

John Cobb

“Process Christianity in the 21st Century”

Episode 6 (transcript of audio) of The Advent of Evolutionary Christianity
EvolutionaryChristianity.com

Note: The 38 interviews in this series were recorded in December 2010 and January 2011.

Michael Dowd (host): Welcome to Episode 6 of “[The Advent of Evolutionary Christianity: Conversations at the Leading Edge of Faith](http://EvolutionaryChristianity.com).” I’m [Michael Dowd](http://EvolutionaryChristianity.com), and I am your host for this series, which can be accessed via EvolutionaryChristianity.com, where you too can add your voice to the conversation.

Our featured guest today is [John Cobb](http://EvolutionaryChristianity.com). [John](http://EvolutionaryChristianity.com) is another one of the elders in this movement. He's been a leader in process thought for the last two generations. In fact, he began teaching at [Claremont School of Theology](http://EvolutionaryChristianity.com) the year I was born, in 1958. He and [David Ray Griffin](http://EvolutionaryChristianity.com) founded [The Center for Process Studies](http://EvolutionaryChristianity.com) at Claremont School of Theology. He's the author of [30 books](http://EvolutionaryChristianity.com) and is a major leader in this field, especially integrating process metaphysics with Christian theology and a deep evolutionary understanding, a deep-time understanding. The subject we talk about is “Process Christianity in the 21st Century.” As you'll see, though John and I have a somewhat different philosophical outlook, we hold much in common as we walk the path of evolutionary Christianity together.

Host: Hello John Cobb, and thank you for joining us in this conversation on evolutionary Christianity.

John: Well, I'm glad that you're doing this work on evolutionary Christianity, and I'm delighted to be part of it.

Host: I am, too. I need to share with you a story, because you directly, through your writings, you're the person who most influenced me in 1984. I was a young student at [Evangel College](http://EvolutionaryChristianity.com) in Springfield, Missouri, and I was struggling with how to integrate a science-based evolutionary understanding of reality with my faith. I had grown up Roman Catholic, but I was here at this evangelical, Pentecostal college, and for several years prior to that had basically assumed that evolution was evil, of the devil, and couldn't be trusted.

I audited a class at Southwest Missouri State University, a graduate-level class. It was called Perfectionism, and there was a guest lecturer who came in, [Tobias Meeker](http://EvolutionaryChristianity.com), and he was totally into process theology. At the time, I felt his theology was so liberal that he was going to hell, and yet he was the most Christ-like person I had ever met. I'd never met anybody more

generous and thoughtful and compassionate. And so, I ended up spending time with him, and he gave me a copy of yours and David Ray Griffin's book, [Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition](#). It was my introduction to this entire evolutionary theology, this entire deep-time understanding. So I want to publicly thank you. If it hadn't been for you and that book, this whole series might not be happening now.

John: I'm glad to claim all the credit I can. *[laughter]* It sounds like you encountered a rather saintly person who had a lot to do with that.

Host: He did, and it was who he was *being*. It wasn't an argument.

So John, could you please share a bit of your own testimonial, your own story.

John: Well, I didn't have the struggle that you did. I remember when I was in maybe sixth grade, one of my teachers gave me van Loon's *Story of Humanity*. It was a history of the world written in a very simple style, and it began with an evolutionary account of how human beings came into being—so I became an evolutionist. I never knew that I wasn't one before. So I've been assuming that human beings came into being in an evolutionary way from childhood.

[Editor's note: The book is [The Story of Mankind](#) by [Hendrik Willem van Loon](#). It was written for children, and won the first Newbery Medal in 1922. It continues to be updated.]

When I was in the army, I had the very unusual experience of being with intellectuals for the first time in my life. That's not what you usually expect to happen in the army, but I was in a Japanese language program, and most of the people who were in that program had gotten themselves quickly into Japanese language studies as soon as the war broke out to make sure they could do something of a more scholarly sort rather than tote rifles in the field. They were mostly from New York, and most of them were either Jews or Catholics, and they introduced me to a whole world of thought that I hadn't known existed.

Host: This was in the mid 1940s?

John: Yes, [Pearl Harbor](#) was '41, so I went into the army in '43. So this was not exactly a *test* of faith, but it made me realize there were all kinds of questions that I had never thought about that didn't immediately support my Georgia piety. I also became aware that Georgia piety was, in the eyes of these New Yorkers, a rather charming but odd eccentricity, or sociological phenomenon, you might say. So I began studying theology in a way. I was told at that time about the [University of Chicago](#), and that it would be possible for me to go to the University of Chicago and go directly into a graduate program, whereas I hadn't really finished two years of college.

I went into the humanities division and into the program, The Analysis of Ideas and the Study of Method. I said that my problem that I would be working on (I suppose, for three years in a master's program) was to study all the reasons that in the modern world belief in God had

become so problematic. Within six months of that kind of study, I fully understood why belief in God had become very problematic—and I was in trouble in my own belief in God. During those six months, I had also had some experience with members of the Divinity School faculty. I had never intended to go to the [University of Chicago Divinity School](#); I wasn't sure whether what they taught was really Christianity, a little bit like what you were saying.

But nevertheless, I saw that they had reflected about the questions that were bothering me, that their thought was taking account of those questions, so I decided it was time to expose myself to some people for whom these problems were not new, and who still were affirming something. So I transferred to the Divinity School and gradually began to piece things back together.

Host: Say a little bit more about how you began piecing things together again, because I think that's an important story.

John: Well, perhaps I need to say why they came apart. They came apart not because there were particular arguments that were particularly convincing, but rather that the modern world had a way of understanding things which really left no place for God. So, piecing them back together again had to do with becoming aware that the modern world of thought was based on some assumptions that I didn't have to accept—that there was another way of looking at reality other than the modern one. These days we'd say “[postmodern](#)”—of course, that word wasn't around in those days. And *that* I learned first and most powerfully through [Charles Hartshorne](#), but then I saw that that was an understanding broadly that was shared by the Divinity School faculty.

The position at the Divinity School in those days was called [neo-naturalism](#)—at least that was the label. If you insisted on a label, that's what they would say. The point there was that what was generally called naturalism was a very materialistic, mechanistic, reductionistic view of the world. And they thought that the changes that had taken place in physics at the beginning of the 20th century made possible a very different understanding of reality that was not reductionistic, materialistic, deterministic, and so forth. And in *that* context, it once again became possible to discuss the reality of God. It didn't follow automatically, but that made it an intelligible discussion.

So, much of my work has been to argue against the dominant metaphysics of modernity and to say there is a deeper way of understanding that makes more sense of contemporary science—but that requires revision of a great deal of what is now ordinarily understood as mainstream science. That's true for me with respect to the theory of evolution. I'm an evolutionist, without any question, but I think the dominant theory of evolution is bad.

Host: Bad, in what sense?

John: It doesn't take account of the evidence, and its implications are extremely humanly destructive.

Host: Say a little bit more about that.

John: I'm talking about the fact that the [Cartesian worldview](#) is adopted by many of the sciences and by the mainstream of biology. That worldview (and of course this is especially emphasized in evolutionary theory) has no place in the world for anything like *purpose*. So, the exclusion of purpose from evolutionary theory is one of the mainstays, and any attempt to introduce any notion of purpose is regarded as heretical. But on the other hand, the evidence that animals behave purposefully is pretty strong. The denial that they behave purposefully is a metaphysical denial; it's not a scientific one. Nevertheless, it is a central part of official neo-Darwinian evolutionary theory.

I believe they are simply wrong in that. Animals *do* behave purposefully, and the purposeful behavior of animals has an effect upon the evolutionary process. So, if you want then to make a quick connection, I believe that *purpose* in the world is derived from divine purpose. That does not mean that God has a purpose which is *the* outcome of evolutionary theory. I think God's purpose is the increase of value in the world, and we derive our purposes from the divine purpose.

Host: I'm just curious, if someone were to say to you, “How does this understanding differ from [Intelligent Design](#)?” how would you respond to that?

John: Well, I'm not an authority on Intelligent Design, but what little I have read sounds to me as if they accept basically the Cartesian worldview. Then *within* the Cartesian worldview, in order to bring God into the picture, you have to point out anomalies in the course of evolutionary development that require something from outside the natural order—so that it has a [supernaturalist](#) tone to it. And that is, I think, not a good way to go about it. Some of the things they point to, I think, have very remarkable features of evolutionary development, but to separate them from the normal course of evolution in a drastic way seems to me to be a serious mistake. I think God is present in every step of the process.

Host: I agree. In fact, one of the things that I've noted is that there are a number of thought leaders involved in this conversation, this [Advent of Evolutionary Christianity](#) conversation, who find great value in a process understanding of God's nature and how God works. I'm wondering if you could say a little bit about that, because I know that it's been an inspiring way of thinking outside of the modernist world or the traditionalist understanding, a biblical literalist understanding as well.

John: Yes, well, the [biblical literalists](#) have to too great an extent accepted the Cartesian world, and then they can be biblical literalists only by then saying, “but there are a lot of exceptions, a lot of interventions into it.” I think the interventionist approach is very destructive

of science. But if we see that God is a factor in everything that happens, which is [the process view](#), then one can understand that *the way God works generates an evolutionary process*. God's acts do not displace others; they become an additional factor in the process. This is the way I understand grace operating in *my* life. I don't think that most of the time I do without God and then all of the sudden there are moments at which God comes in. I think God is present in every moment of my life. Sometimes I'm more responsive to it than others, so that there are particular moments where the graciousness of God is more apparent, but that doesn't make it a drastic exception.

I think maybe there's another way of putting it that might be helpful: If you accept the Cartesian view of the universe as basically a machine, then the only way that anything can happen that is not purely mechanistic is by an action *upon* things from the outside. And this was true in the 18th century debates—that either you say the machine just goes on, on its own, and God's role was just to set it up, or you say from time to time God intervenes in the process in a supernatural way.

But if you understand that the world is not a machine to begin with—it's really made up of events, happenings, occurrences. Each of these occurrences is a synthesis of many, many things. In every moment of my experience, everything I've ever experienced in the past plays some slight role, and new things are playing some slight role. To say that also God is active in every one of those events means that God is one element in my experience—but not to displace the other elements.

God introduces freedom, novelty, also ultimately order. God's role is extremely important, and it is the role of God especially to introduce novelty—that is, a purposive novelty—that allows us to take account of all the evidence in regard to evolution, because animals do behave in novel ways at times. And these changes in animal behavior affect the course of evolution. The evidence for that is very strong.

Host: ... especially when you look at the human animal, and the way that we store and exchange information through symbolic means. We certainly are an animal that brings tremendous novelty into the process. Of course, the question then becomes: from a religious perspective, how do we align with the way reality is? How do we further this divine creative process, this process of grace and creativity that has been at work for billions of years? How do we bring justice into the world? How do we expand our circles of compassion and generosity and care and commitment and consideration? How do we create social structures that embody (to use religious language) “the values of the kingdom”? To use more secular language, How do we create institutions that help create a situation where the cheaper, easier, more convenient thing to do becomes the *right* thing to do? That we find structures that support us in living in right relationship to reality at all nested levels: right relationship to the air, to the water, to the soil, to other species, to other humans, to other human groups. I think that's some of the growing edge that we're on now.

John: It is indeed. And although of course a great deal of what you've described can only be ascribed to human beings, if we take evolution seriously, the line between us and other creatures is not an absolute line. We evolved from other creatures, and those creatures must have had *some* characteristics that are in the same direction as ours.

Host: I couldn't agree more. In fact, I think the idea that there's a sharp line of morality is made by those who are simply unfamiliar with so much that's been done in recent decades in terms of [primatology](#) and the study of [the rudiments of morality](#)—certainly moral feelings and behaviors within the more complex animals and primates. And then throughout human history, we keep finding ways of cooperating in larger spheres, larger circles. My main mentor, Thomas Berry, who just died a year and a half ago, was regularly making this point: that the idea that there's a radical discontinuity between humanity and the natural world is actually a source of many of our problems.

John: And yet, rather strikingly, some of the evolutionists seem to assume it. In fact, because it's very difficult for them to deny that human beings are purposefully manipulating evolution, and yet they insist that there is no purpose in the world.

Host: You probably have certain people in mind. Most of the evolutionists, or some of the leading science figures in evolution that [Connie](#) and I know, wouldn't probably state it that way. Even the term *materialist* is one that's fast fading. The idea of an [emergentist](#), that life is emerging—complex forms keep emerging out of lesser forms—I think adds a sense of the mystery, adds a sense of the majesty (to use religious language) that the old Cartesian mechanistic understanding of evolution... I just don't know of too many evolutionists who would hold that older picture.

John: Well, I'm delighted that you can say that, and I do believe that change is taking place, so that I'm optimistic in that sense. But, nevertheless, if you will examine how evolution is *said* to take place, how the new species emerge, the standard language and formulation is still that of *random mutation plus natural selection*. And random mutation is definitely understood as a non-purposeful event. I think there are a lot of non-purposeful elements in it; I'm not disputing that. And natural selection is described in ways that don't allow the introduction of purpose.

Host: I think the word itself, *purpose*, may be one of the challenging points. We've stayed at the home of [David Sloan Wilson](#), who's probably the most respected evolutionary theorist alive today; he and [Ed Wilson](#) at Harvard and [Richard Dawkins](#) are probably the three most respected evolutionary theorists. David is pretty clear on this understanding that the mechanisms of evolution are more complex than merely natural selection acting on genetic mutations. There's the whole world of [evo-devo](#) and [epigenetics](#). Even in the last decade or so, it's mushroomed. It's a fertile time.

John: Yes, I think there's a great possibility of evolutionists breaking from the background. Again, I haven't done a careful study, but my guess is if you pick up ten textbooks taught in high school or college and examined what they say about evolutionary theory, they will still be sticking to the notion that there's the random mutation and the natural selection.

Host: Yeah, I think you're right. Textbooks tend to be about a generation out of step.

John: So, that's what I'm arguing. We need to work *against* the textbook explanation, which is also one I have heard from rather important figures in the field, so that I don't think it has been overcome. In fact, last summer at a gathering of philosophers and biologists who are interested in bringing into being a new model—I rather like Whitehead's own term of *organic mechanism*, because of course mechanism plays a huge role; but *organic mechanism* is very different from mechanical mechanism. Organisms act, and how they act makes a difference. Many of them act intelligently and purposefully. They don't act for the sake of bringing into being new species. Nevertheless, their intelligent and purposeful acts create a situation that has an effect upon which of the genetic mutations is selected—and that needs to be given an equal place in the standard interpretation.

Host: I completely agree. One of the reasons why chapter two of my book is titled “[Evolution Is Not Meaningless, Blind Chance](#)” is precisely because in the minds of so many people—and I think you may be right, because of the textbooks being used—there's a sense that that's what evolution is: just meaningless, blind chance. That's *not* the current state of affairs in terms of our best thinking on it, but it's not made its way into the textbooks.

John: Unfortunately many of those who you are referring to, who know that's not an adequate way of formulating it, don't make strong statements saying, “Don't trust the textbooks.” You don't hear that very often.

Host: Well, that's a good point. Have you seen young people, students, for whom this process metaphysics, this understanding of a more organic universe, has made a real difference in their lives?—either because they had bought into the dualistic, mechanistic understanding or because of the traditional religious understanding. Do you have any stories of where somebody has truly had a life-changing experience, in terms of coming to this more sacred, organic evolutionary understanding, this process understanding?

John: Well, I hear stories similar to the one that you have just been telling about yourself—of people who felt they had to make a choice between being believers in God, and if they took that route, then they had to reject evolution and a lot of other things—that process thought *did* help them to see they didn't have to make that kind of choice. So, yes: but I'm not sure there's

some *one* story. I'm very proud of what some of my students are doing these days. They are developing process thought in new and rich ways. [Catherine Keller](#) at Drew is, I think one, of the finest theologians in the country at the present time, [Jay McDaniel](#) has done wonderful work in ecological thinking and Buddhism—and also connecting both of those with issues of justice and liberation. I don't think I want to continue bringing up particular people. The two I've worked most closely with were my colleagues here, [David Griffin](#) and [Marjorie Suchocki](#). I think process theology has meant a lot to a lot of our students.

A man who is a pastor of a leading church in Columbus, Ohio, for whom [the problem of evil](#) was the overwhelming difficult one: he gives credit to David and me for having saved him for the church. I'm very, very proud if we had anything to do with that.

Host: On that exact point, Jay McDaniel had a significant impact on me. We served together on the board of the [North American Conference on Christianity and Ecology](#) back in the early '90s. Inevitably, we would have these long conversations about various aspects of theology, and it was on this point of the problem of evil that I also found a process understanding helpful. Could you share a little bit about it, because some people listening to this conversation won't be familiar with that—and may themselves be struggling with how to make sense of an all-powerful, all-knowing God and the existence of evil. What would you say in terms of how a process understanding can help one come to peace with the way things really are, in terms of their understanding of the divine?

John: First of all, we have to ask what is *power*. Unfortunately, when people ask what is *power* without paying any attention to the [New Testament](#) (and much of the [Old](#), for that matter), they think of power in terms of A being able to control what B does. So, controlling power, coercive power is the first thought of power that comes to people's minds. But [Paul](#), I think, rejected that notion of power. And if we take Jesus as a powerful figure, it's not because he coerced people or forced them to do things. There's [that verse in John](#) that says, "If I be lifted up, will draw all men." Well, that's *persuasive* power, and liberating power, and empowering power. Now, from my point of view, those are much greater forms of power than coercive power.

As a parent, when I couldn't find any alternative but to coerce one of my sons to do something—I was never very successful at it, anyway—then I felt almost completely powerless. I wanted them to do things because I could persuade them, or point them in a direction they would then recognize as being the right direction. That's a very different way of thinking of power. So unfortunately, when we use words like *almighty* and *omnipotent*, we almost inevitably connect that with controlling everything. I think that's just the wrong notion of power to begin with. That is not what Jesus reveals to us as divine power.

So, I would never use the word *all-powerful*. It happens not to be a biblical word, anyway. [Almighty](#) is used a lot in our English translations, but it just replaces the proper name [Ei Shaddai](#), which doesn't have any such connotation. So the whole idea that the Bible teaches God's almightiness or omnipotence is, I think, fundamentally misguided. So, I just want to get rid of that, and then we can talk and marvel at the wonderful power of God that brings so much

into being out of what is so much less than that—which transforms human lives, which gives meaning to our lives. I think the idea that God controls everything, so that everything that happens is what God wants, is deeply, deeply contradictory to the biblical view, which repeatedly indicates that God is not too happy about what we're doing in the world. There surely is a difference between what God wants and what happens in the world.

So, if you start out with the assumption that the only kind of power that you want to talk about is the power of controlling things, then of course you hate to say, “Oh, but God only has a little bit of it.” That makes it sound like God is weak. But if you understand that God's power is the power of love, not the power of force, then you can marvel at how great that power is. But it certainly doesn't prevent all kinds of things that happen among those that do not follow the course that God sets out for us or that do not respond to God's love by our love of God and neighbor.

I don't mean that the problem of evil disappears. Evil is a terrible problem for everybody. But the problem of theodicy is not a difficult problem when one identifies God with *particular* processes in the world and not with the totality of what happens in the world.

Host: I like the way that you phrased that at the end: the totality. I see God, in a very real sense, as revealed or expressed in and through the totality of reality—both that which we can know and experience and that which is beyond anything we can know, think, or experience.

John: I see God as present wherever we see loving relationships, wherever we see creative imagination, wherever we see healing taking place. There are all kinds of ways of talking about where God is. And there's an element of that in *everything* that happens, but often it gets crushed. So I think God suffers greatly in the world.

Host: Say more about that, because I think that's an understanding that's part of process thought that touches the hearts of many people.

John: If we see God as revealed in the cross of Christ, it's very hard to say that God is not involved in, or does not experience, suffering. God rejoices with those who rejoice, but God also suffers with those who suffer. God shares our suffering with us. That is comforting to us, I think. I think to have another person who empathizes fully with me is extremely beneficial to me—no matter what evil I'm experiencing. That really is a kind of suffering that God endures. So when we injure a neighbor, we are injuring God. When we give joy to a child, we are giving joy to God. To me, that's a profound source of the meaningfulness of life's actions.

Host: About two weeks ago during a question and answer period after one of my programs, I was asked, “What does it mean to praise God, to worship God, and yet to trash the environment or treat others in an unjust way or be out of integrity?” That's just not true! To love another, to care for the environment, to work for justice, for peace, for sustainability, to be a

blessing to others is a worshipful life. Those are worshipful acts. Those are acts of loving the divine.

John: You're absolutely right, and I think that's so clear in the New Testament. We have to recognize that so much of what's been understood as [Christianity](#) has come not from the Bible but from ideas imposed on the Bible. It's very interesting to me how (at least in my view) the understanding of the greatest power in the Bible is the power of love, even when it's expressed in suffering. That notion simply didn't establish itself well, so that when Jerome came along and he had to find some Latin word to replace the proper name—because he didn't want to use different proper names for God, and [Yahweh](#) had already been transposed into “the Lord,” which I think is a harmless way of doing it—and what did he do with El Shaddai? Well, he took for granted that God was all-powerful, so he used [omnipotence](#)— not because there was anything in the biblical text to justify it, but just because it was something he thought everybody would agree to.

And for 1,500 years or more, that word has dominated thinking about God. If you ask to whom are prayers most often directed: *almighty God*. When people don't want to use the word God, and so they use a substitute, the most common expression is *the Almighty*. There's no basis for this in the Bible—certainly, no basis in the revelation in Jesus. The people who *think* this is what Christianity is are just taking ideas that come much more out of Imperial Rome than out of the Bible.

Host: Yes. Well, John, one of the things that motivated me to do [this teleseries](#)—there were actually several things. One was to simply show as compellingly as possible how it is that our best scientific understandings of the history of the universe—the evolutionary history of everyone and everything—not only doesn't have to threaten faith, but can positively expand it and enrich it and strengthen faith. I'm wondering, is there anything that you'd like to add to that? Does that ring true for you, or is there anything else you'd like to say about that?

John: Well, I think that to separate human beings from the rest of the created world is undesirable either from the Biblical point of view or from the human point of view—from *any* of those points of view. That means that human beings are a part of the natural world. The idea that complex things suddenly appeared out of nowhere is so different from any aspect of our experience, including our own personal experience of God. It seems so artificial. So to me, the natural way of thinking about how God works is to see God as operative in all things, aiming to bring greater value into the world. And of course in human beings, you've given a very rich account of that earlier, of what God is doing with us. But I think God has been at work that way all along, and that means that everything that happens is largely the product of its past. There's no way of avoiding that—but that it is not simply the product of its past. There's always the possibility of some element of creativity and novelty, of adventure. That all comes from God. And it's only because of God, then, that the evolutionary process is possible.

So to me, it just all fits together. I'm a strong believer in evolution, and very strongly opposed to what I've taken to be the dominant theory of evolution. The book that I edited recently we called [Back to Darwin](#). We did that because we certainly didn't want anybody to think this was an alternative to evolutionary thought. But Darwin was very flexible in his view of *how* evolution took place. If we can go back to that openness and flexibility and look at the evidence again, and not bring heavy metaphysics to bear upon it, I think that we can have a view of ourselves as a part of a huge process that's been going on for billions of years—and that we are immensely indebted to that process. We also are given enormous responsibility with respect to the direction that it now takes: called by God to take a very different course from the one that the world is taking at the present time. It's extremely difficult to make the changes that we must make.

Host: I've begun thinking in terms of body metaphors. If we were part of a larger body of life, then the question becomes, what's our role? How can we interpret our role in this larger body of life in a way that feels mythic, in a way that calls us to greater integrity and to greater compassion and to greater commitment to the health and the wellbeing—not just of our own religious group or our own nation-state, but to the health and the wellbeing of the entire body of life, the entire community of life.

I remember 18 or 19 years ago, I was doing a program and I was talking about this notion that we are the universe becoming conscious of itself, and I was drawing on [Thomas Berry](#) and [Brian Swimme](#) and [Julian Huxley](#) and others. And it was a Catholic nun who asked the question: “If we're the universe becoming aware of itself, why are we toxifying the air, the water, the soil? Why is there such injustice? What's that about?” And the question, at the time, actually caught me a little bit by surprise. Let's put it this way—I didn't have a good answer, and I knew I didn't have a good answer. But there was this young man—he was probably in his mid-30s at the time—and he raised his hand, real vigorously, and he said, “Can I respond?” I thought it was like a rescue; I said “Sure, go for it.”

Turns out, he was a medical doctor from Peru who was studying here in the states, and he said he was an oncologist; he worked with cancer patients. He said that a cancer cell is a normal cell that for a variety of reasons gets cut off or disconnected from its genetic memory. And it starts thinking it's separate from the body. It no longer has the genetic guidance for how to act in a harmonious, cooperative relationship with the larger body, and it starts to consume the body of which it's part. Then, of course, if the cancer consumes enough of the body, it'll kill the body, but it also kills itself.

And then he asked this question, and it was a haunting question. He said, “What do we call our society? Don't we call it a consumer society? What does ‘to consume’ mean? Well, it means ‘to eat up.’” And then he said, “Is this because we're bad, evil, rotten, crummy, sinful people? Is that the reason we're consuming the planet? Or is it because, like the cancer cell, we thought we were disconnected from it? We didn't know that we *were* the Earth becoming aware of itself—that we *are* nature becoming conscious of itself, understanding its own nature.”

This [Epic of Evolution](#), or [Great Story](#)—this [Big History](#) understood as our common creation story—is like being reconnected to billions of years of divine wisdom, of divine guidance. That dialogue happened practically twenty years ago, and I found that understanding—both in terms of that we can't continue to consume as though that's the be-all and end-all of human existence (to simply be good consumers)—but it also left me with another question, which is, Is there a way of thinking about our role in the body of life that's inspiring? The analogy that somebody else offered to me was that of an immune system—where humans protect and foster and defend the health and the wellbeing of this larger body of which we're a part and upon which we depend utterly. To the degree that we *do* that—that we make a top priority the health and wellbeing of other species, the air, the water, the soil upon which we all depend—we will thrive in that kind of a world. It's like becoming an immune system in this larger body. It's not even a pipe dream. As I've thought about it in recent years . . . in fact, I was in a conversation with a physicist six or eight months ago and he said that most people at NASA now believe that in the next 30 to 50 years we will have the technology to be able to deflect incoming intruders. That is, we'll be able to have the technology to protect Earth from asteroids and comets.

But at least what I've found is, among young people—high school students and even some grade school kids—this vision of humans becoming like an immune system, when I share with them that “You and your generation get to help our species become like an immune system in this larger body,” that's a vision that, in my experience, most young people can get really excited about. It's a heroic vision. It's a mythic vision—rather than overwhelming them with the bad news, which is what so many environmental and peace and justice approaches have done in recent decades. I found that to be an incredibly useful way of thinking about it.

John: I am impressed, and I will keep it in mind. At the moment, I have to go to another meeting.

Host: Okay, can I ask you one last question, which is, John, could you share with our listeners anything about your writings, or any current project you're working on, or how people would be able to learn more about the perspective you've been sharing with us?

John: Well, the [Process and Faith Program](#) of [the Center for Process Studies](#) is probably the best place to look up things. It's just called [ProcessandFaith.org](#). I'm at the moment beginning to work on bringing a group of rather radical biologists and philosophers together next summer to push ahead with bringing in all the evidence for the complexity that is required in order to think in an evolutionary way adequately. I'm very interested, for example, in Rupert Sheldrake, who is of course generally excommunicated from the biological community. So I'm hoping I can get him, but I'm not sure of that.

Well, thanks for the conversation. I'm sorry to have to rush, but I do need to go.

Host: No problem. Thank you, John, for joining us on this conversation on the leading edge of faith.

© Michael Dowd 2011. All rights reserved.