



Living the Legacy

Darwin Now in Africa

Rissa de la Paz:

Hello and welcome to the last of our monthly podcasts for *Darwin Now*.

Over the course of this series, we've had a glimpse of the ways in which Darwin's theory of evolution has had an impact on fields as diverse as ecology, genetics, anthropology and linguistics. Darwin started a global conversation that influenced not only scientific thought but notions of social progress. As the curtain falls on the bicentenary of his birth, we'll be looking at how this remarkable man's scientific legacy is being nurtured by institutions and individuals alike. We'll also be re-visiting some of the global initiatives organised by the British Council during Darwin year, but we begin with one scientist who's a passionate advocate of Darwin's questioning stance.

Sheila Ochugboju is Senior Communications Officer at the African Technology Policy Studies Network.

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.

Rissa:

What are the compelling issues that confront young people in Africa today?

Sheila:

One of the big challenges facing young people in South Africa or Africa in general is HIV/AIDS, and I realised this when I went to speak to young people in schools in townships across South Africa in 1999. At that time I was working as a research scientist looking at viruses, baculoviruses, and I was working with genetically engineered viruses for pest control, but over and over again the questions I was being asked by the young people were about HIV/AIDS, and thankfully I knew enough to be able to have a conversation. But they kept on wanting to understand it in a more compound way, and so I had to challenge myself to explain it in a more compound way, and really as a virologist it's the most intriguing, fascinating manifestation of evolution in action, and I used to tell the story of, you know, viruses like a man who comes with a cloak and he enters your house and then he puts on clothes, almost like the big bad wolf in Little Red Riding Hood and pretends to be your grandmother, and he's in your house and he's living with you and now you don't know whether or not he's part of your family, came in like that and mutated, and adapted to your body and then began to wreak havoc in your system and in your life, and they could really understand that, and ten years on I'm seeing that those challenges have not reduced in terms of communicating science. They've gotten bigger because as scientists we've not been able to find enough ways to communicate it in the ways that help people to make decisions and to change their choices and their behaviour.

So I think that a disease such as HIV/AIDS illustrates how we as a global community have evolved, have evolved in a way that necessitates different ways of having conversations, and we need to be more culturally aware, we need to be much more astute in our cultural navigation techniques. We need to be astute as scientists, as parents, as policymakers. There is just no room for us to fail any more, because, you know, our failure to communicate, we do not empower people to make the choices they need to live, and we are therefore

complicit in keeping people disempowered and disenfranchised.

When young people ask questions, they want you to explain the science but also in the light of who they are as people, their religion, their socioeconomic level, the fact that they're living with their grandparents and their parents are gone, how did they make decisions, what is good and what is bad? So there's a lot of valued judgments that they want to be able to make, and it's difficult to convey those but you have to find a way of at least starting the conversation to allow them to make the choices.

Rissa:

Darwin's example of asking searching and sometimes uncomfortable questions has been promoted by Ochugboju and her collaborators in a series of recent African Science Cafés, where local communities engage with scientists, often setting the agenda for the discussion.

Sheila:

There are African science cafes in Uganda, in Ghana, in South Africa and there's even one starting in Egypt. And these are conversation spaces where world class scientists go, they talk for ten minutes alone, no PowerPoint allowed, but they talk on the question that has already been framed by the young people, and they are allowed to frame it in whatever way they want. So you have forty minutes where anybody in the audience can actually ask the scientists any type of a question, and the scientist has to honour that question and give it its due consideration like Darwin did. We found it amazingly empowering for the scientists that are involved in it and the community as well, because they've never had this kind of access.

I'm really excited about the African science cafes because I feel that this is the space where we can bring Darwin's legacy to life. This is a space where we can ask powerful difficult questions and those questions can emanate from communities themselves.