

Evolution's Evangelists

For three years Connie Barlow and Michael Dowd have been unique itinerant evangelists for the story of evolution, from the Big Bang to today. Paul Harrison asked Michael about their ideas and activities.



Is anyone else doing this? And what drives you?

If there are any others, we certainly don't know about them. What drives us is the vision of what one of our mentors, Thomas Berry, calls "the Great Work," the collective calling of a particular time and place. The Great Work of our time, it seems to us, is to ensure a just, healthy, beautiful, and sustainably lifegiving world for future generations of all species. If that work's not done, in another 150 years or so there may not be any work at all left to do. This is also our vision of how we can further the creative impulse of the cosmos most effectively.

How long do you spend on the road each year and do you have a home base somewhere?

We've been on the road for the past three years, 365 days a year. You could say we consider the entire continent of North America our home base. We've lived with dozens and dozens of people, anywhere from a few days to a week or longer. Our van is just a van, not an RV, there's no bathroom or kitchen, so we're forced to live with people, which is really what we want to do anyway.

We've stored memorabilia with family. My mail is forwarded to me through my daughter in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Connie's mail is forwarded to her through her sister in Issaquah, Washington. Our bank is in Oregon. Our business address is in Washington. And we voted in Michigan.

How long do you plan to go on living the nomadic life? Can you foresee a time when you might want a change?

At this point it's inconceivable that we'd ever want to settle down. The thought of living in one place is actually depressing! Who knows, maybe in another fifteen or twenty years we'll change our minds. But when we ask ourselves, "How can we make the biggest difference for the planet in our lifetimes, given our particular gifts and limitations?" Doing what we're now doing is the only thing that comes to mind.

What do you do in a typical presentation?

We tell the 14 billion year history of cosmos, Earth, life, consciousness, and culture – the history of everyone and everything – as a sacred story. We tell the epic of evolution in a way that validates and expands traditional

religious insights by grounding them in an empirical, scientific cosmology. Our content is solidly mainstream science. My style, however, is rather evangelical or even Pentecostal – full of passion, energy, and enthusiasm.

I can think of a lot of traditional religious insights that evolution invalidates, such as the Bible creation story, or an even partly external God who intervenes in nature to change history or perform supernatural feats. Isn't evolution compatible only with more modernized versions of theism such as deism or process theology?

Yes and no. Evolution only "invalidates" traditional religious insights if these insights are interpreted literally rather than symbolically and cosmologically. When traditional concepts are interpreted cosmologically they can be seen in a larger, more meaningful, more this-world realistic way than previous generations could have possibly understood them. But yes, I agree that process theology and other attempts to "modernize" theism in light of evolution correspond to the nature of reality far more so than a mechanistic understanding of God as a supreme landlord residing off the planet and outside the universe. In light of a sacred understanding of evolution we can now see how trivialized is such a concept of the divine.

What kind of response do you get? Can you give any examples of unusual responses?

The response we've been getting has been phenomenal! We've been enthusiastically



embraced by an exceptionally wide range of audiences: from liberal to conservative to radical – in Unitarian Universalist, Christian, Unity, Church of Religious Science, Quaker, Mennonite, and Buddhist religious settings, as well as in public and private colleges, universities, and grade schools all over North America. So far, everywhere we have gone the vast majority of people tell us they been touched, moved, and inspired by our message.

Do you ever get trouble from fundamentalists?

Not at all. But, of course, any pastor who believes, as I used to, that evolution is of the devil doesn't invite me into his pulpit.

Wherever I speak there are almost always at least a few

fundamentalists in the audience. But I especially love it when I get the opportunity to speak to groups that are entirely Bible-based. It's rare, at least up to this point, but it's a real treat for me when it happens. For example, last fall I spoke to an InterVarsity Christian

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Fellowship campus group. I'd guess that 80-90% of those attending came as young earth creationists. By the end, however...well, here's one example. A football player size guy who had been extremely antagonistic at the beginning came up to me afterwards and said, "I came loaded

for bear [ready to blow me away]. You haven't converted me entirely, but you gave me a lot to think and pray about." Then he gave me a bear hug! That's a huge move to make after only 90 minutes!

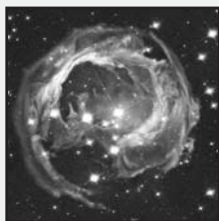
Do you encounter resistance to celebration or spirituality from atheists and humanists in UU congregations?

Atheists, humanists, and freethinkers are among those most excited about what we're doing. Just a few days ago,

the leader of a Unitarian Universalist church where I had presented said, "Congratulations. You achieved something very rare in a UU setting: you've offended no one and impressed everyone!"

A few months ago I preached a sermon in a UU church: "Can the

The Stardust Communion



Connie and Michael have developed a series of rituals embodying the "Great Story" of cosmic evolution, in atheist/pantheist and in theist versions. One of the most popular is the stardust ritual.

The Great Radiance (Big Bang) Light central candle; turn off house lights. 13.7 billion years ago.

Emergence of hydrogen and the formation of great clouds of hydrogen gas. Commune with hydrogen by anointing ourselves with water, recognizing that each hydrogen atom is a true elder 13 billion years old. While doing so, we may each speak of an elder, a mentor dear to us, whose legacy we carry with us and commit to further.

Creation of carbon, nitrogen, oxygen in Red Giant Stars and the giving away of those elements crucial for life in the exhalations of such stars. We focus on our breath: the in-breath of oxygen (from plants), and our out-breath of carbon dioxide (given back to plants), and the vast supply of nitrogen that comprises the atmosphere. All these (especially nitrogen) are the gifts of Red Giant stars.

Creation of silicon, calcium, etc. in hot blue, massive stars. Here we reflect on how the structural frame of our bodies (calcium of bone) is born within stars when the structural frame of rocks (silicon) is fused with more helium.

Participants will feel their bones holding them upright, and may choose to speak the names of rock formations that have been meaningful in their lives.



Creation of copper, gold, and silver in the explosion phase of hot blue stars, when these stars become supernovas. At the start of the ritual, and in anticipation of this part, some participants may have placed rings or other jewelry on the altar, which will be taken back at this time, one by one, while each person may choose to speak of their significance.

Black holes, dark matter, and dark energy. Let us not neglect the 96% of the Universe that we know almost nothing about (23% dark matter and 73% dark energy), while honoring the generative "darkness" that periodically comes into our own lives.

Glitter and song. Close the ritual by anointing the foreheads of one another with stardust (glitter), while the group repeatedly sings: "You are made of stardust, every single atom, of carbon and of oxygen, calcium and iron."

More rituals and stories are available at Connie and Michael's website: <http://www.thegreatstory.org/>

Universe be Trusted?” An 85 year-old woman came up to me afterwards. “This may sound strange to you,” she said, “I’m an atheist. But I’m just so excited that you’ve made it okay to use God language here in our church!”

And as far as celebrations go, whenever we do a “stardust communion service” in a UU church, almost everyone participates and loves it. In our experience there’s a real hunger in liberal religious settings for *meaningful* ritual and celebration – where the ritual and celebration is rationally based and scientifically grounded.

How would you describe your own religious orientation? Do you and Connie share the same spirituality?

Both Connie and I consider ourselves creatheists (we coined the term). I pronounce it “cree a theist” and Connie pronounces it “cree atheist”, but we mean the same thing. Essentially we are both “religious naturalists” who ground our religious/spiritual orientation in the widely accepted understanding that reality is nestedly creative and nestedly intelligent: atoms within molecules within organisms within planets within galaxies, etc, like nesting dolls, with each level being creative and intelligent in its own unique way. “God,” from this perspective, is a proper name, a sacred name, for the Whole of Reality – the largest nesting doll – the only whole that is not a subset of some larger whole.

Do you feel there is a direction to the evolution of the universe? A purpose? A goal or “omega point”?

That’s a tricky question. A direction? Certainly. A purpose, goal, or “omega point”? Possibly. It’s hard to tell at this point. Given the fact that we are a subset of the whole trying to understand the nature and direction of the whole, I’m not even sure we can

ever know for certain one way or the other. But what I believe we *can* say is that evolution *does* seem to be going somewhere. *As a whole*, the Universe can be thought of as “progressing” in the direction of greater cooperation, interdependence, complexity, sensitivity, and self-awareness at ever increasing scale and evolvability. Human beings are now an integral part of this process.

Isn’t that a teeny bit anthropocentric? In terms of numbers insects would be the direction - as Haldane said “If one could conclude the nature of the Creator from a study of his creation it would appear that God has an inordinate fondness for beetles.”

It’s not an anthropocentric perspective! If anything, I’d call it a “pantheocentric” understanding. The focus is on the whole, not on us. The emphasis is not on human beings but merely (yet importantly) on our role within the divine body of life.

Do you see any significant differences between your viewpoint and WPM pantheism?

One major difference is that I feel it’s important to acknowledge that there is a non-measurable, non-material aspect of Reality that transcends everything we can possibly know, think, or experience: what David Bohm called “the Implicate Order” and others have called, variously, “the All Nourishing Abyss”, “Pregnant Void”, “Quantum

Field”, “Realm of All Possibilities”, or “Vacuum State” within which the Universe/Multiverse exists. Other than that, however, WPM pantheism does, indeed, seem very similar to what I am calling creatheism.

Is it possible to make evolution a religious focus? Is it possible to devise celebrations, and ceremonies focused around evolution?

Not only is it *possible* to see evolution in a sacred, meaningful, religious way, I believe it is our destiny as a species to do so...indeed, in a multitude of ways. In my opinion, this is some of the most exciting stuff happening on the planet today!

As you know, most of the Earth-honoring religious rituals and celebrations out there are still coming from a pre-evolutionary understanding of the nature of reality. Neopaganism, Goddess worship, Native American and other indigenous spiritualities, all regularly use a “four directions” invocation, for example. Now few of us *really* believe that there are different spirits in the north, south, east, and west. But we go through the motions anyway because such an approach is the only thing many of us have ever been exposed to.

Connie and I (and others) are not saying there’s anything wrong with a four direction approach - it’s wonderful. But we’re committed to *also* providing evolutionary based rituals, ceremonies, and celebrations. For example, on our website we have a “stardust communion” ceremony, a number of evolutionary parables that can be acted out, a “Coming Home to North America ritual,” and other fun, playful, and meaningful science-based celebrations. People consistently tell us how much they love these experiential, evolutionary-based activities.

