



Charles Darwin - the man and the scientist

Out of Africa

Sheila Ochugboju:

I've chosen Africa as a symbol of my personal evolutionary journey because Africa was where I discovered my love of natural things.

I was born in rural Nigeria. I lived there till I was nine, and my favourite pastime was to go by the riverside, by the streams, and look at insects, play with fireflies.

and after that when I came to the UK, studied science, became a research scientist working in a laboratory in Oxford, I found that I had journeyed far from the thing that inspired me, so when I was fortunate enough to come back to Africa, to South Africa, Cape Town in fact in 1999 and I came back to do some work in inspiring young people in science, I had to rediscover

that love for myself again, and I saw it in the landscape and it brought to mind a line of poetry that Darwin loved and it's from Wordsworth and it says "nature never did betray the heart that loved her". And I was able to visit the cradle of mankind and take the time

to connect my personal journey with our genetic journey as a human race and how we move on as a collective people.

Sheila Ochugboju:

Darwin is an inspiration for me because he shows us how a person can live by wonder, and in the end make a profession of living of living by wonder.

He tried other disciplines, he started off in medicine, he went to theology, but always his curiosity and passion for natural things drove him back to ask those big questions which we are still answering today

Nothing was beyond his interrogation. He gave each thing its proper consideration and tried to find where it sat in the wider order of things.

He also honoured the people that gave it to him, so it didn't matter even though in those days there were very strict hierarchies of class and knowledge was very much contained in a particular elite. He would accept specimens from, there's a story of a taxidermist who used to give him some specimens. People from all over the world would give him specimens and he would consider them with as much thought as those gentlemen elites who used to travel the world and send him their beautifully boxed wonders. He gave everything its proper place. He considered it and in the end he wrote the seminal work which we are still considering today.

Sheila Ochugboju:

I'm curious as to how Darwin's ideas were subsequently convoluted, sabotaged and misused by many of so-called exponents of evolutionary Darwinian theory, and it's ironic because the eugenics movement came out of that, notions of racial superiority and whole systematic laws of disenfranchisement and oppression of many peoples around the world were supposedly built on Darwinian theories, and it's curious because if you look in his background and his life, and his family life, you know, large ... many members of his family were abolitionists and actually fought against slavery and were very much against the oppression of people, so he was a man of his age and yet not and, and, and that, that contradiction, that tension between revolutionary ideas and old systems of power that, that tension still, still continues today.

Sheila Ochugboju:

When I went to South Africa to celebrate DNA at fifty, the discovery of DNA by Watson and Crick, we were beginning to have a bigger dialogue as to what evolutionary theories and Darwinian ideas mean now in the light of new knowledge about the human genome. We share ninety-nine point nine percent of our genes. We are genetically one family as a human race, and so how is it that these divisions of race and class and colour still permeate our thinking?

I think this year's a great time to revisit those conversations, to look at them in the light of what we know about Darwin as a man and how his revolutionary ideas are still empowering many lines of thought today.

Sheila Ochugboju:

Darwin's legacy to me is the value of asking powerful questions, and then going on the journey of finding answers, and those questions are so powerful they hit at the core of who we are, what we believe, so our religious beliefs, our scientific beliefs, everything sits right in the heart of who we are and we shouldn't run away from them. Darwin didn't run away from it in his time. He had the courage to put it out there and allow other people to take what they would out of it and to continue to have the conversation.

Sheila Ochugboju:

So we have been working on the African science café project, and there are African science cafes in Uganda, in Ghana, in South Africa and there's even one starting in Egypt.

African science cafes are informal gathering spaces for communities to have powerful conversations about science with world class scientists,

and these scientists they come without PowerPoint presentations, they just come with their own body of knowledge, and they come as public servants to the community and they answer the questions that the community poses.

They're questions about how should we live better lives and how can we make better choices

given what you know and given what you could find out for us. How can you help us to do that using what you have learnt? I think that this is a place where Darwin's legacy can live in its truest form because

it allows young people to imagine their future to see possibilities that science brings and to connect those possibilities to choices that can open up their world and other people's worlds. I love it because ideas are free and ideas are culturally transferable and the best ideas can come from anywhere. And the power of an idea in its time - that's immeasurable and that's what Darwin gave us, an idea that, whose time had come.