

Science and Religion: The Story of Charles and Emma Darwin

Robert W. Wallace
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“ It is interesting to contemplate an entangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent on each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us.... Thus, from the war of nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of 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; 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.

Charles Darwin, 1859
The Origin of Species

With these words Charles Darwin concluded his “On the Origin of Species by Natural Selection.” It was in this book, published in 1859, that Darwin proposes the mechanism of natural selection as the driving force for evolution. Today, we recognize that our understanding of life, and the Earth’s biodiversity, makes little sense except in the light of Darwin’s masterpiece. Yes, biologists continue to argue, frequently disagreeing over the details of exact path of evolution; however, it is clear that Darwin got the overall mechanism right almost 150 years ago.

Darwin continues to fascinate, and sometimes enrage, a large audience. Walk into any good bookstore and peruse the science shelves. You will find them absolutely groaning with volumes about Darwin’s life and work, and additional volumes are being added yearly. Thus, it is with a sense of amazement that I look back on my own training as a professional biologist, and recognize that I never read any of the works of Darwin. Certainly, I read about Darwin and his theories, but I never actually sat down and read his words.

Six years ago I began teaching a life science course at New York University for freshman and sophomore non-science students in a program that emphasized the reading of great books. What could be more important in such a course, I reasoned, than reading Darwin’s “Origin of Species?” So, I adopted it as a part of the course, and I read it for the first time myself. The more I read, the more fascinated I became, both with Darwin as a scientist and as a person.

This fascination has now led to my having made three trips to the Village of Downe, just a short distance out of London, where Darwin’s home is located. Over the past five years his home has been undergoing restoration, and I’ve had the opportunity to write several articles about the restoration process and interview those involved in reclaiming it’s nineteenth century character. Today, I’ve brought along a slide show of Darwin’s home as well as a selection of books written by and about Darwin. Please feel free to peruse the material during the coffee hour.

If you go to the Unitarian Universalist Association web site you can find a long list of famous UU's. Look down the list and you will come across the name Charles Darwin. I'm not sure his inclusion is appropriate as Darwin was never a member of a Unitarian Church as an adult, but his mother was a Unitarian, and he did attend Unitarian services both as a child and on occasion as an adult. Charles Darwin's wife Emma, on the other hand, was a life-long Unitarian, and it's the relationship between Charles and Emma, and their struggles between the sometimes-conflicting views of science and religion that I would like to explore this morning. It's my belief that their example remains useful to us today as members of a diverse religious community.

When Charles Darwin returned to England after his five-year voyage on the H.M.S. Beagle, he was only 27 years old. He was already famous as a naturalist due to the incredible array of animal and plant samples he had sent back to England during his voyage, and he was soon consumed with writing up an account of his adventures and with placing his various collections in the hands of the right biological specialists for evaluation.

He was not too busy, however, for romance, and soon a spark was glowing between Charles and Emma Wedgewood. Charles had known Emma since childhood—for a very good reason: Charles' Mother and Emma's Father were sister and brother. Yes, Charles and Emma were first cousins; they grew up living in near-by villages and were together frequently as children and young adults. Emma's father was Josiah Wedgewood, owner of the now famous Wedgewood pottery.

As the romance grew, Charles contemplated marriage. Ever the romantic, he did just what you might expect a super-rational scientist to do; he literally drew up a list of the pros and cons of his getting married to Emma; a list that survives to this day.

Under "**Not Marry**" Charles scribbled: "Freedom to go where one liked—choice of society and little of it. Conversation with clever men in clubs. Not forced to visit relatives and bend to every trifle—to have the expense and anxiety of

children—loss of time—how should I manage my business if I were obliged to go every day walking with my wife. Eheu! I would never know French, or see the Continent, or go to America, or go up in a Balloon.”

“Under Marry” Charles listed: “Children (if it please God), constant companion (and friend in old age) who will feel interested in one.”

Then he concluded: “My God, it is intolerable to think of spending one’s whole life like a neuter bee, working, working, and nothing after all. No, no, won’t do...Only picture to yourself a nice soft wife on a sofa with a good fire, and books and music perhaps...Marry—Marry—Marry. Q.E.D.”

Charles and Emma were married on January 29, 1839 and took up residence in a house in London on Upper Gower Street adjacent to the University of London. The pictures on the front of the Order of Service today are of portraits of Charles and Emma done at the time of their marriage. Today, Charles and Emma’s first home is gone; the offices and laboratories of the Biology Department of the University sit on the site of their first home.

Charles and Emma sometimes attended services at the Unitarian Chapel on Little Portland Street, just a few blocks away from their London home. This September I walked the three short blocks of Little Portland Street looking for some sign of the “Greek Style” building that once housed the Unitarian Chapel, but I could find no clue as to its location. I did have the opportunity to read a short history of the chapel that’s preserved in Dr. Williams’s Library, a small theological library at the University of London. The pamphlet, entitled “A Sketch of the History of Little Portland Street Chapel”, states, “Charles Darwin, a connection of the Wedgewood family, was a frequent visitor to the Chapel.” The same pamphlet says that other members included the famous geologist Charles Lyell and that Charles Dickens “was a member of the church and a constant attendant with this wife and family.”

Nineteenth century British Unitarianism was quite different from what we know today. The very first sermon preached at the Little Portland Street Chapel in 1833 by the Reverend Edward Tagart was titled: “The Rise and Progress of Unitarian Christianity as Earnest of its Future Triumph”. In addition to preaching the future triumph of Unitarian Christianity, the Rev. Tagart “rejected the doctrine of depravity of human nature,” a radical notion for the day, “and emphasized social concord, domestic piety and fraternal unity.”

Despite Rev. Tagart’s best efforts, Charles Darwin was having doubts about his religious beliefs and was leaning strongly towards a belief in pure materialism. “It is an argument for materialism,” said Darwin, “that cold water brings on suddenly in the head feelings which may be considered as truly spiritual.” Charles confided these feelings and doubts to his father who advised him strongly to keep his doubts from Emma, noting that in his experience as a country doctor, “Things went on pretty well until the wife or husband became out of health, and then some women suffer miserably by doubting the salvation of their husbands, thus making them likewise to suffer.”

Charles, as usual, did not take his father’s advice. Instead, he confided to Emma his strong doubts about religion. Charles’ father was correct; Emma was tortured by this revelation to the point that she could not bring herself to talk directly to Charles about his lack of belief. Instead she wrote Charles a long letter expressing her despair at the thought of not being with her beloved husband through eternity. The teaching of the day of her Unitarian faith proclaimed that those who were saved, to spare them angst in the afterlife, would not remember the ones who had been lost. So, according to this doctrine, Emma would not even have a recollection in heaven that Charles had at one time been part of her life. Charles was deeply moved by her letter as he felt her despair. He kept this letter for the rest of his life, and today it still resides amongst his papers at Cambridge University. Written on the outer cover in Charles’ handwriting is the note “When I am dead know that I have kissed and cried over this.”

Despite these differences over religion, Charles and Emma got on with their lives. Within three years of marriage, they moved out of London to the Village of Downe in the

Kent countryside, where they would live together for the next forty years, until Charles died in 1892. Charles continued his scientific studies and published a long list of books in addition to the “Origin of Species”, some of which I have on the back table. His last book, published as Charles was approaching 80 years of age, was one on earthworms, and Emma helped him with research for the book, playing the piano as Charles observed earthworms that he had placed on the top of the instrument in an attempt to determine if they could sense sound. He found no evidence that they could do so.

Emma ran the household and the gardens of their country estate and remained almost constantly pregnant from the year of her marriage to Charles in 1839 until her tenth child was born in 1856.

Amidst all of these children Charles continued to work on his theories. In 1842 he wrote a preliminary account of what was to become his “Origin of Species”. He put away a copy of the manuscript and told Emma that this amongst all his writings was most important and provided her with instructions and funds for its publication should anything happen to him. Then he did not touch the manuscript for over 15 years, when he was finally forced to publish because of the discovery of natural selection by the biologist Alfred Russel Wallace. Darwin scholars have pondered why Charles sat on his work and waited so long to publish. One likely reason was that he was fearful of the reaction that he knew the purely materialistic theory would provoke. Indeed that reaction was severe and still reverberates today. But I believe at least part of his hesitation was the hurt he knew such a reaction would rekindle in Emma.

By all accounts Charles and Emma were very close and agreed upon almost everything affecting the family except religion. There was no Unitarian Church in Downe, so Emma took the children and attended St. Mary’s, the local Anglican Church that has been a fixture in the center of the village since the 1300’s. Emma was strong willed, however, and could not abide some of the teachings of the Anglicans. To the embarrassment of her children, she would often turn and refuse to face the church altar during the part of the service where the congregants stood and recited the Anglican creed.

Charles, on the other hand wrote, “My theology is a simple muddle. I cannot look at the Universe as the result of blind chance, yet I see no evidence of beneficent design in the details.” As Charles continued to ponder his religious belief he became ever more doubtful of the existence of a designer and ever more grounded in his materialistic view of life and the Universe. Today, we would label his theology as agnostic or possibly that of an atheist.

Charles was not the typical distant and aloof Victorian-era father. He adored his children and tolerated a huge level of chaos as his many children romped through the house, and sometimes his study. At times he would sit in the floor and growl like a bear as the children ran their hands over his hairy chest. Other times he would let them play with shells and other specimens that he had collected while on the Beagle. Emma provided music from the grand piano that dominated the drawing room, and the chairs were often pushed back so the children could cavort to the piece she composed that they called her ‘galloping tune’.

Once when Emma was away, Charles wrote: “The children are growing so quite out of all rule in the drawing room, jumping on everything and butting like young bulls at every chair and sofa, . . .that I am going to keep them out of the drawing room. I declare a month of such wear will spoil everything.” Later Emma related, “When we were young, Charles and I talked over together what we should do. The house was newly and expensively furnished. Shall we make the furniture a bugbear to the children, or shall we let them use it in their plays?” They agreed that they should not worry about things getting shabby. “So chairs and other furniture used to get piled up for railways and coaches, just as the fancy took them. . . . I believe we have all been much the happier in the consequence,” said Emma.

The Darwins also supported one another through the tragedies of their lives. Randal Keynes, a great, great grandson of Charles and Emma has recently written a book, *Annie’s Box*, in which he tells us that of the ten children born to Charles and Emma, only seven survived to adulthood. Two of the children died as infants, but clearly the greatest

tragedy of Charles and Emma's lives was the loss of the eldest daughter, Annie, at the age of 10 years. She died after a long and mysterious illness that today we recognize as tuberculosis.

Both Charles and Emma were devastated by the loss. Each dealt with the loss in a different way. Charles resorted to writing, producing a moving private memorial to his lost daughter. He then buried himself in his work on his species theory. But he grieved over Annie's death for the remainder of his life.

Emma, pregnant as usual and preparing for the birth of her next child, collected mementos of Annie's short life and carefully stored them away in what had been her young daughter's writing case. "Annie's Box", wrapped in a yellow ribbon, is stuffed with the trivial items of the young girl's daily routine: letters, a piece of embroidery, a lock of her brown hair, and trinkets, along with the quills, steel nibs, sealing wax, and seals typical of a writing case. Today, Annie's box still resides at the Darwin's home in Downe as a moving memorial to their young daughter.

Despite their different world-views, one based on science the other grounded primarily in religion, Charles and Emma loved one another, borrowed from each other, grieved together, and found a way to respect and honor their differences. Yes, they sometimes suffered mightily over their different views, but I believe such differences made them stronger and more complete than either would have been without the other.

In his recent book, "Rocks of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life", the late Stephen Jay Gould makes the case that: "Instead of choosing between science and religion, why not opt for a golden mean that accords dignity and distinction to each realm." Gould goes on to say that the two realms occupy Non-Overlapping Magisteria. Science defines the physical world but cannot provide answers as to why the world is the way it is or how we must conduct our lives as members of this world. "If it is wisdom we seek, and it should be, then what is wisdom," asks Gould? Answering his own question, he replies, "It is a combination of knowledge, that science can supply, and moral

understanding, which science cannot supply.” Gould continues to propose that moral understanding can be acquired through the humanities, including, philosophy, literature, music and religion.

I believe that such wisdom is what Charles and Emma achieved through their many years together. They did not just tolerate their distinct world-views, instead they loved and embraced one another and tried to understand the views of their partner, even though at times it was difficult, and it hurt. But the result was that each of their lives were enriched and strengthened, as they attained wisdom.

Diversity of beliefs is a characteristic of our Unitarian Universalist faith. Instead of a creed that we must all stand and recite together, we each have the responsibility to define our individual creeds for living purposeful lives. As a result we come together as materialists—what we label today as agnostic or atheist—as Christian or Jew or Buddhist or Pagan or with a theology of our own creation. Such diversity sometimes brings, difficulty, friction and hurt feelings, just as it did for Charles and Emma Darwin. But like Charles and Emma, let us embrace and try to understand and even celebrate our differences, as we grapple with understanding the mystery surrounding the meaning of our lives and our place in the Universe. I would like to believe that Charles and Emma Darwin, if they were with us today, could both find fulfillment as members of our Unitarian Universalist religion.

Please stand, as you are able and sing together hymn #21; *For the Beauty of the Earth*, A hymn that I believe both Charles and Emma would relish if he could be with us today.

Closing Words:

May “our two Rocks of Ages—Science and Religion—coexist in peace while each works to make a distinctive patch for the integrated coat of many colors that will celebrate the

distinctions of our lives, yet cloak human nakedness in a seamless covering called wisdom.” Amen.

Stephen Jay Gould
Rocks of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life

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