

## Happy Birthday, Charles and Abraham!

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This coming Thursday, February 12, 2009, marks the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the births of two remarkable human beings: Charles Darwin and Abraham Lincoln. As our reading this morning suggested, these two men have been pivotal figures in the historical processes that have shaped the modern world. As such, they are worthy of recognition, and on this major anniversary, of celebration. If we're going to do it right, I think we need to sing Happy Birthday to Charles and Abraham. Will you join me? "Happy birthday to you . . ."

As part of this commemoration of their lives and their influence, I'm not going to rehash the lives and work of Darwin and Lincoln. I think we're sufficiently familiar with at least the basic outlines of those. But I would like to do three things. First, I'd like to say a bit about the role of religion in each man's life. Partly because it's a habit in my line of work to bring religion into just about everything. But partly because I think that their unconventional, unorthodox attitudes about religion helped to free their minds to transcend other social, political, and scientific constraints that characterized the world they lived in.

Second, I'd like to share a sampling of quotations from the two men, so that we can glean a little bit, from their own words, about their character and their view of the world. And finally, I'd like to share a few reflections on some of the commonalities of their lives and their legacies.

Charles Darwin was baptized in the Church of England, but that was apparently a matter primarily of social pressure. There were strong Unitarian connections among the extended Darwin family, and also in the Wedgwood family into which Charles married. There was also a history of freethinkers in the family, notably his grandfather Erasmus Darwin. Charles attended an Anglican boarding school after his mother's death when he was eight, but before that she had taken Charles and his siblings to the Unitarian chapel.

Later in his life, Darwin expressed an agnostic attitude. He argued in *The Descent of Man* against the view that religion is innate or instinctive in humans. And in a letter written two years later in 1873, Darwin expressed his agnosticism like this:

I may say that the impossibility of conceiving that this grand and wondrous universe, with our conscious selves, arose through chance, seems to be the chief argument for the existence of God; but whether this is an argument of real value, I have never been able to decide. I am aware that if we admit a first cause, the mind still craves to know whence it came from and how it arose. Nor can I overlook the difficulty from the immense amount of suffering through the world. I am, also, induced to defer to a certain extent to the judgment of many able men who have fully believed in God; but here again I see how poor an argument this is. The safest conclusion seems to me to be that the whole subject is beyond the scope of man's intellect; but man can do his duty.

Unlike some of his critics, who accuse him of banishing God from his world view, Darwin exhibited considerable humility in his refusal to indulge the temptation to certitude. I, for one, admire the intellectual honesty of his approach.

Abraham Lincoln's religious beliefs are a matter of some controversy. He frequently referenced god and quoted the Bible, yet he never joined any church. Mark A. Noll, in an article called "The Puzzling Faith of Abraham Lincoln," writes of the confusion and ambiguity surrounding Lincoln's religion. Quoting one biography describing Lincoln as "a man of more intense religiosity than any other President the United States has ever had," Noll states that "On the other hand, Lincoln's faith was not conventional."

As a young man, Lincoln read freethinkers like Thomas Paine. Throughout his adulthood, he had no use for Christian creeds or statements of faith, and had little use for formal theology. Noll suggests that "Lincoln was probably also a Universalist who believed in the eventual salvation of all people."

Carl Sandburg, in *Abraham Lincoln: the Prairie Years*, recounts a telling anecdote. In 1846 Lincoln ran for Congress against noted evangelist Peter Cartwright. Cartwright tried to make religion a campaign issue, accusing Lincoln of being an infidel. At one of his revival meetings, with Lincoln in attendance, Cartwright called for all who intended to go to heaven to please rise. Most did. Then he called for all those who wished to go to hell to stand. Not so many that time. Lincoln had not responded to either option, and so Cartwright closed in. "Mr. Lincoln, you have not expressed an interest in going to either heaven or hell. May I enquire as to where you do plan to go?" Lincoln replied, "I did not come here with the idea of being singled out, but since you ask, I will reply with equal candor. I intend to go to Congress."

So now, let me share some quotations from our two birthday boys. From Charles Darwin, first a few of a general philosophical nature:

The mystery of the beginning of all things is insoluble by us; and I for one must be content to remain an agnostic

A moral being is one who is capable of reflecting on his past actions and their motives - of approving of some and disapproving of others

...it is always advisable to perceive clearly our ignorance.

I am a strong advocate for free thought on all subjects, yet it appears to me (whether rightly or wrongly) that direct arguments against Christianity & theism produce hardly any effect on the public; & freedom of thought is best promoted by the gradual illumination of men's minds, which follow[s] from the advance of science. It has, therefore, been always my object to avoid writing on religion, & I have confined myself to science. I may, however, have been unduly biased by the pain which it would give some members of my family, if I aided in any way direct attacks on religion

And now a few quotes more directly related to his scientific work, and the theory of evolution:

It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent that survives. It is the one that is the most adaptable to change.

In the long history of humankind (and animal kind, too) those who learned to collaborate and improvise most effectively have prevailed

I cannot persuade myself that a beneficent and omnipotent God would have designedly created parasitic wasps with the express intention of their feeding within the living bodies of Caterpillars.

To suppose that the eye, with all its inimitable contrivances for adjusting the focus to different distances, for admitting different amounts of light, and for the correction of spherical and chromatic aberration, could have been formed by natural selection, seems, I freely confess, absurd in the highest possible degree. [I will note that this quote has been a favorite of critics of evolutionary theory. But they usually stop there and do not include the rest of the quote, which goes like this:] Yet reason tells me, that if numerous gradations from a perfect and complex eye to one very imperfect and simple, each grade being useful to its possessor, can be shown to exist; if further, the eye does vary ever so slightly, and the variations be inherited, which is certainly the case; and if variation or modification in the organ be ever useful to an animal under changing conditions of life, then the difficulty of believing that a perfect and complex eye could be formed by natural selection, though insuperable by our imagination, can hardly be considered real

In other words, our lack of imagination does not constitute an insurmountable constraint on what is possible in nature. And now, some quotations from Abraham Lincoln, in which I think you'll find both wisdom and wit:

Allow the president to invade a neighboring nation, whenever he shall deem it necessary to repel an invasion, and you allow him to do so whenever he may choose to say he deems it necessary for such a purpose - and you allow him to make war at pleasure.

America will never be destroyed from the outside. If we falter and lose our freedoms, it will be because we destroyed ourselves.

Am I not destroying my enemies when I make friends of them?

As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master. This expresses my idea of democracy.

Better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak out and remove all doubt.

Die when I may, I want it said by those who knew me best that I always plucked a thistle and planted a flower where I thought a flower would grow.

How many legs does a dog have if you call the tail a leg? Four. Calling a tail a leg doesn't make it a leg.

I care not much for a man's religion whose dog and cat are not the better for it.

I don't like that man. I must get to know him better.

In great contests each party claims to act in accordance with the will of God. Both may be, and one must be wrong.

Sir, my concern is not whether God is on our side; my greatest concern is to be on God's side.

The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew and act anew.

So Charles Darwin and Abraham Lincoln shared the quality of being quotable. They also shared the quality of being remarkable men of achievement who had tremendous impact on their own times as well as the centuries to come. One other thing the two shared in common was that they were not saints; they were not perfect; they were human beings. They were family men, each of whom experienced the tragedy of losing a child. Adam Gopnik points out that “They both even had what one might call the symptomatic diseases of middle-class modernity. . . . Lincoln was a depressive; Darwin subject to [severe] anxiety.” And their legacies are not universally touted as all positive.

And yet their work and their words live on. Gopnik also points out that

Darwin and Lincoln helped remake our language and forge a new kind of rhetoric that we still respond to in politics and popular science alike. They *particularized* everything and their general vision rises from the details and the nuance, their big ideas from small sightings. They shared logic as a form of eloquence, argument as a style of virtue, close reasoning as a form of uplift. Each, using a kind of technical language . . . arrived at a new ideal of liberal speech.

The sweep of history, of course, is greater than the particular contributions of any individuals. However, there are those occasional individuals who find themselves in the right time and the right place to be able to participate in pivotal moments of history. With the benefit of two hundred years of hindsight, we can recognize two such individuals in Charles Darwin and Abraham Lincoln. Happy birthday, Charles and Abraham, and thank you for your contributions.