

# “The Wonder of Creation”

A reflection  
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“And we all know [about] *wonder*, don’t we?” Ken Wilber writes rhetorically, in “The Marriage of Sense and Soul.”

“From the depths of a Kosmos too miraculous to [even] believe,” he says, “From the heights of a universe too wondrous to worship – from the insides of an astonishment that has no boundaries – an *answer* begins to suggest itself, and whispers to us, lightly. If we listen very carefully, from within this infinite wonder, perhaps we can hear the gentle promise that, in the very heart of the Kosmos itself, *both science and religion* will be there, together, to welcome us home”...

Unitarian Universalism has always been a somewhat shaky marriage of science and religion, reason and faith, head and heart. Like a pendulum swinging through the generations, our tradition has veered from the first, enlightened wave of Deism and Biblical criticism, to the enthusiastic Transcendentalism made manifest in Emerson and Thoreau; from the heady assurance of the Humanist Manifesto, to the eager embrace of New Age spirituality and neo-paganism. Today’s Unitarian Universalism is an often uneasy alliance of seemingly contradictory spiritualities – an alliance that, for all its difficulties, still remains, in my mind, the best and most hopeful model of how, in a global marketplace of widely differing and diverse faiths, people might yet be able to come together, and build beloved community.

And wouldn’t that be a wonder!

Yet I have great hope, this morning, that it *can* be done. We all know a little something about wonder, don’t we?

Today, I lift up that sense of innate, human wonder – wonder at the beauty of the earth and the vastness of the cosmos, wonder at the multiplicity of creation, wonder at the fact that we *exist* at all. I lift this wonder up, so we might be mindful of the importance of keeping that flame

of universal mystery and awe burning brightly at the very heart of our lives. I lift this wonder up, as a reminder, that science and religion are not incompatible.

Unitarian Universalists are not alone in this conviction. In fact, this morning, we join nearly a thousand churches and synagogues in all 50 states and nine foreign countries – Methodist and Episcopal, Jewish and Catholic, UU and Lutheran and more – in celebrating what is being called “Evolution Weekend, 2008.” Evolution Weekend is a program of The Clergy Letter Project, a group of some 11,000 ministers who have gone on record as proclaiming the importance of using modern science, in the exercise of modern faith. Theirs is a hopeful, forward-thinking attempt to counter the efforts of religious fundamentalists of all stripes and persuasions, who seek to *discount* science as a threat to their beliefs, or – worse yet – to use *pseudo-science to prop up* their beliefs.

And we in Cincinnati know much about the latter approach. After all, we are home to what is perhaps its most egregious example, the \$27 million Creation Museum, a privately financed, multi-media complex that has been called the world’s largest “religiously motivated fraud.” Whatever *you* may think of the so-called Creation Museum, you cannot deny that it has turned the Greater Cincinnati area into ground zero in the latest battle between science and religion – a battle that dates back to Galileo’s time, and beyond – a battle the modern media have always loved – a battle that I believe is based on a false premise, a false dichotomy. Because, like the Clergy Letter Project, I can see no reason that humanity’s hard-won scientific knowledge – including what we know about the processes of planetary motion and the expansion of the universe, about natural selection and evolution – cannot live in harmony with – and, in fact, cannot deepen – a sense of religious reverence and spiritual awe. The natural, human response to the vast complexity and beauty of creation, is one of wonder.

Now let me admit right here, that, until today, I have studiously avoided preaching about the Creation Museum – just as I have, on principle, studiously avoided going to the Creation Museum, or giving its proprietors a single dime of my money. But Evolution Weekend, and an email I received from its founder, Michael Zimmerman, a biologist and Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Butler University in Indianapolis, have changed my mind, and inspired me to speak out on the subject.

The fact is, I am deeply troubled by the Creation Museum. I am troubled that my son must grow up in a community where there is debate – heated, intense debate – almost every month, in the editorial pages of the local newspaper, about the relative “truth” of so-called intelligent design

versus evolution, about Biblical *literalism* versus rational Biblical interpretation. I am troubled to be living in a time when a journalist feels compelled to ask a question, in a presidential primary debate, about a candidate's belief in evolution – and when three different candidates can answer, with straight-faced conviction, that they *don't* believe in evolution. I am troubled that, just down the road from our airport, a massive “museum” is attracting thousands of people each weekend – including this Evolution Weekend – to walk among displays featuring dinosaurs and people living together on the earth, and exhibits detailing how the universe was created in six days, a mere six thousand and three years ago.

What troubles me is not so much the fact that the Creation Museum exists – but rather what its existence has created – the *scope* of its influence, and the way in which it is taken seriously by so many – people in the media, influential celebrities, politicians, and preachers, and yes – even those as close to home as friends and family. That some feel a need to reject scientific knowledge which contradicts certain narrow religious doctrines or dogma, is something I have never been able to understand.

My first inkling that this was a *serious problem* in our world, came in my high school biology class. I'll never forget the day our teacher – a well-respected, balding man who peered out over tiny wire-rim glasses and then spoke with a booming voice – told us that, although he was required to teach it, he considered evolution to be nothing less than a lie, and a hoax – and proceeded to give Biblical justification for his assertion. Raised, as I had been, in a free-thinking, open-minded, secular home, this clearly inappropriate, if not downright illegal and unconstitutional, moment of evangelism in a public high school classroom, was one of my first indications that there was trouble in river city, when it came to science and religion, church and state.

Contrast that experience with that of my friend and colleague Mark Belletini. Mark tells of his schooling in a decidedly Catholic private school, where the nuns taught him and his classmates that [quote] “evolution was a *fact*, and that religion and cosmology were not in conflict ... that the Bible was full of cultural assumptions, exaggerations, and even out-and-out fairy tales, which we were *not to be so foolish as to take literally*.”

Two children. Two upbringings. Two paths to the Unitarian Universalist ministry.

My own path took another strange turn through the anti-evolution wilderness when – perhaps because of my earlier experience in high school – I chose to do a major college research project on the Scopes trial. As you know, I grew up in Tennessee, and I knew we had come a long way since

1925, when John Scopes was tried, and convicted, in a Dayton, Tennessee, courtroom, for the crime of teaching evolution. We had come so far, that is, that – half a century later – another Tennessee science teacher – mine – had been legally *required* to teach evolution, even if he didn't believe it!

At any rate, as I say, I chose to do a project on the Scopes trial, and traveled the roughly fifty miles to Dayton in order to see, first hand, the place that had been the site of the infamous “Monkey Trial.” I say I “traveled” to Dayton, rather than I “drove,” because the tiny hamlet of Dayton was so far off the beaten path at that time that I was able to drive only part-way there – on a curvy, country road. The remainder of the journey involved taking a *ferry* ride across the river, to reach the courthouse where the trial had taken place.

As I walked the tree-lined streets, and spoke with residents who shook their heads and laughed at the silliness of those days gone by, I remember saying to myself – thank God, at least, that *this* generation of high schoolers is being taught about evolution; thank God, at least, that even those who live in a town such as this one, can see the folly of blind adherence to outmoded beliefs that defy both common sense and the most basic of scientific understanding of our world.

Little did I imagine, that day, that a generation later – when you can reach Dayton, Tennessee, by driving over a bridge – that in many ways our culture has taken a U-turn back toward the horse-and-buggy days, that the myopic views which had been the source of such high drama in 1925 – the unquestioning beliefs that had resulted in downturned eyes and the shaking of heads among my classmates in high school, 50 years after that – would one day be enshrined in a glitzy, multi-million dollar museum, not far from where I serve, as a Unitarian Universalist minister. Little did I imagine that something called “creationism” would be alive and well in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – seeking at every turn to cast doubt upon – to cast out, in fact – evolution from the teachings of our public school system – public schools such as the one my own son now attends.

I've said it before, and I'll say it again – folks, there is *nothing* so important, as what we teach our children. You may not know this, but the words to the hymn we sang this morning, as the children were leaving the sanctuary to go begin a new semester of open-minded, open-hearted religious education – “Seek Not Afar for Beauty” – those words were written by a 19<sup>th</sup> century Unitarian minister, Minot Judson Savage.

Savage is best-known for his advocacy of what we would now call UU Sunday School. Here is how he put it: “Parents tell me continuously that they do not give their children any religious training, from [a sense] that it is

taking unfair advantage of the [impressionable] child. They say, ‘I propose to let my children grow up, as far as possible, unbiased.’ [But the truth is,] if you do not bias your children, the first [person] they meet on the street, or in school, or among [their] companions, will begin the work of biasing [for you]...”

And so, Savage said, all those years ago – perhaps anticipating events like the Scopes trial, perhaps anticipating a time such as ours – *teach your children*. Teach them to have open minds. To be curious about the universe. To be inquisitive, and appreciate the scientific method. And, ultimately, teach them to appreciate the beauty, and the wonder, of creation.

I am proud to serve in a tradition with such a history. For two centuries now, we have been teaching, not only our children, but our adults, that nature is not to be feared, but to be revered. That creation is not simply a collection of objects made for humanity’s use and abuse, but is an interdependent web of which we are just a small part, an intricate process which science may help us to better understand, but which ultimately remains a matter of profound mystery.

That we are a living portion of a living universe that Ken Wilber calls “too miraculous even to believe.”

Yes, I am proud to be the minister of a Unitarian Universalist church where we sing together of beauty and wonder, where we join together in silent gratitude and appreciation for the gifts of this life, where we reach out to others in welcoming embrace – and where we celebrate both science, and religion, recognizing that it is only when spirituality is balanced by reason, that faith can truly thrive.

May it always be so. Amen.