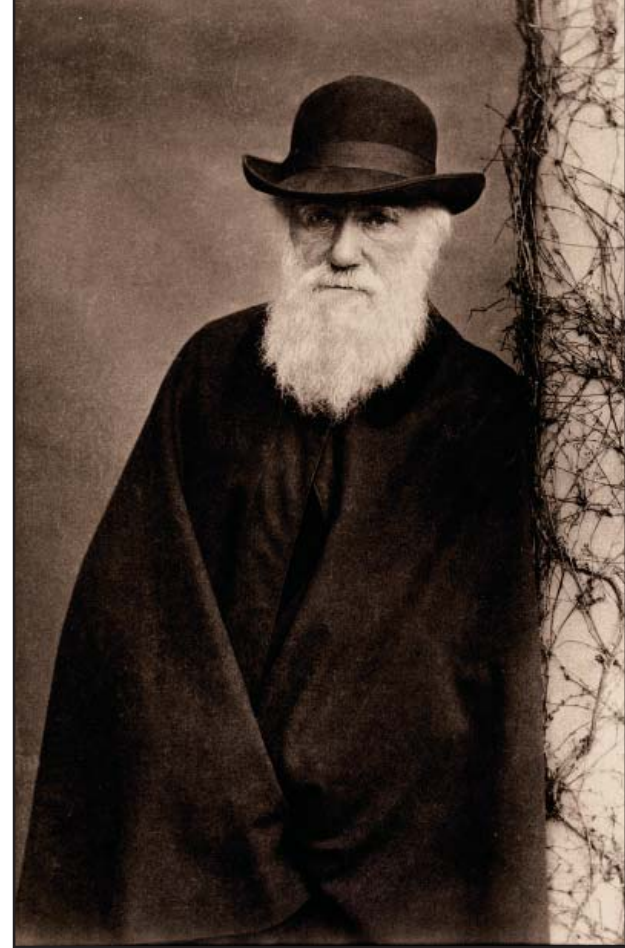


# And Now What, Ms. Ranger? The Search for the Intelligent Designer

by

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“Ms. Ranger, please see me immediately.” She fingered the note apprehensively, reading it again. What was this all about? Which one of her freshmen was in trouble? Or was it the school board on a tear again? Moments later the petite brunette was striding hurriedly to the principal’s office.

“Good morning, Janet. Have a seat; this will only take a moment. You’ll be back in time to meet your first class.” Gerald Talley leaned back in his chair and motioned the teacher to be seated. He could see that she was tense.

“Yesterday, several parents called me up to complain about your science class. They said that you told the students that they came from apes. Is that true? Give me a little background on this. As you know this is a conservative state and the sentiments on this issue are running high, especially now that the school board is pressing to have Intelligent Design taught.”

Janet Ranger sighed and then patiently outlined her evolution lesson. Talley nodded appreciatively as she concluded. “That sounds reasonable to me, Janet. But we do have a major problem on our hands. Robert Bagley, the President of the School Board, is dead set on introducing Intelligent Design into the biology classes. And there isn’t much I can do about it, although I have certainly tried. I appeared in front of the board a couple of times with no success. It looks like Bagley has the votes to pull this off. He is insisting that we use the creationist book, *Of Pandas and People*, for your students.”

“But that is outrageous! We already have picked out our biology book for next year. It deals fairly with the issue of evolution. It is a terrific text. All of the biology teachers agree that it is up to date on the paeleontological evidence on missing links, showing how whales evolved from land ancestors. It has the most recent data on human fossils, and the DNA results on Neanderthals showing that they were a different species than us and ... .”

“Look, I’m sure you are right, Janet. But this isn’t about science as much as it is about politics and religion.”

“Gerry, come on. We have been through this ID issue before. The creationists have lost every court case in the country, in Arkansas and Louisiana and even the Supreme Court. It is against the Constitution to inject religion into the science classroom.”

“I know. I know. But the school board thinks they have a way around this. Tomorrow night they are having a public hearing on their proposal and then take a vote. Frankly, it looks like window dressing

to me; they have already made up their minds. The reason that I called you is to let you know that that meeting will be the last time you and the other teachers will have a chance to influence the vote. So make your plans accordingly.”



The auditorium was packed. People were standing. Here and there Janet could see her students along with their parents. There were lots of angry faces. The nine members of the school board sat on stage behind a long table with stony looks, much like members of a jury. In a way they were, she thought. Subdued conversations sputtered on and off throughout the audience, but they ceased immediately when Robert Bagley gavelled the meeting to order.

“Ladies and gentlemen, it is good to see all of you here tonight. We will dispense with the usual business to focus on a crucial question that has come before us—the teaching of evolution to our biology students.”

“As most of you know, ninth grade biology is a required class by the State. The curriculum is essentially set. But there are many families in our community that have serious questions about the topic of evolution. Evolution is only a theory and a controversial one at that. All scientists agree that there are many gaps in our knowledge. Such as how did life originate, or what is the origin of human consciousness and morality and the soul. Evolution answers none of these things.”

*The Pennsylvania Academic Standards require students to learn about Darwin's Theory of Evolution and eventually take a standardized test of which evolution is a part.*

*Because Darwin's Theory is a theory, it continues to be tested as new evidence is discovered. The Theory is not a fact. Gaps in the Theory exist for which there is no evidence. A theory is defined as a well-tested explanation that unifies a broad range of observations.*

*Intelligent Design is an explanation of the origin of life that differs from Darwin's view. The reference book, Of Pandas and People, is available for students who might be interested in gaining an understanding of what Intelligent Design actually involves.*

*With respect to any theory, students are encouraged to keep an open mind. The school leaves the discussion of the Origins of Life to individual students and their families. As a Standards-driven district, class instruction focuses upon preparing students to achieve proficiency on Standards-based assessments.*

“Because of the inadequacies of Darwin's theory and because there are alternative theories, the School Board has decided that a balanced approach is best. We believe we have a solution to the problem. Next month we propose that all ninth grade biology teachers read an announcement to their classes. Our secretary, Mrs. Katherine Simler, will read the announcement.”

Bagley continued, “Now the floor is open for discussion. Please keep your comments short, to the point, and by all means, be civil. Mr. Curtis, President of our PTA, has asked to speak first.”

“Good evening. Thank you for this opportunity Mr. Bagley and members of the Board. I am Tom Curtis and I represent a large number of our parents who have concerns about this issue. Seems to us only fair that all sides of any question be considered. If there are differences of opinion, let them be aired. Our children have the right to know when a serious controversy exists about a subject. The scientific process demands that any weaknesses in a theory should be exposed. The idea of Intelligent Design has been around a long time. Thomas Aquinas talked about it in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. It should be plain to everyone that the world cannot be due to chance. There must have been a designer. As I understand it, that is what the theory of Intelligent Design is all about. If the book, *Of Pandas and People*, points this out, what is the harm in that? Let’s have the debate in the classroom and let the chips fall where they may. Let the children decide. It is only fair. Surely, everyone must agree that this debate is good for developing our children’s critical thinking skills. I thank you.”

The auditorium erupted with strong applause as Curtis sat down. Scattered voices were heard calling out “Amen,” and a tall man in the center of the audience yelled, “But who is the designer?”

A voice answered, “God, of course.”

Bagley called the room to order and remarked, sternly, “Ladies and Gentlemen, please respect one another. I believe that Reverend Daly of our board, has a comment on this point.

“Yes, I do, Bob. Our attorney has advised us that this is not an issue of God. This is an issue of free speech and the right to teach our children about a current controversy in science. We don’t know who or what the designer is. And we may never know, but the evidence is clear, there was a Designer. He may be a time traveling cell biologist, he may be an extraterrestrial, he may be a space alien as Nobel Prize winner, Francis Crick, has suggested. He may be something that some of us might call a God, but it is important that we not get tangled up with the First Amendment. So, let us agree to set the identity of The Designer aside. Thank you.”

Among the smattering of applause, once again a voice called out, “Who designed the designer?”

Bagley ignored the disturbance and said, “I think it would be helpful at this point to have Ms. Tilley Wilford outline some of the problems with Darwin’s theory so that we can all appreciate the difficulties. Ms. Wilford.”

“Thank you, Mr. Bagley. I don’t claim to understand all of this, but as a layman, I have read about a lot of problems. First: If evolution did occur over millions of years there must be billions of fossils out there. There ought to be a lot of them that show the changes between organisms. You know, missing links. But, where are they? Do we have fossils that show how a mouse became a bat, or a dinosaur became a bird, or a chimpanzee became a person? No. Where are the fossils?

“Second, the biochemist, Michael Behe, has written in his book, *Darwin’s Black Box*, that many of our bodily systems are irreducibly complex. That means that things like the immune system or blood clotting can’t function if any piece is missing. If that is true, then they can’t have slowly evolved one step at a time like Darwin believed. Can they? They had to come into existence all at once or they wouldn’t work. My son, Jimmy, is a good case. He has hemophilia. You know, bleeder’s disease. His blood doesn’t clot right. That is because he is missing one out of a whole bunch of chemicals so his blood doesn’t clot. He would be dead if it were not for the fact of modern medicine. Just one piece is missing and the whole system fails.”

Sounds of sympathy swept through the listeners. Ms. Wilford concluded, “Biologists simply don’t have the answers to a lot of fundamental questions. We are all made of cells, but where did the first cell come from? It seems like a miracle, doesn’t it?” She sat down.

“Now the Teacher’s Union representative, Mr. Juan Martinez, has asked to be heard. Mr. Martinez, it is your turn. You can use one of the microphones in the aisles.”

A stocky, well-dressed man rose from the middle of the audience. “I can talk from here, Mr. President. Ladies and Gentlemen, the Union objects to these proceedings. We object because the Board has tried to coerce the teachers into using the Creationist’s book, *Of Pandas and People*, instead of the biology book they wanted. In fact, Mr. Bagley explicitly said that he would block the use of the biology book unless *Panda* could be used as supplemental material. Also, it is clear that the Designer that the Board is talking about is the fundamentalist’s Christian version of God. As a Catholic I object to this on a personal level and as an American I object because this is a violation of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. There must be a separation of church and state. Even though the Board has forgotten it, the teachers haven’t.” Mr. Martinez smacked his fist forcefully against his palm. “And last, we object to being forced to read an announcement to our classes that we do not believe in. This is an abridgement of our rights as teachers and a gross violation of academic freedom. If we are threatened with reprisals we will seriously have to consider a strike action.”

Amidst a few boos, a contingent of teachers burst into applause. A red faced Bagley narrowed his eyes and angrily replied, “Martinez remember that it is against the law for you to strike. The Board will not be bullied by your grandstanding. Now I believe the teachers themselves would like to speak on their own behalf. Ms. Ranger.”

“Thank you, Mr. Bagley. We know this is a difficult topic for you and the Board and for many parents. This is not about whether or not there is a God. Many evolutionist biologists believe in God. In fact, Dr. Kenneth Miller, the author of the Biology textbook we want to use, is a Catholic. Even the Pope has accepted that evolution has occurred. We teachers object to the Board’s proposal because it is our obligation to teach the most honest version of the subject of Biology. The Theory of Evolution has been accepted for a 150 years while the Theory of Intelligent Design has been rejected. This is not because we are atheists. We aren’t. It is because we are scientists and teachers.

“Look, you know this yourselves: Not all explanations of the world are equal in worth. If someone wanted us to teach that the earth is the center of the universe, we could not do that. If someone wanted us to teach that thunder and lightning are caused by the gods battling in the sky, we couldn’t do that. And, we can’t teach Intelligent Design either and for the same reason. It isn’t what scientists believe. Intelligent Design isn’t science, Mr. Bagley, it is religion.”

Someone in the audience called out, “Why isn’t it science?”

Bagley looked sharply at the speaker, “No outbursts, please.”

Ms. Ranger continued. “I’m glad you asked that. It is pretty simple, actually. Science tries to understand the world in terms of natural laws. We don’t try to explain thunder by talking about poltergeists or spirits or gods in the sky. Anything like that is off limits—no supernatural explanations, please. Biologists have a perfectly good answer for who the designer is. It is natural selection working on genetic variation. We don’t need to turn to extraterrestrials for help. There are thousands of papers explaining how evolution works. There is not one single

scientific paper explaining how Intelligent Design works. Mr. Bagley and members of the board, I ask your indulgence. I would like one of my students to speak.” Bagley glanced at the board members and then nodded.

A student walked hesitantly to a microphone. “Hi, my name is Daniel Epstein. Here is what I think. I think we ought to let Ms. Ranger teach us what the scientists believe. She showed us how all of the animals have the same basic bone structure in their arms—no matter how they move. I mean that bats and birds and whales and even fish have the same bones. And they have the same DNA. Their embryos are alike too. I mean, how do you explain that except by evolution? And the designs aren’t perfect either. Look at all of you. You are wearing glasses. That isn’t Intelligent Design, is it? Your eyes have been designed poorly. None of us are even close to perfect. No Intelligent Designer would do this.” Daniel walked rapidly back to his seat.

“Ok, Danny. That’s fine. And now... Excuse me, what is it? ... OK ... Dr. Dermot, a member of our board, would like to comment.

“Mr. Bagley, with due deference to Danny, the similarities that he talks about among bones, embryos, and DNA are not hard to explain. After all, the same designer is involved, isn’t he? Why would the designer abandon a good design? And I believe that Becky Conner, also a student of Ms. Ranger’s, might wish to speak.”

“Yes sir, I would. Danny is a friend of mine, but we don’t agree on this. I mean, why can’t God be involved in science? If God is the one that created the universe and everything else in science, why can’t we talk about it? Why can’t scientists use Him as an explanation?”

“Because, Becky, they can’t!” Danny practically leapt from his seat calling out. “We don’t have a clue about God, for God’s sake. If we start claiming that little green men are here causing our lights to go on and off , what good is that? We don’t get anywhere talking about things that we can’t see and measure. Science stops!”

Bagley was at it again, banging on the table. “Danny. Danny. Please!”

Almost immediately, a cluster of students sitting near Danny erupted in song. “Give me that old time religion. Give me that old time religion. Give me that old time religion it’s good enough for me...”

Calls from the audience and commotion on stage brought Bagley to his feet. “Ms. Ranger! Stop this immediately.” After a few confusing moments, order was restored.

“Mr. Bagley, I am sorry that the students’ enthusiasm got the better of their judgement.”

“Is this the way that you teach your class, Ms. Ranger? You ought to be ashamed,” Emma Cromwell spoke from the stage.

Bagley intervened. “Ms. Ranger, is there anything further that you would like to add?”

Janet Ranger sat there, exhausted, embarrassed, wondering what else she could say. If this proposal passed, neighbors would stop speaking. The classroom would never be the same. It would be a long time before teaching was fun again. If ever. And would there be a strike? That would damage the community for years. And now what, Ms. Ranger?

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