

Was Darwin a Unitarian?  
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I have three children, two sons and a daughter, whom I have raised as Unitarian Universalists. The oldest is now thirty. Like any good parent, I have spent a good part of the last thirty years giving my children advice about what work they should do in this world. For example, at one point two of my children were both working in a bookstore. I encouraged this, suggesting that there was a bright future in book selling. Following my advice, my dutiful daughter stuck it out with Borders until the last day.

Although my encouragement about book selling turned out to be wrong, I still offer advice to my children, now all young adults. However, I have come to realize that sometimes what a person majors in at University and what they end up doing are not always the same. Consider, for example, Charles Darwin.

He was born on this date 203 years ago in Shrewsbury, England, the fifth of six children. As a child, he was an ordinary, unremarkable youngster. On rainy days, he liked to lie under the dining room table and read *Robinson Crusoe*. In good weather, he liked to wander the country paths around the town collecting birds' eggs and pebbles.

His father was a physician and a financially successful businessman. His mother was the daughter of Josiah Wedgwood, the famous English potter. The Wedgwood family was committed Unitarians, members of the Shrewsbury Unitarian church. Today on their website, the church has this statement:

We believe that everyone has the right to seek truth and meaning for themselves. The fundamental tools for doing this are your own life experience, your reflection upon it, your intuitive understanding, and the promptings of your own conscience. The best place to do this is a community that welcomes you for who you are, complete with your beliefs, doubts and questions.

Charles worshiped at this church with his mother and sisters. The Reverend George Case, the Unitarian minister, had a reputation as a serious and respected man. During the week Rev. Case tutored Charles. Charles' father, an Anglican, was fond of saying that "Unitarianism is a feather bed to catch a falling Christian."

When Charles was eight years old, his mother died. After her death, the family switched churches, leaving behind mother's Unitarianism and replacing it with the Anglican Parish Church. Therefore, Darwin was a Unitarian until he was eight years old.

### **Schooling**

When Charles turned nine, his father sent the boy to Shrewsbury Boarding School, in the center of town, about a mile from the family house. He slept in a long smelly dormitory with twenty or

thirty other boys. There was only one window at one end. The food was bad, beatings were common, and Charles hated it. To escape from the unpleasantness, and curious about the nature of things, Charles and his older brother conducted chemistry experiments, heating substances over an open flame until they fused, or dissolved, or exploded.

### **Edinburgh to Be a Doctor**

When Charles turned sixteen, his father sent the boy, with his older brother, to Edinburgh University. His dad wanted his sons to follow his example and become medical doctors. Arriving at Edinburgh at the beginning of October 1825, Charles and his brother were earnestly committed to the idea of becoming doctors. However, 16-year-old Charles found that he feared the sight of blood. Indeed, to the end of his life if one of his own children accidentally cut their skin, he became almost hysterical.

While officially majoring in medicine, in Edinburgh young Charles pursued a personal curriculum, a program of independent study. He walked to the nearby fishing villages. In the fresh seaside air, he was curious about the shells and interesting creatures he found among the stones. At the university's natural history museum, he met a freed slave who was an expert in stuffing birds. Charles paid the man to teach him how to be a taxidermist. He learned about natural history by asking questions of the museum's curator. He became friends with a medical doctor and amateur naturalist who taught him about marine zoology.

He returned home after two years of study without a medical degree. His father was not pleased. He said to Charles, "you will be a disgrace to yourself and all your family." (There have been times when I have been tempted to say this to my own children. So far, I have resisted the temptation.)

### **Cambridge to Be a Minister**

Trying to help his son, Darwin's father decided that if the boy would not make it as a medical doctor, the boy should become a minister. When Charles was nineteen, his father sent his son to Cambridge University, a theological training house for the Church of England. At first, Charles liked the idea of becoming a country clergyman. He said, "I did not then in the least doubt the strict and literal truth of every word in the Bible . . . it never struck me how illogical it was to say that I believed in what I could not understand and what is in fact unintelligible."

Still as he had done at Edinburgh, at Cambridge he devised a program of independent study. Totally ignoring academic work, he became curious about beetles. Collecting beetles became an obsession. Young Darwin wrote: "One day, when tearing off some old bark, I saw two rare beetles and seized one in each hand; then I saw a third and a new kind, which I could not bear to lose, so I popped the one that I held in my right hand into my mouth. Alas, it ejected some intensely acrid fluid, which burnt my tongue, so I was forced to spit the beetle out, which was lost, as well as the third one."

He later said, "The three years that I spent at Cambridge were the most joyful in my happy life." The only formal instruction in natural science that Charles undertook during his entire

Cambridge career was to attend lectures in botany. As he studied the plants of other parts of the world, he daydreamed about visiting the tropics, traveling to Africa or South America. Besides studying botany, Charles became friends with a geologist who took him on a trip to explore Northern Wales, teaching the young man about rock formations and fossil records.

As for becoming a clergyman, 22-year-old Charles admitted that he could not honestly say yes when asked if he were “inwardly moved by the holy spirit.” Still he agreed with his father that he would return to Cambridge in the fall of 1831 and began the specialized reading necessary for ordination as an Anglican minister.

### **The Beagle**

However, in August of 1831 he received a fateful letter. Charles’ botany teacher had been asked to recommend a young man who was interested in science and natural history to accompany a survey ship leaving England for a trip around the world. The 35-year-old professor was tempted to volunteer himself, but his wife had just had a baby. She vetoed the idea. Next, the teacher approached a recent graduate of Cambridge, who had just started work serving a new parish. He thought it over and said that he should not leave the congregation so soon after being appointed. Therefore, the professor passed the invitation onto Charles Darwin who was still on summer vacation at home. Charles thought it was the most exciting letter he had ever received in his life!

Father was not pleased. This was not a career path into the ministry. Darwin’s father feared for his son’s safety. Charles appealed to his uncle, the brother of Charles’ deceased Unitarian mother. The uncle convinced his brother-in-law to let Charles go on the adventure.

The ship, the Beagle, set sail in December 1831. Darwin was terribly seasick, a condition he never got over during the five-year around-the-world sailing trip. However, each time the ship reached land, the young man’s intense excitement and enthusiasm returned.

Their first stop was the Cape Verde islands. Sitting up on the beach leaning against a rock face eating lunch, Darwin decided that he might write a book on the geology of the various countries he visited. Next, they sailed to Brazil. His mother and the entire Wedgwood family had been leaders in opposing slavery. Darwin was horrified to find himself in a full-fledged slave society. However, he left the cities and explored the jungle finding it “filled with the various productions of the God of nature.” On the southeastern coast of South America Darwin discovered a large collection of fossilized bones. In Chile Darwin experienced an earthquake. He saw signs that the earthquake had just raised the land, including mussel-beds stranded above a high tide. High in the Andes he saw seashells. On the islands, he studied birds and turtles. In Australia, he studied the kangaroo and the platypus.

When the Beagle returned in October 1836, Darwin was twenty-seven years old. His father realized that his son was a gentleman naturalist who was unable to support himself. Father gave the young man an allowance on which to live. (I tell my own children not to expect this.) This freed Darwin to organize work on his collections and write about his experiences. By September of 1838, when he was twenty-nine, Darwin had worked out an understanding of the development of life on earth. The central thesis was simple:

Species have gradually changed by the accumulation of variations that gave their [ancestors] the best chance of surviving in the struggle for existence.

However, because his theory defied orthodox religious belief, Darwin delayed publication, wishing to avoid controversy. In addition, because he wanted other scientists to accept his ideas, he wanted to gather as much supporting evidence as he could. Twenty-one years passed. Finally, another researcher independently proposing a theory of natural selection, spurring Darwin finally to complete and publish his book: *The Origin of the Species*.

*The Origin of Species* met with a firestorm of controversy, largely because it suggested that human beings evolved from animals. One hundred fifty-three years have passed. At least in the United States, there are many who still resist the revolution. Today a Gallup Poll shows that only 39% of Americans say they "believe in the theory of evolution." One fundamentalist website calls evolution "The most insidious and damaging ideology ever foisted upon the mind of modern man." I would call it one of the most important discoveries in the history of the human race.

How do we decide what work we will do?

A year ago, in the days before Borders closed, I bought a book for my children on career counseling called *You Majored in What?* In spite of my urging, none of my children read it, so I did. The writer makes the point that often the work we do is different from what we studied in school. A man with an engineering degree becomes a chef. A woman with a degree in psychology becomes a bank vice-president. A woman with a degree in music works as a deep-sea diver studying reefs. As I read these descriptions, I thought of Darwin. His story suggests that we are at our best, when our work relates to that which excites our curiosity. Finding such work is not easy. In my own case, I worked at sixteen different jobs, in construction, in restaurants, in sales, and in agriculture. At Arizona State University, I changed my major four times. Yet I learned from everything I tried, and eventually I became a Unitarian Universalist minister. Perhaps you have had a similar experience. Our paths in life are seldom simple or direct, but we learn from everything we do.

In Darwin's case, for the first eight years of his life, he learned from being a Unitarian. On this day, February 12, three years ago, members of the Shrewsbury Unitarian Church, held a birthday party. Afterward they published a description of it on their web site. I close with it today.

"We celebrated Charles Darwin's 200th birthday in style at the Church on 12th February. We lost count of the numbers who came to pay their respects and toast the great man; dozens signed a large birthday card, including the children of a school in Bridge north who had plenty of questions for our Chairman, Mrs. Joan Hughes. We also learned things too, and met with the granddaughter of the man who made the beautiful plaque [honoring Darwin], which hangs in the Church. It was good to open our doors and invite the people of Shrewsbury into a Church, which has some fame and a lot of curiosity for those who go by its doors during the week when it is closed and they wonder what is behind them. It was such a

good reception we plan to open again for his next birthday!"

Today they are having another party.