

Evolution & Emancipation

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Introduction

Christine Carlson

Does anyone remember the “Kennedy Penny?”

When I was a kid, I remember being given a penny with the profile of the face of John F. Kennedy imprinted on the front of the coin – facing Lincoln. The coin came with a sheet of titled “Astonishing Coincidences” and gave a list of some interesting similarities between the two assassinated presidents.

So, with today’s technology, I searched the internet and found the Kennedy Penny along with its list of coincidences. Apparently, it was produced in the 1970’s and given out as a promotional item at Woolworths and banks.

A few of these astonishing coincidences are:

- Lincoln and Kennedy were elected 100 years apart
- They were both slain on a Friday
- Both of their successors were named Johnson
- Oswald shot Kennedy from a warehouse and then hid in a theater; Booth shot Kennedy in a theater and then hid in a warehouse

I remember as a kid, I was amazed at this – I really thought this was...astonishing. And so, when I volunteered to assist with this worship service that celebrated the 200th anniversary of the birth of both Lincoln and Darwin, I was intrigued about what similarities might exist between these two great men.

And so I read the newly released *Angels and Ages* by Adam Gopnik.

Gopnik begins, “On a memorable day in human history, February 12, 1809, two babies were born an ocean apart: Abraham Lincoln in a one-room Kentucky log cabin, Charles Darwin on a English County Estate. It was a time of backward seeming notions, when almost everyone accepted the biblical account of creation as the literal truth and authoritarianism as the most natural and viable social order. But by the time both men died, the world had changed: ordinary people understood that life on earth was a story of continuous evolution, and the Civil War had proved that a democracy could fight for principles and endure. Together, Darwin and Lincoln had become midwives to the spirit of a new world, a new kind of hope and faith.”

Sound good? I thought so, too. Gopnik’s prose is so liltingly lovely and brilliantly insightful that I’ll be quoting him quite a bit.

Lincoln and Darwin started out in such different places and had tremendously different personalities. Yet they did have many similarities – you can decide for your self if they are astonishing or not.

- Both had difficult relationships with their fathers.
 - Both were late-bloomers.
 - Both had good relationships with their wives.
 - Both were devastated by the loss of a beloved child.
 - Both suffered from depression.
 - Both were talented writers.
 - Both were not religious
- Lincoln was an atheist, but referenced religion when necessary to advance his own political means. As time went on, Lincoln began to consider a god, as Gopnik says, “for the older Lincoln, overwhelmed by the core experience of grief, of a death in the family, and the common experience of so much death in war, the idea of a universe moved only by necessity was too painful – the absence of a god had become so intolerable that one had to be evoked even as his purposes were seen as enigmatic.”
 - Darwin’s religious doubts did not come from his scientific knowledge but rather from his sense that religion could not explain human suffering. He waited over 20 years to publish his work because he knew the impact it would have on faith. Gopnik notes, “He sensed that his account would end any intellectually credible idea of divine creation, and he wanted to break belief without harming the believer, particularly his wife Emma, whom he loved devotedly and with whom he had shared a private tragedy that seemed tolerable to her only through faith.” After their daughter’s death, “Darwin abandoned the remaining vestiges of Christian faith, the last preferences for even Unitarian theology, and became essentially a stoic. He believed that the contemplation of the immensity of time, and the repertory of feeling, was all that was left to us...serenity could be found only in the contemplation of the vast indifference of the universe.”

But there were differences between the two men:

Gopnik points to their character: “If one word could sum up Lincoln’s character, it would be shrewd; in one word, Darwin’s, it would be sensitive. Lincoln grasped instantly people’s capacities, their intentions, their weak points and their strengths. Darwin was a tentative judge of people, but he was acutely aware of their moods and emotions.”

Both men had differing views of slavery:

- Lincoln truly could not fathom the possibility of whites accepting African American slaves as equals in society. He said that if he could have held the Union together without ending slavery, he would have done it. Emancipation came about because Lincoln came to believe that it was the only way to wage a war that would keep the Union whole.
- Darwin was appalled by slavery and was publicly opposed it.

Yet despite their differences, they radically changed the way we think about ourselves as human beings. Through science, Darwin was able to prove that all of us come from the same place. Through democracy, Lincoln was able to start the process that would allow all of us to be in the same place – together – as part of our interconnected web of life.

When reflecting upon the relationship between these two men another author, Elof Carlson writes, “Both held unpopular views and both gave to the world documents of enduring value. Lincoln provided the *Emancipation Proclamation*, which destroyed the institution of slavery in the United States. Darwin provided *The Origin of Species*, a work... that liberated humans from a once universal fatalism. Darwin's intent was to seek the laws governing the origin of species. He was motivated to do so by his doubts.”

Could it be that Lincoln, too, was motivated by his doubts, wondering if he could both preserve the Union and end slavery – or possibly end slavery in order to preserve the Union. Regardless of his intent, we can all agree it took courage.

Malcolm Jones writes, “Like Lincoln, Darwin was brave. Darwin risked his health and his reputation to advance the idea that we are not over nature but a part of it. Lincoln prosecuted a war—and became its ultimate casualty—to ensure that no man should have dominion over another. Their identical birthdays afford us a superb opportunity to observe these men in the shared context of their time—how each was shaped by his circumstances, how each reacted to the beliefs that steered the world into which he was born and ultimately how each reshaped his corner of that world and left it irrevocably changed.”

Evolution

Janet

Could it be that we are all changing all the time? Are favorable heritable traits passed on from one generation to the next, resulting in our biological evolution? Could this process result in the emergence of new species, which are better designed to survive? Darwin thinks so. And he calls this theory *natural selection* – “the process whereby organisms better adapt to their environment tend to survive and produce more offspring” (Dictionary). In this way the most fit continue to exist regardless of the difficulty, whereas the species that do not evolve become extinct.

In his book *On the Origin of Species* (1859), Darwin finds beauty and wonder in the multiple life-forms found within an ecosystem. Referred to as biodiversity, Darwin helped to explain the diversity of life as an essential part of nature. He writes, “It is interesting to contemplate a tangled 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 upon each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us. These laws, taken in the largest sense, being Growth with Reproduction; Inheritance which is almost implied by reproduction; Variability from the indirect and direct action of the conditions of life and from use and disuse: a Ratio of Increase so high as to lead to a Struggle for Life, and as a consequence to Natural Selection, entailing Divergence of Character and the Extinction of less-improved forms.”

Elof Carlson reminds us that “Darwin had seen too much. Darwin saw a war of nature in which organisms produced far too many offspring who struggled to survive. He saw what to any human being looked like a massive destruction of life, especially among the newborn. He saw distributions of organisms that did not make sense unless some scientific laws were governing their past history. He saw evidence of extinction when he unearthed the bones of fossilized mammals in Patagonia. He saw past upheavals of ocean floors that were lifted up into the Andes mountains. He saw remarkable adaptations of animals and plants to their surroundings. He became so expert at dissecting barnacles that he could look at a museum specimen and identify its place of origin within fifty miles from any place on South America. When he returned home he was already famous, his letters to his teacher, Henslow, having been privately published without his knowledge and distributed to the leading naturalists of Great Britain. Darwin returned with a secret he could not share. He had lost his faith. He had demoted himself to a Deist... a Unitarian...” Darwin himself said he had never been an atheist – meaning, he never denied God’s existence. In 1879 he said, “an Agnostic would be the more correct description of my state of mind.”

The truth is Darwin was” a 22-year-old dropout from medical school who subsequently considered becoming a priest.”¹ Throughout his life Darwin’s curiosity cultivated his sense of wonder to Darwin inquiry. In his earlier writings he said, “There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and 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.”

Darwin’s belief system was very much shaped by his freethinking family. Both sets of his grandparents were opposed to slavery, which at the time, was common in the British West Indies. His maternal grandfather designed and manufactured an antislavery medallion that was used in the campaigns against slavery in both England and America. Benjamin Franklin... was given a medallion while he was in England, and when he returned to Philadelphia received a shipment of these medallions for use in the American antislavery movement.”² The medallion’s caption said, “Am I not a Man and a Brother?” Darwin’s grandparents taught Darwin “shared a hatred of the slave trade... [and promoted] the “sacred cause” of abolition.”¹

Emancipation

Christine

We turn now to November 19, 1863 where President Abraham Lincoln delivered one of the most influential speeches in our nation’s history. It was but two minutes long. Eyewitnesses report saying the speech was not well received, with little or no applause. Newspaper reports were indifferent at best. And yet Lincoln’s words live on...

“Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. Now we

¹ Christopher Benfrey of the New York times.

² Robert Stephens

are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation, so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battle-field of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this. But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate—we can not consecrate—we can not hallow—this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”

Affirmed by many scholars and citizens as one of the greatest Presidents in U.S. history, Lincoln was the first president to be assassinated, and as a result, became a martyr to abolitionists everywhere. Can you imagine how our first settled minister, William Furness, must have taken the news of Lincoln’s assassination? It was April 15, 1865 when he was pronounced dead. This must have been devastating to a church like ours, who at the time was fiercely engaged in the emancipation of slaves. As a liberal religious movement, Unitarians coupled both the scientific inquiry of Priestley and the theological liberty of Emerson. Our ancestors were but one religious and political movement that informed Lincoln’s thoughts. Lincoln listened to many prominent Unitarian preachers and he was reported saying that the most influential sermons he ever heard were that of Unitarian abolitionist minister Theodore Parker. In this way, our religious heritage may have had a small influence on the thinking of Abraham Lincoln.

Closing

Janet

On Thursday, we will honor the bicentennial birthdays of two men who shaped the course of human history. Why do their ideas still resonate with us today?

When thinking of Darwin we are reminded of the ways religion has suppressed scientific inquiry and put a false divide between faith and reason. In his time, Charles Darwin had to confront a culture of superstitious religiosity that closed the mind, feared science and rejected anything contrary to creation myths. Two hundred years later, we gather in the spirit of Evolution Sunday – where worship services are held throughout the country that affirm the coupling of faith and reason. We celebrate the fact that we are still evolving in body, in mind, in spirit. We celebrate our collective ability to take but one more step toward understanding our place in the world. We know we are not there yet, but in celebrating his birth we see how Darwin was but one voice in the many throughout history who has helped us evolve.

When thinking of Lincoln we are reminded of what many scholars call America’s greatest sin – the sin of slavery. In his time President Lincoln had to confront slavery and move the country into a trajectory toward emancipation. Two hundred years later, after having just elected the first African American to the highest office of the land, we gather in the spirit of Black history month

and hold our heads back in wonder at the moral arch of our evolution. In terms of racial justice, we are but still evolving toward freedom; for each day we deliberately take one more step toward equality. We know we are not there yet, but in celebrating his birth we see how Lincoln was but one voice in the many who sought to liberate us from the discriminatory mind.

In what ways are we still bound by the discriminatory mind? Who in our society and in our world are physically, morally or spiritually enslaved? Darwin speaks of the survival of the fittest – are humans going to be the species that will survive or will we fall victim to the power of Mother Nature? We may not be the fittest. Maybe our planet needs to be emancipated from human domination. In terms of the environment, maybe humans need to evolve from species of consumption to species of sustainable creation. In terms of politics, maybe humans need to evolve from nuclear-nation states to peace-making citizens of the world. In doing so, we not only help one another evolve but we emancipate one another from destructive practices, aware that in order to survive humans must be not only physically, but also intellectually, morally and spiritually fit.