

Sneakers and wristwatches

Evolutionists seldom question the intelligent design in everyday life

STAY TUNED FOR THE FAR-REACHING OUTCOME of the trial in which 11 parents have hauled the Dover, Pa., school board to federal court for requiring biology teachers to present Intelligent Design as an alternative to Evolution (see p. 24). Meanwhile, meditate on a curiosity of nature you remember from childhood—sneakers draped over telephone wires. You looked and wondered.

Soon you were a man and faced the biggest “sneakers over the wire” question of all: the teeming, complex, and variegated universe. You have only just arrived on the scene, and no one witnessed the weaving together of the vertebrate eye or bacterial flagellum. You shrug and say, “Your guess is as good as mine.”

But you do not really believe, of course, that one guess is as good as another. Coming upon the wristwatch on the beach, you do not countenance the suggestion of a fortuitous collision of glass and metal equally with the theory that at some time in the past a skillful artisan designed the timepiece. As an adult you have learned to detect design.

A theory may fall into trouble over time—die a death by qualification, become obsolete by dint of new facts. Yet such a theory, moribund though it is, may be kept on life supports for a number of reasons, reasons that themselves are embarrassingly unscientific. Scientist Michael J. Behe describes such a theory in *Darwin's Black Box: The Biochemical Challenge to Evolution*.

Mr. Behe tells of a time when the biological cell was the last “black box”—a functioning entity whose inner workings remained mysterious. But then came Watson and Crick in the 1950s with the DNA double helix, and molecular biochemistry was born. Scientists were now able to peer into the ground-floor workings of life, the molecular level where all the action happens. No longer would inquirers after life's mysteries need to look to gross anatomy but to staggeringly complex chemical processes.

What molecular biology did was to reveal “irreducible complexity.” That is, the function of a system depends on the integrated activity of interactive components, no one of which can be removed without collapsing the system. Genetic mutations would have to occur simultaneously

and coadaptively for this Evolution scheme to work. Mr. Behe writes, “An irreducibly complex system cannot be produced . . . by slight successive modifications of a precursor system, because any precursor to an irreducibly complex system that is missing a part is by definition non-functional” (examples: the vertebrate camera eye, the feather, the mammalian kidney).

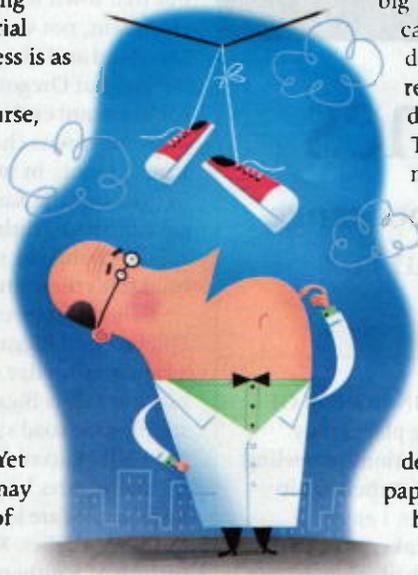
The question is this: Why do so many scientists—people who would never pick up a stranded wristwatch and hypothesize that it occurred by “gradualism”—suspend everyday logic and rules of evidence when it comes to the “big” questions of origins? “There is no publication in the scientific literature . . . that describes how molecular evolution of any real, complex, biochemical system either did occur or even might have occurred. There are assertions . . . , but absolutely none are supported by pertinent experiments or calculations” (Behe, p. 185).

The emperor—Evolution—has no clothes. And meanwhile there's an elephant in the living room—Design—that everyone's ignoring. Things get bizarre: Sir Francis Crick at the end of his career suggested in the scientific journal *Icarus* that life on earth may have begun when aliens on rocket ships deposited spores here. Other scientists paper over difficulties in Evolution with hopeful words (an anatomical adaptation is breezily alleged to have “sprung forth” or “appeared”). It's like a tale told by a

child, full of amusing gaps in the narration. Anything is preferred to considering the alternative that's as plain as the vertebrate eye on their faces.

Mr. Behe concludes: “To the person who does not feel obliged to restrict his search to unintelligent causes, the straightforward conclusion is that many biological systems were designed. . . . The conclusion of intelligent design flows naturally from the data itself . . . a humdrum process that requires no new principles of logic or science. It comes simply from the hard work that biochemistry has done over the past 40 years, combined with consideration of the way in which we reach conclusions of design every day.”

May logic prevail in Dover. May the pedestrian rules of evidence for pondering wristwatches and sneaker-lassoed telephone wires be applied to ferreting out origins of the universe. ☺





COOL
CITY LIMIT
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Name games

Peculiar (Mo.) town names range from the Deplorable (Kan.) to the Hopeful (Ga.)

THIS COLUMBUS DAY COLUMN IS IN HONOR OF pioneers who had the joy of naming places they visited or founded, with future generations marveling at their ingenuity or wondering about their sanity.

As a child growing up in Massachusetts, I enjoyed names such as Buzzards Bay or Nutting Lake, which I thought emerged from conversation ("Whadya ketch today? Nutting") or insults ("Marblehead"). Later, in Oregon, I relished non-euphemistic names such as Drain or Stinkingwater Pass. While traveling since then I've enjoyed melodic town names (Alabaster, Ala.) and optimistic ones: Georgia has Isle of Hope, Good Hope, Hopeful, Angelville, Halcyondale, Glory, and Harmony.

This summer I asked worldmagblog.com readers for their favorite place names, and nominees flowed in: Monkey's Eyebrow and Punkin Center, Ariz.; Bucksnot, Stinking Creek, Sunshine, and Yum Yum, Tenn.; Alligator and Soso, Miss.; Ozone, Goobertown, and Smackover, Ark.; Beanblossom, Gnaw Bone, Toad Hop, and Lick Skillet, Ind.; Spray and Fossil, Ore.; Tightwad and Peculiar, Mo.

Stories also arrived, like the one from the former pastor of Calhoun Baptist Church in Hot Coffee, Miss., who explained that the town derived its name from a

country store on a horseback trail that always offered hot coffee to riders: "So they'd say, 'Let's stop at Hot Coffee.'"

The origin of other names, like Enigma, Ga., may be shrouded in mystery. But I suspect good stories explain Two Egg, Fla.; Why, Ariz.; Whynot, Miss. (and N.C. also); Holy Moses, Colo.; Czar, W.Va.; Casanova, Va.; and Knockemstiff, Ohio. Readers say Snowflake, Ariz., derives from the two founders of the town, Mr. Snow and Mr. Flake, and that Chicken, Alaska, has that name because residents couldn't spell Ptarmigan.

One reader's job dispatched him at times to Morrow, Ohio, and he couldn't resist asking "if they wanted me to go to Morrow today." Kansans can choose to live in Deplorable or Fine City, and Michiganders have an even tougher decision to make: Paradise or Hell, the latter said to sport a sign at the city limits reading, "Welcome to HELL," but without a population marker.

California, of course, still has a Paradise, but residents of two other states reported, "We used to have Paradise, but that town is no more." Utah still has Mt. Olympus but Floridians, not wanting to exaggerate, settle for Niceville. Maryland and Oregon both have communities named Boring, but Oregon also has Hammond, which is heaven for keyboard enthusiasts.

Some towns change their name for momentary glory: Ismay, Mont., in 1993 temporarily changed its name to Joe in honor of the San Francisco quarterback. Television gave birth to Truth or Consequences, N.M. Liberal, Kan., should change its name to Progressive, but stick-in-the-mud folks there are resisting. George, Wash., is holding on.

Canadian correspondents wrote about Magog, Quebec, and Biggar, Saskatchewan, which reportedly has a sign on the edge of town proclaiming that "New York is big, but this is Biggar." An Alabamian wrote about the supply-side road sign in his state: EQUALITY 3 miles, RICHVILLE 10 miles.

Many states have their Athens, Paris, or Rome, but some town names are less ambitious: Ghent and Helvetia, Penn.; or Cairo, Thebes, Karnak, Goshen, and Dongola in the section of Southern Illinois known as "Little Egypt." Maine has Norway, Sweden, and Denmark, which makes sense given its cold climate, but also brags of Mexico. Students at classical Christian schools have an edge in central New York, which has Carthage, Cicero, Cincinnatus, Fabius, Homer, Marcellus, Minoa, Pompeii, Rome, and Syracuse.

Biblical names are also common. Georgia's Hiram matches up well against Alabama's Boaz, and New Jersey's Zaraphath ties Sarepta, La. (they both refer to the same city in Sidon, which the King James Bible spells with an S and other translations with a Z).

Still, nothing can beat out a map of Texas sprinkled with joyful town names like Blessing, Camelot, Cool, Happy, and Smiley, frank names like Gun Barrel City or Cut-n-Shoot, exotic ones like Odessa and Sudan, descriptive ones like No Trees (in west Texas), and wondering ones like Nameless and Uncertain. ☼