

Michael Dowd

“Evidence As Divine Communication: REALizing Faith”

Episode 38 (transcript of audio) of The Advent of Evolutionary Christianity
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Note: *The 38 interviews in this series were recorded in December 2010 and January 2011.*

Michael Dowd (host): Welcome to Episode 38 of “[The Advent of Evolutionary Christianity: Conversations at the Leading Edge of Faith](#).” I’m [Michael Dowd](#), and I’m your host for this series, which can be accessed via EvolutionaryChristianity.com, where we invite you to add your voice to the conversation. Today, I am your featured guest.

Connie Barlow: And that’s why I, [Connie Barlow](#), will be serving as the host interviewer here. I’ve been the audio editor for all of [the previous 37 conversations](#) that [Michael](#) has conducted. I am Michael’s spouse and mission partner, so this is going to be a joy for us to be able to enter into conversation here. Michael is best known for his book, [Thank God for Evolution: How the Marriage of Science and Religion Will Transform Your Life and Our World](#). He and I, for ten years now, have also been journeying throughout North America as “[America’s evolutionary evangelists](#),” joyfully bringing the good news of the sacred understanding of evolution into [churches, libraries, colleges, environmental organizations](#)—anywhere that wants to hear the good news of evolution.

The title of our conversation today is “Evidence as Divine Communication: REALizing Religious Faith.” So Michael, let’s make sure first of all that we all you know what you mean by “REALizing” religious faith.

Michael: Sure, happy to. In my book *Thank God for Evolution*, I used the word REALizing: capital R-E-A-L and then little i-z-i-n-g. What I mean by that is the *naturalizing*—the making real in an undeniable sense. For so many people, religion is all about supernatural otherworldlyism. They think of basically unnatural nouns and verbs. They think religion is all about unnatural nouns—that is, unnatural persons, places and things—and unnatural verbs—that is, the process of creation or the process of redemption. They think about all that stuff in unnatural ways. And so what my life actually has been about is a process of coming to REALize—that is, to *make real* in an undeniable way—these concepts that so many people think about in an unnatural or otherworldly way.

Connie: And the way that many of us first hear about it or get intrigued with this view is kind of the intellectual side of it. We go, “Oh, you mean science can be brought into religion in this

way.” But then we soon find out that the reason that this is so important is that it can make a profound difference in the felt inner experiences of our lives: in our emotional response to how we live and the choices that we make.

Michael: Yes. And it actually goes deeper than that, or it goes broader than that. There are, I would argue, profound negative consequences—there are extreme costs—to having an understanding of religion as primarily about an unnatural realm. And there are profound benefits—there are amazing blessings—available to us as individuals, as families, as nations, and as a species in coming to recognize and indeed celebrate [evidence as divine communication, evidence as divine guidance](#) (also [1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#)). And that our religious traditions aren’t merely about the unnatural realm, but they’re about the real world—the natural realm.

Connie: So hang on a second, Michael, before you go any further down that track of the content of this conversation. Is there anything you’d like to say about this [Evolutionary Christianity](#) conversation series? How it’s gone up to this point? Or what’s coming next?

Michael: I’d be happy to. I guess the first thing that comes to my mind is, I’m blown away—completely blown away—with [the caliber](#) and number of amazing thought leaders that have been involved in this conversation series, and the quality of the conversations. I mean, [all thirty-seven conversations](#) that I had with people have been stunning—each one in its own right. And of course I think some of that I want to give credit to you, in terms of editing so that we all sound good. But more than that, just the thoughtfulness of the responses, the breadth of understanding—from Catholics and Protestants and Emerging Church and Evangelicals and conservatives and liberals and radicals and Integral Church. We’ve just got such a broad spectrum of Christians who have been involved in this series and continue to be involved in it—who all embrace an evolutionary understanding of reality in such a way that it strengthens your faith and deepens your faith.

Connie: And what I’ve been present to is the astonishing emergence that’s going on in the commentaries. After each audio, Michael posts a blog in which people can then start commenting on what they experienced in the audio that they just listened to of a particular speaker, and what questions came to mind, or anything about their life journey. And I have found that even though I have been spending six to ten hours every day editing every single one of these audios, I find myself drawn into these conversations. I find myself thinking in new ways. I find myself developing an ability to put myself in the stance of a worldview that in the past has seemed completely foreign to me. And it’s because of the commentors who’ve done this. I also enjoyed in some places just being a voyeur, watching what’s going on in the blog pages, the comments, and especially when the speaker him or herself comes in and engages with the people. The authenticity of the engagement, the respectfulness, and yet how deep these conversations are going on the text page, not just the initial broadcast.

Michael: Yes, bottom-line is, I couldn't be more pleased with how things have been up to this point—and recognizing that tomorrow, Saturday the 15th of January, we begin six live panel discussions, round-table seminars. We have four or five thought leaders involved on a theme, and I'll be moderating and fielding questions that have been submitted ahead of time and those that are submitted live during the event.

Connie: So Michael, taking off your host hat and putting on your guest hat, let's start off the same way that you started off with every single one of your guests—and that's tell us your testimonial. Tell us your story: how you came to the point where you are now and particularly those moments of transitions, those thresholds—what [Thomas Berry](#) calls 'grace moments' in the larger story of the universe, but what you and I love to call grace moments within the smaller story of our own individual lives. Tell us your story.

Michael: I grew up [Roman Catholic](#) and always had a rich appreciation for God's presence in and through the natural world, and I've had a sacramental way of thinking. Then in my teenage years, I struggled with drug and alcohol and tobacco and sexual issues—and basically my [addictive] nature.

It was an experience at a [Pentecostal](#) church when I was twenty in the U.S. Army, where I accepted Jesus as "my personal Lord and Savior." I had a [born-again](#) experience and then had an experience that I identified (and Pentecostals identify) as the '[Baptism in the Spirit](#),' which was evidenced in [speaking in tongues](#) six months later. And so the people I hung out with and the books I read were all coming from an anti-evolution perspective.

After I got out of the army, I went to [Evangel College](#), which is affiliated with the [Assemblies of God](#), and that's where I was exposed to evolution. At first it was a shock to me, as I shared in a couple of the previous interviews: I walked out of class and I remember telling my roommate that "Satan obviously has a foothold in this school."

While I went on to fully accept an evolutionary worldview there at Evangel, as I think about my own life story, *I see five main steps in the REALizing of my faith*. The first was directly related to my experience at Evangel College and at Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary (which is now called [Palmer Seminary](#)). So basically, it was during the early '80s (from 1982 to 1987, when I was at Evangel College and then at Eastern Baptist) that I really *got* that [evidence is divine guidance, evidence is divine communication \(1, 2, 3, 4\)](#). And as I've mentioned in some of my previous conversations here, some of my main mentors at that time were: [Ian Barbour](#), who was our very first guest in this series; also [Thomas Kuhn](#) and his book [The Structure of Scientific Revolutions](#). [Sallie McFague](#) was hugely impactful for me at that time, as well as [Joanna Macy](#), and then a little bit later, [Joseph Campbell](#).

So my passion at that time, during the early '80s, was [worldviews](#). What is the nature of someone's worldview? How do they see reality? How do they think about reality in their head—like, what's their inner map, their internal guidance, their internal GPS of *what's real* and *what's important*? Then, how do they communicate that to their children? How do they live out of that

in ways that give them a good life and help them make a difference in the world? And how do they *interpret* reality? Because, you know, reality just happens: things just happen, and then how do you interpret that? So I became fascinated with the whole realm of myth and evidence and models and paradigms and all that kind of stuff. And that was a huge piece, because that's where I really began to understand that *evidence* is the main way God is communicating today and guiding us today. ([1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#), [5](#))

Connie: Now I need to break in here, and I'll be also asking a question on behalf of many of our commentors who've been posting on the website blogs, and that is that: Alright, so you lived through your own worldview shift during that time from [a scriptural literalist perspective](#)—where the Bible was the only place you found divine evidence (and, obviously, divine evidence is the most important evidence there is)—you made the shift to realizing that other forms of evidence (coming out of history, coming out of science) were not just secular but divine. And I want to hear, and I'm sure a lot of our commentors would love to hear, was that a difficult shift for you? Did you feel like you were giving something up, and you weren't quite sure whether what you were going to get in its place was going to make you feel as good about the world?—which is scary.

Michael: Yeah, it was difficult. The reason I walked out of class was because I really was convinced that Satan was involved in this school. I wondered, how could they be teaching Darwin and Plato and these secular philosophers and secular studies? It was a hugely traumatic time. What really made the difference were the biblical studies and philosophy professors at Evangel and some of the science professors. I got to know these men and women personally. I had worshipped with them, and I had prayed with them, and I really *got* that you could be a devoutly committed Christian and wholeheartedly embrace evidence as the way that God is communicating to us today. In fact, the core philosophy of Evangel College (at least at that time) came out of [Arthur Holmes'](#) book, [All Truth Is God's Truth](#)—that no matter *where* truth is found, no matter *how* it's found, no matter *who* finds it (whether it's an atheist or a Buddhist or a Christian or anybody else) all truth is God's truth. And that understanding helped me, plus the personal experience of men and women who were clearly as devoutly committed Christians as I was and as passionately committed to Jesus as I was, who were fully embracing science in a way that not only didn't threaten their faith or conflict with their faith, but was in fact enriching.

Connie: So Michael, your first transition in moving towards an embrace of evolution came in the early eighties?

Michael: Yeah. 1982 is when I was exposed to it. It was 1983 that I really started *getting* it.

Connie: Okay. So this is your understanding of worldviews and the importance of interpretation—and I loved how you said, “all truth is God’s truth.” And I was amazed that that was actually being taught at an Assemblies of God college. It’s a wonderful thing to think of. So moving on in your life, what was the next major threshold—the transition—bringing you along in your faith journey on the science and religion theme?

Michael: It continued to be during the mid eighties, and it was as a direct result of (as I’ve mentioned before) [Sallie McFague](#) and [Joanna Macy](#): our understanding that we are always interpreting reality and that we use models and analogies and metaphors to interpret our relationship to reality—and that there’s no one metaphor, there’s no one set of analogies, that’s going to work for all people or for all time. I also grasped that we so easily become addicted to and make idols of particular metaphors.

For example, if we make an idol of the metaphor of God as Father and think of God as a person rather than a personification, we start trivializing the very notion of God. And so I think the next major thing for me was a collapse of the two-story universe, and again that happened probably from 1984 to 1986 or 1987. But it was a complete [collapse of this two-story universe](#), of the idea that there’s the natural world and then there’s the supernatural world above and outside the universe. This two-story universe: it really exploded for me—the idea that the *unnatural* is more divine, or more real, or more important than the *natural*.

The other major influence on me at that time was Gene Marshall and his book, [A Primer on Radical Christianity](#). He had a chapter in there titled, “[What Reality in Human Experience Do We Point to With the Word ‘God’?](#)” I read that chapter probably a dozen times, and it was a huge influence because what it did was it articulated our best theological understanding in the 20th century that the word *God* doesn’t merely point to something unnatural and unreal and mythic and imaginary, up-there-out-there. But that the word *God* is pointing to what it has always pointed to throughout human history—which is, it’s been [identified with reality](#) (also [here](#)). I learned from Gene that “trusting God” or having “faith in God” meant, from an *experiential* standpoint, trusting that what’s real isn’t a cosmic mistake. There’s redemption, there’s creativity at work.

So that was probably the next huge thing. It was a collapse of the two-story universe and a growing recognition that any sense of a God that is dissociated from reality, that is not seen as a personification of reality—at least a personification . . . I mean, whatever we mean by *God* may be infinitely more than a personification of reality, but it can’t possibly be *less* than that. And that’s when I really became what I would call a [religious naturalist](#), or *mythic naturalist*.

Connie: Michael, pausing for a moment here, I remember just last year, you had been inviting so many people to read that particular chapter in Gene Marshall’s book that you asked me to put a PDF of it up on thegreatstory.org website. So we’ll make sure we put that on the blog. [Editor’s note: The PDF of the chapter, “What Reality in Human Experience Do We Point to With the Word God,” is at: <http://www.thegreatstory.org/god-reality.pdf>]

Connie: Going back to how you just ended what you were talking about in this second threshold, you mentioned *mythic naturalist*. Since I've known you and been married to you, you've been using a number of different ways to describe yourself. Every time a new insight comes and so you're expanding your sense of who you are or are going further down this path of integrating science and religion, you tend to come up with a new word. This "mythic naturalist" that you're using now is a new word for us. Talk a little bit about what that means to you and why you just came up with that. What was the inspiration for that term?

Michael: What I mean by the term 'mythic naturalist' or 'mythic naturalism' is, again, it's a one-story universe but interpreted mythically. I mean, to interpret life mythically, individually and collectively, would have been evolutionarily adaptive. That is, it would have conferred an evolutionary advantage to individuals and to groups who thought mythically. If you believed as a nation or as a group of people or as a tribe that God was on your side and God wanted you to do x, y, or z, you would have more energy. It would make it easier for the people to try to cooperate in that endeavor.

As an individual, if you interpret life from a mythic standpoint, when bad things happen you interpret it not as some cosmic mistake or as God is against you or whatever—but, "Okay, how is this situation God conspiring on my behalf? How is this the Universe conspiring on my behalf? How is this not a mistake? How is this perfect?" and to think this way for *whatever* is happening. And including my feelings, too: "How is this perfect for my growth and learning?" Just to stay with the question; you don't even have to have an answer to the question, but it gets you to that place of trust, or faith. We now *know* through positive psychology that people who have an optimistic view of the world—even if that view is a delusion, even if it's not accurate—they live happier, more joyous lives. And so living mythically would have been evolutionarily selected for at the individual level and at the group level.

Connie: Michael, you talked about the collapse of the two-story universe. I might mention here [David Sloan Wilson's](#) books. [David Sloan Wilson](#) is an evolutionary biologist who wrote [Darwin's Cathedral](#) and [Evolution for Everyone](#) (and most recently, [The Neighborhood Project: Using Evolution to Improve My City, One Block at a Time](#)). In fact a couple of our commentators on various blog pages have mentioned David's writings. David Sloan Wilson makes a distinction. He's very different from [Richard Dawkins](#) in that he's very much a [naturalist](#) himself—one of the top evolutionary biologists—but he looks for the functional role that religion plays in terms of *personal wholeness* and *social coherence*. And he used two terms, talking about [practical realism and factual realism](#). What we're seeing now is the possibility in this science and religion dialogue to have the two collapse into one—and collapse in a good sense, that there is no distinction between the practical realism of what gives you zest. You have practical realism of religion. We've seen it in terms of the wars we're fighting now. What's it like to fight

an enemy in which mothers gladly offer their sons to become suicide bombers in order to further the cause of their people.

In fact, here where we're staying—we're in Miami right now; we live entirely on the road so we're always staying with people. We're staying with Michael's mom right now and I had an opportunity to ask her, I said: "Michael was your first born son, and he told me that the expectation was that he was going to become a priest." And she said, "Oh yes! That's what I thought. That's what I hoped." And I went, "Hoped? If he'd become a priest, he wouldn't produce any grandchildren for you." And yet the worldview of that religion was so strong in her it could overcome that biological impulse to want to have grandchildren, and instead the sense of contributing something to the world took over. "I am contributing a child who's becoming a priest." That's high status. That's high stature. That's a gift of the world. It's amazing!

Michael: The other thing that a one-story worldview gave me was [an understanding of religion —all religions—from a naturalistic perspective, from an evolutionary perspective](#) (*YouTube clip, [here](#)*). And this allowed me to actually understand for the first time religious differences. Until I had a one-story understanding of reality, until I saw that God could not be divorced from reality—the reality that we're learning ever more about through science—until I had an evolutionary understanding, I couldn't really appreciate or even understand religious differences. And that's where [Joseph Campbell](#) was a huge help, and others who really helped us see that religious language—metaphorical language, mythic language, so-called supernatural language—is actually pointing metaphorically to *real* things in the *real* world, in most cases.

Connie: So Michael, we've gone through the first two of your thresholds, your transitions. What were they and what's the third?

Michael: I call them "grace moments." The first was recognition of evidence as divine guidance—evidence as divine communication. The second was the collapse of a two-story universe, meaning that what gets called supernatural isn't supernatural, it's pre-natural. I'd like to say a whole lot more about that, can I do that now?

Connie: Sure.

Michael: Okay, great. The major transitions as I see them—certainly, in biological and human evolution—can be seen as transformations in how information regarding what's real and what's important is shared and stored. These two questions: *What's real?* and *What's important?* or in the words of philosopher of religion [Loyal Rue](#), *How things are* and *which things matter*, have been the fundamental questions not only of all cultures but I'd say, really, of all life forms. That's what all life forms concern themselves with. I mean, obviously, they don't phrase it in words. But without an accurate understanding of the nature of reality and how to live in right relationship to reality, you or your culture wouldn't survive. So from a naturalized perspective, I

began to see that [all religions are mythic maps of reality](#). That is, they're maps of 'what's real' and 'what's important' that facilitate individual and social wellbeing. There's not a religion anywhere in the world that isn't a map of 'how things are' and 'which things matter', that, when followed, leads to *personal wholeness* and *social coherence*. (See Loyal Rue's two acclaimed books, [Everybody's Story: Wising Up to the Epic of Evolution](#), and [Religion Is Not About God: How Spiritual Traditions Nurture Our Biological Nature and What to Expect When They Fail](#).)

Connie: Or at least it *did*. The problem we have here in America is with the old maps that used to work. If they haven't evolved, if they haven't been modified, we see the destruction of personal lives—where people trying to use those old maps, and ministers trying to preach from the old maps, just aren't able to effect transitions in peoples' lives anymore.

Michael: Yeah, great point. So, let me take a few minutes and walk through what I think are the important transformations—because if people don't *get* this, in my experience, they can't get a REALized understanding of religion—if they don't understand the nature of human language and human consciousness.

Connie: Okay, and then we'll return to the last three parts of your testimonial.

Michael: Okay, great. So [prior to verbal symbolic language—that is, prior to words](#)—information regarding the nature of reality and how to live in right relationship to it was stored and shared genetically and through cultural practices communicated by sounds, gestures, behaviors, and that sort of thing. Even when we began communicating in words, much vital information regarding how to survive and reproduce was, of course, still stored and shared genetically. As you know, the recent fields of evolutionary psychology and evolutionary brain science shed so much light on all this. I mean, getting hungry and horny doesn't require thinking. We instinctually know how to handle the basics of safety, sustenance, and sex. We also have *feelings* that lead us to cooperate with kin and with those we trust who will return the favor. But beyond this, virtually everything important about how to thrive, given the unique constraints and possibilities afforded by any particular bioregion or cultural context, all that information would have been stored in the minds of elders and shared by our stories and rituals.

Remember, this is before writing. And so, these stories would have naturally reflected both the [daytime and nighttime experience](#) of humans. Sacred tales and religious stories of animals talking or of gods and goddesses blessing or of demons tempting: these are no more supernatural than what we do in our dreams is supernatural. As anthropologist Benson Saler shared back in 1970s, [the very notion of supernatural as opposed to natural is a Western invention](#). Only when scientific understandings of the natural began emerging was it deemed necessary by some to speak of the *supernatural*—that which was imagined to be above or outside of nature.

Connie: So Michael, you just used the term *natural* as distinct from *supernatural*, and you said that there was a time when people had collapsed the two into *one story* and then it became *two stories*. Say more about that.

Michael: Flying in our dreams—no matter how real it may feel—isn't supernatural. It's just the reality of what happens in the dream-state. [Ancient stories of miraculous deeds, superhuman feats, or otherworldly ages and events aren't supernatural; they're pre-natural](#) (podcast, [here](#)) Such explanations came into use long before we had a natural, factual understanding of anything. An example that I sometimes use is: Imagine living five hundred years ago, and without using supernatural-sounding language, try to explain epilepsy or serious infection, or how the Himalayas came into existence, or how the sun moves across the sky. Good luck! We can't do that without using supernatural-like language or supernatural-sounding language. In fact, here's a quote from the preface of my book, *Thank God for Evolution*:

How is the world made? Why do earthquakes, tornados, and other bad things happen? Why must we die? Why do different peoples answer these questions in different ways? The big questions that children have always asked, and will continue to ask, cannot be answered by the powers of human perception alone. Ancient cultures gave so-called supernatural answers to these questions, but those answers weren't truly supernatural. They were *pre-natural*. Prior to advances in technology and scientific ways of testing truth claims, factual answers were simply unavailable. It wasn't just difficult to understand infection before microscopes brought bacteria into focus. It was impossible. Without an evolutionary worldview, it is similarly impossible to understand ourselves, our world, and what is required for humanity to survive.

Connie: Okay, Michael, let's get into the third transition of your five.

Michael: The third “grace moment” in my life was when I had my sense of self expand and my sense of relatedness expand, and my sense of my own history expand. This happened when I was introduced to the [epic of evolution](#) (also [here](#) and [here](#)) or “[the new cosmology](#)” of [Thomas Berry](#) and [Brian Swimme](#). I've shared a little bit of this on previous conversations, so I'll just say briefly here that [Albert LaChance](#) introduced me to this [Universe Story](#), and [Miriam MacGillis](#) (also [here](#)) was one of my main mentors early on, as were Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme.

This whole understanding that “*I am the universe*”: if people do not *get* this, they can't get anything else from this naturalized understanding, this REALized understanding of religion. Anybody who thinks they are separate from the universe—they don't get it! We are an expression of the universe. The universe has been expanding and unfolding for billions of years. And the universe as a whole has gone from simple atoms to more complex atoms, to molecules, to more complex molecules, to creatures, to more complex creatures, to societies and more complex societies—and we're part of that. We are *literally* the universe becoming conscious of itself. And that sense of *identification*—that my larger body is the planet, *is* the universe—was the hugest of shifts for me because I then began to see that all that science is teaching us in terms of “[Big History](#)” (the history of everyone and everything: [physical](#)

[evolution, biological evolution, and cultural evolution](#)), that all of that together which is called Big History was my creation story and was giving me a deeper, richer appreciation of God—because God was no longer divorced from reality. So I was learning more about God by learning more about reality.

Connie: Now the reason that I personally want to stay on this topic of ‘who am I?’—the expansion of self—is that, golly, even before Michael and I hit the road, I had been recording (using audiocassette technology back in those days, then moving into video format) peoples’ stories of awakening: their testimonials. I would ask them, “How did you awaken to this epic of evolution?” And the number of people who had their primary epiphany coming precisely through this sense of learning about galaxies, learning about the history of life, learning about the history of culture, learning about the age of the universe, and not only did it promote a response like, “Wow! That’s cool! Isn’t that awesome!” but it actually took them through this shift of *who am I?*

Two of our audios in this series already, beginning with the episode with [Bruce Sanguin](#)—a great deal of that particular audio is his poignant telling of his story of his awakening. In his case, it started from a very dark place. It started from a dark place of being a Christian minister giving sermons every Sunday but no longer having the passion, the conviction—feeling inauthentic about what he was doing, and going into a very dark time and going on a ten-day silent retreat. But fortunately, during which he had access to a good library, and coming upon a book that another person in our audio series also points to as the key for helping *her* come to this expanded sense of self. And that was [Brian Swimme](#)’s [The Universe Is a Green Dragon](#).

So to learn more about this, go to [Bruce Sanguin](#)’s audio and go to [Mary Southard](#)’s audio. Actually I think I’d like to pause right here and I’m going to read for you a couple of very short quotes from their conversations. These quotes you can also find now on the blog pages pertaining to them.

Bruce Sanguin said, after reading Brian Swimme’s *The Universe Is a Green Dragon* and walking on a beach and feeling terrible and suddenly feeling part of the universe, he said: “Realizing that I was not separate from the universe, that I was in fact the process of evolution become conscious of itself, gave me reason to be in ministry again. I regained the passion, the conviction.” And then he goes on to say: “Being the presence of the universe in human form: that’s what shifts everything.”

Mary Southard, you’ll see in the transcript: “It’s been a quite a journey. I was reading *The Universe Is a Green Dragon* and a wonderful thing began to happen. I’d always sensed a real kinship and presence, but reading about the wind and the sun and so on, I began to experience myself for the first time as Earth—not separate from Earth.”

So Michael, based on that, what went on for you—your sense of *who you are*?

Michael: It happened almost instantaneously. Albert LaChance was teaching a course called ‘The New Catholic Mysticism.’ About forty minutes into the first evening, I had goose bumps

up and down my arms and legs. I started to cry, and I realized, “Oh my God, I’m going to spend the rest of my life popularizing this message!” It was like my total appointment with my destiny—and I *have* been. I began immediately after that waking up at four o’clock in the morning and studying [cosmology](#), [biology](#), [anthropology](#)—all the different [historical sciences](#) and the sciences that had anything to do with evolution ([human evolution](#) or [biological evolution](#) or the [evolution of the universe](#)). And basically I devoted my life to communicating that in the most inspiring ways that I know how.

Connie: So continuing with your testimonial Michael, that was the third threshold of this new sense—this expanded sense—of who you are. What about the fourth?

Michael: The fourth pivotal turning point, or grace moment, was really with you [[Connie Barlow](#)]. Travelling North America—we’ve been doing that for ten years—and it was about two years into it, that I really *got* death in a way that I had never understood it before. When you put together [our best scientific understanding of death](#) through all the different scientific disciplines—and I’m not going to go into details now, but it was a huge transformation. I began to see and feel in my gut that death not only wasn’t a problem and humans weren’t responsible for the existence of death in the universe, but that we couldn’t have the world, the universe that we have, nor our lives... This is the thing: [every single thing that’s important to me, and important to us, is only possible because of the existence of death in the universe](#). And when I *got* that, it changed so many other things.

Connie: And, generously towards religious scripture, it would be impossible...impossible for any peoples prior to our modern scientific understanding to have even a fragment of that understanding of how everything that we view is wrong in the world or everything that shouldn’t be, or everything that makes us think that this is not paradise, that it’s fallen from paradise, or it can be fixed in some way—and “Why doesn’t God fix it?” Any of that kind of stuff would be impossible for any people in the past—any prophets in the past—to have come to, absent the collective intelligence of the scientific community.

Michael: And then the last grace moment—the last real big transformation—had to do with an understanding of human nature, specifically, *our evolved nature*: that we all have mismatched instincts and we’re all surrounded by supernormal stimuli. And I would go so far as to say that the promises of religion cannot and will never be fulfilled in this life, individually or collectively, until we humans get—I mean millions and millions of us really *get*—this understanding of human nature of mismatched instincts living in a world of supernormal stimuli. (See [1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#))

So those five things I count as the five grace moments in helping me to REALize, to make *real*, religion. The first, that evidence is divine communication, divine guidance. The second is the collapse of the two-story universe and the understanding that we’re always interpreting and that God cannot possibly be separate from, disconnected from, divorced from reality. The third

is this expanded sense of self that comes with the universe story, with Big History, and an expanded sense of who I'm related to, what I'm related to—that we're related to stars and to all other creatures and so on. The fourth is that death is natural and generative at all levels of reality. And the fifth is this understanding that the promises of religion can't possibly be fulfilled in this life if we don't have our best evidential understanding of human nature, which is that we have mismatched instincts and we live in a world of supernatural stimuli.

Connie: Now Michael, let's go into a little bit more the personal story behind thresholds four and five. Again, these were the ones that I, as your mission partner and marriage partner, lived through, as well. Let's go to the death one here. I mean, it was quite amazing how both you and I—both of us, each of us—dealt with the possible death sentence you were given just a little over a year ago when you discovered not only that you *had* cancer but where it was and how large it was at the time. And then I started doing research on what the statistics are for being able to get through that. And yet how calm each of us felt, and how surprised everyone around us seemed to be, that we weren't just traumatized by this.

Michael: Yeah. Gosh. What do I want to say? Looking at the real possibility that I could die in the next week or month, from a place of gratitude, acceptance, and trust: that all came from a completely naturalistic understanding. A naturalistic understanding—a REALized understanding—[of God](#), a REALized understanding of [my nature](#)...a REALized understanding of [death as sacred, as holy, as necessary](#). Also, a REALized understanding that my sense of self didn't stop with my skin, a REALized understanding that my larger self continues even when I die, and a realization that this life is an incredible gift: to just be alive!

All of that just coalesced. And this evolutionary understanding of our brain and our natures helped me several years ago (four, five years ago) to let go of the self-judgment, the condemnation—the self-condemnation—for my nature. And I've had gratitude for what I used to condemn and judge about myself; so consequently it doesn't have power over me anymore. I've gotten to the place of having no secrets, no resentments, and no unfinished business—and that was heavenly. It still is heavenly. October 5th 2006 was the day that I confessed my last secret, and it was really not a big deal—and yet, when I could honestly ask myself: “Do I have any secrets whatsoever? Am I holding any resentments whatsoever? Is there any unfinished business?” And I could honestly say: “No, I have no secrets. No, I have no resentments. And, no, I don't have any unfinished business.”

If I die tonight: *Wow, that's great!* The people in my life who I love, know it (I've told them recently). The people in my life who I've harmed or betrayed or had a negative impact on in some way—at least the ones I could remember and track down—I've in some way communicated my sorrow, my regret, my apology. And so it really was “the peace that passes all understanding,” even facing the possibility that I could die soon.

Connie: And that, of course, is part of the practical miracle that many people experience through [12-Step programs](#)—that taking time in order to reframe the past and apologize where

necessary, clean up, is a huge part for people who make it that far down the 12-Step program. In fact, I've heard some people feel that they are sorry for people who haven't been addicted or codependent enough to ever get themselves into a 12-Step program. *[laughter]*

Michael: Well, yeah, exactly. And that's the reason why this evolutionary psychology and brain science stuff ([1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#)), interpreted in a meaningful way, is so vital for this time in history is because one of the enormous costs culturally is that we as a nation, Americans, are profoundly addicted in so many different ways. That is, we are running patterns: we're addicted to television, we're addicted to shopping, we're addicted to being in debt, we're addicted to substances—drugs, alcohol, tobacco, caffeine—and to video games, internet pornography, and so much more—and news: what we call *news*. People are addicted to getting their information about 'what's real' and 'what's important' through corporations. Corporations are giving people what *they* want them to know about what's real and what's important. And so we're making horrible decisions.

We're not gathering [collective intelligence](#). We're not making decisions based on [collective intelligence](#). Families are being ruined, relationships are being ruined, because we are clueless about our evolved nature. And even religious people mostly have a mythic understanding—as though all of their foibles and challenges are because their great-great-great-great-grandmother ate an apple or something.

Connie: Now Michael, could you say a little bit more about that, because when people first hear this and they hear the plight that we're in of having [mismatched instincts](#), and we all see around us the consequences for ourselves and others of this, how can we not just be depressed about it? I mean, [how is this something that actually helps us improve our lives?](#)

Michael: Yeah. What this perspective does...at least, let me say what it has done for me. It has allowed me to have gratitude for my evolved nature. It's like the witness capacity that many people in meditation traditions talk about: being able to witness their feelings, to witness their thoughts, to witness their inner experience. And when you're able to witness it, it doesn't have control over you in the same ways—or at least it's possible that it doesn't. That was definitely the case for me. I mean, I've shared on several of these conversations about being able to *notice* my thinking, my evolved thinking, around substances or attractive women or whatever—and just notice it, and then have humor, have lightness about it. In fact my son, Shane, who I'm in close communication with around this, he sent me an email literally yesterday because I had asked him and his girlfriend to watch my [Evolutionize Your Life program, the first half-hour](#), which is on evolutionary psychology and brain science. And he sent me this email. He said,

The main thing that struck me watching the first half-hour of your *Evolutionize Your Life* program was when you were talking about the fact that the way we are has taken millions of years to develop, refine, and ingrain. This struck me because I thought about the times when I seem to be acting on autopilot or in an involuntary way. And when I realized that the

universe has been conspiring to make me exactly that way for millions of years, it was easy to have compassion for myself. Now, what I'm excited about even further is understanding all the ways in which these unchosen moments of mine make complete evolutionary sense. And I can recognize those moments more easily and quickly and have compassion and humor for myself and others.

Connie: So Michael's son, Shane, he's twenty-five years old. So he is one of the "youngsters" who's been inspired by this evolutionary understanding. And Michael will put on his blog page how anyone can access that [Evolutionize Your Life video program](#). Now in preparing for my job here as interviewer, I went through some of the comments that people have been putting up—particularly of you, asking *you* questions because you've had a presence in the other audios as well—and putting together a list of particular questions that people wanted you to answer, and in some cases that you mentioned on the blogs, in your interactions with them, that you would be answering right now in this conversation.

Some of them were: *How has your experience of God has shifted—particularly, do you have a personal God anymore? The question about prayer: What is it like to pray in this kind of a worldview shift you've come through? What about the afterlife: is there a sense of loss? Is there something frightening about wondering whether there might be an afterlife, or is that important to you? What about theodicy, the problem of evil?*

The interesting thing is, when I was compiling all these questions, I began to realize—I mean, I began to think *myself*, how would *I* answer them? and how I've been responding to people myself in the blog commentaries. And I began to realize that, for me—and then discussing it with Michael yesterday—something happens when you make this worldview shift. The transition points that Michael has already talked about—particularly the transition in *who I am*, not distinguishing my little self as being my full self. And I'm not talking about, I've got some spirit that's been around and keeps being reincarnated or anything like that, but just the basic reinterpretation—nothing supernatural here—but, *who do I feel I am...who do I feel I am*.

Grandparents go through this, in many cases, where they start to lose their sense of self as they're moving towards death and realizing—just in a very biological way—that their self continues through the memories of others...through their grandchildren and so forth. But anyway, what I began to realize is that the reason I have a difficult time taking any of these questions really to heart, and why in any discussion I might have with someone about these questions they won't find my answers satisfying, is that when you make a worldview shift like this, the questions almost melt away. And the funny thing is—the analogy that came immediately to mind—is I'm fifty-eight years old. Now, twenty years ago, birth control: that was like a *huge* concern for me. I mean, that was like a really big focus in my life. At age fifty-eight, birth control has no meaning for me whatsoever, except to the extent that I am concerned of how others need to relate to it. So again Michael, could you talk about any of these questions you want to deal

with: a sense of a personal God; what your prayer life is like; the importance of an afterlife or if none; and the problem of evil: any of these questions that keep coming up for people on this faith journey.

Michael: Once God became identified for me with what was undeniably, fundamentally real—in other words, I began to really *get* that [God is a personification of reality, not a person](#) (also [here](#)). And that all of our attempts to trivialize God in personal ways, in terms of limiting—thinking that God is *literally* a person; God is literally any of our metaphors that we use to describe God—when I made that shift (seeing “God” as a sacred name, a mythic name, for reality, or that reality is a secular name for God) prayer became a radically different thing for me. The analogy that I’ve used many times is, like nesting dolls: Russian nesting dolls of increasing complexity and creativity (subatomic particles within atoms, within molecules, within cells, within organisms, within planets, within galaxies and so on). God for me now—communicating with God—is, *How do I communicate to reality? [How do I intimately relate to reality?](#)*

Here’s something that I think a lot of Christians don’t *get*, which is that Jesus did not believe in a personal God. Jesus didn’t *believe* in God at all. *He related to reality personally*, with the intimacy of a Father and Son. So recognizing that *God* is a sacred name for reality, I have an intimate, personal relationship to God—more so than when I literally thought God was limited to human personality traits, human personality characteristics. And I don’t know how to explain that to people, but it’s really true.

I’ve said it humorously in a number of these conversations: that I have a personal relationship with this continent as “Nora.” Connie and I have a personal relationship that we give to *our* relationship; we call our relationship “Jasmine.” There’s Michael, there’s Connie, and then there’s Jasmine. Jasmine is the sacred name and the proper name for *us*—for *we*. And for me, God is a sacred name, a proper name, for *reality*—a mythic name for reality. I would argue that God has *never* been less than that!

And so how do I commune with Reality? It’s like a cell in communion with the very body of which it’s a part. So for me, prayer is an intimate thing. I have [an intimate personal relationship to God](#) that I don’t think people can get if they think that they’re separate from the universe, if they think they’re separate from nature, or if they think that God is somehow disconnected from the reality that science is helping us to also learn about.

With respect to theodicy, the problem of evil completely evaporates when one gets this understanding of *God as reality* because you are no longer thinking, *How could a loving God allow for x, y, or z tragedy in the world to happen?* You don’t think mythically in that way; you think mythically in terms of *naturally*. It’s like, of course earthquakes happen, of course tornados happen, of course tsunamis happen, of course people go through suffering!

My understanding is that “faith in God” is an interpretive stance toward reality. That whatever happens, I interpret it as, *How can this be a contribution to my life? How can this be a contribution to the universe? How can this be a contribution to our world?* It’s an interpretive stance.

Connie: So Michael, you’ve just addressed the question about how this worldview transforms, at least for you, your sense of a personal God. You’ve talked about how it’s changed your sense of prayer. You talked about problem of evil. What about the afterlife and its importance or non-importance to you?

Michael: To my mind, [any supposed “faith in God” that doesn’t include trusting that whatever happens on the other side of death is just fine, is really no faith at all.](#) I’m sure I’ve shared this on other conversations. Fear of a hellish after-death scenario, or hope of a blissful after-death scenario, are just that: fear or hope—not faith, not trust. So for me, “trusting reality” is a way of saying “faith in God.” And I trust that whatever happens on the other side of death is just great! And no, I don’t think that *I* continue—little, small-me Michael continues. I’m cherishing this life as the one chance I get—and I also know that my larger self does continue. My faith is in reality; my faith is in God. I don’t know quite what to say beyond that.

Connie: So Michael, winding down this conversation, what’s the most important thing you want to leave our listeners with?

Michael: Since I’m sharing this in a Christian context, speaking to Christians and speaking as a Christian, as a [Christian naturalist \(an Evangelical Pentecostal naturalist\)](#), I think what I’d like to do is offer that my deepest desire for the Christian faith, and for Christian individuals, is that we all embrace [scientific evidence, historical evidence, and cross-cultural experience \(and the evidence that comes from that\) as God’s Word—as divine revelation.](#) (Also [1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#)) I believe that our tradition will evolve in some really healthy ways when we do that.

To the degree that we continue to identify our tradition and the important concepts and doctrines and insights of our tradition with [un-naturalism](#), and we think of them in primarily unnatural ways, I think we’re going to suffer. We’re going to continue to see the Church shrink. And I think we’re going to continue to see individual Christians struggling and having all kinds of doubts and fears and uncertainty.

So I think in closing I’d like to say that, as best I can tell, *there are four things that determine the quality of our relationship to God.* And it’s not what we believe. It’s not being part of the right tradition. It’s not doing the right rituals. The four things as I see them are:

(1) The first is YOUR ENVIRONMENT. What feeds you? What feeds you physically, emotionally, and intellectually—like, what do you read? What do you watch? What do you listen to? What are your sources of pleasure? Where do you get your dopamine hits? How do you listen to God? How do you listen to what's real? How do you bring it in? And so I see that the first thing is environmental.

(2) The second thing has to do with HOW WE THINK AND INTERPRET: What's our mental software? How do we interpret reality? How do we think about reality? Is our thinking aligned with reality or not? Are our interpretations generous or stingy? Are they empowering or disempowering? And that's, How we think about our world? How do we think about human nature? How do we think about in-group and out-group? How do we think about conflict and chaos? How do we think about death? How do we think about divine guidance? Where does that come from? So our interpretations, our mental software, what we think: those determine the quality of our life and the quality of our relationship to God.

(3) The third has to do with INTENTION AND SUPPORT—like, Are we committed to [growing in integrity—in right relationship to Reality](#)? Are we committed to growing in Christ-likeness, Christ-centeredness (to use traditional religious language)? Are we growing in humility, authenticity, responsibility, service?—These sorts of things.

(4) And then finally, what's our LEGACY? How are we serving the world? How are we being a blessing to others?

I see those things: our environment, our thinking and interpretation, how we relate to our own instincts ([1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#)), and what kind of a legacy we're leaving. Those, to my mind, are what right relationship to God is all about. My hope and prayer is that we wholeheartedly, fully embrace an evidential understanding and allow that to completely transform our religious understandings and our religious life, based on what God is revealing through evidence. ([1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#), [5](#))

Connie: Well, thank you Michael Dowd for sharing your heart, your experience, and just your presence—not only in this conversation but, I'm sure I speak on behalf of other listeners, in this whole series exploring the leading edge of faith.

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