

**Big History, Death, and Human Nature:  
The Foundational Topics for Addressing “Meaning of Life” Questions  
(for adults and children)**

by Connie Barlow February 1, 2012

Recently, it occurred to me that the three topics that Michael Dowd has been singling out for more than a year are fundamental in a deeply integrated way. The three topics are: **Big History, Death, and Human Nature.**

In my view, the two fundamental questions that philosopher of religion Loyal Rue poses are **not emotionally significant enough** to serve as bedrock concerns for most individuals. Rather, more proximately significant questions emerge from the ultimacy of the two themes Loyal Rue identified as the two deepest issues for religions (and secular worldviews) to deal with:

- *How things are*
- *Which things matter*

I do, of course, see those two issues as handy ways to assess what religions are all about in a very broad sense. Indeed, Loyal Rue is surely correct in highlighting that these questions are what religions are about. As he asserts in one of his recent book titles, *Religion Is Not About God.*

Indeed, for Coming of Age classes in UU and liberal religious contexts, if we get caught up in focusing on *beliefs* — whether God exists, and whether there is an afterlife — we do our kids a terrible disservice, because beliefs may have very little to do with being informed and empowered to live a fulfilling, contributing life. Rather, the core questions for adults and youth are the deepest philosophical concerns, broadly speaking:

1. What is the meaning of life?
2. What is the meaning of *my* life?

So here’s how the 3 topics that Michael and I focus on actually fit into those 2 philosophical questions. . . .

**QUESTION 1: WHAT IS THE MEANING OF LIFE?**

**A. BIG HISTORY.** It all begins with Big History. Only by understanding the patterns of Big History do we begin fully equipped with the perspective accumulated by all of humanity and passed forward into today. The history of the Universe and Humanity are not the same as Big History. The experts who present to us lay folk “Big History” take all those facts and then sort and search for PATTERNS. It is the patterns, and only the patterns, that provide any basis for meaning-making, which we can then do collectively and individually. So it is vital for Coming of Age classrooms to help kids see Big History: the patterns that actually exist through time. What adults and youth want to make of the patterns is then, of course, up to them.

They can layer on supernatural stuff if they wish, or they can just do what Ursula Goodenough (biologist and religious naturalist) does in her book, *The Sacred Depths of Nature*, and which I sense is also my bottom-line. In that book, she posits a *Credo of Continuation*. The actual patterns that one would value as continuing (and these are not identified by Ursula, but by me) might be seen as these:

- GREATER COMPLEXITY AND DIVERSITY - Beginning 13.7 bya, and continuing via the processes of physical and biological emergence
- GREATER COOPERATION AND AWARENESS - Beginning 3.8 billion years ago, with the origin of life through which molecules "cooperate" within a cell, cells cooperate in ecosystems (keeping the chemicals cycling on this planet to support continued life), and continuing to emerge as life and societies evolve
- GREATER COMPASSION AND LOVE - Beginning with mammals / dinosaurs some 200 million years ago, and ramping up as birds and mammals became social, and then as CULTURE emerged: specifically, human language and worldviews that enabled compassion and love to express at far wider scales than biology (instincts) alone could support.
- GRATITUDE AND PRAISE TO THE WHOLE - Beginning with the birth of religious consciousness, celebrations, and ramped up by scientific discoveries which help us learn the Story of the Universe, which help us see ourselves as expressions of the whole and with real and important roles to play in its present and further unfolding. Also, as with Jon Host's ideas, if we grasp all the effort and suffering that our ancestors lived through (without which, we would never have been born!) then not only gratitude but a will to similarly persist and pass forward gifts to the future becomes a deeply felt imperative.

Thus, within the Credo of Continuation — the foundational belief that this universe and its patterns are worth revering and upholding — we can begin to collectively and individually identify what the *role of our own species is*. And, what is the role of our species *specific to this time*? As Thomas Berry would say, "What is the Great Work for humanity at this time in history?" And then, of course, the next question comes: "What role do I myself play in this Great Work?"

## **QUESTION 2: WHAT IS THE MEANING OF MY LIFE?**

Thus, what role can I play in honoring the past, in expressing the core values of the universe in the present, and provisioning the future by my actions today and in the remainder of my life? And how can I do this in ways that provide me fulfillment, while balancing with the basic joys of my animal nature — my conscious and self-aware animal nature?

**B. DEATH AND LEGACY.** The meaning of *my* life necessarily requires that one acknowledge that *my* life has an end. Indeed, from a practical standpoint, until we make the fact of our death an ever-present reminder and actually welcome it as a

motivator for shaping our life, our animal passions and present-moment attention span will almost surely be running the show. Now, there's nothing wrong with animal passions and present-moment attention running the show from time to time. In fact, a free and happy childhood is exactly that — as are components of adolescence and young adulthood. But at some point, those instinctual drives are harnessed and celebrated within a *chosen* drive that is more compelling, if we are to realize our full potential as humans. That chosen drive is our vocation — which is not necessarily the same thing as our career or how we earn a living, but where we feel we are playing our own individual role in the larger Great Work of our species and of our time in history.

Note: One's legacy need not be divorced from our ancient animal instincts; indeed, those instincts can be harnessed to support one's legacy and thus powerfully contribute to a sense of personal meaning in life. For example, one's primary legacy ("vocation") might be raising children who, in turn, make positive contributions in their adulthood, and then continuing to help nurture our grandchildren until we die. That is certainly a very ancient, instinctual, and traditional way of leaving a positive legacy. It is deeply innate, especially in many women.

Another way that our instincts can support us in our "great work" is to acknowledge the power of our social instincts which drive us to seek positive recognition from our peers, or even to be admired by (and lifted above) others in our social hierarchies. Thus the ancient animal drive for status can be harnessed in ways that positively support both a sense of meaning in life and the importance of living in a way that contributes to the wellbeing of others and the future.

But what happens when our instincts do just the opposite? What happens when they get in the way of our focusing on and fulfilling a positive legacy? This is where our third topic becomes vital:

**C. UNDERSTANDING AND MEETING THE CHALLENGES OF OUR HUMAN NATURE.** Understanding that we are evolved beings, that we each have 4 brains — not one — and that we have "mismatched instincts" that are sorely challenged by our cultural environment of "supernormal stimuli" is a vital PRACTICAL CONCERN. If we fail to actively engage with this topic and learn and acquire "best practices" for dealing with this fact, we will likely sabotage not only our "great work" and legacy, but we'll lapse into bad habits and addictions that will leave both our lives and the lives of those we love in tatters. So we each have a choice: to become aware of our mismatched instincts, so they can be effectively managed as we lead deeply fulfilling lives, or to leave them in the dark, where they can and will enslave us to do their bidding, hurting us and those we love.

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One other topic of attention would also address a prior question that underlies the question, "What is the meaning of *my* life?" That question would be:

**QUESTION 3: "WHO AM I?" (toward an evolutionary awakening of one's sense of "Great Self")**

In a way, this question feeds into the previous two. Ultimately, the power of grasping Big History is that there is the possibility of having an “evolutionary awakening”, or an “evolutionary enlightenment,” which impels us toward our “great work” and also helps us accept with ease and comfort the fact that we will die.

This awakening has been singled out by many of us in this Epic of Evolution movement: It is a sense not of ego-loss but rather of self-expansion: “I am the Universe aware of itself.” “I am evolution sensing the impulse of evolution.” “I am the story of Universe celebrating its achievements.” “I am the impulse of evolution manifesting as greater compassion or greater awareness, etc.” This sense of self-expansion, remarkably, has the same effect as what nonevolutionary traditions laud as “overcoming/annihilating ego” — it puts us on a course of focusing far beyond our own self concerns. It puts us ultimately on a path of service. But it does so not by rigorous meditation or other traditional ways of diminishing the ego. It does so by expanding a sense of who we truly are, and thus helping us utterly identify ourselves with the evolutionary process.

Powerful techniques for gaining this awakening, this expanded sense of self, and that move beyond rational understanding would include Jon Host’s ongoing project of learning about and invoking ancestors. As well, many people have achieved it suddenly after some degree of exposure to the ideas of Thomas Berry or Brian Swimme, or to a simple “we are stardust” story.

This awakening is yet another of the many examples of the spiritual awakening experience found in many religions, and like those, it cannot be explained to those who have not experienced it. It brings individuals to tears, changing their view of the world, indeed, of themselves in a profound way, and they never see (themselves in the Universe) the same again.

#### **QUESTION 4: “IS THE NATURAL WORLD ALL THAT THERE IS?”**

I would argue that all the above merits consideration as the *core commons* that universally can be grasped and held in common by any individuals alive today who value the fruits of humanity’s accumulated *collective intelligence* in 3 areas:

- the evidence of science (both spatial and temporal -- deep time)
- the evidence of scholarly study of human history
- the evidence culled from cross-cultural experience

Beyond those 3 forms of *knowledge* (and recognizing that there will always be knowledge waiting in the wings or fomenting paradigm shifts), the question becomes, *What about beliefs?* What about those claims that are not (or are not yet) in the main stream of scholarly work in science, human history, or cross-cultural experience — things that people **believe in**, because there is not sufficient evidence to **know them**? That is, what about beliefs in supernatural interventions, miracles (past and present), “the law of attraction,” past lives, reincarnation, heaven, astrology, the healing powers of crystals, prophetic or channeled writings, etc.?

Ultimately, people may continue to bring any of those *beliefs* into their worldviews, provided we all maintain the understand of the natural, factually knowable world as our reality — just like we all breathe the same air. If, however, (as Tom Atlee has

long argued) that we insist that those unproven beliefs must be jettisoned, then there will be no hope that the core benefits of "the Great Story" will expand outward beyond a small subset of humanity (especially given the fact that the human brain is so welcoming of feel-good ideas and is so inclined toward beliefs that elevate our individual significance by having natural events occurring as signs and benefits *for us*). The most we can aim for is thus to encourage everyone to accept the Universe Story as the *core*, and to consider beliefs as add-ons, which are recognized as possibly incorrect. If beliefs remain primary and the Universe Story is the add-on, then we will surely remain locked in a world where people of different religions cannot live in peace, where most individuals and all societies are out of control and enslaved to our inherited instincts, and where the future becomes darker every year.

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