

By Sharon Abercrombie

SINCE THE DAWN of time, people have used pebbles or a string of knots or beads on a cord to keep track of their prayers. The concept evolved, as different paths of spirituality manifested themselves. Hindus and Buddhists named their beads “malas.” The Sufis and Muslims called theirs “tasbihs.” Catholics and Anglicans christened theirs “rosaries.”

And now, thanks to the creativity of four individuals in the ecospirituality movement, there is a new set of prayer beads available to help individuals meditate upon the creation of the Earth and of the Universe herself. They go by the names of Earth Prayer Beads, Cosmic Rosary, and Great Story Beads.

Science writer Connie Barlow, one of the beads’ creators, is simply delighted how the

phenomenon is unfolding. She cites the emerging trend as a classic example of “parallel evolution—the same thing happening independently, in several places, nearly at the same time. The earth calling forth these ways of being,” Connie reflected.

Sister Gail Worcelo, co-founder of the Green Mountain Monastery near Weston, Vermont, was the first to hear the call. Sister Gail had felt drawn to create a special prayer form, which individuals could use to help heal the Earth. So, tapping into her Catholic heritage, she invented a set of wrist-sized Earth Prayer Beads.

Numbering 15 handcrafted blue and green orbs, each bead represents a billion years in the unfolding story of the Universe, “of which we are a part,” she pointed out. The central bead of the little rosary simultaneously draws upon the ancient and contemporary. It features an image of the fish,

“which is our symbol of the Christ and a reminder in our time of the depletion of the fisheries of the planet,” explains Sister Gail.

A group of volunteers from Weston make the beads to help support Sister Gail’s ecozoic monastery. The crafters use hemp for their handmade bead bags, and the set sells for \$15. “Our intention is to bring the power of prayer to bear upon the needs of our planet. The journey around the beads is a way to awaken to the presence of the divine within the total sacred community of life,” she said.

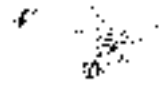
Earth bead creators pray and fast as they make the rosaries, “with the intention that Earth may know healing and that human consciousness may shift into the Ecozoic mind.”

The shift is gradually happening. The beads—more than 1,000 sets—have made their way all over the world, throughout the U.S., Ireland, England, India, Africa, New Zealand, the Philippines, and to places we don’t even know about,” reports Sister Gail.

Last July, more than halfway across the United States, the parallel evolution touched down in Seattle. Paula Hendrick was conducting one of her women’s Earth Story Circles. She had just finished leading the Spiral Walk, a moving meditation with different stations, symbolizing the evolutionary path of creation.

When she asked for feedback, someone wondered if and how the meditation could be done privately, in the confines of a small space. Well, why not put the walk into a rosary format, suggested two Catholic women. Within their tradition, prayer beads are used as a meditation upon significant events in the lives of Jesus and Mary, through the Joyful, Sorrowful and Glorious Mysteries. So how about a set of beads to keep track of

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significant events in the evolution of the Universe, from the primordial fireball onward?

Their idea sounded great to Paula. She knew about prayer beads, having spent time hanging out with Seattle's Sufi community. So the three women went shopping for beads. They scoured local stores and garage sales, finding one delightful treasure after another. Why there was a large, colorful bead that could pass for the Super Nova. And, oh, wow, look at all those little trinkets shaped like stars, birds, turtles, flowers, dinosaurs, and crescent moons! Returning with their bounty, they went to work. Supplied with wire cutters, wire, thread, beads and imagination, each woman made a rosary, telling the Universe Story in her own way. "We loved it," said Paula.

Each realized that the very act of creating her own set of prayer beads was as meaningful as the follow-up meditation. Paula, especially, was quite taken with the process. She began collecting more beads. Paula's mom helped by opening up her jewelry box to the cause.

Then, when Paula began giving her Cosmic Rosaries away to friends, people asked her to teach them how to make them. So, since last July, Paula has conducted five classes. For her own spiritual practice, she uses the Cosmic Rosary as "an aid for centering and reflecting." Sometimes she wears it as a necklace. It serves as a great conversation starter, reported Paula. When people ask about it, she invites them to sign up for her Earth story circles, where she has since incorporated a rosary making session into the curriculum.

"For some people, the Universe Story is brand new, so they follow a very simple timeline. For others, it's an opportunity to get

'hands on' with something they've studied, or at least been exposed to. The bottom line, is everyone learns that our scientific story of the Universe is a sacred story," said Paula.

FROM SEATTLE, the Cosmic Rosary wound its way to the East Coast. Paula sent one to her friend, writer Connie Barlow. All the Cenozoic era glass beads got smashed, en route, though, so Connie went shopping for replacements. "And then, well, one thing led to another," she sighed. "What a great idea this is," Connie said to her husband, Michael Dowd. He agreed. Now, neither of them ever had an opportunity to pray the Catholic Rosary, or any other variety, for that matter. Connie calls herself a "religious naturalist" and Michael comes from a mainline Protestant denomination—he was ordained ten years ago as a United Church of Christ minister and now belongs to the Unitarian Universalism denomination.

But by the time they'd finished stringing their rosaries, both Michael and Connie had been caught up in the magic of the creative process. "This is a way to not only celebrate Jesus' story, but everybody else's story, as well," Michael exclaimed. 'Caught up' might be too mild a description for his enthusiasm. "Michael has the most comprehensive Great Story beads in the Universe," Connie laughed.

"There are 270 beads, and they include my life story," Michael explained. Then Connie chimed in, noting that her spouse "added a whole lot more events he wanted to mark for the human era than I wanted to mark. So his beads are 10.5 feet long. They make a stunning, quadruple-loop necklace over his ministerial garb. They also wrap well as a tie belt for his monk's frock." Hers is a little smaller. They form a loop about four

feet long, "which makes a lovely, double-loop necklace."

It is hard to predict where this latest twist on an ancient prayer tradition will end up. On April 25, Connie and Michael began traveling around the country in their van, to teach the Great Story to anyone who will listen. The pair is using their own savings for this new ministry. And they are depending upon the generosity of their hosts and audiences to provide food and shelter. They are speaking in churches, schools, convents, colleges and private gatherings, to adults and kids. The "Great Story Beads" are always right there during their presentations. "Our point is, the Universe Story is not 'out there.' It's our story, too," said Michael, adding that through their travels, they hope to bring it to mainstream America.

Like Paula Hendricks, Connie wears her rosary as a necklace. "Pick a bead, any bead, and I'll tell you its story," she says.

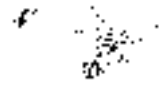
There are no rigid rules for making one's own Cosmic, Earth, or Great Story Beads, Paula, Connie, and Michael point out. To coin a pun, the expanding universe is the limit! Kids can use Jennifer Morgan's new book, "Born with A Bang," for ideas. Connie and Michael suggest adding beads symbolizing personal history. Even birthdays.

The couple themselves is partial to using Richard Forty's book, "Life" (1997); Richard Ellis' Aqua genesis (2001), and Tim Flannery's "The Eternal Frontier."

Paula Hendrick's extensive timeline is two pages long, spanning everything from the primordial flaring forth, 13 billion years ago, and includes the emergence of the first cells, blue-green bacteria, animals, and humans. It

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Gaia, ye, with Gaia herself. You have gained power, O Man, but you will now feel my wrath! All others will know the joy of giving. But you will not! I will come to you constantly, not at the end in prayer to receive your greatest gift. No, I will come to you daily in vengeance. I will keep Life from you, even as you live.”

Man looked deep into the eyes of Death and knew terror, the terror of the loss of his most beloved, Life. He fled the forest and never returned.

Man continued to grow in power and fear. But his dances with Life were short, for Death always appeared and drove the two apart. Gaia wept for her child.

The Dance of the children of Gaia became more difficult. In his fear Man kept trying to dance with Life so that she could not visit the others so readily. Life became weaker. Death spent more time among Gaia’s children.

Once again Gaia sought the counsel of Wisdom. “Tell me, O Wisdom, tell me of my youngest born, the man-child. How shall I be with him? He responds not as the others.” Wisdom responded, “You have taught your children well. All give that they may live. The one, the man-child, will also learn. Even now he grows less in strength and more in wisdom. So give, O Gaia, continue to give. For such is the Dance.”

Larry Edwards is a chemist turned storyteller. After many years of teaching at several universities and then working at the U.S. National Science Foundation, he decided that a better strategy for the healing of Earth would be the telling in a variety of ways the newly discovered story of Earth and Universe. Presently Larry teaches cosmology and chaos at the California Institute of Integral Studies, the University of Creation Spirituality, and Genesis Farm.

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even has a bead to mark the invention of the Hubble Telescope.

During one of his workshops, when Michael Dowd mentioned including one’s personal history and birthday, Sonya Shoptaugh perked up. Sonya knew about prayer beads because she is a practicing Buddhist.

Each April, the Washington, D.C., resident, celebrates her birthday by returning to Mendocino, California,—“my spiritual home, the place where the land meets the water, the place where I feel most at peace.”

“I learned about Michael’s rosary just as he was making it,” she said. Sonya decided she needed to make one, too. Michael sent her to the bead shop he and Connie had gone to. Sonya, ablaze with newfound enthusiasm, told the sales people how the beads “were becoming symbols of magnificent evolutionary leaps in our Earth’s life.” Her listeners were fascinated. “They even gave me a discount on the beads,” said the teacher/writer/photographer. Sonya’s birthday happened to be April 25, the same day Michael and Connie were beginning their adventure.

So on this particular birthday, as Sonya sat in her favorite spot, she had her beads and Universe time line with her. “I strung my beads starting with the Divine and the beginning of the Universe as we know it, continuing through time where my life becomes a part of the strand. As I strung the beads, I felt in an emotional and physical way my place in the matter of things. I honored the birth of plants, when water first came into existence on Earth, the coming of frogs, trees. I recognized the various extensions that have occurred and the coming of humans and our impact on Earth. I celebrated the birth of all

that is and felt at a core level how my birth is part of a long lineage of births and deaths and births.”

When she finished making her rosary, Sonya dunked the beads in the ocean as “a symbolic blessing, christening, baptism, sanctifying the strand in the waters of my spiritual home. I put them on proudly, feeling both the solidity of my connection to Earth as well as the temporariness of my singular existence. I am humbled and honored to have a place in the evolution of life.”

Sonya plans to restring her beads next year, by adding new ones based on facts she has learned, or have become important to her.

“When I hold the beads and marvel at the beauty of what they stand for, I am reminded how miraculous the Divine is. I am of the Earth. I move and breathe because of a force so awesome, I can barely even begin to grasp its significance.

“Through my connection to Earth in this way, I can hold the beads and pray for our humanity and myself to awaken to the responsibility bestowed upon us to be wise stewards of the Earth’s resources. My passion for Earth, social action, science, and God has combined together in the Universe Story rosary.”

For further information about rosary making, or ordering a set of Sister Gail’s Earth Prayer Beads, contact her at srgail@together.net; to learn more about Paula Hendrick’s bead making, write her at paulahendrick@hotmail.com. To access information about Connie Barlow and Michael’s Dowd’s Great Story Beads, plus their travel schedule, contact them at www.thegreatstory.org.

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