

## **MY ROAD TO DAMASCUS: The Making of an Evolutionary Evangelist**

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I know how the Apostle Paul must have felt on the road to Damascus (see Acts 9:1-31). Twenty-one years ago I had a similar experience.

In my early 20s, after a born-again experience while in the military, I was cocksure that I was doing God's will by attacking a very threatening perspective: evolution. But then, like Paul, I was knocked off my high horse, struck blind, so to speak. Then I discovered, to my dismay and confusion, that my destiny was to evangelistically promote the very thing I had been certain that God wanted me to condemn. Truly, God works in mysterious ways.

### **My Road to Damascus**

I grew up Roman Catholic, but like so many of my peers during the 1970s, I struggled with drugs and alcohol during my teenage years. In 1979, while in Berlin, Germany serving as a Military Police officer in the U.S. Army, I had a born again conversion. Six months later I experienced the baptism of the Holy Spirit, evidenced by speaking in tongues. (To this day speaking and thinking in tongues is one of my favorite spiritual practices. I find it to be an unparalleled means of stilling the rational, verbal part of my mind and keeping my awareness on the grace and miracle of the present moment.)

For the next three years the people I fellowshiped with, the books I read, the television programs I watched, and the music I listened to, all reflected a born-again, evangelical/pentecostal perspective that was strongly fundamentalist and rabidly anti-evolutionary.

For me, evolution was of the devil. It was antithetical to the Word of God and served to distract and seduce people away from godly thinking and living. I believed that the root of most social problems was Darwinism. I was deeply concerned for my friends and family, especially those who were caught in the snares of this secular humanistic worldview. I demonstrated at events where people would be speaking about evolution. I passed out tracts (anti-evolution pamphlets), and argued with anyone who thought the world was more than 6000 years old.

My own road to Damascus experience came in 1981 at Evangel College (now Evangel University) in Springfield, Missouri - which is affiliated with the Assemblies of God. On the first day of biology class, when the teacher held

up the zoology textbook we were going to use, I couldn't believe my eyes. Having used that same textbook four years earlier at the University of Miami, Florida, I *knew* that it taught evolution. Aghast, I got up out of my chair and walked out of class, slamming the door behind me. I went straight to the Registrar's Office and withdrew from the course. I told my roommate (and anyone else who would listen to me): "Satan obviously has a foothold in this school!" This was the only way I could make sense of the fact that a conservative, evangelical/pentecostal college would be teaching evolution.

Thanks to the love, patience, and commitment of my professors at Evangel's Biblical Studies and Philosophy Department, and my fellow students, my "blindness" was soon healed. I came to embrace evolution as the *means* of divine creativity; that is, *how* God created everything. I also began to accept that while the Bible was clearly divinely inspired, it was also a human book. I came to see how unfair and misleading it was, for example, for me to expect sacred scripture to reflect anything other than the scientific worldview commonly held when the Bible was written.

Two thousand years ago it was widely believed that the world was flat, stationary, and that the sun and stars revolved around us. The biblical writers naturally assumed that mountains were unchanging and that all creatures were placed here by God, one at a time, in complete and finished form. How could they think otherwise? The idea of a round Earth turning on its axis and orbiting the sun, or the North Star being a great cloud of hydrogen gas converting into helium 2.34 quadrillion miles away, or mountains rising and eroding away due to tectonic plates and weather, or animals and plants evolving and changing over time - all these now commonly accepted scientific facts would have seemed utterly absurd to those living when the Bible was written. Had God inspired someone to write about such things then, the early church leaders would never have considered the document authoritative. They would only have thought it bizarre.

### **My Mission Revealed**

When I originally felt God's call to full-time ministry, in 1981, I understood it to mean inviting as many people as possible, as quickly as possible, into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior. I was certain that Jesus was coming back any day on the clouds to rapture the faithful (that is, all born again Christians would fly away with him, leaving everyone else here on Earth to suffer). During my years at Evangel College and Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary (from 1981-1987), my sense of my ministerial calling kept expanding. Then on February 1, 1988, I was

given a vision so clear, so personal, and so unmistakable, that it has been the guiding compass of my life ever since.

This second stage of my conversion from evolutionary inquisitor to evolutionary evangelist occurred when I was introduced to the thinking of Passionist priest, cultural historian, and "geologist" Father Thomas Berry, and cosmologist Brian Swimme.

While pastoring my first church, in western Massachusetts, I drove four hours to Boston and back to take a six-week class entitled "The New Catholic Mysticism," taught by poet/prophet Albert LaChance. Albert, who had studied with both Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme, was popularizing the epic of evolution. The first night I heard this Great Story, about an hour into the evening, I began to tremble. Goosebumps broke out all over my arms and legs. Then I heard that unmistakably familiar voice of Great Heart, my Lord, say to me, "Michael, your calling and destiny is to evangelize the world with this good news. The science-based story of an emerging universe and the Bible are not in conflict. They are mutually enriching. Show others how this is so, and live it."

From that moment, and for the next decade, my prayer was "Lord, when you feel I'm ready, let me know and open the door. You know I want to preach the Great Story gospel full-time. I trust your timing."

Then, in preparation for this evangelistic science and spirit work, I began passionately studying the history of the cosmos, Earth, life, and humanity through sacred eyes. Thanks to the work of countless modern-day prophets and the life training I received while pastoring three United Church of Christ congregations (from 1987-1995), I continued to grow in my understanding and experience of Christ-centered ministry.

The Great Story - the 13.7 billion-year epic of God's love and creativity - has deepened, strengthened, and expanded my evangelical Christian faith. And it has helped me value and appreciate other spiritual traditions as well. God as creator is more real to me than ever. I have a more personal relationship with Jesus as the incarnation of God's love, as well as a more intimate experience of the Holy Spirit, and a deeper appreciation for the cosmological significance of the Bible. It has also, importantly, enabled me to engage in justice, peace, and ecological sustainability work (my career from 1995-2000) as a direct expression of my faith in, devotion to, and love of, God.

## **The Marriage of Science and Religion**

In the spring of 2000, just after I moved from the West Coast to the East Coast, I went to a pentecostal/charismatic worship service in Kingston, NY, near my childhood home of Poughkeepsie. I love the celebration, enthusiasm, and heartfelt praise characteristic of pentecostal worship. During the service one of the members of the congregation, the woman who invited me, walked up to me and said that she had a word from the Lord for me. I said, "Great! I'm wide open." Then, taking my hands in hers and looking me straight in the eyes, she said, "Thus sayeth the Lord, 'My son, I have called thee home to reveal thy true mission. Step out boldly with thy beloved and fear not. For I will bless thy steps and thy ministry more abundantly than thou canst imagine.'"

Several thoughts raced through my head in rapid-fire succession. The first was, "Praise God! I'm ready!" The next two were a tad less reverent. "I wonder why the Lord likes Elizabethan English so much?" I mused with a smile. This thought was quickly followed by another, even more playful, "Woe boy, did you hear that? God said, 'with your beloved'! You'd better get moving, dude. You don't even have a girlfriend!"

Several months later my friend's prophetic words were made flesh, so to speak. I met popular science writer and long-time Great Story enthusiast Connie Barlow at a special event with cosmologist Brian Swimme at Auburn Theological Seminary in New York City. Within weeks we realized that we shared a common passion: communicating "the Great News of the Great Story and promoting the Great Work" as far and wide as possible. Six months later I asked Connie to marry me and three weeks later we were wed at the 2001 EarthSpirit Rising Conference on Ecology, Spirituality, and the Great Work, in Louisville, Kentucky - held in honor of our mentor Thomas Berry.

A few months later came 9-11, while we were living just north of New York City. Within weeks, we felt God's call to hit the road, though it would be another six months before we gave away all our possessions, I quit my job, and we became full-time itinerant ministers/educators.

To symbolize "the marriage of science and religion for personal and planetary wellbeing" in an eye-catching and playful way, we decided to display on the side of our van a Jesus fish and a Darwin fish kissing, with a small red heart between them. We've received lots of enthusiastic feedback. Most people flash a big smile when they see it, though other responses are not uncommon. A retired biology professor we met, a Unitarian Universalist,

took one look at the decals and scoffed with a tone of humor in his voice, "Oh great! Now you piss *everyone* off!"

Connie and I love our lives as itinerant Great Story evangelists. We're meeting and staying in the homes of all sorts of gifted people committed to the Great Work of honoring God through ensuring a just, healthy, beautiful, and sustainably life-giving world for future generations of all species. We hear their stories, share our own, and partake of their own favorite places of natural beauty or evolutionary significance. Virtually every Sunday we're preaching in some church and often speaking in colleges, universities, grade schools and high schools, Quaker meetings, or living rooms during the week. The response we've been getting has been phenomenal! People in religious settings are hungry for a message that bridges heart and mind, faith and reason, and enables them to see their faith tradition in a larger, more encompassing light. Students and faculty in educational settings are grateful for a way of understanding the cosmos, our times, and our role in the emergent, evolutionary process that is meaningful, hopeful, and truly inspiring.

What Connie and I do on the road is serious, but it is best served by our maintaining a light, nonjudgmental, and humble approach. Our fishy coupling of what many regard as oppositional is thus a playful reminder to ourselves of who we wish to be along our shared journey.

Our encouraging and soliciting evolutionary parables (see our website: [www.TheGreatStory.org/parables.html](http://www.TheGreatStory.org/parables.html)) is related to this yearning we have to broaden what future generations will understand sacred scripture to be, and to find fun, playful ways to teach The Great Story of science and Spirit.

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