

Coming Out of the Evolution Closet

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I UNDERSTAND THERE MAY BE some wards in the church where members are able to rationally discuss controversial issues in Sunday School without hurling accusatory labels (and odd pieces of rotten fruit) at each other. This seems unlikely to me, but my brother-in-law, Rick Walton, swears that his Provo ward never has doctrinal arguments, that all members agree with one other—and if not, they simply refrain from mentioning certain subjects. While Rick's observations may be a tad naive, or perhaps merely a symptom of encroaching Alzheimer's, I am nevertheless left with the impression that I am stuck in an unusually quarrelsome ward.

From the moment we moved into the Ogden 40th Ward ten years ago, I found myself secretly at odds with certain members who seem to think that all Latter-day Saints are—or should be—ideological clones. In one Sunday School class, we were subjected to a member's musings about the "good old days" when white people weren't allowed to marry blacks in the temple. Several times we have been treated to diatribes against Democrats—specifically and generally—as if, naturally, all of us understood that only Republicans could be good people. Through it all, I held my tongue on the advice of my calm, rational, college professor husband who really detests conflict.

But one issue finally turned me into what my teenagers describe as a "bitter old lunatic." That issue was evolution.

It is true that every time the subject of evolution comes up at church, I come home ranting like a "lunatic." It's also true that I have been "bitter" from time to time. But "old"? Come on. I'm only forty-five.

Sometimes, I seem to be the only person in the entire church who knows that it's okay to believe in evolution and still be a faithful, believing Mormon. I have heard unconfirmed rumors that there are others—perhaps even a few here in Ogden, Utah—who are aware of this fact, but

so far not one has come forward in my presence. They must still be in The Evolution Closet, secret members of a secret cult with secret dreams, looking forward to the day when they will be able to expose their beliefs to the world without being publicly branded with a scarlet "L" for "Liberal."

As for me, I received that brand long ago when the ward learned that my family had become vegetarians. (Well, in truth, I was the first family member who became a vegetarian, but since I am the only cook in the household, the entire Reynolds clan was forced to convert.) This was yet another cause for head-shaking. I was told—gravely—by several ward members that "Mormons don't have to be vegetarians." Thank you, ward members. I grew up and have been active in the church my whole life, not to mention going on a mission, graduating from four years of BYU religion classes, and reading all four standard works at least eight times through. And yet somehow I had strayed into vegetarianism.

Thus, I suppose that my recent emergence from the Evolution Closet was simply further evidence of my straying. It was a spectacular emergence, if I do say so myself. After an unsuspecting sister mentioned a "stupid" acquaintance who believed in evolution, I actually shouted at the entire Relief Society. To the best of my memory, these were my remarks: "I'm tired of being told by church members that I'm evil or stupid if I believe in evolution! Just respect my opinions and I'll respect yours!"

To fully understand this outburst, you have to know that a few months before, my 17-year-old daughter had been told by her seminary teacher that "people who believe in evolution are evil." Now, I'm pretty sure it isn't the intention of the church to have its seminary teachers calling their students' parents—or anyone, except perhaps serial killers or child molesters—"evil." In fact, it doesn't sound remotely Christian to me, even if you count fundamentalist scolds as "Christian," which I'm not at all sure you can do. But our poor daughter, whom we had tried to teach through the years that she could make up her own mind about evolution, came home doubting her own parents. This was enough to inspire a bitter lunatic. I wanted to march down to that seminary and give that teacher a chunk of my mind, as well as some official church-sponsored written material, but my (conflict-avoiding) husband yet again advised me to "let it go." So I did. It may have been the very first time in our marriage that I actually followed his advice.

You might think his advice was good and that peace is surely always the better option. But that single incident seems to have festered inside the dark corners of my head, opening up a wound which would not heal and, in fact, grew and grew until I burst out of The Closet in that Relief Society meeting, bellowing my perfidy to the world. So now everyone knows that I am an evolutionist—and hence also stupid and evil, but at least now I'm openly so.

As for my future plans, I am considering starting a support group for "Mormons Who Believe in Evolution." The scattered few of us need to get together and lean on each other. We could swap persecution stories and share interesting scientific details, such as the fact that a banana is only 15 percent genetically different from a human. (Obviously, some of us are more banana-like than others.) We could have a web site and conduct periodic live-chat sessions. In other words, it's time to come out of The Closet. "United we'd stand," at least until the universe starts collapsing on itself. But that's another controversial issue. You'll have to get your own support group for that.