

Michael Morwood

“Evolving Prayer and Ritual Celebrations”

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Michael Dowd (host): Welcome to Episode 13 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, which is also where you can add your voice to the conversation.

Today, [Michael Morwood](#) is our featured guest. [Michael](#) is a gifted educator with over forty years of experience in retreat, education, parish, and youth ministries, both in Australia and overseas. He's got a real passion for helping Christians to rethink what they believe and why they believe it. Michael is the author of a number of books, including [God is Near](#); [Tomorrow's Catholic](#); [Praying a New Story](#); and [Children Praying a New Story: A Resource for Parents, Grandparents, and Teachers](#).

Michael is one of the primary communicators of the epic of evolution, and is [a leader in progressive Christianity](#). Our topic of conversation today: “Evolving Prayer and Ritual Celebrations.” As you'll hear, Michael and I both share a deep love of [The Great Story](#).

Host: Hello, Michael Morwood, and thank you for joining this conversation on evolutionary Christianity.

Michael Morwood: Hello, Michael, it's a great joy to be with you.

Host: A joy to be with you too, brother. As you know, this teleseries is designed to bring together a wide diversity of Christian thought leaders and ministers—basically those who are grounded in the Christian tradition, deeply committed to the Christian tradition, and yet also who fully embrace an evidential understanding of reality. I like to begin by asking people to share a little of your own story, your testimonial. How did you get to where you are now in your faith journey, and how do you see your role or niche in this larger conversation?

M. Morwood: Well, Michael, something of my story and how I see my role is this: My background is [Roman Catholic](#). I was a member of a religious order for 38 years, 29 years in priestly ministry. My background is basically in spirituality, retreat work, and adult faith education.

It was in the 1990s that I began reading [Brian Swimme](#) and [Thomas Berry](#), and looking anew at the religious worldview in which I had been raised and nurtured, and raising questions about that as I looked at this new story [of evolution]. It raised theological issues. It raised questions about religious imagination: Was there a Fall? Is God above us? Is ours a story of disconnection from God?

In the 1990s, when I was working in Australia, especially with teachers in religious education, it was very clear that many teachers simply did not believe anymore the traditional story of a Fall and a God who locked us out. I was surprised when I was looking at the new story, as expounded by Thomas Berry and others, that no one was really talking about the theological implications of the new universe story, the age of the universe, how life developed on this planet.

So in the mid 1990s, I wrote a book called [Tomorrow's Catholic: Understanding God and Jesus in a New Millennium](#). I was trying, basically, to say, "Well, we know *one* story very well: the theological story. But there are other stories in our tradition around God, Jesus, sacraments, and prayer." As I tried to articulate something of those other stories in our tradition — trying to bring them in line with what [Thomas Berry and others call the New Story of the Universe](#)—I ran into institutional authority that didn't like what I was writing.

So in 1998 I was silenced. The book that I wrote was banned. So I resigned from religious life and priesthood. In the years since, I've been working mainly with Christians who are disillusioned by the traditional story, the traditional theology. My role and what I'm doing is trying to say, "There *are* other stories in our Christian tradition—and I think in the Jewish tradition, and probably too in the Islamic tradition—that can gel well with the new story that we have about the universe and the age of this planet.

There are two stories around God and around Jesus: Is God an elsewhere deity? Or is God an everywhere presence—that is, beyond our human images? Is Jesus primarily someone who comes down from up above us somewhere and is the unique pathway to a God who lives somewhere else? Or is Jesus the revealer of this mystery in our midst?

There are two stories around sacraments. Are sacraments primarily people being dependent on what I call "middle management" to access the sacred and bring them to us? Or are sacraments about ritualizing an inner disposition, a readiness to stand up and be counted? That's what I think Baptism was in the early church. That's what I think Eucharist is.

And then, two stories around prayer: Is prayer primarily about trying to contact an external deity who listens and responds? Or is prayer more about changing us and deepening our awareness of this mystery within us, among us—and challenging us to give witness to the way that we live?

I think what drives me, especially in the Christian community, is coming across many adults who are saying, "I'm disillusioned, I don't believe the story I was told." One option is to say, "Well, I'm out of here! It's finished, it's over, it's not believable anymore." I see my role as saying, "Wait. There is another story—and these stories are faithful to our Christian tradition, and they blend well with what we know about the universe today." If the role of the Christian church is to bring the story of Jesus to today's age, and what we know about our universe and

our planet today—and that’s what I think the role of the church *is*—then let's embrace this new story of the universe.

Let us embrace this story of evolutionary development and, rather than talk about it as a God outside it directing it, let us go into our tradition and say, “Here’s a story of a God who is *everywhere*—in all and with all and operating in all.” And let us go back into the story of Jesus —not as someone who is a unique pathway to a God who lives somewhere else, but as someone who in the Gospel clearly says to people, “Open your eyes. The kingdom, the reality of God, the presence of God: it’s here in your own living and loving.”

Let us explain sacraments and prayer in the same role.

So my primary concern in all that is for Christians especially to be able to say, “There's another story here.” It's not just a new story about the universe, but there are stories in our tradition that gel well with this new story about the universe, and how old the planet is, and evolutionary development, and all that.

My sense is, as I have walked in this story in the last 15 or 20 years, that it's more exciting. It makes spirituality more alive. It makes Jesus become more human, more true, more dynamic. It makes far more sense of prayer and sacraments and liturgy than the old story ever did. So I'm enthused by it. I think there's something there for people to be enthused by, rather than to be discouraged and say, “I don't know what to believe anymore.”

Host: I appreciate you for saying that, Michael, because one of the things that I've valued most about *your* contribution to this movement is that, like myself, you're grounded deeply in both the Christian tradition and in this new cosmology. You're grounded in this [Great Story](#), the [epic of evolution](#), as a sacred story, as a meaningful understanding of our place in the universe. You're finding the fertile ground between these two stories: the traditional Christian story and then of course this new story, the universe story as the larger context for all of our religious stories.

Every religious story on the planet is a story of humanity. It's a story of humans coming to understand [the nature of reality—what's real and what's important](#)—and then articulating that by using metaphors and analogies appropriate to that part of the world they lived in. Now we find ourselves with this *collective* story, this story that would not be possible if it weren't for people all over the world, from all different traditions, and all of our technology and our science, which *can* be seen (and sometimes *is* seen) as threatening, upon first exposure by religious people. But, as you and I and many of the others within this conversation series have discovered, when you look a little deeper into the new story and reinterpret some of the core truths, insights, and understandings of your particular religious tradition, it opens them up to a far richer, grander, more magnificent understanding. At least, that's been my experience—and I know it's been yours, as well.

M. Morwood: Most definitely. One of the things that's become very clear for me—it's almost like a decision that I make as a Christian: Will I theologize, will I pray, will I conduct liturgy in a worldview that sees God (whatever God *is*, the mystery of God) primarily as an external

elsewhere reality? Or will I do all that in a thoroughgoing Christian conviction that I stand in a universe that is totally and utterly permeated with the divine presence. I think that's a choice that you make.

My sense in the last 15 or 20 years as I've *made* that choice—and quite clearly in my own mind I've decided: I will not theologize anymore, I will not pray anymore, I will not think of sacraments or Jesus anymore in terms of that *dualism*—of a God being somewhere else above us. I'll try to do *all* that—trying to honor a basic Christian belief that I live in a universe that is totally and utterly permeated with the divine breath, the divine presence—whatever names that we want to put on this mystery we call God—that *is* the ground of all being, that holds everything in connection and relationship. I think that's a choice that you make.

People will say “Well, maybe it's either/or.” I think when you get into either/or you get into, as you were rightly calling, metaphor. I can imagine God as a person, I can imagine God as a loving father: and that's been very important in my Christian upbringing. It's very important in the lives and prayer and liturgy of many Christians. I keep saying to people, “Well, for sure: honor that, honor that. That's part of our tradition, but realize it is metaphor trying to deal with the mystery. Whatever we do, do not literalize the metaphor so that you actually make God into an external, overseeing personal deity who listens, who intervenes, and so on.”

I think that's the choice. What's the choice for me? I now have made the choice fairly clearly, saying: I want to walk in an understanding of the divine that's everywhere. At the same time, I will respect and I will even *use*, the metaphorical language, or the prayer, as if God were somewhere else. But I think what's happened is I see the danger, or limitations, of literalizing that metaphor into an understanding that God is *out there*.

The other thing that's become clear to me, as I've done this, is that institutional Christianity keeps literalizing the metaphor. I think it does that because it gives institutional identity. The institution claims, for example, that we are a unique institution because we have access to that God. So, there's institutional investment, I think, in literalizing the metaphor so we [the institution] can say, “We can tell you what God thinks; we have exclusive access to God.” And then you get into that whole elitism and divisiveness that is not good for our world.

I think the other part of the Christian story as I see it now is that when one walks in the sense that the universe is permeated with the divine presence, and I as a Christian can look at that, at the same time I'm saying, “Well, yes, but this is true for Muslims, it's true for everyone.” So now we have a universal story about the divine presence—which is not new, but we need to honor it more and be more in tune with it.

Host: Yes. I began to first think along these lines in the 1980s, and there were three major influences on me at the time. The first was [Ian Barbour](#), who was our first guest in this series. His book [Myths, Models, and Paradigms](#) was hugely important for me. And also [Sallie McFague](#): several of her books were pivotal for me. The first one was [Speaking in Parables](#). It was very significant along these lines. And then, [Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language](#).

I found her writings to be so significant, exactly on this point: that *we trivialize the divine—we actually belittle God—if we take our metaphors for God literally*. Because what it forces us to do, then, is to eliminate all other metaphors as not legitimate. For example, if I say that God *is* king, God *is* lord, God *is* father—then God can't also be mother, friend. It fails to recognize what we now understand through cross-cultural study of the world's myths and religions and neurobiology: that *all* of our concepts, all of our images and language for God are personifications. They are ways of *relationalizing*—of expressing [our relationship to Reality](#), to what is fundamentally real.

And yet if we concretize, if we make an idol, of any particular metaphor, we then limit the divine—because we shift from thinking, “Reality is father-like,” to thinking, “God *is* father.” So, there's this objectification of God as up-there-out-there somewhere—a father who's looking down on us. Our brains do that pretty instinctually, so it's not a surprise that people have done that.

But I think the work that *you're* doing, the work that [Joseph Campbell](#) also did—I mean he was constantly trying to remind us (in [The Power of Myth](#) series that was shown years ago and has been re-shown on PBS many times)—he was constantly bringing home this point that all of our language for the divine is metaphorical. And that's a good thing! That's not a bad thing. Ian Barbour made the point that all traditions have personal metaphors for the divine and also impersonal metaphors—and both are necessary.

M. Morwood: Yes, I remember being struck by a section in Sallie McFague's book, [The Body of God: An Ecological Theology](#). She was saying that when Christians literalize the notion of a God-out-there being incarnated in Jesus of Nazareth, as if it's all put in one person—in a sense, how limiting that is of God.

So, let me ask you: Was Joseph Campbell number three on your list?

Host: Yes, exactly: [Sallie McFague](#), [Joseph Campbell](#), and [Ian Barbour](#).

M. Morwood: What a great list!

Host: Michael, I want to push a little bit more into your comment before, which I found very provocative and exciting. I want you to elaborate more in terms of, How has this epic of evolution, this [Great Story](#) (the Universe Story as our common creation story) —how has that helped you reinterpret and re-experience, from a more naturalized way, things like the sacraments, or your understanding of God or Jesus? You touched on it before, but I want you to go a little bit deeper into prayer, sacraments, Jesus, God—from a sacred evolutionary understanding.

M. Morwood: I think what happened when I was locked into the old story—certainly in the early '90s, that story became unbelievable. So when I started reading [Thomas Berry](#) and [Brian](#)

[Swimme](#) and others, and learned for the first time [the age of the universe](#)—I would say, too, I was immensely helped by the [Hubble Telescope](#); it just blew my mind—there was the sense that if God is everywhere, then what am I imagining? Where is this mystery?

The next question that arose out of that was: If God is everywhere and God is the ground of all being, then where would we experience this God? Where would we look to see this reality at work? And one of the things that struck me was: The patterns at work in the universe are the patterns of the divine presence. This is how the divine manifests itself in the universe. So I'm wanting to honor the sense that this mystery of God is everywhere at work, and it's an unfolding process. If that is true, then in the human endeavor—if I follow the patterns that I see at work—I would expect to see in the human endeavor this same presence coming to expression in human voices, giving expression to the same pattern. In other words, saying, "You must work together, cooperate so that this presence will keep unfolding within us."

So, if I ask the question then, "Where does Jesus come from?" Well, Jesus comes from God. "Where is God?" God is at work in the universe. Jesus is a product of the universe. Jesus is a product of the Earth, of the divine presence at work in the Earth, in the universe. So is the Buddha, so is Confucius, so are the Australian aboriginal people.

I would expect, then, that in a Jesus or a Buddha or the great religious leaders: that this same divine presence—whatever word you put on it, God—would come to expression with some clarity, of, "You must work together, cooperate, stop the violence." And that's how I see Jesus.

So I ask the question of Jesus: "Who is he? Where does he come from?" He comes from God. He's the expression of the divine at work in the universe. But he's a product of the universe; he's a product of the Earth. He's not a drop-down from heaven. Jesus, then, to me is someone who gives expression to the divine, and then says to me and to others, "Now, this is who *you* are! This is this *your* story!" So, it's a different context—totally—of seeing Jesus.

When I go back to the Gospels, I want to go back to the Gospels in this light—through this screen. I *do* go back to the Gospels, and I understand Jesus was a Jew. He stood within his Jewish tradition, Jewish culture, Jewish thought patterns, Jewish worldview. And I understand that. I understand that the Gospel writers did the same thing. But also when I go back, I see that there's a bigger story here. And the bigger story is the story we're trying to tell today. I see Jesus coming *out* of that story, but also necessarily *limited by* his own humanness—the fact that he stood within the whole Jewish tradition of messiah and the worldview of the time. So I would expect to see in Jesus the limitations of his own thought.

That's different from the doctrinal Jesus that I knew: As the Son of God, he knows everything! So the question here is, "Do I honor the doctrinal notion that he's the Son of God and knows everything? Or do I today honor where I'm trying to walk in understanding the divine of the universe?" And I go back and say, "No, I don't see Jesus the way Roman Catholic doctrine sees him anymore."

Now, when I *do* this, do I stop being a Christian? That's the big question for many people. Do I stop being a Christian if I go back and look at Jesus this way? And I want to say "No, no, no!" The whole point of being Christian is to look at Jesus: How does Jesus articulate for us

an understanding of our relationship with the divine? How does he challenge us to give expression to that? What is the kingdom of God all about? Nothing of that changes.

So I see Jesus more clearly than I ever saw him before, as the emergence of the divine at work in the universe. But now it's not that it's just *his* story—that he's so different from *us*. Now, I see him saying, “This is *your* story. Open your eyes. See this! See this!” The kingdom of God will be clear; justice will come again—if we see this. And it will change the world.

When I look at sacraments in the Christian tradition, and if I look particularly at the Roman Catholic notion of the Eucharist, I see that since the Middle Ages we've had this focus on *reception*. We do this with children at the age of seven or eight: [we tell them that] the sacrament is all about what you are *receiving* and how it's going to work. When I go back into the Jesus story and the night before he died, I'd want to tell a different story. I want to tell the story that this sacrament is about, “Stand up and be counted!” This is about ritualizing one's readiness to give one's life to what one believes. Augustine says this, too: “*You* are the bread, *you* are the body. This is *your* mystery that's put on the altar.” Baptism, again, is “Stand up and be counted!” This sacrament is a mature, solemn oath.

So the sacraments are primarily about an *inner disposition*: “I've heard this story. I know what I'm being asked to do. I will stand up in your presence. I'll look you in the eye. And I'll give you my word: I will say, Yes! I *am* the body of Christ. I will live this way. You'll see it in the way I live.” Or we say, “Yes, you told me the story. Pour the water over me. I will live in such a way that you'll see the mind and the heart of the very *spirit* that moved in Jesus, that moved in our universe. You'll see it in my life.”

So sacraments are not about dependence on a middle class to bring the sacred *to* us. That's a dependent model that came in the Middle Ages. Sacraments are about empowerment. Sacraments are leading us into a story that empowers us, that challenges us, and that ritualizes the wonder of who we are—but also the challenge to give witness to that.

And what liturgy is, too—I think liturgy should not be primarily concerned with addressing an “elsewhere God” who demands to be worshipped and gets annoyed if we're not there. I think liturgy, worship—it's for *our* sake. It's to nurture a story in *us*, to deepen awareness, and then to call us to give witness to it.

It's the same with prayer. For most of my life my *prayer life* was about trying to talk to an external God. That's where I *was*, and in many ways it worked well. So I would never say to people, “Don't pray that way.” But prayer for me now is not so much trying to reach out or talk to a listening, external deity. As I move into trying to honor the mystery of God everywhere, prayer now is my responsibility to deepen my awareness that I do live in a universe permeated with this presence—that as a human person, I give expression to this mystery. So prayer should be telling me who I am. I think that's one of the key things about prayer: What does our prayer life tell us about who we are in relationship to God? Does it tell us we are distant from God? Does it tell us we are exiles? Is that what prayer tells us? Or does prayer honor, again, the Christian tradition: Hey! we are the body of Christ; we are the earthen vessel that holds the treasure; we are the temples of God's spirit.

So prayer primarily for me now is about slowing down. It's about awareness. It's about a sense of wonder, a sense of appreciation. What strikes me is that prayer does two things. One, it pulls me into this new story of the universe: the wonder of what it is to be human—stardust becomes aware; stardust looks at the stars. Now my Christian overlay on that is it is not just a story about the universe and the wonder and the appreciation of what it is to be human. My Christian faith now puts another layer on that and says, “Hey! I’m also giving the mystery that I call God, the divine presence—I’m giving that reality a way of coming to expression.”

So the more I can enter into that sense of “*This is what prayer is!*”—there's a sense of appreciation, a sense of wonder. But then, also, as Jesus would do, it's the sense of *challenge*. If this is what it's about, how am I giving expression to this? How am I being *neighbor*? How am I gathering together? How am I cooperating? How am I working to make this a better society? And so on.

Host: That's great, Michael. In listening to you, one of the things that comes up for me is that you have walked a similar path to my own in that [I no longer interpret anything in my Christian tradition in an unnatural way. I interpret all of it naturally](#). I don't interpret any of it in a magical way.

I used to have an understanding of pretty much everything in my faith—from Jesus to original sin, and salvation, and the kingdom of God, and heaven and hell, to the second coming of Christ—I used to interpret all of that in a magical way, in an unnatural way. By “unnatural” I mean that [if you interpret it literally, it would be supernatural, or unnatural](#). It wouldn't be natural. It wouldn't be something we actually have evidence could happen in the real universe as we actually experience it. It's the kind of thing that would happen in our dreams. If I could actually do during the daytime what I do every night in my dreams, I'd be having unnatural experiences every night.

I used to interpret my tradition that way. Now I call it the REALizing, the naturalizing, of all the core concepts of my Christian tradition. So I now interpret *all* of it in a this-world, realistic way. For me at least, that has opened up my relationship to God.

I so appreciate what you said about some of these patterns at work in the universe. When we really understand these, from our best evidential understanding of reality, it allows me to look at my own life and Christian tradition from a richer way. I *do* see these patterns of *greater complexity, greater interdependence, and greater cooperation at larger and wider scale over time, both in the pre-human world and throughout human history*. 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, and then to societies and more complex societies. And, yes, there have certainly been setbacks. It's not an arrow—it's a tendency. But this process is undeniable.

[The pattern of change in the universe] can be interpreted in either teleological ways, as some do, as God guiding the process in this way. There are others who interpret it in a non-teleological way. We can have a multiplicity of ways of interpreting it. But I think this pattern, when we recognize it, then we recognize how we can participate in the process in a way that,

to use religious language, glorifies God—in a way that furthers the process in healthy ways. For example, how do we now cooperate across ethnic and religious and political divisions so that we can work together in service of a just, healthy, and sustainably life-giving future for all of us? I think that's part of the work of the Kingdom.

M. Morwood: Following from what we're saying, one thing that strikes me as I sit with this pattern at work, and the emerging of the divine at work in the human endeavor, is that it's obvious we're the only life form that can say no to this. I think that's part of the task of religion. It's the point of a Jesus or a Buddha or a Muhammad or a Moses or whoever—people who are saying, “Don’t say ‘No’! Let the divine unfold! Work together, cooperate.”

Probably, we're at a time in history when we *are* saying *no* in such violent and such clear ways. We're saying “No” politically. We're saying “No” religiously, in our divisions. We're saying “No” in the way we have political discourse. We're saying “No” in economics. So this is not just about trying to rescue Christianity. This is a story that the world needs to hear —and religion has an important role in saying this.

The second point I'd like to highlight as I walk in this journey is that I'm wanting to honor the fact that Jesus walked and talked in a universe that was permeated with the divine presence. I think that is so important because institutional Christianity still refuses to say that. It still wants to tell the story of dualism—that God sent his Son from somewhere else, that Jesus is the unique savior (in the sense that Jesus opens the gates of heaven and Jesus gets us access to a place where God is, which is somewhere else). To all this, I want to say, “No, I am not there anymore. I will not walk in that story.” And I'm saying, “I will not walk in that story as a Christian.”

It's probably time for many Christians to be unapologetic about that. And I know in *saying* that, for example, I'm disagreeing with some of Paul's writing. I'm disagreeing with the writer of John's Gospel. I'm disagreeing with the [Nicene Creed](#). People will say, “Well, how can you call yourself a Christian if you disagree with that?!” And I say, “Well, you tell me that you don't believe that Jesus walked and talked in a universe permeated with the divine presence: You tell me why you don't believe that.” I think that's a key point of discussion for Christians.

Host: I agree. I think that making an idol of past interpretations is probably the thing that has done more to keep any religious tradition from evolving. As long as we go back to old interpretations of reality—of what's real and what's important as was understood 500 years ago or 1,300 years ago or 2,000 years ago or longer—we will not evolve. And of course, that stuff gets embodied in our creeds. Especially in the liturgical, high-church traditions that recite the Nicene Creed or the [Apostle's Creed](#), we're constantly reinforcing these ancient interpretations. That's why I think some of the work that *you* are doing and that [Bruce Sanguin](#) is doing, and others who are attempting to evolve our prayers, our understanding of the sacraments, our ritual celebrations, our liturgies for adults and kids: I think this is some of the most important work that needs to happen.

M. Morwood: I see [what you are saying] clearly within the Roman Catholic Church. [Vatican II](#) tried to engage the modern world. What we've seen in the last forty years is a retrograde step going back, trying to preserve the institution in the face of—I guess, what they would call — liberalism. And now that the task is not so much to engage the modern world—I mean, that is important—but also to engage *this story*, [the need for change has become] so clear to people.

I was in Chicago recently, and saw the [3D Hubble Telescope documentary on IMAX](#).

Host: I know. Connie and I saw that too. It was amazing!

M. Morwood: It was magnificent! And in the audience, there were three or four hundred young children—and this is their worldview. Last week I was at Midway Airport in Chicago, and I'm walking along the tunnel from the train to the airport. And they have [48 large pictures \[taken by\] the Hubble Telescope](#) in that tunnel. I mean, this is the worldview that people see! The church has to *engage* that.

What I see in the Roman Catholic Church in the last 30 or 40 years is a sense of “Protect the institution at all costs!” I saw that in the sexual abuse crisis, and I see a parallel movement within my church with this theological movement. [The goal seems to be] “Let's put men in positions of power—not men who can engage *this story*, not men who can engage the *challenge* of modernity in the modern age, but men who (above anything else) will be institutional men and who will preserve the institutional story.”

It's not surprising that so many people—not just Catholics, but people of other denominations, as well—when they see the institution not willing to engage this, they ask, “Where do I go? What do I do?” One of the tragedies is that scholarship so often, certainly in the Roman Catholic tradition, is not allowed to publicly question the institutional story. People have the sense of, “Well, where do I go? I'm left on my own: What do I believe? How do I pray? If I go to the institutional liturgy, it doesn't nurture me.”

One of the big movements going on is the movement to begin to ritualize one's own faith in small groups, if the institutional liturgy is not doing it. So one of my passions in all of that is that several years ago I wrote the book, [Praying a New Story](#). There, I was trying to put into the hands of Christians (not just Catholics) a way of praying that is not addressing an external deity. Last year, I published [Children Praying a New Story: A Resource for Parents, Grandparents, and Teachers](#). I think the issue is that we cannot get [these ideas] to children until parents and grandparents and teachers are steeped in this story. And not only steeped in a new story, but that they are given ways to understand:

What does this say about Good Friday? What does this say about Christmas? What does it say about Baptism? What does it say about Eucharist? What does it say about the way I could look at the Gospel stories? What does it say about death? What sort of prayer forms might I use with children? How would I pray with my four-year-old at night?

So I wrote *Children Praying a New Story* to try to engage those questions.

Host: That's great, Michael. As I've said before, I think that's some of the most important work that needs to happen. Connie, my wife, has developed a whole bunch of children's curricula and things for parents, homeschooling parents, teachers, religious educators. She tries to help both adults and children take this story deep into their hearts and deep into their psyches—and I think that's vital work.

You've mentioned a couple of times the Hubble images. We received an email about six years ago from a woman by the name of Joyce Keller. She came to one of our programs, and a week later she sent us a poem she had written. I want to read it here, because it's a gem. It's called, "All My Life", by Joyce Keller:

All my life I've wanted to believe in God,
gone to church, followed every spiritual teacher in town,
meditated and prayed, attended 12-step programs,
but still I felt abandoned and alone in the universe.

All my life I've wanted to see the face of God.
Is he really just a mean old man in the sky?
Perhaps God is a chubby Buddha,
or maybe the Dalai Lama, always laughing.
Or is She a woman, the green Tara, weeping pearl tears,
the Virgin of Guadalupe, crowned with roses?

All my life I've tried to solve that old mystery,
Who are we? Where did we come from? Why are we here?
Then one day I saw the pictures
sent back by the Hubble Telescope:
Hot blue stars born out of the red glow of galaxies,
a pulsating firestorm of fluorescent clouds,
the obsidian sky of deep space.
Spirals of comets, like swirling diamond necklaces.
Black holes, exploding supernovas,
a hundred thousand light-years away,
endless, unimaginable, eternal.
And I knew that finally I had seen the face of God.

M. Morwood: Wonderful! Wonderful! Let me share a little poem, too. I was giving a retreat and talking about not just the Hubble but the whole development of our atoms—that our atoms were once out in the universe there, and that there are atoms in us that were once in dinosaurs.

And in the afternoon, one of the [Catholic] sisters, Mary Shannon, in her group read this poem that she wrote,

Question:

A piece of dinosaur in me?
A drop of sea?
Small bird fallen from a tree?
A bit of Jesus even?
. . . Me?

Have I eaten from the treetops?
Crashed upon the rocks and crushed
them into sand?
And did I one day fly?
Or heed a bleeding woman's cry?
. . . Die?

Why were we not told
That we are old as any star?
That God is in—not far
Or not be helped to see
That ultimately star chips
called divinity . . . are we?

Isn't that great? And that comes out of a woman's reflection from a presentation.

Host: Yes, it is. It reminds me, Michael, of the children's stories that Connie and I will often do in church services, when we do the Story for All Ages. One of the stories is about the fact that [our bodies are made of stardust](#). The atoms of our bodies literally were created—other than hydrogen, which was created right after the “Great Radiance” (or the Big Bang)—all the other atoms (the carbon atoms, the oxygen atoms, the nitrogen atoms, the calcium in our bones and iron in our blood), all those atoms were created inside stars that lived and died before our Sun, our star, was born.

We don't believe this; we *know* this. This is what every astrophysicist in the world would agree with. But when kids get this understanding that they are made of *stardust*, it's just totally cool! There's this *relationship* to the night sky that they have. And when they realize that these atoms are constantly recycling . . . Sometimes I'll take a drink of water and I'll say, “Did you realize that the water on Earth is constantly recycling? These hydrogen and oxygen, H₂O molecules, are constantly recycling. And so with every drink of water, you're drinking a little bit of dinosaur pee!” And the kids, of course, go eeewwwhhhhh!—but they love it.

M. Morwood: [It's a great, great story](#)—of all the transformation over billions and billions of years. And about that great story, we say, “It's not *just* the scientific story. This is the story of this divine ministry operating and coming to expression in this quiet vessel that I am today.” And then, “Well, what am I *doing* with this?”

Host: I remember earlier in this conversation, you were talking about ways to interpret the sacraments, such as Eucharist, from an evolutionary understanding—an evolutionary appreciation. It gets at this understanding that we're always interpreting, and interpretations necessarily have a slant, either a positive slant or a negative slant. [By using the term] “the Big Bang,” science offers a not particularly inspiring way of thinking about the beginning of the universe. That term was coined by [Fred Hoyle](#), who actually didn't believe the theory: he was dissing it; he was putting it down! And the derogatory way he was saying, “Oh, the Big Bang Theory,” well, that stuck! [Carl Sagan](#) tried to get that renamed before he died, but he was unsuccessful.

But this notion of “nature red in tooth and claw” has a negative slant. It's got a negative interpretation. You get the sense that, “Oh! It shouldn't be that way!” What, of course, the phrase is pointing to is that evolution proceeds, life continues, because creatures eat other creatures. That's true; that's a fact. But I've come to interpret that in a different kind of mythic way: I now see that as pointing to the fact that the entire body of life is in a state of holy communion at all times. The entire body of life is saying, “Take, eat. This is my body, which is given for you.” Now, that's also an interpretation. That's not the truth; it's an interpretation. For me it's a far more inspiring interpretation because it allows me to be present to the fact that creatures eat other creatures—but through the lens of my particular tradition. And I see it in a very real way as *the body of life in communion*, in holy communion.

M. Morwood: One of the words, too, that I find myself picking up on is this word *just*. “You're making Jesus *just* a human person.” “You're making evolution, this whole story, *just* about nature.” My sense is that behind [those objections], people have lost their sense of wonder. The Jesus story [as I now interpret it] is not *just* human; it's the *wonder* of being human. It's the incredible, extraordinary privilege of what it is to be human.

I mean, “Can you listen?! What are you saying about the human, if you use that sort of language—if you say, *just* human?” And yet, such language is used so often by people who are suspicious of this whole story that we're trying to tell. They say, “It's *just* natural, or it's *just* human.” There's no appreciation; there's no sense of wonder.

Until you get *into* the story, I guess people can't have a sense of wonder in it.

Host: Yes. Well, [this is where I appreciate the work of Richard Dawkins so much](#). Obviously, everybody knows that Richard isn't particularly friendly to traditional, otherworldly, supernatural religion. But what he's brilliant at, in my opinion, is helping people to move beyond exactly what you were saying—this idea that, “Is this all there is? Is this *just* nature? Is it *just* human?”

More than most scientists, he has a gift for writing and helping people of all backgrounds and beliefs to see the majestic, incredible, amazing universe that we in fact live in and are part of and are an expression of.

One of the great gifts of science is that science helps us see. It gives us 'deep-time eyes'. It's as if [without the scientific view] we close one eye and lack depth dimension. Science helps us see what's right in front of us, what sometimes we might be tempted to see with shallow eyes. But we can have a deep-time understanding and have a far richer relationship to what's before us than we could have possibly had without a science-based understanding. For example, looking up at the stars, knowing that those stars aren't (as the biblical writers believed) the pinprick holes in the dome of the heavens that allows God's glory to shine through. Rather, we know that those stars are our *ancestors*: that our bodies are made of the stuff created in stars—just like those—that lived before our Sun was born. Having deep-time eyes allows you to be present to the natural world in a richer way than without deep-time eyes.

M. Morwood: Yes, and I think that the advantage of the criticism of someone like Dawkins is that it challenges people: "Well, what *do* you believe?"

Host: Well, Michael, in winding down this conversation, I'm wondering if you'd like to help our listeners know a little bit more about your various books and any current project or projects you're working on that you'd like folks to know about.

M. Morwood: Well, one of the key books, as I mentioned earlier, is the book [Children Praying a New Story](#). How would we look at Jesus through this lens that we're talking about today? How would we tell the story of Christmas, if we're not telling the story of a God figure coming down from heaven—but more of Jesus who manifests the divine that is working through the universe and the Earth? How do we tell the story of Good Friday? What's the story of Easter? What's the story of Pentecost? And then it looks at the sacraments, as well.

One of my main concerns in that book, and also in [Praying a New Story](#), is to try and provide prayer forms. We're so conditioned to pray *to* God—even, for example, if we were to say a grace before a meal. Instinctively [we begin], "Bless us o Lord" or "O God." If we're to pray a prayer at the beginning of a meeting, many people would say, "O God, send your spirit upon us." So what I've tried to do in both the books is try to develop and articulate and shape prayer forms that do *not* address God—I'm not saying, "Don't *do* that," but we need to readdress the imbalance of prayers that constantly address a listening deity.

So instead we pray with prayers that begin by affirming a presence: "We gather here today mindful of the divine presence that has worked in all places at all times." That affirmation becomes part of the prayer. Let me give you an example: prayer at the beginning of the school day. "We give thanks for the spirit of God present in our world, and present here in each one of us. We give thanks for the ways we see the spirit of God present to us in people who love us and care for us. We give thanks for the special abilities and talents each one of us has. They

are gifts of God's spirit with us. And may the spirit of God be seen in all we do and say and learn today.”

That sort of prayer is inclusive. We're *all* in this story—whether one is Christian or Muslim or Jew, or whatever. It gives thanks, and it also gives a challenge. And so I've tried to bring that kind of prayer to, like, How would I pray with a four-year-old at night? How would I open a meeting? How would I begin liturgy? What's our opening prayer in liturgy? How would I shape a Eucharistic prayer?

For example, if I'm breaking bread with people, the prayer would go something like, “We take this bread today, mindful of Jesus who gave everything he had for what he believed. We break this bread today, committing ourselves to allowing the same spirit that moved in Jesus to be given free and courageous expression in our lives. To this we give our amen.” So the emphasis *there* is not about, “Oh, what are we receiving and how does it work?” It's about an affirmation of who Jesus was and what he did.

It's saying, “Stand up and be counted! When I eat this bread in your presence today, to what am I committing myself?” So that's what I've done in those two books.

Children Praying a New Story is not generally available. The place to get it is my website, which is simply Morwood.org, or [here](#). (*Editor's note: it's also available on Amazon Kindle.*)

I have a new book coming out in January, which is a different style of writing altogether. Its title is [Faith, Hope, and a Bird Called George](#). And the subtitle is [A Spiritual Fable](#). It's written from the perspective of a 79-year-old lady whose name is Hope, who's just learned that one of her lifetime friends has got cancer and has six months to live. And she's sitting at home, stroking her cat, who is Faith. And she ends up exclaiming aloud to Faith, “It's not fair! Elsie deserves something better than this. God should not treat her this way.”

And then Faith, the cat, says to Hope, “God? Who's God?” And so you have these conversations going. And George is a parrot who's lived in the Catholic presbytery. George has a lot of the answers. George chimes in later, as well. So what happens throughout the book is that you have the conversations with this woman who is a traditional sort of Christian, but Faith is the voice pushing her, “What do you believe? Why do you believe?” And she comes to articulate a sense of the realization that, “You mean, all my life I've lived, and God has been with me?” So that's the way it goes.

Host: That's great. Well, Michael Morwood, thank you so much for your great work in the world, for sharing your ideas and your life experience with me and with our listeners today on the leading edge of faith.

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