conception of Evolution Weekend, and that was over whether the Theory of Evolution should be considered as one idea among others, and that Creationism and Intelligent Design should be included as viable alternatives in science curriculum and textbooks, as some religious folk are in favor of doing. Zimmerman, and a vast majority of scientists, thought that was not a good idea. A better idea was to discuss the relationship between science and religion in churches, synagogues, and other religious venues—and here we are.

I hesitate to generalize about what people might be thinking and believing in this room. I know, and I am glad, that we have a variety of beliefs and shades of belief among us. But I do have the sense that the proposition that religion and science can co-exist, and perhaps complement each other, is not controversial among us, and that the Theory of Evolution is not seen as a threat. We are reasonable, modern people, more or less. And we have in our community scientifically oriented, highly knowledgeable people, even bona fide scientists—and when they have brought the message on Evolution Weekend, there has always been, it seems to me, a note of lucidity, and comfort with science, and a calm, well-informed acceptance of the Theory of Evolution.

I have always enjoyed the messages that have been given here on Evolution Weekend, and I especially like hearing from the scientifically-minded among us. But this time, the assignment has fallen to me, and I have a confession to make: in terms of scientific training, not to mention aptitude, I might be the least qualified person in the room to speak on the topic. As far as academic coursework, I topped out in the 9th grade, when Earth Science was the last time I did well in a science course. Let's not even talk about math. 9th grade was my high water mark there too: A in Algebra I. After that, there was some kind of sea-change, and C was the grade that I was lucky to receive. There was a period of a week or so in Basic Physics in college when I think I understood the Theory of Relativity, but mostly science courses were alien territory, and I was happy when I fulfilled the last requirement and escaped to live in the friendlier fields of Literature (my major) and Religion (my minor).

And I have to admit also that it is not just the *truth* of Evolution, backed up by scientific consensus, that appeals to me, though I am glad to be on the side of scientific truth—it is also the beauty of it that appeals, and the poignance of some of its implications. The very things which were threatening to some Victorians, and are threatening to religious fundamentalists today, are welcome to me, appealing to intellect, imagination, and spirit.

The beauty is in the evolutionary vision, and the scientific evidence supporting it, that show us to be truly a part of nature— more deeply part of it than we might otherwise have supposed. There has always been the worry that Darwin's way of thinking might make us atheists, and it is true that many scientists are atheists, or something close to it, though many are theists as well, as Evolution Weekend has made clear. But however that may be, evolution ought to make us Earthiests—it could be spelled eist or iest, whichever you prefer—that is, conscious participants and fellow-travelers in the long story of life on this wonderful, dear planet. I know

we may be feeling a little oppressed by the elements lately, and earth can be terrifying at times. But it is our home, it is unspeakably beautiful, and it nourishes us body and soul. And evolution puts us in the line of animals, and rather than feeling upset by that, it might make us a little more humble, and at the same time, less lonely. It's not Facebook. But there is another kind of connection, lovely and profound.

I've never been comfortable with the claim in Genesis and elsewhere that we are made in God's image. I know it's a metaphor, it isn't about physical appearance—but still it bothers me, because it seems narrow and self-aggrandizing. Human beings the image of God—hmm, let's see—which species was it that came up with that? It seems a little suspicious.

I saw a hawk the other day, a clear, quite close view of it, perched in a snowy tree, looking out with its hawk gaze, and I thought about the phrase “the image of God,” just before it opened its wings and lifted away.

It's natural for us to be species-centric. So are all the other species, I suppose—though they are less elaborately, less imaginatively so, than we are.

Our humanity comes with great rewards—also liabilities and limitations. Biologist Edward O. Wilson points out in his book *The Meaning of Human Existence*, “Human beings have one of the poorest senses of smell of all the organisms on Earth, so weak we have only a tiny vocabulary to express it....We depend on the sophistication of trained dogs to lead us through the olfactory world, tracking individual people, detecting even the slightest trace of explosives and other dangerous chemicals.” Our hearing is not much better, compared to bats and elephants and many others. Wilson says that “The human brain is the most complex system known in the universe,” but also that we are “chemosensory idiots.” But—we have science. We have the arts. And we have religion—which I think is closer to art than to science. Our kind of

intelligence also carries responsibilities, asking of us humility, empathy, self-control, and stewardship, none of which are exactly instinctual for us--although some primatologists have found fundamentals of cooperation in the apes that could be the foundation of those capacities. See, for example, Frans DeWaal's *Peacemaking among Primates*.

No doubt we have all had the experience of taking a walk with a dog and observing the olfactory heaven of what a walk in the woods is for a dog. Now a dog is not God, even though they are spelled with the same letters, and yet "the image of God" would have to include a dog's way of being in the moment, wouldn't it? So I am in favor of a liberal, trans-species view, if we want to talk about the image of God.

And then there is Charles Darwin, the man. The date for Evolution Weekend is chosen to fall on the weekend nearest to Darwin's birthday. And then there is the wonderful coincidence that Darwin and Abraham Lincoln share a birthday—not just share a birthday in the usual sense, but that they were born on the very same day. The two of them emerged from their mothers, in the old biological way, little babies, on February 12, 1809, one in England, one in Kentucky. Their accomplishments were great. Neither of them was perfect, but both tried to live by the better angels of their nature. Both were long-suffering, Darwin with chronic severe stomach disorders, Lincoln with susceptibility to depression, including the long-suffering and depression of a thoughtful, sensitive man in the Presidency during civil war. Both of them were devoted to families; both knew what it is like to lose a child. When we contemplate these two individual specimens of our species, we picture them in their dark 19th century coats—which are also the long, dark coats of responsibility and humane intelligence.

I would like to conclude with a poem I wrote, quite a few years ago. The teen-age boy in the poem is now forty-two. There it is again: the mystery of time, which is both a stream and an ocean, in which we are swimming.

GORILLA BLESSING

Sitting in a restaurant eating a quiet meal, I'm often struck
by how much human beings resemble gorillas.

The way that woman over there
just now lifted her small daughter's hair
to examine some scratch or bite on the back of her neck,
just above the shoulder,
and then let the tender dark hair fall back down,
and patted her on the head.

Or the way my son,
young adult male of this species,
picks up french fries one by one,
making a casual but satisfactory choice each time,
dips each one into the pool of ketchup
and raises it to his mouth,
resembling the way the chimpanzee
raises the twig crawling with termites to his.

All this quiet lifting of food to mouth
Around the dusky room—
the steadiness and murmur—
there's something beautiful about it—
something ape-like and sane.

There are differences of course.

We do less touching than they do, and much less mutual grooming.
Our conversation is more intricate than theirs—
though perhaps not so much.

They have a considerable variety of grunts, belches, and croonings,
and much must be said in their glances
and black-furred silences.

But in these moments in restaurants,
when I see a gorilla in every chair,
and the chairs are humps of earth
and the booths are lush booths of vegetation
on Karisoke slopes,
I think of kinship across six million years or so,

how similar our faces are, and our hands,
and how human behavior is trickier than theirs,
though certainly not better—
our best really not better than theirs,
their worst far less than ours.
And I think of how strange it is
that they have come and we have come
and both ride this planet
among chilly space and starry eternity,
they fewer, we always more.
And the baby gorilla at its mother's breast,
and the deep-browed gaze of the silverback
stripping wild celery, stopping to look up,
and looking carefully around.

READINGS

“Chimpanzees, gorillas, orangutans, have been living for hundreds of thousands of years in their forest, living fantastic lives, never overpopulating, never destroying the forest. I would say that they have been in a way more successful than us as far as being in harmony with the environment.”

“People say maybe we have a soul and chimpanzees don't. I feel that it's quite possible that if we have souls, chimpanzees have souls as well.”

“From my perspective, I absolutely believe in a greater spiritual power, far greater than I am, from which I have derived strength in moments of sadness and fear. That's what I believe, and it was very, very strong in the forest.”

Jane Goodall