

Holy Trinity

Darwin, Lincoln, Obama

February 8, 2009

On February 12, 1809, all of Europe was emerged in the Napoleonic Wars, as Napoleon and the Empress Josephine were granted a divorce. Joseph Hayden died and Felix Mendelssohn was born. Beethoven composed the 5th Symphony. Robert Fulton patented the Steamboat and Thomas Jefferson was serving his last term to be succeeded by James Madison. King George 111 sat on the British throne.

In 1809 the warship the USS Constitution was recommissioned and set to sea; there was no toilet paper, cocoa cola, vacuum cleaners, light bulbs or Swiss army knives. The extraordinary miracle of Gas light was introduced to London city streets. North Americans were heading westward and three million acres of Indiana territory that had belonged to the Native Americans were granted to the United States at the Treaty of Fort Wayne. Slavery was abundant and affirmed the needs and the desires of Caucasian dominance. Romanticism had trumped Enlightenment and was taking its place in the annals of history. All measure of unquestionable truth and reality was known and cherished in the civilized world, as God himself had indeed created heaven and earth and anointed mankind as the supreme ruler of all creatures both great and small.

It was in this world, this era, of great wealth and oppressive poverty, of infallible theology and enslaved human ownership, that two men were born who would greatly influence and ultimately change the principles of religious and social thinking of their time and of ours.

Charles Darwin and Abraham Lincoln were born on the same day, February 12, in the same year 1809, on two continents 3000 miles apart. Initially, they little in common. Darwin was born in Shropshire, England, son of a successful Physician, a cultured and wealthy family of the famous Wedgwood Pottery fortune, and Lincoln was born to uneducated farmers, facing years of debt, hardship and poverty in a log cabin in the woods of rural Kentucky.

Yet somehow in the course of both of their similarly turbulent lives, one shook the foundations of myth and superstition and moved the highly controversial theory of Evolution into the coffers of intelligent science and the other salvaged a nation, breaking not only the bonds of war but the chains of slavery, laying the groundwork for what we have been blessed to joyfully experience, 200 years later, with the inauguration of Barack Obama.

Darwin and Lincoln's early years, although vastly different in geography and education, evolved into an interesting scenario of intellectual and religious compatibility that would draw both of them to many of the same conclusions even though they never met. There was never any early indication that either of them would amount to much.

Darwin had all the advantages of a high class education, forced upon him by his domineering father who determined that if he could not succeed as a physician as he flunked out of medical school, than he could, at the very least, become a clergyman an endeavor which he also failed to fulfill much to the chagrin of his father. Darwin felt the same way about religion as he did about imposed, organized education and chose to spend his time exploring the world and his ideas on his own, preferring to study and to collect bugs, study barnacles, rocks and earthworms. As a potential surgeon, he could not tolerate the idea of surgery without anesthesia, nor as clergy, could he abide by the severity of the strict doctrines of his father's Anglican church.

In contrast to the life that Darwin could afford to pursue, Lincoln followed a vastly different course. He attended a log schoolhouse, his formal education lasting a mere 18 months. At the age of 7 Lincoln shot a wild turkey, but his remorse at killing a living thing kept him from never hunting or fishing again even for food.

Lincoln worked as a common laborer, farming, plowing and planting for hire, mauling rails and crewing on long boats. Lean and strong, he even wrestled Jack Armstrong a local muscle man, to a draw.

While Darwin was off pondering the significance of the natural world and making endless lists of what he had seen and observed, Lincoln was teaching himself mathematics, reading Robert Burns and Shakespeare and giving the local debating society and run for its money! On his own, through his independent studies, Lincoln managed to pass the Bar exam and became a lawyer.

During their formative years both Lincoln and Darwin were in flux about their careers. In spite of their vast monetary differences, there were some things they had in common, that began to converge as they grew into adulthood. They both suffered from re occurring bouts of debilitating depression and struggled with the restrictive superiority of religious evangelism expressed by their contemporaries.

Great Britain and the United States shared a perception of literal Biblical truth. Like Darwin, Lincoln's religious affiliation remains an enigma. Although he read and could quote a good portion of the Bible, and he dabbled in a number of protestant sects, Lincoln never joined a church nor did he make a clear profession of Christian belief and he never shared his religious views or his theology with anyone. He had borrowed and read *The Vestiges of Creation* by Robert Chambers that presented the theory that the Universe was created by Natural selection. Lacking a traditional formal education that would have denounced such an idea as preposterous, Lincoln chose to adopt Chambers theory. However as he rose to office of President, it was his revolutionary stand on slavery and his firm belief in the actual practice of equality among all men that led to the end of the Civil War and the abolition of slavery.

For Darwin, who declared his leanings toward atheism, it was the influence of his Grandfather, Josiah Wedgwood, a dissenter and a British Unitarian, whom he admired the most, and who supported his crazy ideas of putting aside his formal education to pursue the secrets of the natural world, which he did on his five year journey aboard the converted warship *The Beagle*, where he was invited aboard as an intellectual and conversational companion to the captain. It was to be a journey that would determine his future and would change the course of Biblical commentary and scientific thinking in the years to come.

Both men shared a passion as free thinkers, both were eloquent in their copious writings and they both, had they lived in this day and age, would have, in all probability, openly called themselves, Unitarian Universalists. Growing up both Lincoln and Darwin were very unclear about their career choices, yet each fulfilled their insatiable quest for knowledge, as they each made their choices, either by circumstance or economics, apart from the acceptable educational criteria expected of respected and learned men of their time. Through Darwin's extensive travels all over the world, on the good ship *Beagle*, where he spent most of his sailing time hanging over the rails, he formulated his theory of evolution, which he knew, once published, would shatter the foundations of traditional religious doctrine. Fearing for the welfare and potential persecution of his family Darwin delayed publication of "The Origin of the Species" for twenty eight years. Once published in 1859, as expected, it was met with scorn and contempt, considered trashy, by most clergy, (surprise!) as it challenged the very principles upon which the Anglican faith was built. During Darwin's voyage he also wrote of the abomination of slavery, recalling with an intense sadness, the screams of torture and abuse, of children taken from their parents and sold...images and sounds that haunted him as the *Beagle* slipped through the portals of the South Sea islands. His uncle, Josiah Wedgwood 11, financed and spearheaded the anti-slavery movement in Great Britain of which Darwin wrote:

"I believe those who soar above such prejudices yet have justly exalted the nature of man...What a proud thing for England, if she is the first European nation which utterly abolishes it."

As Darwin had struggled with the anticipated aftermath of the publication of "Origin of The Species", Lincoln wrestled with his own prejudices, as slavery was such a common practice that he had to come to terms with his own biases and subsequent fears of incurring the wrath of the South. It was 100 years to the day after Lincoln and Darwin's birth that the NAACP was founded, and a little over a century following Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation that Martin Luther King stood in Lincoln's shadow and spoke;

“this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of it's creed. We hold these truths to be self evident that all men are created equal.”

100 days before Darwin and Lincoln's birthday, Barrack Obama, son of a Kenyan and a European American, stood before this nation with his hand on the Lincoln bible, to take the oath as America's 44th president and told us:

"The time has come to re-affirm our enduring spirit, to choose our better history; to carry forward that precious gift, that noble idea passed on from generation to generation; The God given promise that all are equal, all are free and all deserve a chance to pursue their full measure of happiness." Symbolic of the legacy that Darwin and Lincoln independently gave us, Obama has opened a new chapter, in which he recognized our "patchwork heritage" and reminded us that" We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews Hindus and non believers ...seeking a new way forward, based on mutual interest and mutual respect."

Now Barrack Obama will take his rightful place in history, as our first president of African origin. Darwin's theories suggested that humankind had a common evolutionary ancestor that originated Africa, linking together the slave and the slave owner as evidence that “we are all equal.” For all three, it is apparent that the significance of any concept that truly fosters progress and understanding is not merely found in its content, but in the courage to present a radical and unpopular idea, to a skeptical and critical public.

Three men, two of whom have paved a very long and bumpy road, and one who today, because of their courage and effort long ago, now walks upon it freely, with dignity and with promise.

**So be it
Amen**

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