

Why We Celebrate Darwin Day

By Donald A. Hicks

February 12, 2009 marks the 200th anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin, British naturalist and author of a pretty famous book, “On the Origin of Species,” published when Darwin was 50. In cities around the country and the world, groups of likeminded people will come together in dark wooden bars, buzzing coffee houses, and swanky little wine bars to celebrate Darwin Day. They will toast Charles Darwin, bemoan the state of science and reason around the world, and toast the Brit who first published the dangerous ideas of evolution and natural selection: Patrick Matthew.

In 1831, 28 years before the Darwin, Patrick Matthew provided in his book “Naval Timber and Arboriculture” an account of natural selection as the obvious method by which species attained evolutionary advantage and flourished. Darwin acknowledged this fact publicly and gave Matthew all the credit for being first. Matthew, likewise, returned credit back to Darwin as well. Not for being first, of course, but for his cautious, detailed, observational approach to the topic--and, of course, for the incredible success and popularity he achieved in doing so.

Natural selection does not say that the strong triumphs over the weak. It does not have any implication even that better beats worse. Rather, the actual theory simply states that if a characteristic helps a living creature to reproduce more effectively, that characteristic will over time become more and more prevalent. Ostriches don't develop large, colorful plumes because the plumes are beautiful, they develop plumes because it helps them get lucky with other birds. Does that make the plumes any less beautiful? No—happily, what we humans find beautiful also happens to be an advantage for our friendly birds.

Ideas, ideologies, and worldviews are also subject to the forces of natural selection. Ideas are born, propagate, get mutated, and can die. Some ideas are beautiful and serene; some ideas are ugly and poisonous. However, ideas can't survive on their own, without us humans to carry them. Since they are a part of us, ideas don't succeed because they are beautiful, or even because they are right or true. They succeed when they confer an advantage to their bearer. Ideas succeed because of what they DO for us, not because of what they ARE.

Charles Darwin didn't discover natural selection. But barring an unlikely surge of interest in 19th century ship building techniques, the beautiful and serene ideas of evolution and natural selection, the basis for nearly all of the amazing discoveries in human genetics and the enabling tool for molecular biology and modern biotech, may yet simply die out.

We celebrate Darwin Day because we have to, because an idea which is good and true needs our help to succeed and survive. Good ideas must give us an advantage in the real world, to help us live longer and better, and reproduce to live beyond us and our limited lifetimes. Selfishness and greed, twisted and perverted ideologies and worldviews, reliance on superstition and supernatural powers as a means to exploit and control our fellow mankind—these ideas can and do confer reproductive advantages. For reason, logic, and truth to survive, we have to get out and support them, popularize them, propagate them. They'll only survive if we who love and cherish them live better and more successfully.

So get out there on February 12th and raise your glass to the great propagator of good and dangerous ideas, Charles Darwin. Come out with us and celebrate reason, toast evolution, and give it your best effort to reproduce. Who says we can't make evolution one hell of a good party while we're living it?