

Mary Southard

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

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Michael Dowd (host): Welcome to Episode 17 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 you too can add your voice to the conversation. Indeed, please do so!

Today, our featured guest is [Mary Southard](#). [Mary](#) is a [Sister of St. Joseph](#) and a student of [Thomas Berry](#), who was a mentor for many of us in this series. Mary’s [paintings](#), [sculptures](#), and perhaps most famously her [Earth Calendar](#), communicate a sacred and deep-time relationship to Earth and Cosmos across religious divides. For nearly two decades Mary has been a dear friend and colleague in what Thomas Berry called “[The Great Work](#)”—that is, the work of ensuring a healthy world for future generations. Here, we discuss “[Deep-Time Art and the Language of the Heart.](#)”

Host: Hello Mary Southard, and welcome to this conversation on evolutionary Christianity.

Mary: Hi Michael. Thank you. Thank you for inviting me.

Host: Well, Mary, I was so excited to have you participate in this, because you bring an aesthetic, artistic sensibility that touches many of us at a really deep emotional level and a spiritual level. The question that I typically start with, which I want to start with you as well, is to share a little bit about your story. How you were raised, how you came to embrace this understanding that you now have of evolutionary Christianity, and how you got to where you are now.

Mary: I was raised in a pretty traditional Catholic family, and one thing I was certain of is that God was important. That was probably the greatest gift that my parents, although I didn’t always like the strictness, that’s the blessing—that faith really nourished us. After I left high school, I joined a religious community, so I am a Sister of St. Joseph. It’s a wonderful community. During the time when the [Catholic Church](#) was opening up—[Vatican II](#), dear [Pope John XXIII](#)—I found myself allured to study the work of [Teilhard de Chardin](#), and probably that was my first introduction to an evolutionary consciousness.

While I was an art student, later in the sixties at [Notre Dame](#), we were able to take advantage of all the ferment that was happening in theology. It was absolutely wonderful. Even though I was studying art, we could go to any of the theology classes on campus during the summer sessions. If I hadn't had that, I'm not sure sometimes where I would be today.

I was in education at the time, and then there came a day when I was involved with the formation of our younger sisters. It was at the time when things were really changing a lot, and eventually, out of that grew my work with spiritual direction and retreats and the Spirituality Center. So I have been in ministry, you might say—in spirituality, in programming on all kinds of different levels.

What shifted me was a wonderful burnout experience, where I was kind of brought back to a point zero. It's a scary place to be; I was terrified. I thought that this was the end. But out of that came a realization—because there were only a couple of things that I could do that really gave me energy, and one of them was drawing and painting.

So I discovered, at that time, that in my zeal for doing what needed to be done and leaving the teaching of art, that I hadn't done any art for several years. And that might be part of what allowed my overwork to get to me, because what I find is that if I am doing art, it gives me energy that I can apply to other things, as well. So there I was, but I was learning a wonderful thing—and that is, the power of images, the power of art, the power of process, and the ability for us, in a sense, to consciously partner our soul as we grow. I guess, our soul 'partners' us if we are engaged, especially in the arts, because I would have never been able to think my way out of it. But I was able to paint my way through the process of burnout and the kind of depression that went along with it.

So that was really, probably, my turning point and a “moment of grace” because it gave me an attitude, or an overriding image, which is really an image that is at the heart of the universe. It's out of crisis that possibilities come forth and flower. To use Jesus' words, which were what I was with at the time, “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it's just a grain of wheat. But if it dies, and is broken open, it brings forth much fruit.” So that was my dominant image and it kind of still is. It's at the heart of the dynamics of the universe.

Host: I completely agree. In fact, that's what I have found to be one of the most resonant themes in these last nine years of Connie and I traveling and teaching and preaching this [Epic of Evolution](#)—this [Great Story](#) perspective—is that this theme of chaos, breakdowns, destruction, violence, extinctions, and major bad news keeps catalyzing creativity and transformation, over and over and over again. When people really *get* that in their belly, when they feel that in their gut: for most people, it builds their faith, it builds their trust. It allows them to trust, as it did me. It allows me to trust the chaos of my life, the chaos of our culture, the chaos of our times, because I have faith. I trust that chaos, death, and breakdowns aren't the last word and that there's a possibility that's available only *because* of the breakdown. That's why I was so blown away by your interpreting of it . . . how did you say it? “a beautiful breakdown.”

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

“Though I walk in the dark valley” was one of the things that I painted at the time. It was so interesting because it was during that time I was seeing a spiritual director, and the first thing she encouraged me to do—actually it was a bit before the real crash—she just invited me to paint over Easter. I said, “There’s no way I can do,” I said. “I have three groups coming to the Christian Life Center . . .” But I did it, and when I finished I felt *whole*. My first thought was “Oh, there’s much more inside; I’m going to have to do *more*.” That was just the beginning. It was like cracking the door open. So when the burnout gave me all the time I needed, I just went back and started painting—and found that it was very, very helpful and very revelatory.

Host: That’s a powerful word: *revelatory*. One of the things I’ve greatly appreciated about [Matthew Fox](#)’s writings, and the whole [Creation Spirituality](#) that he introduced, is because it’s not just the positive. It’s not just the positive way, the way of the light, by which [God, Reality](#), speaks to us. There’s a grace present in the darkness, in the depression. When you look historically at some of the greatest artists of all time, it was in those times of melancholy or depression or silence or woundedness that huge creativity often blossomed forth.

Mary: And I think, Michael, it goes with the territory. Over the years since then, what I’ve begun to realize is that there are certain sensitivities that allow all of that to come *into* you. Out of that, expression then comes: the good things and the bad things, the light and the darkness, the chaos and confusion as well as the hope. So I’ve come to learn that it goes with the territory—and I wouldn’t have it any other way, anymore. There was a time when I thought, “Oh!” It can wipe you out sometimes!”

One of the things that began to happen was I started to do a calendar in the '70s—again, by accident. My brother asked me to do one for him for Christmas. So since I made a homemade calendar for him, I made one for another friend as well. The following year I made about twenty. Then someone said, “Why don’t you have them printed?” So I did that. And it became, what’s been called, *The Earth Calendar*. It gave me a challenge and an opportunity because I would put things on it—little daily practices for each season—to invite people back into a relationship with Earth, or with their own soul, or with their family. Little suggestions, like, “Follow a bee to a buttercup.” Or, “have homemade soup for supper.” Something like that: and people loved that. So it required me to really reflect on what was happening in the culture—what were the issues that I would hope we could invite ourselves to think more deeply about?

Turning up with twelve images every year and some spiritual reflection on that: it kept calling me deeper and deeper. Throughout the eighties I was doing these calendars. The summer of 1988: that was quite a summer. I was in Connecticut giving retreats at the end of the summer of ‘88, and that’s when all the medical waste was washing up on the beach. That

summer had been very, very hot and I was visiting one of our sisters in Wyoming, just as Yellowstone began to burn—so we were in this great smoke. And when I saw the first [Time Magazine of January, 1989, the Person of the Year was the Planet of the Year—and it was Earth](#). Remember that?

Host: I do. That year, 1988, was a huge piece of my *own* awakening.

Mary: Me, too.

Host: If I remember correctly, I think that in December 1988 [National Geographic also had a cover issue on “Endangered Earth.”](#) Yes, that was a major year...

Mary: ... wrapped up in plastic and tossed out on the beach, with the rest of the waste... It was like something shifted inside of me. The following summer I was able to study with [Thomas Berry](#) for three months. He wasn't there for all three months, but we went up to Holy Cross and did “The Pilgrimage to the Earth.” *[Editor's note: Holy Cross Centre for Ecology and Spirituality was in Port Burwell, Ontario, Canada.]*

That's where I really learned the extent of the environmental collapse that was taking place. I had no clue. I had a lot of inklings: I had done a lot of art, even, around compassion for Earth and that sort of thing. But when I really learned the facts and figures and the science, it really set me on the course for the rest of my life.

Host: I can so deeply relate because right at that same time, you and I were awakening to this—really in the same year. It was 1988 when I began to really be distressed at not finding hardly anything being said within my Christian tradition that was really on par with the issues that we were now becoming aware of. But it was the writings of [Sallie McFague](#), [Matthew Fox](#), [Gene Marshall](#), and then, of course, [Thomas Berry](#) and [Brian Swimme](#) that helped me have a new way of thinking about my Christian tradition. It went far deeper than beliefs; it was a deeply ecology-celebrating and evolution-celebrating version of my faith. I was pastoring my first church, so it was a real crisis of faith. It was at that same time, somebody gave me a copy of one of your calendars. It was in 1988 that I first had your calendar. Every year for many years after that your calendar helped me *visualize* this relationship to the cosmos—again, with a deep appreciation for my Christian tradition.

So I want to ask you, if you could say a little bit more about how you came to this embrace of the New Story—and what it was like first meeting Thomas Berry and being introduced to this “[Great Work](#),” this [Great Story](#) perspective.

Mary: It's quite a journey! I first met [Brian Swimme](#)'s writing when one of our high school religion classes was reading [The Universe is a Green Dragon](#). The teacher there gave a copy to all of the science teachers, and one of those teachers is one of my good friends. She was

reading it and she said, “Mary, you’ve got to read this. You’ll love it!” And so I was reading *The Universe is a Green Dragon*, and a wonderful thing began to happen. I had always been able or invited, you might say, into catching the vibes of the Earth; I always sensed a real kinship and presence. But reading about the wind and the sun and so on, I began to experience myself in a new way. I couldn’t have said it then, but I can say it now: I think that was the beginning of *experiencing myself as Earth*—not separate from Earth. I realized that the dynamics within Creation are the same dynamics that are going on in me—growing me, alluring me.

It was then in 1988, a few years later, that I really faced the bad news. I was reading everything in sight (which I tend to do), while practicing *believing* that I am part of the Earth. I was able to live on a farm, in an old farmhouse by myself, for a year. That was the one thing I had wanted to do all my life: to live on the land. And the whole story of Creation was so magnificent, and the bad news was so bad! What I felt myself called to do—to participate in this Great Work, in this project of Creation, of evolution—was so beyond me that I decided the best thing I could do was, as soon as I woke up in the mornings, I would pull on my boots and my parka and so on, and I went out and stood on the Earth. That was to remind myself of the billions of years of creative energy, which is flowing through me *now*—that it's not *me* that has to do anything. But I need to allow it to be done *through* me. You know what I mean?

Host: Yes, yes.

Mary: So there I would be, standing on the top of the hill, and that practice was a wonderful practice. I can see why our Indigenous people began the day that way. It's like remembering who I am: that I am the Earth.

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

I was teaching a course at Loyola one day a week called, “Self, Symbol, and Integration.” But after the summer with [Thomas Berry](#)'s thought, I said to the director of the masters program at the Institute for Pastoral Studies, I said, “I’d love to teach again, but I have to teach something else.” So I taught “The Universe Story, Our Story.” It was a wonderful experience because I told the class at the beginning that there were only two or three books available at that moment: one was [The Dream of the Earth](#) by Thomas Berry, another was [The Universe is a Green Dragon](#) by Brian Swimme—and nobody knew where to put them in libraries or in bookstores.

I said, “This is so new that we’re going to create this course together.” There’s a sense of direction, but actually we kind of practiced evolution. That was the greatest thing that helped me to trust my intuitions. Oftentimes I wonder, what would it be like if we could really *trust* that we have [the wisdom of 13.7 billion years of evolution within us](#)—that we have these dynamics, that we can rely on that creative energy, that fire that’s within us since the fireball?

Host: Oh, preach it, sister!

Mary: *[laughter]* Okay!

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

Host: Exactly. The other thing that I found at that time was a huge piece of my own education, and also it allowed me to share this Great Story, the sacred evolutionary understanding, with a lot more people. So I am imagining that you probably experienced it too, and that is [Sr. Miriam McGillis](#)' audiotape: [The Fate of the Earth](#).

Mary: That's right, that's right—[The Fate of the Earth](#).

Host: In the late '80s and early '90s, that tape just put it together in such a compelling way. I remember making a hundred copies and giving them out to people all over.

Mary: *[laughter]* Generosity of being, Michael: you've always been generous. That's wonderful!

Host: Sister Miriam, of course, was a huge mentor. In fact my youngest daughter, Miriam Joy, is named after Sister Miriam.

Mary: Wonderful! Well, the following year [John Surette](#) asked me to come and help him start a center—[Spiritearth](#). I was out East and one of the first things we did was to take a course with Miriam, down at [Genesis Farm](#), in becoming storytellers—on telling the story. That was enriching. So we just started, you know? We learned it as we told it. One of the people you interviewed, I just loved the way he said that “as we get deeper into the intricacies of the story and the dynamics, it fills us with awe and wonder.” It fills *me* with awe and wonder—and I'm so grateful to be a part of this wonderful universe. It is radically amazing.

Host: [Bruce Sanguin](#) had an awakening around [The Universe is a Green Dragon](#), as so many of us did: a religious experience.

Mary, I would love to ask you to go a little deeper into that. How has this cosmic creation story—our common creation story, this evolutionary epic—how has that affected your Christianity? How has that made a difference in terms of your faith?

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

Let me tell you about one of the first links with Christian mysteries, or our Christian traditions, and so on. We used to say [the Rosary](#) when we grew up, and it took all these moments—turning point moments of [Mary](#) and [Jesus](#)' life. One of those moments is called, "[The Visitation](#)," where Mary is asked to become the mother of Jesus, and she was told that her older cousin, Elizabeth, was also going to have a baby. So when Mary goes to see her, Elizabeth realizes she is coming because the child in her womb leaps. That visitation became to me something new: I said, "Oh! That's what happens to me when I'm out praying at the ocean, where something in me is moving—there's new life that moves in me! That's what happens when I'm walking at night and I feel the presence of the tree! It's really the presence of God within all Creation." Even back in high school I can remember having those moments. And now, with this new understanding of the universe, it made perfect sense. It concretized in me the meaning of why it is that, almost anyone tells you, if they are really distraught and upset, if they go out in the natural world, things begin to fall into place again for them. There is something very healing about the presence of the natural world—because that's where we came from; that's where we belong.

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

I would have to say that the most exciting thing that's happening along those lines—and it continues to happen—is how Jesus, the *human* Jesus and Jesus the *Christ*, is evolving in my consciousness. I remember the day I realized that I was raised in the Garden of Paradise. I was raised in the Garden of Eden. We're evolving—we came out of the Earth, we carry within us what other creatures invented, we might say, over the course of evolution. So then the question became, *where is Jesus? What does Jesus mean?* We were so ingrained with "Jesus came to save us from our sins," so now—*who is he?* I remember Thomas Berry's response when someone asked him that question. He just kind of chuckled and said, "You know, if Jesus is who he says he is, he'll show up."

He's been showing up in so many wonderful ways! So, I was raised in a garden. The day that I realized that, I remember thinking, "Wow, are stories ever powerful!" It had kept me from seeing what's all around me and realizing that *I'm living in a paradise*. I am not just here so that

God can try me out to see if I am worthy of heaven. That was kind of ingrained into us somehow—this whole thing about being born in sin and having to be rescued and that we are just here to prove ourselves. So that was a huge shift for me, and it is ongoing—because that other stuff is so deep in us: achievement, and the difficulty we have in really believing how loved we are, unconditionally. I began to see in Jesus when those moments happened for *him*. I think his self-realization, or his self-sense of identity, came when he was baptized in the Jordan and he heard, “You are my son, my beloved.” So then I began to allow myself to experience that same sense, more and more. And sometimes it just overwhelms you, when you're out there: realizing how *loved* we are. There's nothing we need to prove.

Host: I think one of the great gifts of this time in Church history—this time in the history of Christianity—it's like we're at this incredible time when we get to rethink all the core aspects of our faith: [sin, salvation, the Kingdom of God, heaven and hell, Jesus as “the way, the truth and the life,”](#) and so many other central aspects of our faith. And we get to reinterpret them, to relook at them, to re-appreciate them from this cosmological understanding that we are the result of nearly 14 billion years of divine grace and creativity—that we are the Earth becoming conscious of Itself. We are nature uncovering its own nature.

It's an incredible time to be alive—that we all get to participate. It's not like we can wait for some group of authoritative men to tell us, “Here's what it means.” It's a community co-creation.

Mary: Yes. That whole thing about co-creation is huge, too—that we're not just spectators in this universe but reflecting on it. [John Haught](#) does this so beautifully: reflecting on what it means to be a participant in the universe, to be a participant in bringing about what we will be, what we will become—and to do that consciously. No other humans have ever even dreamed of such a thing! This is such a pregnant moment—such a beautiful moment.

I love the way you said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life” because I believe that's who Jesus is. I love the way [Judy Cannato](#) talks about this in her book, [Radical Amazement](#). When the first prokaryotes were able to take in the sun and invented photosynthesis: from then on Earth had a whole new relationship to the sun; all of life depends on it. In Jesus, a new consciousness emerged and he *lived* out of it. He lived out of that consciousness of inclusivity and of the great tenderness for the people around him. He didn't buy into the culture—well, of course, it cost him his life.

Host: He wasn't a liberal or a conservative; he was radical.

Mary: That's right; he was radical.

Host: He kept saying to the religious establishment, “Those of you who think that being in [right relationship to God](#) is simply being a part of the right tradition or doing the right rituals or having the right beliefs, you don't get it! It's bigger than that!”

Mary: It's much bigger!

What's emerging now in the writings of some people is deeper and deeper reflection into what does this mean, "the reign of God?" What does this mean, that "we are the Christ?" What did Jesus mean when he said, "And the things that I do, you will do greater than I" and that we are to *become* the presence of Christ in the world—that we *are* the Christ?

All of those things that my mind has grappled with for decades ... I don't grapple with them anymore; they're just *there*. That's what it's about! The Kingdom is within us; we are bringing it about.

Host: Amen.

Mary: That's what gives me hope—that there is a seed that is growing within us now and becoming stronger and stronger as a human community. That's my hope. I don't see a lot of evidence in some arenas, but beneath the radar screen there are lots of wonderful things happening.

Host: Mary, I want to come back to, what so many of us recognize as one of your great gifts in this movement, which is [your art](#). I want to ask, How has an evolutionary worldview, how is this understanding that we now have that humans are part of the universe process—that we are the universe becoming conscious of itself—how has that thinking affected both [what you paint](#) and *how* you paint?

Mary: What I realize is that I participate in evolution when I paint. I never know where a painting is going to go. There are some kinds of art that are self-expression—like the grieving I already talked about, or the ecstasy: that's an *expression*. But then there are things where the Earth, or the wisdom of the Earth, the dynamics, things that I'm learning, things that I experience lead me deeper. That is more like an exploration and a discovery. It's probably what they call "process." Art is, I think, really a process.

I do lots of programs with people, and what I'm realizing (after about eight or nine years of doing this) is it's a great way to invite nonartists into an experience of evolution—like their own evolution and how to trust, how to silence the little ego critic, which we all have in our culture, that says: "I'm not an artist!" "I can't do this!" "I can't draw a straight line with a ruler!" And then to move through that to their core creativity. It's a wonderful thing to do in the context of the story of evolution, the creation story, because they can call upon that creativity of the universe. And they do—so that by the end of four or five days, they have a whole new sense of their own inner truth and creativity, and that they can trust their inspirations, and so on. It's kind of sharing what I've learned over the years and in a way that I love to do it.

Host: We spoke earlier at the beginning of this call about where we find the Divine, where we find God in the silence, in the depression, and in the breakdowns. Yet there's this other side that is also true, which is in some ways we're never closer to the heart of God than when we are expressing our own creativity in some way. I mean, if God is creator, certainly that makes sense. But I think for many of us, that's what we *feel*—sometimes it's hard to *feel* the presence of God when you're in a depression or a breakdown. But it's often easy to feel this [intimacy with God, with Reality](#), when we are expressing our own creativity in the world in some way.

Mary: That's a beautiful way of saying it—that we're closer to God when we are closer to ourselves, too. And to know that it is all good, and it's all okay.

Host: That's the primary interpretive stance of the “eyes of faith,” which is to say, “Yes, this hurts like hell. Yes, this is not the way I wanted it. Yes, this isn't how I wished it would unfold. And yet, okay: what's possible now? Here's what real; now what's possible?” That is a faith-stance of *choosing*—because it really is in many cases a choice—it's choosing to not see this as a problem to be fixed but as an opportunity that may not feel good, but there is something emerging.

Mary: There's something good coming! [I also do sculpture](#). One of the most exciting things for me was to be involved in the renovation of our chapel recently. I would have to say that this might be my “Mona Lisa” because I was asked to do an altar. Let me just describe it to you. It has, what Thomas Berry used to call, “the compassionate curve of space-time.” So it has these curving, wooden forms that are embracing, you might say, or holding in love the Earth. I made a large Earth out of plaster and then that was coated with bronze. These arms also hold up the altar top—the Table. The Table is transparent so that natural lighting comes down through it onto the Earth (because we have light right down the center of the ceiling of our chapel). So you can always see Earth, and the presider at the [Eucharist](#) can always see Earth.

[This altar](#) design was inspired by Teilhard's wonderful reflection called, “The Mass on the World.” [Teilhard](#) had an awareness that the “body of Christ” is the whole Creation. So we have that image before us at all times. Now, even for some of the elders who are in our worshiping community here: they don't need to know about Teilhard, they don't need to know all that. But they *get* it right away—that God loves God's Creation, and that we are the body of Christ—this community that comes together to worship. *Editor's note: You can view the chapel altar [here](#).*

Host: One of the great opportunities of *our* time is to not only tell the story, but to enroll the artists in doing so: the musicians, the storytellers, the poets, the sculptors—all the people who can take the various forms of artistic expression and find ways of embodying this great story in those things.

Mary: You are reminding me of something else I would like to talk about, and that is the importance of the arts in this time of transformation, because it's a way of learning the Story, or being present to the Story, or being able to experience the implications of this amazing time that we are in, at a level that is deeper than our verbal *Homo sapiens* can grasp it. We have so many more levels of consciousness that are deeper than thought, and that we are just beginning to discover and to access. I think the arts invite us to *go* there and be able to receive the mysteries that are really beyond thought, beyond realization. Like one of the questions that I mentioned earlier: What does it mean to be the Earth? What does it mean that I have within my cellular reality all of these operations and dynamics that are going on—digesting my lunch and breathing and so on? How intimate the universe is! You know, sometimes we think of the universe as being so huge (which it is), but it's also more intimate than we ever imagined.

So, how can the arts bring us to that? Some of the best stories actually are coming out in film. That's a medium that speaks to people today. Poetry, more and more, certainly is. It allows us to go a little bit deeper than the head.

Host: It also engages our feelings. It engages our emotions.

Mary: Of course, and our hearts.

Host: Mary, one of the things that Connie asked me to remind you of is, not only are you a visual artist, but you are also a really good writer; you're a beautiful writer. I remember back a few years ago, now, seeing an issue of [Spiritearth](#) newsletter, where you wrote about your experience in the [Grand Teton National Park](#). I wonder if you can share with our listeners that experience.

Mary: Oh my goodness ... I finally did a painting of it. It's been waiting for a few years to be painted, so it's very, very fresh in my psyche right now. I found myself really allured by the mountains there—other things as well, but the mountains especially. One day I spent a long, long time just gazing at these mountains. And, you know how it is when sometimes time and space collapse? All of a sudden, they were *right there*. So I turned around, because I know how hard it is for me to stay focused on what I really need to do, because there are so many other things that need doing. It's like Earth keeps saying, "Are you are ready now? Now? Are you ready now?" That was another one of those times. So I turned around, and it was like the mountain lent me its strength and became my backbone.

So that was one day. And then the following day, [Bill Plotkin](#) and Jen of the Animas Valley Institute, who do wonderful work helping people reconnect with our "Earth Self," they were leading us through guided imagery, and I found myself sitting with my back against the mountain. I don't remember what they were saying or anything like that or how this all happened, but suddenly I was *inside that mountain*. The image of it was I was inside this glorious chamber of amethyst crystals. It was like being inside of a giant geode at the heart of

the mountain. Well, even just talking about it I just get overwhelmed. It really is an experience of just being held by Divinity, by the magnificence of this Creation. I came back home with the strength of the mountain in my back—the Grand Tetons.

Host: Wow, wow! Well, thanks for sharing that story. Before this call, Connie and I were looking at a number of your paintings on your website and one of the ones that just jumped out was "[You are a Child of the Universe](#)". It reminded me of one of my favorite poems from Thomas Berry—actually, you mentioned it there on that piece of artwork, as well. In fact I often will conclude a Sunday sermon when I preach in churches with this poem of Thomas Berry—I want to recite it here because it just says it, and your painting, "You are a Child of Universe" gave visual expression to it just so beautifully.

This is a poem from [Thomas Berry](#). It's called, "It Takes a Universe."

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

Host: I love that poem.

Mary: I do, too. Michael, if we only realized the magnificence that is right here in front of us. If we only let ourselves be filled with it, wouldn't that be great?

Host: Well, more and more people are doing that, more and more of the time. We're all in process.

Mary: Yes, we are. And we can help one another so much with that. We certainly can't do it alone, and that's one of the wonderful lessons we are learning.

Host: Exactly.

Mary: That we're all in this together.

Host: Well, Mary, thank you so much for your artistic expression, for your heart, for your passion for this sacred understanding of evolution, and integrating that within your own Catholic tradition. And thanks for sharing your experience and your story as part of this Great Story with our listeners today on the leading edge of faith.

Editor's Note: View some of Mary Southard's paintings [here](#) on the EvolutionaryChristianity.org website, and also on [her own website](#). You can see the chapel altar she designed [here](#). The two paintings mentioned in this transcript are below:

"Once Upon a Universe"



"Gift of the Mountain"



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