

Mary Southard

“Deep-Time Art and the Language of the Heart”

Episode 17 of The Advent of Evolutionary Christianity

EvolutionaryChristianity.com



Mary Southard, a Sister of St. Joseph, is one of the best known visual artists depicting the inner human experience of a meaningful and broadly sacred understanding of an evolving universe and planet. For several decades she has been producing paintings and sculptures beloved by secularists, Christians, and adherents of other faith traditions who resonate with scientifically accurate and ecologically sensitive portrayals of this ancient and evolving cosmos — from the scale of galaxies to creatures and inward to the human response.

HIGHLIGHTS

This episode is **unsurpassed for its exploration of human despair and depression** — as evoked by life’s challenges, **“the suffering of the planet,”** and **crises of faith** that may ensue when one opens to the **discoveries of a scientific and evolutionary world picture**. Yet at each turn, Mary Southard offers, by way of her personal story and that of the universe, poignant examples of **overcoming the darkness and emerging into a brighter future**. As a **Catholic nun**, the brighter future for Mary comes in part by revitalized and this-world relevant **reinterpretations of biblical stories and passages**.

As **the sole visual artist in this series**, she explores how her paintings and sculpture have given her (and others) gifts of healing, and how any form of **creativity** can be pursued in ways that **express the very dynamics of the Universe itself**. Though not a professional theologian, Mary offers **theological interpretations that are profoundly practical** and deeply felt — as they evoke **gratitude, wonder**, and other positive emotions. Another highlight is her sharing of **her own awakening to the evolutionary wonders** of the universe and its congruence with the Divine — and to a sense that **she herself is an expression of the Universe** (as we all are) and that she is **provisioned with the same creative dynamics** (and challenges) — all the while held within **God’s unconditional love**.

SUGGESTED AUDIENCES

This is one of the top-recommended episodes for all audiences. Because Mary Southard brings into the conversation only those Christian doctrines that are enriched by an evolutionary worldview (rather than those that may be challenged by it), even theologically moderate

Christians and many Evangelicals will resonate deeply with this dialogue. Because she is an artist, not a theological scholar, there is nothing here that lay Christians will find difficult to understand. More, her clarity and wisdom is expressed with humility and a gentleness of soul — and by one who readily admits to suffering episodes of despair and confusion in the many decades she has served her community as a devout Sister of St. Joseph. Overall, she is an ideal partner to accompany anyone or any group (and across the full spectrum of Christian denominations) who may be experiencing a “dark night of the soul” or who find themselves on the cusp of a stressful transition in their own Christian faith journey.

This episode is also unsurpassed for its emotional reach. It will serve as an especially helpful beacon for those afflicted by sadness for the plight of Earth and its creatures and the difficulties of the human condition. It is also the top recommendation for any audience interested in exploring the role of the arts and storytelling in opening minds and hearts to an evolutionary and ecological worldview. Because the Study Guide questions that are suggested for this particular dialogue maximize opportunities for self-reflection and authentic (and vulnerable) discussion, group or classroom gatherings that are disinclined toward safe and heartfelt sharing will want to steer toward other episodes in this series that align with more concept-oriented and rational forms of reflection and discussion.

BLOG COMMENTS

Karen Wade says:

I have enjoyed the voices and the discussion of ideas through these conversations. Mary's unique gift to date was the voice of the mystic and the direct encounter with God. During many of these conversations I find myself on Amazon perusing a particular speaker's books. This time, I was on Mary's website perusing such a vast portfolio of paintings and sculpture.

'A picture paints a thousand words': How truly beautiful to see through her art into the great beyond of experience. And how powerful! I was also heartened by the reminder that out of darkness and chaos the new is born. Thank you, Mary and Michael, for a rich conversation that was also a delightful change of pace.

Len Sroka says:

For more than a decade now, Mary's art has spoken to me in a language beyond words. Her paintings have stirred my soul, as no environmental or spiritual rhetoric ever could. For example, her "Compassion" and "Earth I Am" bring the words of Teilhard de Chardin and Thomas Berry to such compelling life within me that I am motivated to dig deeper into my own creativity.

As a visual artist (photo-composites) and video producer, I've always been on the search for inspiration from kindred spirits. And I have certainly found that in Mary. We've been exchanging emails for over a year now, but hearing her voice her

convictions in this interview has raised my appreciation of her gifts to a new level.

KEYWORD TOPICS

Thomas Berry, Earth Calendar, the Great Work, Sisters of St. Joseph, Vatican II, Pope John XXIII, Teilhard de Chardin, evolutionary consciousness, spiritual direction, burnout, depression, art as therapy (drawing and painting), art for Universe Story, soul, personal growth, moments of grace, Jesus (wisdom of), Epic of Evolution, chaos (creative role of in universe), faith (as trust, not belief), God as light (without darkness), Matthew Fox, Creation Spirituality, Earth (environmental devastation of), medical waste on beaches, fires in Yellowstone, environmental collapse, compassion (for Earth), Sallie McFague, Gene Marshall, Brian Swimme, expanded sense of self, fall in love with Earth, the Universe Story, the wisdom of evolution, Miriam McGillis, John Surette, storytelling, Bruce Sanguin, crisis of faith, rosary, The Visitation, God's presence in Creation, Nature (healing power of), suffering of the planet, grieving (importance of allowing), Joanna Macy, Garden of Eden, paradise, unconditional love, Jesus (his sense of identity), Jesus (new perspectives on), baptism, John Haught, Judy Cannato, photosynthesis (invention of), the Kingdom (within us), hope, Eucharist, Bill Plotkin, poetry (by Thomas Berry), children (awakening to universe)

BIOGRAPHY

Mary Southard, CSJ, is a life-adventurer in matters of the heart and of the amazing beauty, wisdom, and creativity of our “sacred Universe.” A visual artist, she works in a variety of media as a painter and sculptor. She is best known as creator of the *Earth Calendar*. Mary is also an experienced educator, retreat facilitator, “Sister of Earth,” and a compelling voice for the Earth Community.

She began to realize the power and importance of art during a paralyzing crisis in her own life. She discovered that painting was the one thing she could do to restore energy, as well as heal, and to reveal and explore the depths within. Realizing that her work also spoke to others, she arranged a year of study to explore the relationship of creativity and spirituality. “I was being led into sacred spaces of soul that connected me to others, eventually to everyone and everything — to my place within all of creation.”

Around the same time, attuned to the natural world and awakened by the human stresses on the planet, Mary began a focused contemplative exploration of the evolutionary Universe. Mentored by Thomas Berry, Brian Swimme, and others, and learning some “new science,” she found this cosmological worldview making even more tangible her sense of the Divine intimately present and active at the heart of Creation. She loves to share this good news of the Universe with others, inviting them to enter the Great Story. “I see more clearly than ever that

we are essentially creative beings, engaged with the Creator in the Great Work of our time. We are all co-creators, participating in a radical shift taking place in our understanding of the nature of the Universe and our human place in it.”

Mary Southard’s webpage: <http://www.marysouthardart.org/>

SUPPLEMENTARY PICTORIAL WEBPAGE

Mary Southard’s main website includes assemblages of her paintings, including this page that features several paintings discussed in the audio conversation:

<http://www.marysouthardart.org/New%20Paintings.html>

SUPPLEMENTARY WEBPAGE

Listener comments to this audio can be found, and new ones posted, at the following url:

<http://evolutionarychristianity.com/blog/general/mary-southard/>

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. **Downturns as “moments of grace” for the creative universe and self.** Mary Southard practices what she **paints**. She not only incorporates and interprets in her art the **destructive and painful** aspects of the universe (which nevertheless bring forth **creativity**); she explores the same dynamic in her own life story. For example, she says,

What shifted me was **a wonderful burnout experience**, where I was kind of brought back to a point zero. It's a scary place to be; I was terrified. I thought that this was the end. But out of that came a realization—because there were only a couple of things that I could do that really gave me energy, and one of them was drawing and painting... So that was really, probably, my turning point and a **“moment of grace”** because it gave me an attitude, or an overriding image, which is really an image that is at the heart of the universe. **It's out of crisis that possibilities come forth and flower.** To use **Jesus’** words, which were what I was with at the time, “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it's just a grain of wheat. But if it dies, and is broken open, it brings forth much fruit.” So that was my dominant image and it kind of still is. It's **at the heart of the dynamics of the universe.**

Question 1A: *What is your response to Mary’s telling of her personal story, and her willingness to speak not so much of her accomplishments but of **her struggles**?*

Question 1B: *Is there **a painful episode in your own life story**, a deep downturn, that you might now interpret in a creative or positive way — as having called forth within you, or in some way made possible, the eventual **blossoming** of a component of your life or aspect of your*

personality that you now cherish? (Note: You need not disclose the details of the downturn, if you'd prefer. Instead, focus on the upside, what became possible that you're now grateful for.)

2. **Faith as trust, not belief.** Michael Dowd is inspired by Mary Southard's forthright presentation of chaos in the universe and in her own life as leading to creative breakthroughs. Dowd says,

What I have found to be one of the most resonant themes in this **Epic of Evolution**—this Great Story perspective—is that this theme of **chaos, breakdowns, destruction, violence, extinctions, and major bad news keeps catalyzing creativity and transformation**, over and over and over again. When people really *get* that in their belly, when they feel that in their gut: for most people, it builds their **faith**, it builds their **trust**. It allows them to trust, as it did me. It allows me to **trust the chaos of my life, the chaos of our culture**, the chaos of our times, because I have faith. I trust that chaos, death, and breakdowns aren't the last word and that there's a possibility that's available only *because* of the breakdown.

Question 2: *Throughout this series, host Michael Dowd consistently uses the word “faith”—not in the sense of “belief” but as “trust.” What is your response to Dowd's statement of what “faith” means to him? And reflecting on your own experiences of difficult times, is it belief or trust (or some other stance) that you find most helpful for carrying on when you do not yet see a way through the challenges?*

3. **“To face the dark and tend to it.”** This particular episode, more than any of the others, excels in the **forthright and heartfelt exploration of dealing with the dark corners of life**. Mary Southard offers many pieces of wisdom, in a humble way, that have grown out of her own struggles with darkness and depression. She speaks of one episode after she had become a nun and an art teacher:

I felt that I had been abandoned by God, because “God is light and in God there is no darkness.” And, boy, I was in darkness! It was also an invitation to **pay attention to the dark**, which we have a hard time doing in our culture—to really face into death, to really face into our compulsions, our addictions, and so on, and to *face* the dark and to *tend* it, and to listen deeper than that.

Question 3A: *In your own life, to what extent has it been helpful to do as Mary suggests: “to face the dark and tend to it?” What negative consequences may ensue if we do not face the dark?*

Question 3B: *Have you had dark times in your life when you felt you had to **conceal your emotions from others** — that you could not be authentic? Did you feel you had to pretend to colleagues or family members or friends or associates in your school or church that you were doing okay? (If not, have you ever felt sad that people important to you had been doing just that — and had suffered in isolation?) Please elaborate, to the extent you feel comfortable.*

Question 3C: *Mary Southard's willingness to talk openly about her depressions is a sign that she doesn't unduly judge or condemn that process in herself or others. She links this openness and acceptance to what she learned about the prevalence of chaos and breakdown in the universe — and that it can lead to breakthroughs. Might you be able to manifest a **more accepting and generous attitude to your own dark times**, and those of friends and loved ones, if you too learn more about the story of the Universe? Or is the cosmos just too big and inhuman a context to offer real emotional sustenance for you?*

4. **Sensitivity in artists as leading to depression.** Southard and Dowd share common knowledge about how there is sometimes **a link between creative artists and depression**. Mary confirms,

Over the years, what I've begun to realize is that **there are certain sensitivities that allow all of that to come into you**. Out of that, expression then comes: the good things and the bad things, the light and the darkness, the chaos and confusion as well as the hope. So I've come to learn that [darkness and depression] go with the territory—and I wouldn't have it any other way, anymore.

Question 4: *Is it helpful to know that aspects of yourself (or others) that easily pick up and amplify both the hope and the despair of the surrounding world may actually have **an important role to play because of that sensitivity**? If so, how? If not, why? Might this awareness assist you with authentically feeling more **compassion** (and less judgment) toward yourself and others? Say more.*

5. **Environmental degradation and despair.** Mary Southard poignantly tells of a time in her life when she really took in — cognitively and emotionally — the extent of our species' impact on the planet. She recalls,

The summer of **1988**: that was quite a summer. I was in Connecticut giving retreats at the end of the summer of '88, and that's when all the **medical waste** was washing up on the beach. That summer had been very, very hot and I was visiting one of our sisters in Wyoming, just as **Yellowstone began to burn**—so we were in this great smoke. And when I saw the first *Time Magazine* of January, the Person of the Year was the Planet of the Year. And it was Earth—wrapped up in plastic and tossed out on the beach, with the rest of the waste... It was like something shifted inside of me.

Question 5: *Is there a particular instance you can bring to mind when you yourself really understood—and perhaps despaired—over the plight of the planet or some particular facet of the environmental crisis? If not, to what extent does it seem that your expectations may have shifted over the years — that you, in a way, have grown numb to planetary deterioration, and have come to expect bad news as a matter of course? Please elaborate.*

6. **“Experiencing myself as Earth.”** Mary Southard tells the story of how she first encountered the story of Earth and of the Universe as **a meaningful, sacred story**. She recalls,

I first met **Brian Swimme's writing** when one of our high school religion classes was reading *The Universe is a Green Dragon*. The teacher there gave a copy to all of the science teachers, and one of those teachers is one of my good friends. She was reading it and she said, "Mary, you've got to read this. You'll love it!" And so I was reading *The Universe is a Green Dragon*, and a wonderful thing began to happen. I had always been able or invited, you might say, into catching the vibes of the Earth; I always sensed a real kinship and presence. But reading about the wind and the sun and so on, **I began to experience myself in a new way**. I couldn't have said it then, but I can say it now: I think that was the beginning of **experiencing myself as Earth—not separate from Earth**. I realized that **the dynamics within Creation are the same dynamics that are going on in me**—growing me, alluring me.

Question 6A: *Many people (both religious and nonreligious) who have been inspired by encountering the Story of the Universe in a meaningful, inspiring way **report the same pathway of "awakening."** They experience a fundamental and lasting shift in **identity**. They no longer primarily think of themselves as a human being on Earth in a universe. Rather, they become an expression of Earth, an expression of the universe. [Another episode in this series, the interview with Bruce Sanguin, powerfully speaks of this same awakening experience.] So the question is: **Have you had an opportunity via this series or in some other context to expand your sense of identity by feeling yourself as an expression of the Universe or Earth?** If so, what conditions made that sensation happen? And has it made a deep and lasting difference in your life, as it has for Mary Southard, Bruce Sanguin, Michael Dowd, and others?*

[If not, take a moment to reread or re-listen to this piece of her story of awakening, and see if you can step into her shoes. See if you can feel what she feels. And then report on your experience.]

Question 6B: *Mary Southard links her **ability to witness her emotional dark times** to her understanding of the role that breakdown plays in the creativity expressed in the universe at large. Do you think her **expanded sense of self**—as an expression of the Universe, not just an isolated human—also plays a role **in her ability to accept and handle periods of despair?** Please elaborate.*

Question 6C: *If you, too, could be blessed with an "awakening" to an expanded sense of **self** (seeing Earth and the Universe as your larger "body"), do you think this shift might also help you better handle the inevitable **challenges and breakdowns in your own life journey?** If yes, how so? If no, why not?*

7. **Practices for embodying beliefs.** It is one thing to acquire a new perspective or belief. It is quite another to have it **securely embed in our deep emotional brain** in a way that has us *live* that belief. Here is how Mary Southard describes an **embodied spiritual practice** she initiated.

What I felt myself called to do—to participate in this **Great Work**, in this project of Creation, of evolution—was so beyond me that I decided the best thing I could do was, as soon as I woke up in the mornings, I would pull on my boots and my parka and so on, and I went out and stood on the

Earth. That was **to remind myself of the billions of years of creative energy, which is flowing through me now**—that it's not *me* that has to do anything. But I need to allow it to be done *through* me. You know what I mean?

Question 7A: *When you acquire a new perspective that has great emotional appeal, and especially one that you sense may assist you in living your life in a bigger way, what have you done to prevent that perspective and that resolve from just **fading as the weeks pass**? Overall, have you developed a **habit or embodied practices** that keep you on the path of expressing your highest self and for maintaining trust and hope **in times of setback or confusion**? If so, please share more.*

Question 7B: *If this perspective of feeling the dynamics of the Universe flow through you is alluring, or if a **different perspective you have gained in this series is important to you**, what **habits might you cultivate** (whether they be embodied or something else) that could help you maintain, deepen, and habitually reside in that perspective? ... And what will be your first steps?*

8. **“What would it be like if we could trust...”** Mary poses this question,

Oftentimes I wonder, **what would it be like if we could really trust that we have the wisdom of 13.7 billion years of evolution within us—that we have these dynamics, that we can rely on that creative energy, that fire that’s within us since the fireball?**

Question 7: *How would you respond to that question?*

9. **“We’ll protect what we love.”** Mary Southard’s artistic work in behalf of Earth is based on a **principle of love**. She says,

The way we’re going to wake up and change the way we are doing things is we have to **fall in love again with the Earth**. So that year I worked on an Earth Calendar that I titled, “Let’s Fall in Love Again.” I think there’s a kind of insight there that is really true—that we’ll protect what we love.

Question 9A: *Does that ring true for you? In your service work, or the donations that you make, do you find that you serve and give most authentically and with joy **when you are serving that which you love**? Or is some other emotion a more important motivating force for you? (Please elaborate.)*

Question 9B: *Can you **recount a specific experience or insight** that inclined you to want to serve in some capacity—**not from a sense of responsibility or duty** but out of a deep and energizing love?*

Question 9C: *As parents, grandparents, teachers, neighbors, or mentors, how might we more effectively assist **our children and youth** to develop an environmental conscience that would not only provide knowledge and guide action but that would **nurture a deep love for Earth** and its creatures?*

10. **Bad news and overwhelm.** Mary speaks from her own experience that **gaining knowledge about a problem** (in her case, it was the planetary scale of environmental degradation) can sometimes do **the opposite of urging us into helpful action**. She says,

We can't do everything, because there's so much to be done—and I think that kind of overwhelms people. **If we're going to be able to let the truth in, we also have to have a sense of how we can live with that truth.** Otherwise, we'll be so overwhelmed. **Sometimes we feel guilty** to start with—that it's all our fault. Well, that doesn't help. We didn't do it on purpose. But now, how can we creatively participate in creating alternative ways of being in a relationship with the planet?

Question 10A: *Has this sense of overwhelm ever been part of your experience? And have you encountered any particular books, media, or other sources that helped you learn about the scope and causes of bad news without plunging into overwhelm or despair? Overall, what do you do to prevent bad news about the world from driving you into the **numbness** of overwhelm or the **heartbreak** of despair?*

Question 10B: *Did you have an opportunity in **your childhood** to develop a sense of wonder and a bond with the natural world before you had to take in the bad news? Please elaborate.*

Question 10C: *At what age should **children** be introduced to bad news, including the perils facing our planet? Is it important for children to be **afforded opportunities to fall in love with Earth and its creatures, and to be filled with awe and wonder, before** having to learn about the losses and the looming dangers?*

11. **Letting go of old faith forms before the new forms are clear.** Mary uses the **image of a trapeze** to convey the uncertainty that faced her as she took in this new, scientifically grounded understanding of the universe. She recalls,

I remember one time listing all the things [in doctrinal beliefs] that didn't make sense anymore. It felt like I had to leave those behind and hope that something would come up to replace them. **It felt like I was leaving what was familiar—like, if I were a trapeze artist.** You know how you leave the trapeze at the one end, and then you hope there's going to be one at the other end when you arrive there—wherever *that* is in mid-air.

Question 11A: *To what extent does Mary's image of a trapeze ring true for **your own times of letting go of something foundational for you**—before you were sure there was an adequate replacement waiting on the other side?*

Question 11B: *Is there **something lingering in your own life**, perhaps in the background, that remains unresolved because thus far you have not been willing to swing out from your platform and let go of the bar? And, if so, what encouragement might you find in Mary's story?*

12. **Reinterpreting core Christian stories and doctrines: The Rosary.** After Mary took the leap and “let go of the trapeze bar” of the traditional interpretations of Christian stories she had grown up with, she was **launched into an exciting realm of discovery**. As an example, she

tells this story:

We used to say the **Rosary** when we grew up, and it took all these moments—turning point moments of Mary and Jesus’ life. One of those moments is called, “**The Visitation**,” where Mary is asked to become the mother of Jesus, and she was told that her older cousin, Elizabeth, was also going to have a baby. So when Mary goes to see her, Elizabeth realizes she is coming because the child in her womb leaps. **That visitation became to me something new:** I said, “Oh! That’s what happens to me when I’m out praying at the ocean, where something in me is moving—there’s new life that moves in me! **That’s what happens when I’m walking at night and I feel the presence of the tree! It’s really the presence of God within all Creation.**”

Question 12A: *Whether your faith perspective is Christian or secular or something else, **what is your response to Mary’s sense of triumph in this story?** For both Southard and Dowd, the scientifically grounded Story of the Universe enriches their experience of life and trust in the overall dynamics of the world. If you’ve had a similar experience, please share it with the group.*

Question 12B: *Bring to mind an **example from your own life experience** when you grasped a **fresh interpretation** of an old way of seeing or understanding — and when the new way of seeing delighted you. Briefly describe that transition, what it felt like, and where you are now.*

13. **Reinterpreting core Christian stories and doctrines: The Garden of Eden.** Embracing the story of the Universe and herself as an expression of the Universe, Mary allowed **her love for Earth** to blossom in a new way. She recalls,

I remember the day I realized that I was raised in the Garden of Paradise. I was raised in the Garden of Eden. We’re evolving—we came out of the Earth, we carry within us what other creatures invented, we might say, over the course of evolution... So, I was raised in a garden. The day that I realized that, I remember thinking, “**Wow, are stories ever powerful!**” It had kept me from seeing what’s all around me and realizing that *I’m living in a paradise.*

Question 13A: *To what extent do you resonate with Mary’s reinterpretation of the notions of paradise and the Garden of Eden?*

14. **New perspectives on “the human Jesus and Jesus the Christ.”** Mary offers several examples of how, now that she embraces the Story of the Universe, she has new ways of thinking about (and feeling) the significance of Jesus in her faith walk. For example, she says,

I am not just here so that God can try me out to see if I am worthy of heaven. That was kind of ingrained into us somehow—**this whole thing about being born in sin and having to be rescued and that we are just here to prove ourselves.** So that was a huge shift for me, and it is ongoing—because that other stuff is so deep in us: achievement, and the difficulty we have in really believing how loved we are, unconditionally. **I began to see in Jesus when those moments happened for him.** I think his self-realization, or his self-sense of identity, came when he was baptized in the Jordan and he heard, “You are my son, my beloved.” So then I began to allow myself to experience

that same sense, more and more. And sometimes it just overwhelms you, when you're out there: realizing **how loved we are. There's nothing we need to prove.**

Question 14A: *Again, Mary takes a key Christian story and interprets it in a way that has deep emotional and practical significance for her. **Can you bring to mind a Christian story or doctrine that you have personally interpreted in a way that is different from how you first learned it — and that lights you up or lights your path?***

Question 14B: Michael Dowd reflects on the importance of reinterpreting the Christian story in this way: “We’re at this incredible time when we get to rethink all the core aspects of our faith. And we get to reinterpret them, to relook at them, to re-appreciate them from this cosmological understanding that we are the result of nearly 14 billion years of divine grace and creativity—that we are the Earth becoming conscious of Itself. We are nature uncovering its own nature.” Then Dowd concludes, “**It’s an incredible time to be alive—that we all get to participate.** It’s not like we can wait for some group of authoritative men to tell us, ‘Here’s what it means.’ It’s a community co-creation.” Here’s the question: *When you step into Dowd’s shoes, can you feel (or imagine) why he is so fired up for reinterpreting Christian doctrines in light of our new understanding of an evolving Cosmos? When you remember **that you too are participating in this process**, what, if anything, comes up for you?*

14. **The healing power of the arts and for working through grief.** Mary not only produces paintings and sculptures that deeply resonate with many viewers—**she also paints for personal therapy** and to work through episodes of grief. She recalls,

Another link is **the suffering of the planet**; I would have to do a lot of grieving. Again, grieving isn’t something that we do really well in our culture. But **Joanna Macy** has done so much to help us with that. **Unless we grieve, we will never have the energy to make the changes we need to make.** And so, I would find myself, when I was distraught with grief, I would paint it out. There are quite a few images that I have painted, because I have to do it every once in awhile. It builds up—because the news is coming at us, all the time, of how much more serious it is.

Question 14A: *To what extent **have you experienced the healing power of the participatory arts**—painting, pottery-making, singing, music-making, dance, poetry, needlework, weaving, woodworking, other crafts? Or perhaps cooking-as-art, or gardening not as a chore but as artistic expression? And which of the arts most calls to you—or can you think of someone you know for whom the arts are therapeutic?*

Question 14B: *What about **grief**? Have you used artistic expression for working through grief? (Grief here is meant generically: the experience of any major loss—not only death of a loved one or pet.)*

15. **The arts as exploration, as participating in evolution.** Beyond personal therapy, Mary talks about another aspect of the process of artistic creativity. She says,

I participate in evolution when I paint. I never know where a painting is going to go. There are some kinds of art that are self-expression—like the grieving I already talked about, or the ecstasy: that’s an *expression*. But then there are things where the Earth, or the wisdom of the Earth, the dynamics, things that I’m learning, things that I experience lead me deeper. That is more like an exploration and a discovery.

Later in the interview she explains,

The arts provide a way of learning the Story, or being present to the Story, or being able to experience the implications of this amazing time that we are in, **at a level that is deeper than our verbal *Homo sapiens* can grasp** it. We have so many more levels of consciousness that are deeper than thought, and that we are just beginning to discover and to access. I think the arts invite us to *go* there and be able to receive the mysteries that are really beyond thought, beyond realization.

Question 15: *Mary Southard, as a professional artist whose worldview has been expanded and deepened by the Great Story of the Universe, experiences the process of creating art as participating in the evolutionary dynamics of the universe — especially the sense of openness to new and unplanned possibility. What difference might it make for your own attitude and joy if you played with Mary’s perspective whenever you engage in some form of creative activity?*

16. **“With the strength of the mountain in my back.”** Mary told the story underlying one of her most recent paintings: “Gift of the Mountain.” She was on a **spiritual retreat in Grand Teton National Park** in the Rocky Mountains, when she had a powerful experience:

I found myself sitting with my back against the mountain. I don’t remember what they were saying or anything like that or how this all happened, but **suddenly I was inside that mountain**. The image of it was I was inside this glorious chamber of amethyst crystals. It was like being inside of a giant geode at the heart of the mountain. Well, even just talking about it I just get overwhelmed. It really is an experience of just being held by Divinity, by the magnificence of this Creation. **I came back home with the strength of the mountain in my back**—the Grand Tetons.

Question 16: *What response do you have to her story (and her painting of that experience, below left)? Does her story remind you of a particularly powerful and uplifting experience in nature you may have had? And, if so, what (if anything) did you do to embed that experience deeply into your memory? For example, did you journal about it, write a poem about it, perhaps paint it? Or did you interpret and embed it through storytelling? Do you periodically find yourself re-telling this story to yourself or others? If not, why? If so, how has it been received by others?*



17. **POEM: “It Takes a Universe.”** Host Michael Dowd speaks of one of his own favorite paintings (above right) by Mary Southard, and then he recites a poem that the painting reminds him of. The poem is “It Takes a Universe,” and it was written by their shared mentor, **Thomas Berry**. Here is the poem:

The child awakens to the Universe
The mind of the child awakens to a world of wonder
Imagination to a world of beauty
Emotions to a world of intimacy
It takes a Universe to make a child
Both in outer form and inner spirit
It takes a Universe to educate a child
It takes a Universe to fulfill a child.
And the first obligation of any generation to its children
Is to bring these two together
So that the child is fulfilled in the Universe
And the Universe is fulfilled in the child
While the stars ring out in the Heavens

Question 17: What is your response to the poem and/or painting?

*Supplemental: If you would like to experience an **AUDIO of Thomas Berry** reciting another poem he wrote about children (as the above poem is not available in audio on the Internet), click on “Dedication Page” audio here: <http://www.thegreatstory.org/tb-audio.html>*

18. **Modes of learning: rational, stories, art.** A central feature of this “Evolutionary Christianity” series is host Michael Dowd inviting each guest to talk about (and give examples

of) how a scientific understanding of the Universe (of “Creation”) enriches faith. Many of the most esteemed theologians in Christianity are represented in this series. **Mary Southard is the only speaker whose vocation and role in the Epic of Evolution movement is not primarily as a generator of ideas and as a writer of treatises, but as a visual artist.** She offers personal stories and examples that focus on **the emotional gifts of** these fresh perspectives on Earth, the Universe, life’s challenges, Christian doctrines, and faith.

Question 18: What mix of approaches do you prefer for learning new perspectives? Is empirical presentation and rational argument pretty much all that you need? Or do you primarily grasp new ideas and ways of viewing the world via stories and examples? What about emotional expression and imagery, as Mary uses? What about experiencing someone else’s artistic expression of that concept or perspective?

Editor’s Note: View some of Mary Southard’s paintings [here](#) on the EvolutionaryChristianity.org website, and also on [her own website](#). You can see the chapel altar she designed [here](#).

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