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Photo: James Hayward



Clouds and the colors of sunset give the impression of a volcano explosion.

RECOUNTING *the Conversations*

BY ALITA BYRD

In mid-August, a small band of intrepid travelers set sail on a voyage of discovery among the legendary Galápagos Islands, an archipelago off the coast of Ecuador, straddling the Equator.

The trip had been long delayed by the pandemic, and many of the travelers had packed and re-packed, read and re-read relevant books, and prepared in multiple ways for both a physical and spiritual journey among the islands.

The Galápagos Islands are famed as a destination that can touch hearts and minds as few other places can. We knew about the revelations Charles Darwin experienced after visiting the islands almost 200 years ago, and we had also read former evangelical pastor Brian McLaren's much more recent book describing the spiritual insights he found there. We were ready for our own spiritual journey.

We were ready to learn, to have our minds expanded, and to come away with a new understanding. Would we find the birthplace of evolution or the natural wonder of God's creation?

Many spiritual journeys are solitary. Think Moses and the Ten Commandments, Jesus in the Wilderness, Paul of Thebes in the third century, or the medieval St. Kevin, who avoided his followers by living in a cave in Ireland's Glendalough. But for many of us, the pandemic has helped us to realize that we really are social beings who thrive in community and have a biological need for the company of other humans. And the August trip to the Galápagos was that rare opportunity to satisfy both our need to escape from the crazy world on a spiritual quest, and to make those discoveries in the company of sympathetic friends.

Welcoming us on board our Avianca flight bound for San Cristóbal—one of two Galápagos airports—the flight attendant proclaimed we had chosen an airline that was “Cambiando Juntos,” or “Changing Together.”

That summed it up. We were ready to change, to evolve, to grow together. Our senses were primed to experience wonder—to be amazed—and to do it together.

The Group

Friends of *Spectrum* all, our group encompassed a variety of pilgrims keen to explore—and find community through conversation.

We were a motley group. An 81-year-old former university president determined to experience his first snorkeling venture was on board. We had a librarian enamored with marine iguanas (adversely dubbed “hideous-looking” by Charles Darwin). An ethicist and a retired nursing professor celebrated their fifty-fifth wedding anniversary on the trip by stepping over a sea lion to see antique sailors’ graffiti dating back almost 200 years, and then climbing to a lava rock lookout over a salty crater lake.

A pathologist, a biologist, and a radiology consultant all carried pendulous super-telephoto lenses on their SLR cameras and captured colorful close-ups of flamingos, land iguanas, and blue-footed boobies. A renowned pediatric cardiologist practiced a new skill of photographing giant sea turtles underwater during the week.



Guide Omar Medina enthusiastically greets the *Spectrum* team as they land on an island for a morning walk.



Photo: James Hayward

Dinghy rides from the *Archipel I* to the islands were a daily routine.

There were several PhDs and authors of multiple books who daily strove to ensure they did not step on some fearless basking creature by accident and struggled to paddle a kayak without going in circles.

We were isolated. Our voyage lasted for seven days, and only one afternoon was spent in Puerto Ayora, the largest town in the islands, with about 12,000 inhabitants. We visited half of the twenty-one islands that make up the archipelago and on only one of the uninhabited islands did we see another tour group in the distance. We had no Wi-Fi—no connectivity to the outside world except during the afternoon we spent in Puerto Ayora.

“It was a long time-out,” said Carmen Lau, chair of the Adventist Forum board. “We didn’t see anyone else. There were no signs. No trash. No boats. I didn’t expect it to be so desolate. There was time to think and re-ground myself. The chance to be with kindred spirits, away from COVID, was a sweet deal.”

Our boat was an 88-foot catamaran, and we were sixteen travelers, sleeping in eight comfortable cabins. It was close quarters—but it felt positively spacious when we realized that the HMS *Beagle*, the boat that Charles Darwin sailed in for five years around the world, was only two feet longer, at 90 feet, and it held seventy-four!

The National Park and government of Ecuador take the preservation and conservation of the islands seriously. Tourists are not allowed to set foot anywhere without a licensed National Park guide. Our assigned guide was Omar Medina, fluently bilingual, with a ready smile and hearty laugh, who was born on one of the islands, and whose son coincidentally attended the Adventist school in Puerto Ayora for four years. Omar has over a dozen years of experience guiding tourists (mostly photographers) around the Galápagos Islands. Ecuador’s program to become

a Galápagos guide is fiercely competitive, according to Omar, with less than 10% of those who apply accepted into a study program that lasts for nearly half a year, and then requires ongoing refresher courses and tests. Omar's knowledge of the geology, history, wildlife, and ecology of the Galápagos Islands is impressive, and he could answer many seemingly esoteric questions. However, there were things that he didn't know, which he readily confessed. Sometimes he was able to look up the answer, which he seemed good at remembering to do. Other times, he was happy to listen to explanations and information from some of the experts among our group, several of whom have researched and published on related topics.

The Conversation

Every day on board the *Archipel II*, and on short walks with Omar to explore the flora and fauna of the islands, we had time to converse with our fellow travelers. Three times a day we sat at two long tables, eating mostly vegetarian food, and talking.

"The nature was spectacular, but the discussion and stories were equally as much fun," said David Grellmann, an urgent care and family practice physician in South Bend, Indiana.

Conversations were sometimes cut short by seasickness, or exhaustion after early morning expeditions—but we learned a lot about each other.

One evening, Brian Bull, a pathologist and research biologist at Loma Linda University whose lab is currently investigating why COVID kills, talked about the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator personality test. He talked us through the main personality types, then helped us to sort ourselves and huddle with our fellow-personality-types in the four corners of the boat's main cabin. It turned out that a majority of us were introverted, scientist types who crowded uncomfortably together in one corner,

a goodly number were the introverted organized get-things-done types, while only three of us were the happy-go-lucky extroverts: editor Bonnie Dwyer, the journalist and bringer-together-of-persons who has always excelled at getting people talking, our gregarious guide Omar Medina, and this correspondent.

Another evening, those of us who weren't felled by an especially bumpy crossing between islands, talked about books we had recently read, from scientific tomes to memoirs to biographies to novels. The group showed a definite predilection for non-fiction, and an especial interest in books examining the intersection between science and religion.

Later, we all played Trivial Pursuit, which included some fairly obscure popular culture questions. The Dwyers, including Bonnie, her husband Tom, son Mark, and daughter-in-law Kathryn Hunt, were undoubtedly the winners, with an impressive expertise in minutiae.

Brian Bull took the figurative lectern again to talk about gut health, another area he has researched extensively, explaining why obesity has become an epidemic in American society. His answer lies in the extreme processing of grains following the introduction



This is the largest statue of Charles Darwin in the Galápagos. It is on San Cristóbal Island where he first landed.

Throughout the journey we talked as a body, we discussed in small groups, and we chatted in pairs. Our conversations ranged from the mundane to the metaphysical, from the quotidian to the celestial.

of new milling techniques at the end of the 1800s, leaving almost no soluble fiber for our large intestine, which it needs in order to function effectively. (John Harvey Kellogg even joined in the new trend by removing the corn germ and fiber from Corn Flakes.) The removal of nearly all of the fiber from the majority of our diet leads to myriad complications, and Bull believes that the current food industry in the US means it is nearly impossible to buy the food that your lower gut needs to stay healthy. This topic led to lots of questions and conversations and clamorous requests for Bull's special recipe for Oat Bran Breakfast Porridge with a goodly dose of fermentable fiber!

Throughout the journey we talked as a body, we discussed in small groups, and we chatted in pairs. Our conversations ranged from the mundane to the metaphysical, from the quotidian to the celestial. We compared the ways we have coped with COVID, we talked about why Sabbath School is crucial, we discussed who has given their bodies to science and why burial is not particularly important.

"The best thing about this trip was the fellowship," said David Grellmann. "There are some great minds on this trip—giants—people I have heard about all my life. It is an immense privilege to be able to go on a trip with them."

The camaraderie was something special, everyone agreed. Without the dimension of conversation with like-minded travelers, the trip would have been an entirely different experience.

"The chance to talk at length about what we are seeing and what bombards our senses here in the Galápagos with people who are very thoughtful and highly knowledgeable" was the most meaningful thing about the trip for Brian Bull. "And then we would go and see something new the next day and talk about that!"

Yung Lau, professor and director of pediatric cardiology at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, also agreed that the "constant learning has been wonderful. Not only from Omar, but from all of our travel band. Listening to stories from our elders—and seeing them stick with the Adventist Church despite its foibles and the trials they have experienced with church leadership, is inspiring. Our heritage has a lot to offer the world."

"The best thing for me was being in the presence of others who share a belief in the Creator and celebrating



Ancient graffiti by sailors who landed on Isabela Island in the 1800s covers the rocks behind guide Omar Medina.

together the grandeur of creation," said Gerald Winslow, bioethicist and professor of religion at Loma Linda University. "The best thing is feeling like we are a part of that creation, together as human beings, and connecting with new friends and reconnecting with people (like Jim Hayward, who was my student at Walla Walla decades ago), and sharing this sense of awe together. If I came here alone it would be wonderful—but not wonderful like this."

The Theories

Evolution, traditional Adventist beliefs concerning a literal six-day creation, and the age of the earth were topics at the forefront of our thoughts, our conversations, and our study every day.

We talked a lot about Charles Darwin, beginning on our very first day when we took a group photo at a large statue of Darwin on San Cristóbal Island, which commemorates the landing site of the HMS *Beagle*. Our ebullient guide Omar showed us several films and explained which islands Darwin had visited, where he walked, which animals he collected, and how his visit helped him to create his theory. Some of us had entirely missed any education about Charles Darwin (basically all of us who were educated in the Seventh-day Adventist educational system).

For those of us with this big hole in our education, some of the things we learned surprised us mightily: for instance, Darwin spent only five weeks out of his famous five-year voyage in the Galápagos Islands, in 1835. That was only a little over a month (not even 2% of his journey) to gather much of the material that gave him his theory



Photo: Mark McKenney

Trekking across South Plaza Island in the Galápagos National Park

about natural selection. Darwin was only 22 when he joined the voyage—a recent university graduate who was headed for a life in the clergy—and he didn’t finish writing *On the Origin of Species* until 1859, when he was 50 years old. In the first edition of the book, the word “evolution” did not appear at all, and even later, Darwin always seemed to favor phrases like “descent with modification” and “natural selection” rather than “evolution.”

“We skipped that chapter in my academy biology class,” said Mark Dwyer, Bonnie Dwyer’s son, who works as a behavioral therapist. “I remember that my teacher told us that we wouldn’t need our biology books for the next four weeks. He told us to bring our Bibles instead, and we read Genesis.”

But several of our number have spent a lot of time musing about Darwin. Brian Bull has written a trilogy with Fritz Guy. *God, Sky, and Land: Genesis 1 As the Ancient Hebrews Heard It*, was published by the Adventist Forum in 2011. Six years later came the second volume: *God, Land, and the Great Flood: Hearing the Story with 21st-Century Christian Ears*. And finally, *God, Genesis, and the Good News: God, the Misreading of Genesis, and the Surprisingly Good News* was published in 2019.

Jim Hayward, research emeritus professor at Andrews University, biologist, and expert in the behavioral ecology of seabirds, published *The Creation/Evolution Controversy: An Annotated Bibliography* in 1998—a collection of 447 volumes published between 1543 and 1996 that provide an overview of the literature addressing the creation/evolution discussion. He also edited *Creation Reconsidered: Scientific, Biblical, and Theological Perspectives*, a collection of

essays that grew out of an Adventist Forum conference about creation and science. Most recently, Hayward published a memoir describing his own journey, called *Dinosaurs, Volcanoes, and Holy Writ: A Boy-Turned-Scientist Journeys from Fundamentalism to Faith*.

A number of us read Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of the Species by Means of Natural Selection* and/or *Voyage of the Beagle* in preparation for the trip. Jerry Winslow listened to *On the Origin of the Species* all the way through twice, and halfway through a third time—read by Richard Dawkins. Bonnie Dwyer listened to Dawkins read *Voyage of the Beagle*.

Some of our conversations brought to light interesting parallels between the nineteenth-century naturalist Charles Darwin and our nineteenth-century Church founder, Ellen G. White. Both were prolific writers, publishing numerous letters, articles, and books. Charles Darwin, born in 1809 in England, was 18 years old when Ellen White was born in 1827 in the United States. Both had a great interest in religion—with Darwin having more education, as he spent three years studying at Cambridge University, with an especial focus on theology and philosophy, preparing to become a clergyman. Both were interested in social justice, and both abhorred slavery and were committed abolitionists. During the time Charles Darwin was traveling on the HMS *Beagle*, slavery was eliminated in Great Britain and all of its colonies. Darwin saw slavery firsthand during the voyage, and this made him more determined to see such practices done away with. Like Ellen White, he supported the Union during the Civil War in the United States, and its fight against slavery. Darwin also saw missionaries and the effect of their work

during his travels, particularly in Tahiti and New Zealand, and he became a firm supporter of religious missionaries and their “civilizing” impact. Ellen White, of course, also was a proponent of missionaries spreading the gospel.

Both Ellen White and Charles Darwin lost children. Darwin’s daughter Annie died in 1851, at the age of 10. By all accounts, Darwin was a devoted father who was constantly concerned about the health of his ten children. Ellen White was the mother of four boys. Her oldest, Henry, died of pneumonia in 1863, at the age of 16. Her youngest, John, had died in 1860 when he was only three months old.

There is no record of Ellen White mentioning Charles Darwin by name—or vice versa!—but Ellen White’s first published statement supporting the belief in a literal six-day creation, followed by a global flood, was published in 1864, five years after the publication of *On the Origin of Species*.

Both Ellen White and Charles Darwin were reformers, preaching new visions of life and espousing new beliefs that were not commonly held at the time.

“Over time, I have completely changed my thinking about Darwin,” David Grellmann said. “Back in my earlier years, I thought he was on the Devil’s side. But with increased understanding, I have learned that Darwin was someone who could move beyond the paradigm of his time and break boundaries. He was a great man.”

Yung Lau said: “Now I think of Darwin as someone with a characteristic I have learned to admire: the pursuit of truth no matter where it leads you. Darwin had to have a lot of courage—anytime you go against the mainstream you risk being completely ostracized.”

“Darwin was a Christian, and a seeker who was trying to make sense of the world,” said Carmen Lau. “I can see how visiting this spot could stimulate a lot of thought and be life changing.”

For some of us, the trip helped our own thinking to evolve.

“I have sailed around islands before, but I was truly in awe at the grandeur of the scenery and the uniqueness of the wildlife here,” said Barbara McKinney, a physician surveyor for the Joint Commission. “I was amazed to see the adaptability of nature in up close and personal terms.”

Bonnie Dwyer, editor of *Spectrum*, said her thinking has changed significantly. “I think you have to be open to change,” she said. “I see speciation and adaptation here.

But I don’t see how that rules out God. I want both. I realize evolution happens. But I believe there is a Creator.”

“The evidence for change and adaptation just knocks you between the eyes,” Jim Hayward said about the Galápagos. “You can’t avoid it.”

What do the islands teach us about evolution?

“That it happens,” Jim Hayward said. “And that the changes can be extensive. We can understand them to a certain degree, especially now that we have genetics (which Darwin didn’t). To me, it says something very powerful about the nature of life: that it has the capacity to change in response to changing conditions. To me that is tremendous evidence of creativity. The marvelous capacity of organisms to change makes me all the more respectful of life and the Creator.”

Possibly of greater interest to the reader would be the story of heated arguments among our merry band about the merits of evolution and the origins of the earth—but this reporter, at least, heard no such debates. Perhaps we were a group of Adventists too tolerant, too open, too polite—too tired—to get into it. Perhaps we were seeing the overwhelming evidence of evolving species too closely. Perhaps, while maybe not all on exactly the same page, we were at least all in the same book.

“Genesis is theology—not science,” said Brian Bull. Bull and Guy’s three volumes set out to answer a basic question: How do you harmonize science as commonly understood with the way that Genesis is usually read? The books are not easily summarized; Bull says there are no CliffsNotes. But the answer Bull and Guy came to was that the biblical creation story has been completely misinterpreted, partly through the fault of those who have translated the Bible from Hebrew into English. “The creation story itself insists that it is not science,” Brian says.



Photo: James Hayward

Ocean breezes quickly dried laundry.

The story is about what God is understood to do and what he is doing in the world—this is by definition theology. But we have turned it into science because it looks like science. And every translator from Hebrew into any other tongue has translated it to make it appear even more like science. The Hebrew word *‘erets* in English most commonly becomes either “earth” or “land.” In the first 11 chapters of Genesis translators almost always have chosen “earth.” In the rest of the Bible, they have, almost always, chosen “land,” or nation, as in “the land of Israel.” (God promised Abraham not the world, or the earth, but the land.) But this translation leads English readers to believe that in Genesis the Hebrew Bible must be talking about the planet.

Because, for 500 years, Bible translators have chosen “earth” rather than “land” for the Hebrew *‘erets*, Genesis appears to tell the story of the beginning of the earth, or planet, on which we live.

Here in the Galápagos was the place where this notion about the origins of the earth was first confronted by an alternative explanation. And that has now become the accepted explanation by almost everybody except for certain religious groups.

Finding God

We learned about Darwin and the giant tortoises, and his research on the adaptation of the finches. But did our band of pilgrims see God in the Galápagos?

“God is everywhere. I don’t have any worries about how old the earth is. I gave that up a long time ago,” said the pragmatic Betty Winslow, emeritus professor of Loma Linda University’s School of Nursing.

“Absolutely we saw God here in the Galápagos,” said Brian Bull. “The fact that animals can adapt to harsh conditions and survive, the fact that plants like these cacti can undergo such dramatic transformation from island to island because of predation—that speaks to me of an extraordinarily prolific designer. But it has taken longer than 6,000 years.”



On the last day, a final trek across the beach

Photo: Alina Bond

“It’s meaningful to solidify the idea that I can still have God as the Creator while I can see definite adaptations occurring,” said Barbara McKinney. “Those two can sit side by side and I am comfortable with that. It doesn’t have to be either/or.”

Is the debate over evolution still a big challenge for the Adventist Church and its members?

“Yes,” says Yung Lau, “and I wonder why.”

Could a large part be fear—fear that incorrect belief could jeopardize one’s salvation? If we could just stop being afraid and believe in a loving God who loves us unconditionally, we could freely explore, knowing we have the Holy Spirit to guide and help us to follow truth wherever it might lead.

I think that when we get to heaven, part of the joy will be discovering where we were just plain wrong, and then knowing we finally have the capacity to understand the truth in all its complexities. And for all the times we confidently thought we knew what was right, I am sure that God will extend us grace, because he loves each of us unconditionally.

Spending seven days contemplating nature and evolution and seeing animals we had never seen before in such proximity that we could have touched them, was a transformative experience for us personally.

“Having a chance to connect with the animal world—when animals have been so pushed out of modern life—helps us to change our relationship with the earth,” said Bonnie Dwyer. “There is so much that the animals can teach us. When we are at a transition point in our own

lives—realizing that we are changing like it or not—we can learn from the animals and how they adapt so gracefully to change.”

We were amazed and delighted by the fearlessness of the animals—one of the most extraordinary and unique things about the Galápagos Islands. Sea lions, marine iguanas, land iguanas, sea turtles, giant tortoises, sharks, and birds of all sorts, paid no attention to us intruders, calmly letting us watch them. The sea lions actually approached us, seeming to want to play.

Cultivating Wonder

On one of the final evenings of the trip, our group discussion was led by Jerry Winslow, who as well as professor of religion at Loma Linda University, is also the founding director of the Institute for Health Policy and Leadership. He reminded us about the importance of awe and wonder.

“O Lord, our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth! who hast set thy glory above the heavens.”

This is the way the eighth Psalm begins and ends. Visiting the Galápagos is one way you might restore a sense of wonder in your life. But there are two parts of wonder, Winslow contends. First, awe is the overwhelming emotion when you realize you are in the presence of something far more amazing and awesome than you can begin to imagine. The second part is puzzlement. Why does God care about this earth and this galaxy?

As Stephen Hawking put it:

The human race is just a chemical scum on a moderate-sized planet, orbiting around a very average star in the outer suburb of one among a hundred billion galaxies. We are so insignificant that I can't believe the whole universe exists for our benefit.

But to be a Christian is to realize that the master of the universe was willing to risk everything for the little life that we have here.

When we wonder at something, we honor the Creator. When we question it, that can also honor him.

No, science doesn't take away the beauty of the stars, as Richard Feynman explained. “The vastness of the heavens stretches my imagination. Stuck on this carousel

my little eye can catch one-million-year-old light. A vast pattern—of which I am a part. . . . What is the pattern, or the meaning, or the why? It does not do harm to the mystery to know a little about it.”

Faith enhances the dazzlement, Jerry Winslow argues, and science makes that dazzlement even more wonderful. “I think it's our job as people of faith to hold those two things together.”

Science by itself doesn't have the ability to justify its own existence, he said. But here in the Galápagos we have the chance to experience awe—and to ask questions.

We can follow the best evidence and still believe in a Creator.

As the voyage ended and our little band dispersed back to its own communities, slowly losing the feeling of the boat's rocking, and re-integrating into a life of daily tasks and commitments, we strive to keep the conversation going and not to forget the sense of wonder we discovered on our voyage. Every day—nearly every hour—we saw something awe inspiring, something incredible, something unique. We saw these things—so far from our everyday lives—and we were able to dissect and discuss them with our traveler friends. We saw some of the same evidence that Darwin saw and used to create a groundbreaking new framework for life on earth. We also saw beauty and extreme creativity, pointing to a divine hand with unlimited resources. We resolve to continue the conversation with our wider community, to keep an open mind, and to remember to wonder.



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