

“We Are Stardust: Darwin and a New Creation Story”
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When Charles Darwin published On the Origin of Species in 1859, he reimagined and rewrote a story that humans had told themselves for millenia, the story of how life itself began. Not surprisingly, his radical theory that all species, including humans, evolved by natural selection was met with skepticism in some quarters and outright hostility in others.

Orthodox Christianity and the scientific community of his day were not ready to broaden their views, no matter how carefully documented Darwin's research methods or findings. Accepting Darwin's creation story meant questioning the prevalent view that humanity was created literally by the hand of God and in the imager of God. The new creation story asked human beings, instead, to accept that we share an evolutionary pathway with fish, bird, and monkey. Accepting Darwin's theory inherently demanded a new understanding of reality, a new worldview, and a new understanding of the relationship of humanity to God and the nature of God.

Darwin's reimagining of how human life began found traction here in the United States in liberal Protestant faiths, where the reformation of religious understanding was still underway. Unitarian and Universalist theologians were among the earliest to affirm this new creation story and to set in motion one of our core principles: there is a fundamental unity and interdependence of all existence and our world continuously is recreated in an open-ended and dynamic

process. Both Unitarians and Universalists sought a way to incorporate Darwin's thought into a new conversation where science might inform faith.

In 1885, American Unitarian theologian Francis Ellington Abbot published his book Scientific Theism, in which he used Darwin's idea of evolution and the scientific method to recast several orthodox theological doctrines, anticipating both the humanist movement and process philosophy.¹ The same year, Universalist minister Orello Cone proposed that the "conflict" between science and religion had "arisen from the opposition of priests and theologians to the conclusions of scientific investigation." In a cutting edge article "Evolution and Revelation," published in *Universalist Quarterly* (1885), Cone argued that science, which "had unveiled the hidden secrets of nature [and revealed] the grandeur of the universe and its wonderful economy, its order, harmony and laws," made the foundation of religion more secure. Science, Cone said, demonstrated the method of creation, not the force behind it.²

"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth," according to the Genesis creation story. Darwin's research findings not only challenged the traditional religious view in Western culture of how human life on earth came into being, it also implicitly challenged the orthodox story of how the "heavens" came to be. Evolution led inexorably to a spiritual focus on natural processes, with theologians looking to nature rather than a supernatural deity as a source of the feelings of awe and wonder, mystery and reliance that define the religious experience for most.

1 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/F._E._Abbot

2 <http://www25.uua.org/uuhs/duub/articles/orellocone.html>

Turning to themes from the Psalms and writings of early Christian mystics, Unitarian minister Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote of the spiritual depth of his transcendental experience with the natural world. At the beginning of his great essay *Nature*, Emerson posed the provocative question, "*The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we--, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?*"

However, it was not until the middle of the 20th century that scientists discovered even the heavens are not immortal and that our own sun was born from the the death of previous generations of stars over a nearly unimaginable period of time. It took the technology and thought of modern astrophysics for us to discover that the same explosive force that gave birth to the stars long before our own sun was born also created all the complex atoms that are around us and in us.

Not only are we the product of the evolution of species but also of the evolution of stars. Now we are able to perceive the universe itself as having originated in a time before time; a vast universe that is ancient yet evolving and seemingly subject to the same laws of change that we experience in our natural world.

What a grand narrative! What a marvelous creation story that teaches that we, in truth, are made of stardust! That we share this life force with all other living creatures in our DNA, the building blocks of life itself. What a wondrous creation story that contains the epic adventure of fish emerging from the water to dry land and becoming amphibian, of reptile taking to the air and becoming bird, of

mammal moving to the sea and becoming whale, of a primate climbing down from a tree and becoming ... US!

What a story to tell our children! A new creation story that makes sense, that is inspiring, that leads to more questions that inspire more scientific research and investigation, that helps them develop a unified understanding of how they and the world fit together. We might begin the story something like this:

“In the beginning in a time before time, out of what scientists call the big bang, and what you might like to call the great radiance, out of the fireball came the simplest gases, hydrogen and helium. And after a long, long time the gases swirled and heated and cooled and became billions and billions of stars, like our very own sun. And some of the same gases that made the stars also carried stardust along with them, like cosmic hitchhikers. The gases with stardust wrapped themselves like a blanket around our very own planet Earth, and became the air we breathe and the great oceans where all living things began. We, too, are made of that same stardust!”³

Our children ask us big questions and they deserve big answers from us, answers that help them cultivate a sense of the sacred in the natural world while celebrating the diversity, complexity and mystery of life itself. We can give our children a story of creation that offers a foundation for faith, that instills a sense of spiritual connection, a sense of reverence and gratitude for life, compassion and connection with something bigger than oneself. A story that leads to right relationship at all levels of being with all aspects of life.

³ Also see, “We Are Stardust,” Connie Barlow, [The Whole World Kin](#)

If we don't give our children real answers to their big questions and teach them evolution as their creation story, children from other churches will be happy to share their answers and their “in the beginning...” stories on the playground.

Our children need solid information and solid answers to develop their view of reality. Our children need our help to distinguish fantasy and imagination, myth and poetry, from fact.

We should have no doubt that opposition to Darwin's ideas remain today just as they did in Victorian England. Our culture sometimes seems stuck in a permanent battle where we are asked to choose between thought, especially reason based on the scientific method, and faith. “Creation,” “evolution,” and “faith” have become hot buttons, fighting words, triggering knee jerk reactions. Our children need a solid grounding in reality to hold their own as debates over public school biology curriculum, public policy funding, and other cultural battles swirl around them.

Perhaps Darwin's lasting legacy to religion will be the concept that systems of faith also can evolve. We might call this, suggests UU minister Naomi King, the principle of *spiritual selection*.⁴ Perhaps the evolutionary work that remains for us is to direct our creative forces selectively toward greater love, compassion, connection, and well-being among all of life as this tiny planet and our tiny sun inexorably continue the slow return to the stardust where it all began.

4 “An Imperfect Legacy,” Naomi King, The Whole World Kin