

How the Earth began - A humanist perspective

Scientists think the universe just happened. It began with a big bang and it is still getting bigger.

After the big bang there were lots of stars and planets. The Earth is one planet and it goes around a star, the Sun.



After millions of years, life began in the sea. At first living things were tiny.



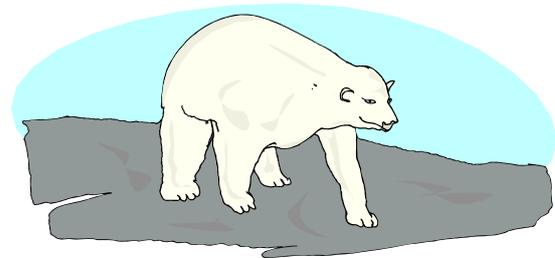
Very slowly living things changed. Some became bigger and more complicated. There were plants and fish and other animals. The ones that were stronger or cleverer or found the most food did best.

Others changed, or died out.

Today, living things go on changing – some do well and others do not. Humans have done well because our brains grew very big, and we use our brains.

Questions to think or talk about:

1. Why do polar bears have thick white coats?
2. What are fish good at?
3. What are birds best at?
4. Can we run as fast as horses?
5. Can we make webs like a spiders?
6. Could we live in the Arctic ?
7. Could we live under water?
8. Can we fly like birds?
9. What are human beings good at?



Follow-up work and questions:

On change and evolution:

1. What evidence can you see of things that have changed, even in your short lives?
2. What has changed since your parents were at school? Family photos, old photos of schoolrooms and classes can be useful.



3. Look at fossils – species that once existed and no longer do. Dinosaurs died out (perhaps because of a natural disaster) but reptiles and birds are quite close descendants, e.g. iguanas.

4. Which things around us are living things and which aren't?
5. Look at all the different breeds of e.g. dog – how selective breeding can create new varieties.
6. The peppered moth – its camouflage evolved very quickly as response to pollution. You could look at pictures of moths and the environment and think about reasons for change.

On adaptation:

1. What are human beings good at? How do we use our brains to help us survive?
2. What are animals that you know something about good at? How do they use their skills to help them survive? Some living things are so well adapted that they haven't changed much, e.g. coelacanths.

A good subject to provoke awe and wonder:

At the scale of the universe.

At the immensity of time involved in evolution.

At the variety of life, and the fact that it all shares the same ancestry (look at some of the living things around the classroom – people, trees, spiders, flowers, grass, hamsters, fish etc – all related!).

At the mystery of how life began, something scientists are still thinking about.



A humanist discussion of... THE GOLDEN RULE

All societies and religions have moral principles, laws and rules. Although many of the less important rules vary, all traditions seem to have come up with a version of "the Golden Rule", "**Do as you would be done by**" or "**Treat other people (and animals) in a way you would like to be treated yourself**" - there are more examples below. It can be expressed positively (as above) or negatively ("Do not treat others as you would not like to be treated yourself"). Some people think that the negative versions are better, because it is easier to agree on the things we would not like, and anyone can work out what would cause suffering to themselves or another person (**or animal**) and then avoid doing it. For example, you wouldn't want to be bullied, so you shouldn't bully other people.

The Golden Rule requires kindness and care for the less fortunate, (**including animals**), because this is what we would want in their situation, and it discourages actions like lying and theft because no one wants to be lied to or to have their property stolen. It is simple and clear, and works well in practice.



Humanists are impressed by the fact that we find this very useful basic principle everywhere. It appears to be based on our common humanity, using our need to be treated well by others and our aspiration to live harmoniously with others as its foundation. It can be worked out by anyone, anywhere, by thinking about our understanding of ourselves and other people. It does not need to be given to us by sacred texts or a god.

Questions to think about:

Why do you think so many different cultures have come up with something so similar?

Do you think the Golden Rule is enough on its own?

Would it always stop people lying or stealing, killing people **or being cruel to animals**?

If people followed it, would they always do the right thing?

If they disobeyed it, would they tend to do bad things?

Would the world be a better place if everyone, including world leaders, obeyed the



Golden Rule?

What are rules for?

Think about your family's rules. (They may not be written down but most families have some "rules" - like "Everybody makes their own bed"). What are they for? Are they based on the Golden Rule?

Think about school rules - what are they for? Are any of them based on the Golden Rule?

What are good manners for? Are they anything to do with the Golden Rule?

If you were only allowed one school rule, what would you choose?



What should you do when people break the Golden Rule?

If you ruled the world for a day, what rule or rules would you establish to make the world a better place?

Examples of the Golden Rule from around the world

"He should treat all beings as he himself should be treated. The essence of right conduct is not to injure anyone." (JAINISM - from The Suta-Kritanga, about 550 BCE*)

"Do not do to others what you would not like for yourself." (CONFUCIANISM - from The Analects of Confucius, about 500 BCE)

"I will act towards others exactly as I would act towards myself." (BUDDHISM - from The Siglo-Vada Sutta, about 500 BCE)

"This is the sum of duty: Do nothing to others Which, if done to you, could cause you pain." (HINDUISM - from The Mahabharata, about 150 BCE)

"What you would avoid suffering yourself, seek not to impose on others." (ANCIENT GREECE - Epictetus, the Greek philosopher, about 90 CE*)

"Love your neighbour as yourself." (JUDAISM / CHRISTIANITY - Leviticus 19, in The Torah, about 400 BCE, quoted by Jesus in Matthew 22 and Mark 12, 1st Century CE)

"What is harmful to yourself do not do to your fellow men. That is the whole of the law..." (JUDAISM - from Hillel: The Talmud, about 100 CE)

"None of you truly believes, until he wishes for his brothers what he wishes for himself." (ISLAM - a saying of The Prophet Muhammad, 7th Century CE)

"As you think of yourself, so think of others." (SIKHISM - from Guru Granth Sahib, 1604 CE)

One should be "contented with so much liberty against other men, as he would allow against himself." (GREAT BRITAIN -Thomas Hobbes, English philosopher, 1588-1679 CE)

"He should not wish for others what he does not wish for himself." (BAHA'I from the writings of Baha'u'llah, about 1870 CE)

"You should always ask yourself what would happen if everyone did what you are doing." (FRANCE - Jean-Paul Sartre, French existentialist philosopher, 1905-80 CE)

"Treat other people as you'd want to be treated in their situation; don't do things you wouldn't want to have done to you." (British Humanist Association, 1999 CE)

BCE = BC CE = AD

© BHA (With thanks to the British Humanist Association)