

Evolution

Amby Kane sat out on his porch every day when the weather permitted and waited for me to bring his afternoon newspaper. A retired fireman, he knew my father from the fire department and always had a story to tell about fighting one fire or another or about his battles in the war. He was one of the few adults I knew who cared enough to ask me about my pursuits and he seemed genuinely interested to hear about my radios and weather observations and reading and the like.

One afternoon as I walked the length of my paper route, I was full of wonder from having just heard about evolution and natural selection in my high school biology class. Sister Mary Brendan had spent the entire period that afternoon explaining Darwin's theory of natural selection. She seemed a bit reluctant, it seemed to me, and she interspersed her discourse often with phrases like "it's a theory" and "according to the Church" and "separate from Atheism." But I didn't care about all of the conditions, my imagination was captured by a process at once simple and elegant. And not only biological selection, but the ability of many things to sort themselves into new structures as time went by, with the successes continuing into the future.¹

Amby (for Ambrose) waved to me that afternoon even before I arrived at his house. He seemed glad to see me as usual. I think his wife had stopped speaking to him and I once heard her call him an old Irish coot. Stuck on his

porch with severe arthritis, he may have seen me as his only outlet for conversation.

When Amby asked, "What's new?" I launched into an oration about molecules forming cells, cells forming organisms, the Cambrian Explosion and all about how tiny fragments of life could select themselves into larger animals, even intelligent animals like us (not including the soul, of course,² according to Sr. Mary Brendan.) Mrs. Kane came out on the porch in the middle of my lecture and stood behind her seated husband.

Amby listened with a look of doubt on his craggy old face. "You mean," he said, "all it takes is a lot of time and any of those tiny critters in the water that you talked about could grow up into someone smart like me?" Mrs. Kane rolled her eyes.

"All they need is time," I agreed.

"Well, I'll tell you what," said Amby, "you take a jar of water and seal it up real good. Keep it with you through the rest of high school. Then take it to college and into the army with you and even on your honeymoon when you get married. Keep it on your dresser until your children are all grown up. Tell your wife not to dust it or move it. Every once in a while you be sure to wave at that jar. And if you see something in the jar waving back at you, then you can say it's true for sure."

"But Amby," I said, "that isn't nearly enough time for it to happen."

"Then," he said, "I guess you'll never prove it." Mrs. Kane looked down at the top of her husband's head, waved her hand back and forth over it and said. "Nothing waving back in there, either."

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¹ **Darwin's Cathedral:** Evolution, Religion, and the Nature of Society, David Sloan Wilson, 2003.

² For one version of Evolution and the soul, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05654a.htm>