

An excerpt from Chapter 1 of
Only a Theory: Evolution and the Battle for America's Soul
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Chapter 1 - Only a Theory

In a courtroom, even a whisper can catch your attention, especially one that comes right at you with a smile and a wink.

“Only a theory” she said, shaking her head just enough to get my attention as I walked past her. “It’s only a theory — and we’re gonna win.” Her smile was genuine and its certainty was unmistakable.

She didn’t win — at least not that day and not in that court, but the quiet certainty of the remark has stayed with me ever since. It’s provoked me to doubt, wonder, and even fear — and

it’s my reason for writing this book. It came at the conclusion of my first trial, the first time I have ever sat in a witness stand and given testimony, the first time I’d ever been cross examined, the first time I’d ever had to meet reporters on the courthouse steps. But it wouldn’t be the last — and that’s part of the story, too.

When I walked into a Federal courtroom in Atlanta in the Fall of 2004, you would have thought that a book was on trial. An attorney stood next to a four foot high enlargement of the Table of Contents of a biology textbook. Nearby, a collage of more than 50 pages from the evolution section of the same book had been pasted against cardboard and placed on a mounting stand. It seemed to form a wall of evidence that might be used, one could suppose, to convict the book or its authors of some awful, seditious offense against the state or against the good school children of Georgia for whom the book had written.

These were first impressions, to be sure, but they were first impressions that mattered, especially to me, the coauthor of that book. It was almost as though the project on which Joe Levine and I had labored for so many years had been cut apart, and now its entrails were glued to that board like the organs of a laboratory animal pinned against the soft wax of a dissecting tray.

When I climbed into the witness stand, I wondered if the attorneys regarded me that way, too. Were they looking at me as I might look at a laboratory mouse? Trying to find a quick and easy way to get inside and take what they needed?

I would find out soon enough. But the remarkable thing about that trial, the packed courtroom, the media attention, the calls from reporters was the size and scale of what was being litigated. All of the effort, attention, paperwork, and argument was focused on a paper sticker, about 6 inches square, containing just three sentences:

This textbook contains material on evolution. Evolution is a theory, not a fact, regarding the origin of living things. This material should be approached with an open mind, studied carefully, and critically considered.

Why such a fuss? The issue in this trial was whether the actions of the Cobb County Board of Education, in affixing this sticker to the inside of thousands of public school science textbooks, amounted to a violation of the First Amendment of the United States Constitution. For the record, the Court found that the stickers were indeed such a



violation, and ordered them removed. Constitutional questions are always matters of public interest, and one that applies to the public schools, where most American children are educated, naturally drew plenty of attention and passion.

But it didn't take a psychologist to sense that there was something more at work here, something far deeper than the establishment clause or the narrow scientific meaning of a word like "theory." The stickers were actually the result of a school board's effort to fashion a compromise between thousands of its constituents and the science education standards their schools were required to meet. Those standards had pushed evolution, the central organizing principle of the biological sciences, into the textbooks, classrooms, and even into the homes of families in Cobb County, and thousands of them had pushed back. You might say that the sticker was the Board's half-baked effort to split the difference between God and science — and that it satisfied neither.

I'll have more to say about the wording of that sticker a bit later, but what most impressed me at the trial was the passion of those who defended it. It was clear that something much greater was at stake than a handful of words pasted inside a book, something that would inspire a civic movement — not just here in Georgia, but all across the country. Something that would lead a majority of Americans to say they reject an idea at the very heart of biology, the theory of evolution. To them, what was at issue was a question of the heart and soul. An issue for which they were prepared to fight, and fight they would.

A Battle is Joined

As I left the courtroom in Atlanta, something made me recall the last time I had seen such certainty in the face of defeat. It was the summer of 2000, and I had just driven for hours across the scorching plains to speak to several hundred people in the

basement of the First Lutheran Church in Manhattan, Kansas. I was on a crusade.

A year earlier, the Kansas Board of Education had fired an opening salvo by excising all mention of evolution from the state's new public school science curriculum. Science teachers in the state were stunned and embarrassed, and they resolved to do something about it. Before long, a loose coalition of teachers, science professionals, and other citizens had formed to reverse the Board's actions in the most direct way possible — to vote its members out. That was precisely the reason for my July "holiday" in the Midway State. Most members of the Board had to run in primary elections in just a few weeks time, and this week was, ironically, the anniversary of the Scopes trial. What better time to run a series of "teach-ins" on the issue of evolution than a hot week in July, exactly 75 years after Clarence Darrow and William Jennings Bryan had done battle over the same issue in a steamy courtroom in Dayton, Tennessee?

The summer of 2000 was hardly the first time Americans had come to Kansas to do battle over an idea. In the 1850s, concerned lest they find themselves in a situation where free states might have a majority of votes in the United States Senate, slaveholding states fashioned a delicate compromise. The Kansas-Nebraska act of 1854 preserved a 50:50 deadlock in the Senate by requiring that Kansas be admitted to the Union as a slave state and Nebraska as a free state. The wisdom of this compromise was not well received among abolitionists in the territories, and skirmishes over the issue of slavery quickly came to dominate the affairs of the two new states.

Even today, the history books speak of "bloody Kansas," a burned-over district in which abolitionist jayhawkers clashed with pro-slavery bushwackers. Murders and atrocities on both sides would divide the state and eventually the nation into two camps. What followed would become, in

hindsight, a savage rehearsal for the American Civil War.

This wasn't civil war, I told myself, and in truth the evening went well. The timing was perfect, and on one level, the issues seemed just as clear. Simply stated, did Darwin get it right? Throughout the earth's history, had species leapt suddenly into existence, or had they descended, as the old man wrote, with modification, from an endless chain of ancestors? Was the earth truly old enough to have allowed natural selection the time to produce the remarkable adaptations that fit species so beautifully to their environments? Can the mechanisms of molecular genetics actually produce the biochemical and physical novelties that evolution demands?

The answers to such direct questions are not hard to come by. In almost every respect, Darwin did get it right, and that was the message I would bring to my audience in Manhattan. The very ground upon which we stand is eloquent testament to the age of this planet. The expanding richness and diversity of the fossil record documents one case after another of descent with modification. Our expanding knowledge of molecular genetics completes exactly the mechanistic framework for which Darwin might have hoped.

Explaining all of this would be great fun, and so it was. Science at its best is neither an acquired taste nor an exercise in an exclusive form of mental gymnastics. Properly explained, science is nothing more than organized common sense, and that's exactly what I did my best to bring along that evening. As I will explain, the specific objections raised against evolution are easily answered, and I had no trouble answering them in Manhattan. For many of the people in my audience that night, that was enough. They had come to see for themselves if evolution is the "dying theory" that its opponents had claimed. When case after case of evidence to the contrary was laid before them, they came to the same conclusion as did the scientific community

— that evolution has never been on stronger scientific ground than it is today.

That should have been enough. But it was not. For a handful in the audience, nothing I could ever say about evolution would be sufficient, absolutely nothing. To be sure, these folks might bring up certain scientific issues in the battle against evolution, but the issues themselves were not their real problems. There was something in the science itself that bothered them, an undercurrent of unease and fear that no fossil, no DNA sequence, no experiment in lab or field could ever address. And they were certain, certain beyond belief, not just that evolution was not the answer, but that evolution *could not be the answer*. These were exactly the folks whose quiet self-assurance reminded me so much of my new friend in Atlanta.

The opponents of evolution lost the 2000 elections in Kansas, and a pro-science Board took office. But like bloody Kansas of the 1850s, it wasn't long before territory claimed by one side was taken back by the other. A 6-4 anti-evolution majority took back the Kansas Board in the 2004 elections, and in the following year, they once again rewrote the science standards to their liking. This time they didn't remove evolution, but introduced evidence "against" it and redefined science in a way that made practicing scientists and educators shudder. Once again, pro-evolution forces geared up for battle.

As the lines and tactics of the struggle shifted in the middle of the nation, Kansas became just one front in a war that seems to be everywhere in today's America. Even the President of the United States waded into the fray, casually recommending that schools teach students "both sides" of the debate, and nearly every American state played host to the expanding conflict. The battle was truly joined, and today nothing seems to be able to hold it back.