

“Believing in Dinosaurs”

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May

First Parish in Wayland

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In the news this week, there was an item pertinent to today’s sermon. A graduate student has proposed a new classification of dinosaurs. Turns out, the science of dinosaurs is still examining the evidence and searching for better understanding—an endeavor that has captivated people for centuries.

To be honest, my own knowledge of dinosaurs is more cultural than scientific. Perhaps like me you’ve heard of *Jurassic Park*, the movie, but not of the Jurassic Coast in England? There is, in fact, a Jurassic Coast on the South edge of England. The coastline there has preserved, and over time revealed, the fossilized remnants of an ancient ocean. Along this coast sits the town of Lyme Regis. In the early 19th century, this town was a favorite of upper-class English to retreat to in the summer. Some of the working-class folks would sell fossil curiosities to the visitors as a source of income.

One of these poor, self-educated fossil hunters was Mary Anning. Born in 1799, Mary began life remarkably—surviving a lightning strike as a 15-month old infant! In a fictionalized retelling of Mary’s life, author Tracy Chevalier depicts Mary as feeling a shiver of energy, an echo of the lightning, whenever she finds a fossil. Chevalier suggests that it is this energizing feeling that motivates Mary to search. She longs for that bolt that reminds her of who she is—a survivor of a lightning strike. Alive and unique. This metaphoric image of lightning energizing the seeker feels wonderfully appropriate to me for what it means to seek and to discover.

As a fossil hunter Mary had very little formal education, but through self-education and experience she became known in her lifetime as a geologist and paleontologist. Respected for her knowledge and contributions, her death was noted by the Geological Society of London—even though women would not be allowed as members until 1904. In other words, Mary was a scientist. A scientist whose love of discovery—as well as the need to earn an income—consumed her life from the time she was a girl.

In fact, Mary was only 12 years old when she helped to extract a skull and then a body of a sea creature—a creature that Mary called a crocodile. In 1811, the word dinosaur had not even been invented yet. In Chevalier’s fictionalized account, Mary’s older friend, Elizabeth, holds her own questions about the truth of the fossil to herself. Chevalier writes,

“If it was not a crocodile, what was it? I did not share my concern with Mary, however, as I had begun to on the beach, before thinking the better of it. She was too young for such uneasy questions. I had discovered from conversation I’d had about fossils with the people of Lyme that few wanted to delve into unknown territory, preferring to hold on to their superstitions and leave unanswerable question to God’s will rather than find a reasonable explanation that might challenge previous thinking.”ⁱ (p. 80-81)

Such fossils raised questions that unsettled even those responsible for their discovery.

As it turned out, Mary, with her brother, had discovered what came to be known as an *Ichthyosaurus*, an ancient reptile, that lived in the seas during the age of dinosaurs.ⁱⁱ At the time, most people in England assumed that the world was 6,000 years old—a date arrived at by Biblical scholars. They believed that God had created the world and that it pretty much looked the same as it had at the beginning—well, perhaps with the exception of some damage from Noah’s flood. This knowledge was simply the truth. Common sense. Everyone knew this.

So what would such people make of the fossils of unknown creatures? Were they simply yet undiscovered or long dead? Did God plan for some creatures to die off? How do you make sense of new information that disrupts the foundation of your knowledge about the world?

Accordingly, Mary Anning and other fossil scientists like her were enormously controversial. Mary died twelve years before Darwin went public with his theory of evolution. Even so, her discoveries played a part in the emerging scientific understanding. In its infancy, the science of fossils, of extinct and changing species, was a seed about to fiercely grow. Over the coming decades of debate and education, evolution would become the knowledge that (*mostly?*) forms common sense knowledge today.

This cultural shift amazes me. Consider the centuries of accepted thought that was overturned. Consider all the paintings, books, stained glass windows, and songs that formed the Western world telling the same story of a historic Creation. A story now thrown into question. Talk about being hit by a lightning bolt! The idea exploded religious understanding. Still today, it is an idea some resist or deny.

Consider how this revolution of worldview, this dislocation of certain knowledge, began in part with a young girl walking a cold beach looking for curiosities to sell.

More than one hundred years later, a group of Unitarians, freethinkers, and other liberals signed their names to the first Humanist Manifesto in 1933. After a century that had witnessed the invention of the term dinosaur, the public unveiling of Darwin's Theory of Evolution, and the Scopes Trial which upheld a ban against teaching evolution in public schools, some people had simply concluded that belief in God was no longer necessary. This first Humanist Manifesto listed fifteen affirmations. It began like this:

FIRST: Religious humanists regard the universe as self-existing and not created.

SECOND: Humanism believes that man is a part of nature and that he has emerged as a result of a continuous process.ⁱⁱⁱ

The rejection of the Christian creation story and the embrace of evolutionary science was unmistakable and intentional. In that previous century of change, not everyone had shied away from the territory of the unknown. Some had followed the emerging knowledge into a totally new way of understanding the world. Some even chose to leave the supernatural behind.

Since that first Humanist Manifesto, it has been rewritten twice—most recently in 2003. Such openness to revision affirms the humanist commitment to the evolution of ideas. While the American Humanist Association exists as an independent group, Unitarian Universalists continue to be a part of their ranks. And, Humanists continue to be a part of UU communities. Indeed, one of the six sources that UU's affirm and promote is: Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.

I know that this congregation counts many scientists and humanists within its numbers. To be honest, it's very confusing for some folks when I explain that I'm a minister *and* that the congregation I serve includes many humanists and atheists. This information completely baffles some people—isn't religion *by definition* about belief in God or gods? Isn't the whole point of religion to make sense of the supernatural? Sure, there's always been doubters, maybe even atheists, in the pews of congregations...but you kept it to yourself!

But, here we are. A 377-year old religious community that embraces our humanists and atheists warmly. In fact, I sometimes wonder if the embrace of those who *do* believe in God or some kind of divinity might be chillier?

By embracing theists, humanists, agnostics, and those who resist any label, we are engaged in a complex and difficult project. When you consider that the last two centuries have

involved many devastating debates between religion and science, theists and humanists, it's rather remarkable that we say, "Bring it on! We don't have to think alike to love alike." There is something more important than theological agreement. There is human well-being.

And, in this shared concern for human well-being, we are all humanists. Rev. Kendyl Gibbons, a leading UU Humanist voice today, wrote in a recent article,

As a religious position and a spiritual path, Humanism looks beyond the idea that a self-conscious, personal god doesn't exist. Rather, Humanism is founded on the more radical claim that the existence or nonexistence of such a god, or goddess, or gods, does not matter much. As its name implies, Humanism is concerned with the world of human existence as it is known through human experience.^{iv}

In this sense, humanism is defined primarily not by its position on god, but by its embrace of human experience. Gibbons continues saying,

What we are willing to say about the universe and our lives is based exclusively on our own shared experience and reason. "Because the Bible tells me so"—or the Qur'an, or Jesus, or Jehovah, or the Buddha, or any other religious authority—carries no weight. We trust that which can be proven, either by evidence, science, and careful study or by the cumulative moral insight and experience of the human race. Humanism is quite the opposite of a religion or philosophy that teaches, as some would say, that we can believe anything we want. In fact, as the [third Humanist Manifesto](#) asserts, Humanism encourages us to "distinguish things as they are from things as we might wish or imagine them to be."

In other words, humanism calls us to be like Mary Anning—wandering the shores of our lives, carefully attending to what we find, and allowing the evidence we collect to shape our emerging understanding of the world.

Yet, what defines "evidence" in our experience? In its earliest days, humanism embraced the world of evidentiary science so firmly that, to its critics, a rigid rationalism took hold. Such an enthusiastic embrace of reason makes sense in a context where rational argument and scientific knowledge was so frequently challenged by claims of "faith" and "tradition." But, in time, humanists such as Gibbons have insisted that our human experience be more broadly defined. Yes, we are rational beings, but we are also more. As Gibbons says, "Humanism is not just a function of the mind. The life well lived has emotional, aesthetic, and moral fulfillment as well as mental and physical satisfaction, and these we ignore at our peril."

For me, humanism is the full embrace of the experience of life. It is the beauty of a richly colored sunset and the love I feel for my son. It is the heartbreak of losing first loves and the penetrating grief of the death of one we held close. Humanism is the unexpected discovery that sends shivers up one's spine. And, it is the satisfaction of sore muscles after a day's hard work. Humanism is the embrace of this life with its stream of unknown joys and sorrows. It is the willingness to listen and learn from experience, your own and others, as well as an openness to saying, "I don't know" or "Boy, was I wrong." Humanism is an expedition of meaning in this life, here and now.

I don't know whether or not there is a god. But, I do know that this life matters. I believe that we are all connected—both to the human community as well as to the natural world that sustains all of our lives. And, I believe that being human calls us into the project of caring for the well-being of humanity and for this planet that makes human life possible.

And, I believe in dinosaurs. Which is to say that I believe in reason and science as sources of discovery about this world. For me, science and religion are not enemies but intertwined projects of trying to make sense of the experience of life and death. Like Mary Anning, we are all walking through life, searching for the treasure that will both feed us and, if we're lucky, fill us with a bolt of energy reminding us of the sheer gift of being alive.

So may it be, Amen.

ⁱ Tracy Chevalier, *Remarkable Creatures*, (New York: Penguin, 2010), 80-81.

<http://www.tchevalier.com/remarkablecreatures/index.htm>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.ucmp.berkeley.edu/diapsids/ichthyosauria.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://americanhumanist.org/what-is-humanism/manifesto1/>

^{iv} Kendyl Gibbons, "Essentials of Humanism," *UU World*, Spring 2017.

<https://www.uuworld.org/articles/essentials-humanism>