

Eros and Evolution

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Charles Darwin was born on Abraham Lincoln's birthday; Abraham Lincoln was born on Charles Darwin's birthday; both came into the world on February 12, 1809. Two infants born on opposite sides of the Atlantic Ocean, both destined for infamy:

I picture Lincoln focused backwards in time, called to clean up the mess left by our Founding Fathers over the issue of slavery; I see Darwin getting to pull together the emerging knowledge of the era and fling his fresh insights into the future.

That a century and a half later nearly half us of all Americans still don't accept evolution never ceases to astonish me! More on that later.

First let me focus on Valentine's Day: for I find it to be a delicious synchronicity that love and sexual reproduction are some of the most amazing elements of **evolution!**

In the beginning, when organisms reproduced themselves by merely dividing, their lives went on forever and ever, dividing and re-dividing for all eternity. But when evolution called for more complex creatures, sexual reproduction came into play so that two beings could co-create a third, a separate, a whole other being. And then there had to evolve a way for the parents to make space for their offspring's offspring's offspring.

Thus the parent organisms had to **die**. So death entered the world the partner of sex.

And we are the species that knows it is alive and will one day die. Religion is the human response to this knowing.

Thus I'll discuss the spirituality of sex for a few moments this fine February morning, two days before Valentine's Day.

Our early European ancestors noted that mid-February was when the birds mated. This is technically true: birds such as the missel thrush, the partridge, and the blackbird really do mate in mid-February. From this observation came the idea that all birds did the same, and that, therefore, humans should do likewise.

Back in ancient Rome, at mid-February each year two young boys were chosen to run through the streets, wielding strips of goatskin called thongs. The streets would be crowded with young women, for a lash with the sacred thong was believed to make them fertile. These goatskin thongs were called 'februa,' the lashing was called the 'februatia,' Latin for *to purify*, from which comes our word for February. To purify: in order to insure fertility.

It was on the eve of such a purification and fertility festival that St. Valentine was executed, probably as part of the entertainment.

Valentine was a priest who lived in the third century after Christ. When the Roman Emperor Claudius II needed soldiers, he decreed that no one could marry or become engaged, because he realized that marriage made men want to stay at home instead of going off to fight in wars. (and we thought 'make love, not war' originated with us!) Well, back in ancient Rome, the kindly Valentine defied the Emperor's decree and married a number of young couples. Thus he was arrested, imprisoned, and put to death (from Hearts, Cupids, and Red Roses by Edna Barth).

What is truly remarkable here is that Valentine risked marrying couples some 13 centuries before the Christian church sanctified marriage. Marriage didn't become a sacrament until the 16th Century: it couldn't take place in church because human sexuality was considered impure. I guess the early church didn't stock goatskin lashes.

But St. Valentine's Roman culture **did** honor human fertility. In fact, in ancient Rome, Venus was the goddess of love and her son and consort was named Cupid...but this is NOT the cupid we see on our

cards and candy boxes: oh, no, Cupid was not envisioned as a cute little cherub shooting arrows: he was a full bodied, beautiful young man/god whose very sight evoked the passionate longing of **erotic** love.

And in ancient Greece, Aphrodite was the goddess of love, whose son and consort was Eros, the god of romantic, passionate, and playful love. Can you see how the image of birds mating evolved into festivals for human mating and then into the spiritual dimension? *Gods and Goddesses of Love*, real embodied love.

Okay, so its sanctity got lost on the Christian Church, with its bias towards agape, celibate love, despite dear St. Valentine's martyrdom. However, the connection between spirituality and sexuality **was** kept alive, and did survive. When modern feminist theologians began looking back in history for evidence of *women's* spirituality, they came across 43 centuries of love poetry written by women as a **way of expressing their experience of god**.

As in the words of one such poem, written by the Shulammite woman who consorted with Solomon in the third century B.C.E.:

Arise my love, my fair one, and come away. For lo the winter is past...and the voice of the turtle (dove) is heard in our land.

You can find other such poetry in Jane Hirshfield's 1994 book *Women in Praise of the Sacred*. Hirshfield, herself a poet, writes that the line between love poetry and sacred poetry was fluid across many cultures...and cites works such as those of the Tamil poet Antal, the Marathi poet Mirabai along with other devotional poets of India, and the Sufi poet Rabi'a, in whose work the seeker and god are portrayed as lover and Beloved in language that is openly erotic. Hirshfield claims that

Each of the two kinds of experience of union serves to illumine and enlarge our understanding of the other.

Really!?!??? Hmm. If you are questioning this, think about your own dreams. UU community minister Jeremy Taylor tells us in his book *Dream Work* that "overtly erotic imagery contains a level of reference to the desire for direct experience of spiritual reality, the desire to understand directly what's really going on beyond the obvious appearances of life, the desire to commune more directly with the energy of the divine." (Taylor, *Dream Work*, p145)

So now, what would happen if we took a careful look how our sexuality, our sensuality, informs our spirituality? as our celebration of mid-February....

What would we come to know that we don't know we already know? Many of us Unitarian Universalists have come to believe that god is immanent; that the divine is manifest within this world, not just transcendent of it, and that each of us is a part and parcel of god.

So if the divine lives within people, what happens when we make love to and with another person: are we not also making love to, and being made love to by, "god?" This is certainly what the poetry in the Song of Solomon suggests.

But let's take a closer look here. As we deepen in our romantic love for another human, we become more and more vulnerable: our boundaries dissolve, and we open to something far beyond our rational ego-control.

In fact, as romantic love goes beyond its initiating stages, it takes us to some pretty frightening places within ourselves...we are naked in body, mind, and spirit...we are in a place of being known for the whole of who we are, not just the persona we prefer to project. Once the honeymoon stage is over, and the other sees us for who we really are...will s/he love us anyway?

No wonder some run from this deepening experience, by moving from partner to partner, thus keeping love on a superficial, non-threatening level...that delicious level of intoxicating love that is as addicting as all other chemical substances, and as destructively deadly. For a love addiction, like all addictions (with the possible exception of my chocolate addiction), serves to keep us pitched away from the center of what's really important in our lives: that god-place deep within where the divine child of the spiritual life is waiting to be conceptualized, and brought forth. And thus we are **afraid** of the spiritual

power of our sexuality, for we intuitively know that it has the same power to change us, just as surely as having biological children changes our lives forever.

For as the late Forrest Church says in his book Life Lines: :

Fear looms as an impediment to every kind of love--personal, neighborly, and divine. Fear sets up a protective shield. This shield does not protect us from our enemies as intended; it only protects us from ourselves. Since the opposite of love is not hate but FEAR, all that fear finally protects us from is the possibility of love. Rev. Dr. Church continues: Forget about loving your enemies. Loving enemies is the material for a much more advanced course in spiritual discipline. Think about your attempts to love those who are struggling to love you in return. To nurture and sustain a loving relationship we must conquer the fears that induce self-protection: (p.90)

If/when we resist doing this, we give up on the most precious possibility of human experience, the sensibilities that Rebecca Parker, president of Starr King School for the Ministry, wrote about in a 1992 UU Minister's Association publication.

Her essay entitled *Making Love As a Means of Grace* summarizes the sensibilities created through positive sexual experiences as follows:

The self we come to know in our best sexual encounters is, first, a self that is intimately connected with all of life....it is not a discreet, self-contained entity, but a center of feeling flooded by the whole world .Second, the self we come to know has power to deeply affect another....it has the power of presence; it gives pleasure. Third, the self we come to know takes joy in sheer being, in its own life and in the life it senses all around. Being itself is joyful, and being itself is a complex integration of breadth, created by receptivity to a vast field and intensity, created by the power to move another and to bring forth life. In sexual intimacy we can experience ourselves as having power---the power of receptivity and action combined, the power of feeling and doing, being moved and moving. We feel the force of our soul, the reality of our powerful presence in the world, and we feel it with joy. Sexual knowledge of this nature, knowledge bequeathed to us through our bodies, is gracious and saving knowledge. It releases us from a false sense of separation and alienation from the world. It baptizes us into the whole creation and tells us we are good".

i.e. *It fills up our senses*, as John Denver sings.

This sense of oneness with the world is a profoundly spiritual experience, one documented by all spiritual traditions. And we in the west are finally beginning to realize that sexuality is a viable path to this spiritual experience.

I believe in the spirituality of sex because the sexual encounter is that place from which each of us springs; it is the source of our own beginning, and therefore it is our primary experience at the instant of our own creation.

Picture this: the arrow shaped (cupid's, if you will) sperm penetrates the ovum and kabum! YOU explode into being!.....the unique you, with all your particularities and possibilities. **Your very own big bang experience!!** I'd like to suggest that this moment of fertilization is such a profoundly religious experience that for the rest of our lives we keep trying to recreate it! Human sexuality is simply the most obvious way we attempt to re-experience that fertile state of being in which we began...return to that place of infinite potential bursting forth in unforeseeable directions! And this is the very essence of Evolution. Evolution is about becoming. It is about creativity, procreation, recreation: something more emerging from nothing but, over eons of time.

To give you the physical experience of the epic of earth's evolution on this, Darwin's birthday, I invite you to stand up. Using your own body to measure all of Earth Time, your feet planted on the ground mark the beginnings of earth at the birth of our solar system 4.5 billion years ago, the first cell appears at your ankle (3.8 bya), life's common ancestor is at calf level (3.5 bya), multiple cellular life emerges at the knee (3 bya), sexual reproduction comes into being at hip level (2 bya), plants and oxygen come about at shoulder height (1 bya),

Now raise up your arms: the Cambrian Explosion is at the elbow (500 mya) dinosaurs come and go just below the wrist (70 mya), and at the wrist bone itself is homo sapiens (2 mya). In the span of Time

between the two lines wringing your wrist, modern human migrated out of Africa and walked on the moon. Now sit back down and take a good look at your hand. The palm of your hand represents the amount of Time that Earth has left....the 500 million years scientists estimate for the natural life of the planet. The same length of Time since the Cambrian Explosion is all there yet is to go! (Many thanks to my partner, Milt Hetrick, for helping me put this time line together!)

This is the remaining Time that evolution has to work in, and work out its potential, possibility, and promise...yet that process is in peril because we humans have become such a destructive force on the face of the planet. Will we cease poisoning the very bio systems that brought us forth and sustain all life, or will earth shuck us off as a failed experiment? We are at the crossroads in this!!

I believe it is our human duty to keep the planet viable so that evolution can continue to play itself out,,,,,a process that includes human consciousness and creativity and change. Yet evolution's open-ended narrative threatened the established world-view of Darwin's day, continuing to our own as well. It appalls me that we are still arguing over its reality, as is depicted in my favorite bumper sticker that reads:

Evolution is only a theory, kind of like gravity.

You don't believe IN gravity; you either accept it, or you don't. And IF you don't, you are free to climb up that cliff of red rocks behind us and test it by stepping off into the void. Likewise, you don't believe IN evolution; you either accept it, or you don't. And I have noticed that those who deny the science of evolution also deny the science of climate change. And while they are free to believe whatever they choose to, they do not have the right to pull me over the cliff with them and destroy the whole planet in the process. I do not give them that right. Which is why this up coming election cycle is so critical in the history of this planet.

I find it frightening that Rick Santorum has gotten this far in the primary process. This rabidly anti-evolutionist was at the forefront of insisting that creationism's 'intelligent design' be added to the school curriculum in Pennsylvania, and even got it written into George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind legislation.

Santorum fears evolution because, he claims, if we are merely a 'mistake of nature,' then there are no moral demands put on us, and our behavior will fall to its lowest level. (from Kenneth Miller's Only a Theory, Evolution and the Battle for America's Soul) Speak for yourself, sir.

Knowing that I've come from star stuff, that I am related to every living thing on this earth, imposes a moral imperative on my every action, including: is my burning fossil fuels and releasing carbon back into the atmosphere ethical, or criminal?

The real moral issue here is one of following the money: who's getting rich from denying the science of evolution and lying about global warming at the expense of the rest of us?! Each of us might well take on this question as we celebrate Darwin's Birthday...and decide what will we do, both personally and politically, with the moment of Evolutionary Time that is in our hands.