

Punctuated Equilibrium

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Last month when I was down in Georgia for a week of study leave,
I was fascinated to hear a story about the state's governor,
the honourable Sonny Perdue,
who just a few weeks earlier had taken to the steps of the capital
building to address the severe drought
that for months has gripped much of the American South.

What was most striking though,
was not that he was publicly speaking out,
but that, as an elected official, he was publicly speaking out to God.

In hopes of currying divine favour
and the soaking rains of a thunderstorm,
Perdue told the few hundred people who had joined him outdoors,
that: "We come here very reverently and respectfully
to pray up a storm."¹

And pray he did. Mightily.

He wailed to the heavens:
"We have not been good stewards of our land.
We have not been good stewards of our water."

"Lord, have mercy on your people,
have mercy on us and grant us rain.
Oh God, let rain fall on this land of Georgia."

Now, unfortunately, the current governor
is apparently not nearly as effective a prayer as his predecessor,

¹ James Salzer and Jim Galloway, "Perdue asks crowd to 'pray up a storm,'" *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, November 13, 2007.

who prayed in the same spot during a drought some twenty years ago.

On that dramatic occasion,
the end of the then-governor's prayer
was punctuated by the first soggy drops of a nourishing rain.

Everyone was duly impressed –
not least of all, the governor himself.

Unfortunately, today,
much of Georgia awaits an answer to the present governor's prayers.

What struck me about this story
was not so much the question of the effectiveness of prayer
but how the scene hearkened back to a time
before we had meteorologists televised around the clock
to give us a rough – and sometimes frustratingly rough –
predictions of what the weather holds in store.

It echoes a time when not only a severe drought,
but the failure of one's crops, a devastating earthquake,
and the fury of a tsunami
were all seen as clear signs of God's displeasure
being meted out from the heavens.

Amid tragedy and disaster, it's a fairly common human response to
question, even irrationally, if we're being punished somehow,
to wonder if there might just be some vast universal conspiracy
that's out to get us.

It seems a natural response to the hardships of this life, then –
that people seek within them an interpretation of events
that offers some modicum of meaning and purpose.

Somehow, for much of our history,

the acceptance of divine punishment
has a seemingly offered more comfort
than the sobering idea that natural disasters were, indeed, “natural”
and that life on this planet is ultimately a precarious enterprise.

Even more, if droughts and plagues were God’s punishment,
there was always the hope that God – or the gods –
could be appeased,
there was always the hope
 that through faithful worship, offerings, and sacrifices,
 humans could in some small way determine their own destiny
 by doing what they could to mend a rift with The Almighty.

It’s a compelling perspective in some ways.

In the face of devastation and despair,
who wouldn’t want to hold on to the hope
that divine intervention might change our circumstances?

And, who could resist the temptation of the other side of this
coin: the temptation to interpret a bountiful harvest and fair
skies as clear indications of God’s favour?

Yet, from the beginnings of the scientific revolution, in the 16th
century, this long-standing system of belief and behaviour
 has been showing the strains under which it has long laboured.

One of the most infamous challenges to this way of thinking
came on the morning of November 1, 1755,
when the faithful citizens of Lisbon gathered for worship
to commemorate the feast of All Saints,
 one of the most solemn days in the Christian calendar.

At 9:40 that morning, a massive earthquake struck the city.

Estimated to have been a magnitude 9 on the Richter scale,

the quake leveled almost every building in Lisbon,
including the cathedral and countless churches
full of the faithful at worship.

Those who could
took refuge along the coastline
to flee the falling debris of collapsing buildings,
but only to soon be confronted
with the three devastating waves of a massive tsunami.

When the waters receded,
in their wake were fires that raged for five more days,
destroying most everything else that had been at the heart of a great
city.

In the end, between 60,000 and 100,00 people were killed,
And all on one of the holiest days of the year.

Such a cataclysm brought about deep questioning and
spurred on the already skeptical thinkers of the Enlightenment.

How could God allow so many people to die –
and while most of them were in church, no less?

It was a question that could not be adequately answered
without unraveling the orthodoxy of the day.

While there had certainly been cause to question before
God's involvement in human affairs,
this event marked a significant milestone in the secularization of
Europe and challenged the foundations of prior understandings
of how the universe around us works.

My colleague Judith Walker-Riggs describes this worldview as

“a three-storied [building],

with heaven on the top floor, full of gods and stars;
earth in the middle, full of people and animals and plants;
and hell in the basement, full of terrible and scary things.

[And, in those days] God had nothing else to do but sit up
there watching us [from above].
We were the center of attention.
We were his people.²

Yet, that notion came crashing down with all of the other buildings in
Lisbon.

While there were some who were certain
that the people of Lisbon were being punished,
there were others who recognized in this event
the classic “problem of evil.”

For them, God either didn’t hear the prayers of his people,
didn’t care, or was incapable of helping.

In the face of such suffering, people reasoned that
God was either not omnipotent, not omniscient, or not all-powerful.

None of these options offered much in the way of comfort.

In the aftermath of this disaster,
the world, or at least the human understanding of it in Europe,
was beginning to change.

But, it wasn’t the first time the foundations had been shaken,
and, it wouldn’t be the last.

Over the prior two centuries, Copernicus, and Kepler, and Galileo

² Judith Walker-Riggs quoted in John A. Buehrens and F. Forrester Church, *Our Chosen Faith: An Introduction to Unitarian Universalism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), p. 155.

had dethroned the earth as the centre of the universe,
and risked all the penalties of heresy
to argue that the earth orbited the sun, and not the reverse.

And just over a century after the Great Lisbon Earthquake
came another revolution,
this one reluctantly ushered in by Charles Darwin, himself,
who found that humans were not, in fact, a “special creation”
crowned by God to rule over all other living things,
but were, instead, part of the unfolding struggle for life on this planet
– guided, not by the hand of the divine,
but by the process of natural selection.

So, not only was our home no longer the centre of the universe,
we were left to wrestle with the implications
of being descended from more simple forms of life.

It was quite a demotion from the noble self-image imparted to
humans in the cosmology rooted in the scriptures of monotheism.

Not surprisingly, the reactions to and against these movements
within the scientific revolution were fierce,
and, in many cases, as you well know, rage on to this day.

Now, almost 150 years after the publication of “The Book,”
Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*,
vast swaths of the population acquainted with the theory of natural
selection, simply don’t buy it.

Having come from a fairly fundamentalist corner of the continent,
I stereotypically imagined this to be the case only among the
undereducated in off-the-beaten-path parts of the world.

So, imagine my surprise, then, when I heard a fellow student at
Harvard explain that the convictions of her faith led her
to “believe in evolution, just not for people.”

Even with that experience embedded in my mind, I was shocked to come across a study reported in *The Globe and Mail* last summer that found that evolution was embraced, if only slightly, by more Americans than residents of Ontario.³

51% of the population in this province, or at least those who were asked, agreed that humans evolved from less advanced life forms over millions of years.

Just over half.

While, 26% said that God created humans in their present form within the past 10,000 years, and 23% were not certain enough to answer either way.

For reasons not quite yet clear to me, every other province in Canada had higher numbers of people indicating their belief in evolution.

That worries me.

So, when the invitation came to have our congregation join with hundreds of others around the globe in celebration of Evolution Sunday this morning, I was happy to say ‘yes.’

I said ‘yes’ because I believe it is a topic worthy of our consideration in the context of worship,
for natural selection is surely a central key to understanding this great gift of life we gather here to celebrate each week.

³ Rebecca Dube, “What Does Darwin Know Anyway?” *The Globe and Mail*, June 19, 2007.

And, I said, ‘yes,’ because as Unitarians,
amid the range of creation stories that have been passed down to us,
we ultimately recognize that the great scientific story of the origins of
life is as wondrous as any that’s ever been told.

We take evolution seriously, and for good reason.

The very sources from which our faith draws,
and which can be found in the opening pages of your hymnals,
include our commitment to:

“Humanist teachings which counsel us
to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science,
and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.”

In fact, ours may well be the only hymnal in the world
that includes the category of evolution
in the indices of readings and hymns in the back.

Where, then, other more orthodox religions
wrestle with the insights of science,
we proudly embrace them,
ever seeking to weave into our religious understanding
the latest advances in the various fields of science.

I believe this adaptability – a bit of natural selection, even? –
to be one of the most promising traits of our Unitarian faith:
the realization that we need not and must not
shy away from the knowledge that science imparts to us.

Far from being in conflict, then –
and far from being sent to their separate corners of the ring,
I believe it is possible and even imperative
that religion and science coexist
with genuine respect for the gifts and disciplines of the other.

To be sure, there are many who say that these two sometimes different ways of looking at the world should keep to their own side of the fence and not tread upon the turf of the other.

“Good fences make good neighbours,” they say.

But as Ian Barbour writes,
“We [don’t] experience life as neatly divided into separate compartments; we experience wholeness and interconnectedness before we develop particular disciplines to study different aspects of it.”⁴

To separate them, prizing one over the other risks what my colleague Roger Bertschausen calls the idolatry of “worshipping a part as the whole.”

He says that,
“Scientific imperialists who believe only science reveals truth make an idolatry of science;
[and] religious imperialists who believe only religion reveals truth make an idolatry of religion.”⁵

History has surely shown us the perils of both paths,
so I prefer the one that walks the line between them both,
making certain that the insights of science inform the foundations of our faith,
and seeking to impart to science an abiding appreciation for questions of meaning and purpose,
as well as the highest regard for ethical behaviour.

Though they use different languages and follow different disciplines, I believe that religion and science can be better together,

⁴ Ian G. Barbour, *Religion and Science: Historical and Contemporary Issues* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), p. 100.

⁵ Roger Bertschausen quoting John A. Buehrens and F. Forrester Church, *Our Chosen Faith: An Introduction to Unitarian Universalism* (Boston: Beacon Books, 1989), pp. 160, 171.

strengthened in dialogue rather than divided by it.

But this is only true if the conversation remains honest and open and respectful.

There are, in my experience, fundamentalists on both sides of the fence who would benefit from engaging the other in such dialogue.

But the stakes are high.

Religions that continue to resist the insights of science, seem to me, to be on a path to irrelevancy because they will eventually lose the ability to speak to the times in which we live.

Though the full embrace of the scientific revolution has proved rather slow-going, I do trust there will come a day when the people in the pews the world over will no longer abide being told as literal truth that the earth was created in six days.

At least not with a straight face.

It's a beautiful story, and certainly has value as literature, but it no longer passes muster as serious cosmology.

Unfortunately, to make such a statement is heard as a threat by many good people around the globe who fear that the foundations of their faith will crumble if they reach out to reconcile the teachings of their religion with the teachings of science.

But, it need not be so.

In 1925, at the height of the Scopes trial in Tennessee, my predecessor, the Reverend Jabez Sunderland, who served this congregation in the first decade of the 20th century,

and for whom this very room is named,
delivered a sermon of his own on evolution.

He said that:

“Evolution teaches us,
as no other thought can do, that the past belongs to us,
a heritage infinitely rich and precious.

But it belongs to us,
not as a stream emptying itself into the present as a pool,
to stagnate and dry up and breed disease and die.

The past belongs to us as a stream that must flow on through the
present into the future. . . .

If evolution means receiving from what has been,
it no less means contributing to what shall be.

It means giving.
It means making ourselves willingly and joyfully
a part of God’s eternal order.

Evolution means a face set to the future,
toward which we press with faith and high purpose.

It means believing in some better thing, and forever some better
thing, for religion, for (humankind), for the world;
believing in it so earnestly that we shall
gladly make ourselves coworkers with God to bring the
consummation.”

It’s a little rich to me that after hearing such eloquent words more
than eighty years old that there remains a need to discuss evolution
from the pulpit at all.

But, that's why I chose as my title, the term "Punctuated Equilibrium."

It's a theory within biology that suggests that evolution unfolds not by steady, gradual steps, but in rare and rapid moments of great change that punctuate the otherwise relative stasis.

The theory has its detractors, but something about it rings true for me, non-scientist that I am.

To be sure, there are turning points in life – when an event or situation suddenly and forever alters the map of our understanding.

For us as individuals it can happen with the birth of a child or the death of a spouse, the end of a career or the sting of a new diagnoses.

As congregations, it can happen with changes in staff, or the growth of membership.

And, certainly, it's true in the realm of knowledge.

We discover the earth spins around the sun, we wrestle with the meaning of an earthquake, we learn of evolution and our place in the order of things.

All were, and continue to be, turning points that challenge our identity, calling us to humble ourselves in awe and wonder at the stunning universe which invites us all, through the gift of our lives, to play our role in shaping what yet shall be.

"Believing in some better thing," then, as Sunderland put it,

may we take up this great privilege with gratitude and grace.

Amen