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University Relations, "PZ Myers exchanges theories with Richard Dawkins" (2007). *Campus News Archive*. 912.

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PZ Myers exchanges theories with Richard Dawkins

Summary: Paul Z. “PZ” Myers, assistant professor of biology at UMM, has a theory of evolution that he recently took right to the source - the birthplace and home of Charles Darwin.

(January 29, 2007)-Paul Z. “PZ” Myers, assistant professor of biology at the University of Minnesota, Morris, has a theory of evolution that he recently took right to the source – the birthplace and home of Charles Darwin. Myers’ long-time colleague, Larry Moran of the University of Toronto, arranged for Myers to accompany him on a trip to England. While in England they talked with Richard Dawkins, who currently holds an endowed chair as the Charles Simonyi Professor of the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford University.

Dawkins is a preeminent British ethologist, evolutionary biologist and popular science writer. He first came to prominence with his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene*, which popularized the gene-centric view of evolution. In 1982, he made a major contribution to the science of evolution in his widely cited book *The Extended Phenotype*. He has since written several best-selling popular books on, and appeared in a number of television and radio programs about, evolutionary biology, creationism and religion.

Dawkins is an outspoken atheist, humanist and skeptic, and is a prominent member of the Brights movement, which describes various types of people who have a naturalistic worldview, without casting that worldview as a negative response to religion. In a play on Thomas Huxley's epithet "Darwin's bulldog," Dawkins' impassioned defense of evolution has earned him the name "Darwin's rottweiler."

A developmental biologist (one who studies embryos), Myers discussed with Dawkins the latter’s book, titled *The God Delusion*. Dawkins takes a strong atheistic view with which Myers essentially agrees. “We disagree on the scientific issues, however,” added Myers, “such as on the relative importance of selection in evolutionary history.” Although Myers views Dawkins as a well-spoken, quiet person, he also noted that Dawkins is the biggest “popularizer...a big man for communicating science to the public.”

“We also did the ‘touristy’ things related to evolutionary biology,” said Myers. They visited a natural history museum in Kensington as well as Down House where Charles Darwin lived as well as Westminster Abbey, where Darwin is buried alongside Sir Isaac Newton and, noted Myers, “it is nice to see Darwin get that measure of respect,” a reference to Darwin’s burial in such a prestigious location.

Myers has garnered some notoriety of his own. His personal Web blog, Pharyngula (pronounced far-ING-ula, named after a specific developmental stage), won top honors in the 2006 Weblog Awards in the Best Science Blog category. Last year Myers’ blog won the Koufax Award in the Best Expert category. A seasoned blogger, Myers developed a Web site in 1993, from which his personal blog evolved in 2003. Today, 20,000 to 25,000 people read Pharyngula each day.

What’s the attraction to his particular blog? Myers cites several reasons why people are attracted to blogs. “Word of mouth. To have a unique voice people are looking for personality. Being controversial and tapping into politics. And,

speaking with some authority on a topic in which one is an expert.”

The success of Myers’ personal blog has led to an opportunity to write a bimonthly column for a relatively new publication, *SEED* magazine, which sponsors science blogs. Myers’ January 10, 2007 column, “PZ Myers on how the cavefish lost its eyes,” can be read online at [SEED](#).

SEED’s founder and editor-in-chief, Adam Bly, is “an up and comer who promotes good science,” said Myers. The magazine is all about bringing art and science together, a concept of which Myers, as a faculty member at UMM, one of the nation’s premiere public liberal arts colleges, is well aware. Myers was also invited by *SEED* to a “salon” in New York, an occasion for presentations, informal discussion and a celebratory dinner attended by only 30 invitees.

Myers is also in the process of writing his own book about evolution and developmental biology, atheism and creationism, with the working title *Natural Revelation*.

A UMM faculty member since 2000, Myers and his student research partners have presented at various national conferences. Matt Larson '01, for example, won first prize for "best undergraduate research presentation" at the 2001 National Zebrafish Conference. Following graduation from UMM, Larson continued his education at the University of Minnesota Medical School, and is now a physician.

"Research is very important [in getting] students [to think] scientifically doing something new and having them thinking differently," said Myers. "At UMM, students get to know faculty on a one-to-one basis and faculty get to know the students. At the University of Washington (where Myers earned a bachelor of science degree in zoology), I felt like a passive consumer. UMM students get to be active participants."

Personal blogging and hob-nobbing with experts in his field aside, Myers is first and foremost a teacher and researcher. He deftly separates his personal beliefs from his classroom lecture topics: “I tell my students that they must talk about facts and evidence.”

Photo: Richard Dawkins, left, and PZ Myers

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