

MESSAGE FOR MEETING, FEBRUARY 13, 2022, EVOLUTION
WEEKEND

READINGS

Matthew 6:26

Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?

From *The Origin of Species*

Nothing is easier than to admit in words the truth of the universal struggle for life, or more difficult—at least I have found it so—than constantly to bear this conclusion in mind. Yet unless it be thoroughly engrained in the mind, the whole economy of nature, with every fact on distribution, rarity, abundance, extinction, and variation, will be dimly seen or quite misunderstood. We behold the face of nature bright with gladness, we often see superabundance of food; we do not see, or we forget, that the birds that are idly singing round us mostly live on insects or seeds, and are thus constantly destroying life; or we forget how largely these songsters, or their eggs, or their nestlings, are destroyed by birds or beasts of prey; we do not always bear in mind, that, though food may be now superabundant, it is not so at all seasons of each recurring year.

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I'm grateful to have found Poplar Ridge Meeting many years ago— about fifty now—not only for the community that it has been for me, but also for the style of practice we have here. We have a variant of Quakerism that you wouldn't find in very many places. We were a hybrid meeting before the technology revolution and pandemic caused us to start using that term. Whenever I go to a service somewhere else, Quaker or some other denomination or tradition, I am reminded that our flexible combination of silence, words, and music is not to be taken for granted. I'm not criticizing any of the others—only saying, this works for me. The proportions of silence, words, and music vary from service to service, and added into that, the words that you might hear can be very different, from week to week, from year to year. We follow the “What canst thou say?” principle, which provides a lot of leeway. One week, you might hear many references to God, and the next week, few, or none. One week, you might hear a reading from the New Testament, or the Psalms; the next, the reading could be from Thich Nhat Hanh. If Christ is mentioned, the reference might be to Jesus, or it might be to an Inner Christ. Sometimes, instead of God, the word used might be Spirit, with a capital S. Many different ways of understanding our situation—by situation I mean, being alive in the universe. Which is one reason why Silence is such a good thing in religion: Whatever one's belief, or perspective, or non-belief, it can be contained well in silence. Nobody disagrees.

For several years, our meeting has had a service on a Sunday in February, the one nearest to Charles Darwin's birthday (which was yesterday), on the themes of evolution and the relationship between religion and science. It is part of a national observance called Evolution Weekend, which began in a moment of cultural tension around teaching religious creationism in the biology curriculum—a long-standing controversy in American education and culture. Various people in our meeting have taken a turn at bringing the message on this Sunday, including those (as distinguished from me) who have real scientific credentials. And it has always seemed pretty clear to me when they have spoken that evolution carries little or no tension in relation to religion here. The messages have all been interesting, but the tension, as far as I could tell, seemed non-existent.

There are many ways of reconciling the scientific view and the religious view. One has been laid out well by the paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould in his book *Rocks of Ages*. Gould proposes a position that he calls NOMA, an acronym for Non-Overlapping Magisteria. "Magisterium" (a great word) is defined as "a domain of authority in teaching." So, according to NOMA, science is over here, concerned with the empirical realm: what the universe is made of (fact) and why it works that way (theory). Religion, meanwhile, is over here, dealing with questions of ultimate meaning and moral values. Different realms of authority, and, important to Gould, the two do not overlap. Maybe those other Friends who have

brought Evolution Weekend messages were practicing some form of NOMA. I'm not sure.

However—I have a feeling that generally in this meeting we are more into overlapping than Gould is. What is the force that created, shaped, and continues to shape, life on this planet? Is it Love? Darwin said it is natural selection, and the struggle for existence. We use the word Love a lot, to the point that sometimes I don't know what we mean by it. Does the universe care about us? Does the force that created and maintains it love us? Maybe. Or maybe, whatever love we have to sustain us, will have to come from our own hearts.

In writing about these questions in a letter to his friend the botanist Asa Gray, who accepted natural selection but urged him to view such laws as instituted by God for a discernible purpose, Darwin said: “With respect to the theological view of the question. This has always been painful to me. I am bewildered. I had no intention to write atheistically. But I own that I cannot see as plainly as others do, and as I should wish to do, evidence of design and beneficence on all sides of us. There seems to me too much misery in the world.... On the other hand, I cannot anyhow be contented to view this wonderful universe and especially the nature of man, and to conclude that everything is the result of brute force. I am inclined to look at everything as resulting from designed laws, with the details, whether good or bad, left to the working out of what we may call chance.”

I am not trying to convince or unconvince anyone about any of this, but I do think that it is appropriate to include Darwin in our service not just for the greatness of his scientific insight, but for the dignity and integrity (to cite a Quaker testimony) of which he was a model.

Besides the great and famous Charles Darwin, I'd like to mention someone local: Bill Tyler, who used to sit right over there. I remember him at a discussion group where the language of faith and theism was being used, saying, in his quiet, slightly self-conscious way, "I'm an agnostic." I don't think Bill's comment caused much of a stir. I'm quite sure of it. Bill went on to serve on Ministry & Counsel, and on Clearness Committees! I'd like this talk to be a Bill Tyler moment, though I'm using more words. And I thought that those newer to the meeting who might be wondering what the system or climate of belief is here might be interested to hear that story.

The word agnostic was coined by Darwin's friend and defender Thomas Huxley. Huxley was more hard-edged than Darwin, and he meant by agnosticism not just doubt, but "open-minded skepticism," which he thought was "the only rational position because, truly, one cannot know." Both Darwin and Huxley, like so many others in the 19th century and long before, and still today in many places, experienced the deaths of children, and for both, that experience was devastating, and pushed them further away from religious faith and belief in a caring, personal

God than they already were. Others, of course, have different ways of responding to and understanding such experiences of pain and loss.

Darwin and Huxley's view of life may seem negative to some, but I do not think it is. For one thing, the perspective of evolutionary time, not the mention the perspective of the flaring lights of interstellar time and space, is in a way the ultimate expression of "and all shall be well again, and all shall be well, again, I know." The universe so vast, and time so long—what can go wrong? And personally, I also like the way the evolutionary view de-centers human beings as the most important players in the story of life. Contrary to the panic some Victorians felt at the idea of being descended from apes, we can take a kind of comfort, or at least self-acceptance, in our shared lineage with the other animals, and in being part of the web of life. We human beings have our good qualities, and we have our horrible qualities. We have some special and remarkable abilities. But as I sat writing this, the crows in the woods around my house were amazing, a big group of them, doing something, in their inscrutable social arrangements— foraging and surviving through the winter—remarkable in many ways, including their talent for harassing hawks. We have some extraordinary qualities, but so do they. In any case, we are not the only ones who matter; we are not even the main attraction. Caw, caw, caw.

So, that is my attempt to take a walk in the non-overlapping magisteria of religion and science, and along the borders of faith and non-faith. I'm not sure exactly where I may have violated NOMA and overlapped, or across what other lines I may have trespassed. "Forgive us our trespasses," we are told to pray.

So now, let us go into one of the other elements, the magisterium of silence.

SILENCE

Earlier I said that I chose Christmas carols for our hymns today because we need what they offer even more in February than in December. Let's hope that by the time we take them out again next December, we will be able to sing them all together, and not with most of us just humming behind our masks. I also chose them because they are for me exhibit A for a level of feeling where intellectual reservations are suspended. I can appreciate the Psalms as poetry, but as I read them I'm aware that they do not speak my mind, or to my condition, as certain passages from Darwin do. (I might make an exception for the 23rd.) But the carols—that's a different effect entirely. They tell a beautiful story, but just as important, and maybe more important, music makes the difference. Does anyone want to choose between the magisterium of science and the magisterium of music? Luckily, we don't have to make that choice. So, even with the restrictions and limitations we are dealing with right now, let's sing "Joy to the World."

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