

# WHEN I LOOK . . .

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs  
Preached on UCC Science and Technology Sunday, February 19, 2017

*In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

## **T**esting Darwin's Idea for Life in a Warm Pond with Nutrients

In 1871, in a letter to Joseph Hooker, Charles Darwin wrote:

“ . . . But if [and oh, what a big if] we could conceive in some warm little pond with all sorts of ammonia and phosphoric salts, light, heat, electricity, et cetera present, that a protein compound was chemically formed, ready to undergo still more complex changes . . . .”

That was the letter that introduced a phrase that held forth for nearly a century in biological sciences — the notion of the “warm little pond,” which would be the kind of place where life would begin. It just sort of makes sense.

In 1953, Darwin's idea finally got tested:

“Stanley Miller, a graduate student at the University of Chicago, took two flasks — one containing a little water to represent a primeval ocean, the other holding a mixture of methane, ammonia, and hydrogen sulfide gases to represent the Earth's early atmosphere — connected them with rubber tubes, and introduced some electrical sparks as a stand-in for lightning. After a few days, the water in the flasks

had turned green and yellow in a hearty broth of amino acids, fatty acids, sugars, and other organic compounds.”<sup>1</sup>

Harold Urey was the supervising professor of Stanley Miller — a Nobel Laureate himself, by the way — and he said, “If God didn't do it this way, God missed a good bet.”

Going way back in time, Aristotle believed in “spontaneous generation.” He had seen it too many times. In a corner of a barn, there's a pile of old hay, and by golly, the next thing you know, mice appear. You have a dead body, a bird dies, a cat dies, and the next thing you know, you can pretty much rely on maggots and then flies, and they just spontaneously appeared. Along comes Darwin with the “warm little pond” idea, which held forth for a long time. Warmth, water, light, lightning, nutrients were they keys to life.

## **A** Strange Wedding Is a Metaphor for Gathering Life

About two years ago, I did a fascinating wedding, in which the groom was a Ph.D. biologist from Yale, also an atheist, and his lovely bride was a graduate of Yale Divinity School. While we were planning the wedding, I remarked that I was thinking about the homily that I do in a wedding. I was going to preach on the “warm little pond,” that Darwinian

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<sup>1</sup> Attributed to Bill Bryson, author of *A Short History of Nearly Everything*.

idea, because it was a metaphor for a strange marriage in that you're bringing together all these different elements, and something good might emerge out of it.

The pair thought that was a fine idea, but the groom started to get a little fidgety. Reluctantly, he finally told me, "You may not realize that idea has been debunked." Okay, that took the wind out of my sails, and I said, "Well, what's the leading theory now?" So he explained:

"It's those undersea spouts, where you've got water that passes over very hot volcanic rock, gets super-loaded with all kinds of minerals and nutrients, comes out of these little chimneys on the bottom of the ocean floor. It sort of looks like black smoke coming up except that it's supersaturated with very hot water coming out of these undersea spouts. Scientists think that is actually the place where life originated, the original bacteria around those kinds of spots."

### **I Didn't Like the Idea of Preaching on Undersea Spouts, so I Moved on**

Today, in the Twenty-First Century, evolution is a fact, pretty much on a par with gravity. The details are still being worked out: New instances where you take the theory and it's not quite clear how to apply it, but pretty much it's a phenomenon on a par with gravity. As a matter of fact, it's gravity of all things that spurs a significant idea about evolution. You know everybody knows everything there is to know about gravity. Stuff falls.

Just in the last few years, there have been two monumental new discoveries about gravity:

One is the Higgs boson, which is that boson that binds to other subelementary particles, giving them mass. When it's around, you have gravity, and when it's not, you don't.

The other monumental theory has postulated that gravity might produce waves. How do you detect them? Well, you look for a big one and see if your instruments can detect it. The biggest wave that astronomers have been able to find was two black holes crashing into each other, sort of like a gravity tsunami, and they were able to detect gravity waves, predicted by theory long ago.

### **So Also with Evolution, and Such Is Science with Different Ways to Cope**

There are different ways in which evolution is seen to work throughout nature. The very concept of evolution has been problematic for the church because so much of the church has denied it forcefully for a long time. One of the examples of evolution that we use pretty much on an annual basis is our need for flu shots.

The influenza virus has a life span of around a day, and so between last winter and this winter, a lot of evolution has happened in 300 to 400 generations. Scientists then tried to pick out which strands of virus would be virulent, likely to be the ones that are going to make people the most sick. Then they would try to target those strands for the following year.

Such is science, from Aristotle to Darwin to Stanley Miller, up into the Twenty-First Century.

### **You and I Are Heretics, According to the Analysis of Our Transcripts**

Let me shift gears a little. I joke, maybe every other Sunday or perhaps every third

Sunday that, in some way, most of you and I are heretics here at First Congregational Church. Let me suggest a thought experiment: Imagine a historian of religion was to visit us and was provided with transcripts of the sermons, transcripts of the dialogue that takes place in the various classes in the parlor, transcripts of interviews in which we are asked, in the safety of absolute anonymity, what we really think inside about religion. And this historian begins to scientifically analyze all of these data, and you ask him, "Well, what is it that they believe at your church, anyway?"

What would that person discover? My best guess is something along these lines: Our thoughts about religion would be a blend. There's quite a bit of Unitarianism here — this notion that there's one God for the Muslims, for the Jews, for the Hindus, for the Christians. Pretty much there is a concept of oneness to the idea of divinity that we have. There's a very strong current of Christianity running here. After all, this is called a Christian church, allegedly, meaning that we have roots that go back to the Puritans who came over from Holland seeking freedom of thought within Protestant Christianity, tracing its heritage back from the Mayflower Pact to the Reformation. So there is a very strong Protestant version of Christianity here as well.

I happen to know from multiple private conversations that a lot of you are quite Buddhist in your spiritual practices, in your belief systems. It's not overwhelming, it's not a torrent, but there is a significant stream of Buddhism here as well. And finally, another significant stream is of a Universalism that God loves all of us and that God isn't a judge, like here are the people I really like,

and here are the people I have a serious problems with, and I may have to judge them. Rather, it's that we're all on a path, finding our way toward what is divine, what is holy, and what is the righteous way to live.

So those four strands are my best guess as to what's going on at First Congregational Church — Unitarianism, Christianity, Buddhism, and Universalism. Now you ask this historian of religion, "Are they Christians?" The answer, "Well, sort of, more or less." Okay, "Are they classical Christians?" Well, not really. You know, "Maybe a little" might be the answer.

## **H**ere Comes the Point of the Sermon; **I** Offer One of the Fundamentals

I would like to offer you this morning one of the fundamental reasons we're the way we are. And I'd like to begin with some quotes. They are pretty short, six of them to create the context for answering that question, "Why are we that way?"

Neils Bohr. He's the one who figured out the structure of the atom, a Nobel Laureate from the early part of the Twentieth Century. He said:

"Everything we call real is made of things that cannot be regarded as real."

Thanks. That's helpful.

Hebrews, Chapter 11, Verse 3:

"By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible."

Nicola Tesla, the enigmatic, brilliant, and prescient Croatian physicist, said:

“The day science begins to study non-physical phenomena, it will make more progress in one decade than in all the previous centuries of its existence.”

Max Planck, another Nobel Laureate in physics, this one in 1918, said this:

“I regard consciousness as fundamental. I regard matter as derivative from consciousness. We cannot get behind consciousness. Everything we talk about, everything we regard as existing, postulates consciousness.”

The fifth quote is from Richard Henry, Professor of Physics and Astronomy at Johns Hopkins. The quote is from his book called *The Mental Universe*, and it starts off with quoting somebody else, Sir James Jeans, where Jeans says:

### **“The Stream of Knowledge Heads Toward Nonmechanical Reality**

“The universe begins to look more like a great thought than like a great machine. Mind no longer appears to be an accidental intruder into the realm of matter. . . . We ought rather [to] hail it as the creator and governor of the realm of matter.”

So that’s Jeans being quoted by Henry, who then concludes in his book:

“The universe is immaterial — mental and spiritual. Live and enjoy.”

Elsewhere, he hammers it home again:

“Get over it, and accept the inarguable conclusion. The universe is immaterial — mental and spiritual.”

And then my sixth quote is from Carl Sagan, the great Cornell astronomer and producer of the television show “Cosmos”:

“A religion, old or new, that stressed the magnificence of the universe as revealed by modern science might be able to draw forth reserves of reverence and awe hardly tapped by the conventional faiths. Sooner or later, such a religion will emerge.”

### **I Can’t Tell You How Cool This Is for Theology; This Is Wonderful**

The church has a lot of catching-up to do. Theology has a lot of catching-up to do. But this vision that we have been handed on a silver platter by science, of where we’re going, is indescribably beautiful. And as theology catches up, the enthusiasm, the beauty, the excitement will become palpable. Right now, we’re sort of behind the eight ball. We’ve had trouble shedding the leaves that had been problematic to churches for centuries. But as we succeed in doing that, where we’re going is of indescribable excitement and beauty.

A hundred years ago, Albert Einstein, along with others — this would be 1905 to 1915 — became convinced and wrote in their academic articles that the universe is indeed immaterial. The way Einstein worded it is that “The field is the only reality.” What we see as matter is just a concentration of the field. Empty space, each portion of it, is pregnant with the whole, the all. Furthermore, the field is also conscious. It is aware. Beings are concentrations of that consciousness that is everywhere.

A physics professor by the name of Tegmark at MIT wrote an article about a year ago that

had a line of logic in it, and it goes largely like this:

“If the universe is really immaterial, then the core reality of the universe is the interrelationships, the interactions of that field that Einstein talked about. So if it’s immaterial, then it’s the interactions of the field within it that is the core reality. Whether it’s seen through the lens of physics or chemistry or biology or psychology, doesn’t really matter.

“Therefore, this ultimate reality that we try to get our hands on is in the end just mathematics. Therefore, this ultimate reality is all just an idea. Our mind, with a lower-case ‘m,’ is becoming aware of what is obvious to the Mind, with an upper-case ‘M.’ ”

So yes, theology needs to adapt, it needs to keep up. There are many ancient beliefs that no longer serve us as a people. Our task, thus, is one of winnowing — keeping the wheat, getting rid of the chaff, which actually is what Unitarians, Christians, Buddhists, Universalists have done for a long time.

I will conclude with a quote from Loyal Rue. He is a retired philosopher in Florida, enjoying the warmth, where he said:

## “**The Universe Is a Single Reality: a Sweeping Process of Connections**”

“The universe is not a place where evolution happens; it is evolution happening. It is not a stage on which dramas unfold; it is the unfolding drama itself. If ever there were a candidate for a universal story, it must be this story of cosmic evolution. . . .

“This story shows us in the deepest possible sense that we are all sisters and brothers — fashioned from the same stellar dust, energized by the same star, nourished by the same planet, endowed with the same genetic code, and threatened by the same evils.

“More than any other story, this humbles us before the magnitude and complexity of creation. Like no other story, it bewilders us with the improbability of our existence, astonishes us with the interdependence of all things, and makes us feel grateful for the lives we have. And not the least of all, it inspires us to express our gratitude to the past by accepting a solemn and collective responsibility for the future.”

*Amen.*