

Mr. Fred Edwords, Humanist (I came from where) – Introduction and personal statement

This video was recorded at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History on March 28, 2011

Fred Edwords: 00:21 My name is Fred Edwords. We can just go back to that standard slide there. There we go. I've been part of the Humanist Movement for 35 years, having been Executive Director of the American Humanist Association and Editor of the Humanist Magazine. I currently teach at the Humanist Institute and I'm National Director of the International Darwin Day Foundation. (00:50) Now humanism itself is an intellectual, ethical, and artful way of life in which the universe is seen as natural. This means we don't believe in anything supernatural or mystical, such as a God or a higher reality. Now there's a famous story, it may be apocryphal, it may be true, but it kind of illustrates a viewpoint in which Napoleon was listening to the scientist of his day, Pierre Laplace, give his view of cosmology. His view of the way the solar system worked, which was about all they knew about in those days. (01:34) And after Laplace explained to Napoleon the way the solar system worked in his model, Napoleon asked, "Well, where is God in your system?" Laplace answered, "I have no need of that hypothesis." Now what humanists do is they take that basic attitude expressed by Laplace and apply it generally. When people say to us, well, don't you want more? We tend to respond with Robert Louis Stevenson, who in A Child's Garden of Verses said, "The world is so full of a number of things. I'm sure we should all be as happy as Kings." The universe is vast, to explore all of its ramifications and nuances is more than any person can do. There's enough to keep us plenty busy, but there are unanswered questions at the fringes of science. And these are what makes science and life exciting and challenging. And in our worldview, it's okay not to know. It's okay to have a mystery. We can live comfortably with uncertainty. (02:48) Commonly regarded as a secular philosophy, humanism can also be expressed in a community setting where people gather for weekly inspiration, celebration, and song like a church. In this way, humanism functions religiously in ethical culture societies, humanistic Jewish temples, many Unitarian Universalist churches, a few Quaker meeting houses and in a number of independent humanist fellowships. The ideas remained the same of course, but the setting is traditional. Now, as one who's been a humanist all my adult life, I find this worldview continually enriched by the discoveries of science. Beyond the answers provided in this way,

there's also the excitement of the quest itself. Many humanists have found a satisfying sense of purpose and an expansive outlet for their love of mystery, within the depths of the scientific enterprise. (03:46) Philosophically, we humanists are committed to following the scientific evidence, wherever it leads. Thus, ours is an attitude of openness to new discoveries, but skepticism toward what lacks sufficient foundation. We aren't saying we're the only ones and think like this. In fact, it looks like just about everybody or everyone on this panel thinks like that, but certainly we're among those who think like this, and we're happy to work with a traditionally religious in this and in other pursuits. Of particular interest to us is the study of human origins. We see an honest and accurate understanding of human evolution as helping to explain who we human beings really are. Although the present may be the key to the past in learning about our origins, that we have to look at the evidence that exists now in order to figure out what happened back then, because we weren't there then. We have to go with the evidence we have now, but the past is also key to the present in understanding our human nature. (04:53) How did we get the way we are, and why? These are important questions. What does it mean to be human? For it's only through this self-understanding together with a better grasp of the world around us, that we gain the tools to better decide on improved ways to live. Given this, it can't offend us to know where we came from. It can only enlighten us and humble us, for the study of human origins now shows how close we human beings once came to extinction between 60 and 90,000 years ago, our species almost died out. Homo sapiens went through a population bottleneck, in which we were down to no more than 10,000 individuals, and perhaps as few as 600. We were endangered. How did scientists conclude this? Because the genetic diversity in the human subspecies Homo sapiens sapiens is so low that our differences across the planet in mitochondrial DNA are roughly equivalent to that of two neighboring populations of western lowland gorillas. (06:11) Think about that. You me, an Australian Aborigine, an Inuit, we're all as closely related as two neighboring populations of western lowland gorillas. We're so closely related that there must have only been a few of us a short time ago, evolutionarily speaking. This also means that there's only one race, the human race, we're all in this together. There are no other sub-species of Homo sapiens still living besides us. Indeed, no other members of the genus Homo have survived. There aren't even any other hominidae, like the Australopithecines. All of our nearest relatives are extinct, and our entire ancestry is a litter of dead bones, which you can see upstairs in the hall of human origins. (07:10) We alone

survived, and that only barely. Our secret? Flexibility. We have the brain power and the body structure that allows us to live in a range of disparate environments from the equator to the Arctic, from parched deserts to lush rainforests, from the depths of canyons to the tops of mountains, from large land masses to tiny islands. Using our brains, we gather, hunt, fish, till the soil, domesticate animals, engage in selective breeding of flora and fauna, and practice bioengineering. We also formed communities and cultures, take care of one another, and spend lots of time with our kids. Like our ancestors and ape relatives, we have evolved family values. In some, adaptability is our middle name. That's why we're still here. That's how we survived that bottleneck. But we also happen to think that we're pretty special. Being alone in our species, sapiens, alone in our genus, Homo, and alone in our subtribe, the hominidae. We find it easier to feel a bit isolated from the rest of the animal world. There are no living Neanderthals and Lucy's to connect or confuse us. (08:32) Moreover, at the time the Western religions were developed people in the West hadn't encountered the great apes, so they were effectively alone in their family, the hominids, as well. Perhaps this is how we human beings got the idea that we weren't animals at all, but we're instead just one notch below the angels. How different our perception might've been if we were the dogs, for example, then we'd have seen all those different breeds all around us. And within our same genus, we'd have found dingoes, wolves, coyotes, and jackals. Within our tribe we'd have found wild dogs, bush dogs, maned wolves, and foxes, and so on. It would have been difficult, then, to feel apart from the animal world. Whether we see it clearly or not, we are a part of nature and we need the rest of nature if we are to survive. Humanists are among those who accept this and having no belief in a life after death. This is our one and only world, so it's no surprise that we're committed to saving it. (09:40) But now comes the hard question. We have to look at the broader social impact. Are we human beings flexible enough to live on? Or do the very traits that fostered our present success doom us to ultimate failure? Have we over farmed, overgrazed, raised too many domestic animals of too few varieties, and in the Northern hemisphere created an ecological footprint. That's too large? The global human population will reach seven billion this fall. Most people on the planet now live in cities. Have we exceeded sustainability? And if so, can we make necessary changes in our collective behavior this side of catastrophe? (10:25) The study of human evolution can help us answer these questions about ourselves and our destiny, but it's only when we accept our past and face our present without fear or offense that we have any

hope of learning enough, soon enough to secure a significant future. We depend then on the growth of scientific knowledge and philosophical insight to help us mature in our ability to survive and thrive and to develop and apply our human values in more effective ways. That's why we, Humanists, unreservedly embrace the science of human origins. Thank you very much.

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