

Evolutionary Spirituality: Coming Home to Reality

By **Michael Dowd**

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All the words or phrases that show up red on this pdf are hotlinked to other websites in the online version.)

The present moment is highly overrated. From an evolutionary perspective, the past and the future are where it's at. Any aardvark, antelope, cat, or cockroach can effortlessly reside in the present moment. **Only human beings can engage deeply with the past and consciously co-create the future.** By doing so, by looking outward with aims of bettering our world, big or small, we also walk a path that leads to inner fulfillment.

Each of us has a role to play in the "**Great Work**" of ensuring a just, healthy, beautiful, and sustainably lifegiving future: the collective task of our species at this time. **The practices of Evolutionary Spirituality can help us find, embark upon, and bask in the satisfactions of participating in the Great Work.** Evolution is, after all, about the past and the future. Evolution is **the story of a magnificent 13.7 billion year old Universe in the making**—and about how our own lives might affect and shape its future. We, of course, ponder both the past and the future from **our stance in the present.** Our capacity to perceive clearly and choose beneficially are profoundly shaped by the **integrity** of that stance.

Evolutionary Spirituality, first and foremost, is about right relationship with reality. It is about **grounding ourselves in the actual ways of the Universe**—how evolution really does take place, about the processes of growth and the directions of becoming.

For millennia our ancestors were about this task, too. The cultures that survived and flourished were those most aligned with the inner and outer realities of the world as it actually is and was. The difference today is that **our species, as a now planetary presence, collectively knows a great deal more about how physical and cultural changes happened in the past.** That knowledge, when morphed into wisdom, can offer profound guidance for moving into the future.

The core understanding of a **practical** (one might say, "muscular") form of Evolutionary Spirituality is this: **When we are not aligned with reality, we suffer, and so do those around us.** Hence the need for practices that can help us find and create such alignment.

Coming into alignment with reality—as reality really is, not simply as we might wish it or think it to be—is **not just about shedding bad habits** and cleaning up our messes. Attending to **relational hygiene** with the human and more-than-human communities around us bears its own fruit: we discover **a lightness of being and an ability to focus** whereby pursuit of an evolutionary calling becomes both compelling and achievable. And it is through pursuit of an evolutionary calling that we come into **right relationship with the future.**

EVOLUTIONARY CALLING AND DEEP INTEGRITY

By "evolutionary calling" I mean the paths of action in the world along which one's own joys and the world's needs intersect. An evolutionary calling is not something we have to struggle to find. Nor is it something we perform as a spiritual penance for the scale of modernity's ecological imprint on the natural world and other peoples. As **Joseph Campbell** advised, it is about following our bliss—**deep bliss**, the kind of bliss that engages with the world and that honors the past and blesses the future no less than it blesses ourselves. Others looking on may admire our perseverance, our willingness to engage in difficult or seemingly thankless tasks. But **our calling is, in fact, our calling precisely because for us it is also a form of delight, and it yields the deepest of all satisfactions.**

To discover and pursue one's evolutionary calling, the decks must be clear. We must free ourselves to perceive possibilities and subtle opportunities that inevitably come our way. We must be sufficiently **unburdened of guilt, regret, and resentment** to enable a "yes" to bubble up rather than the otherwise automatic "no" that clamps down the lid on our little lives.

The quest for a lightness of being that will unleash our souls to guide our actions in the world is the path of, what I like to call, "deep integrity." **Deep integrity draws heavily from the insights of modern science** in that we are encouraged to actually **appreciate our inherited instincts**—no matter how troublesome or horrific they may be—rather than to simply accept or fight to overcome them.

We are invited to appreciate basic instincts, our inherited proclivities, for **how they served our human and prehuman ancestors**. Only then do we stand a chance (especially given the excesses and enticements of modernity) of channeling our most compelling bodily and emotional urges in ways that are lifegiving for today and tomorrow, for ourselves and others.

By engaging in practices that move us along the path of deep integrity, we discover that **humility, authenticity, responsibility, and service** emerge naturally within and through us. This cleaning up of character, this unmasking of hidden potentials, is indeed the reason that all the world's spiritual practices, in fact, evolved. **Deep integrity offers the promises of religion in this life**. And the freedom we thereby discover clears us to devote our energies toward evolutionary ends, which in turn is a sure path toward personal fulfillment.

Importantly, because our work in the world almost surely will be collaborative, we don't need to become compulsive about self-improvement on the integrity path. Indeed, **we shouldn't wait to perfect ourselves before wholeheartedly participating in the Great Work**. As my wife and mission partner, **Connie Barlow**, likes to point out, so long as she works in situations in which her gifts and talents are not obstructed by her shortcomings, good work flows almost effortlessly along the path of her calling. The situations that make her creative flow possible are, in one way or another, **collaborative**—beginning with a fundamental collaboration with me. Although Connie's and my values and mission orientation are in complete alignment, our personalities and talents are in many ways opposite. Said another way, they are fabulously **complementary**. Her attention to detail balances out my expansiveness; my gift of gab balances out her preference for bookish and online research. As evolutionaries we recognize that **not only does the evolutionary impulse manifest most powerfully in collaborations, but the participating parties have to let go of expecting to foresee, plan out, or micromanage that flow**. The flow is bigger than any of us; that is why intuition, faith, and courage are vital.

Thus, when we talk about the evolution of consciousness, we must be careful not to think about it merely in individualistic ways. As **Eric Chaisson, David Christian, Robert Wright, John Stewart, Kevin Kelly**, and **many others** have shown, **evolution has been in the business of creating assemblages of greater complexity, interdependence, and cooperation for billions of years, and humanity is now an integral part of that process**. Stars create almost all the atoms in the periodic table of elements. Atoms in community give rise to molecules. Molecules assemble into living cells. Out of cells emerge multicellular plants, animals, and fungi. Ants, termites, crows, prairie dogs, and human beings generate societies. Societies spawn cultures and technologies.

Technologies are accelerating the process of collective learning and the emergence of organizations of increasing complexity and cooperation. Here's the way I talk about it in the Introduction to my 2008 book, ***Thank God for Evolution: How the Marriage of Science and Religion Will Transform Your Life and Our World***:

Human consciousness emerged within a world of powerful and mysterious forces beyond our comprehension and control. As modes of communication evolved—from gestures and oral speech to writing and mathematics, to print, to science, to computers—so has our

understanding of the scale and venerability of Creation, and the meaning and magnitude of humanity's divine calling. **An inspiring consequence of seeing the full sweep of history is discovering that human circles of care and compassion have expanded over time.** This trend is in keeping with evolutionary forces.

Early on, owing to genetic guidance honed in a pre-linguistic world, and then supplemented by knowledge that could be accumulated, retained, and shared only to the extent that spoken language would allow, **our abilities to cooperate with one another were limited and localized.** Anyone outside the tribe was suspect, and probably an enemy. As technologies of communication evolved, our ancestors entered interdependent relationships in ever-widening circles from villages, chiefdoms, and early nations to today's global markets and international organizations. Finally, **the emergence of the World Wide Web has made possible collaborations no longer stifled by geographic distances and political boundaries.** Throughout this evolution of human communities and networks, an inner transformation has also been taking place. At each stage **our circles of care, compassion, and commitment have grown** and our lists of enemies have diminished. Our **next step** will be to learn to organize and govern ourselves globally, and to enjoy a mutually enhancing relationship with the larger body of Life of which we are part.

The ways in which individual and collaborative contributions might assist humanity in organizing globally will be vital concerns of Evolutionary Spirituality. I have found **Tom Atlee's *The Tao of Democracy***, his most recent book, ***Reflections on Evolutionary Activism***, and **John Stewart's, *Evolution's Arrow*** and "**Evolutionary Manifesto**" particularly helpful on this point.

A RELATIONAL MODEL OF EVOLUTIONARY SPIRITUALITY

There are many different approaches to Evolutionary Spirituality. Some advocates see it mostly in **esoteric**, metaphysical ways; others, in the context of a specific religious or philosophical lineage, such as integral philosophy or the meditation traditions. In contrast, my approach is decidedly **exoteric** and **emergentist**. This approach draws from perspectives grounded in our best collective understandings of what is natural and undeniably real (approaches sometimes called transtheist/**creatheist** or **religious naturalist**). Indeed, what distinguishes a muscular form of Evolutionary Spirituality is that **the foundation is knowledge of and appreciation for the Epic of Evolution** (a.k.a., the **Great Story** or **Universe Story**).

Heartfelt knowledge of the Epic of Evolution leads almost inevitably to **an expanded sense of self** and thus to an expanded sense of what "self" concerns really entail. Ecstatic "**awakenings**" to this expanded sense of self via meaningful exposure to the grand history of the Cosmos, our common creation story, can offer up **unitive experiences** no less profound than those achieved by rigorous devotion to ancient and proven methods of meditation or contemplative prayer.

Not only is the Story new, but **the practices for coming into right relationship with reality are to be drawn from the combined corpus of spiritual practices old and new.** For example, the so-called "recovery movement" (born of the **12-step** approach of Alcoholics Anonymous) is widely regarded as the most significant spiritual movement of the 20th century. To ignore this new body of proven spiritual practices is to ignore the evolutionary impulse as it has blossomed in our midst.

My book, ***Thank God for Evolution***, has been endorsed by **6 Nobel laureates** and other science luminaries, including **noted skeptics**, and by **religious leaders** across the spectrum. It offers a **practical, relational, integrity-based model** of Evolutionary Spirituality. This **pragmatic approach** is not a religious perspective in competition with other religious approaches. It does not engage in duels between differing metaphysical outlooks (perspectives that are, by their nature, indeterminable for the simple reason that they manifest beliefs or assumptions that go beyond the physical, beyond what can be evidentially determined). Rather, the integrity model of Evolutionary Spirituality is intended to feed and nourish all approaches.

Even so, I hereby issue a challenge to the full range of **leaders and teachers** now pioneering forms of Evolutionary Spirituality—and to those who would follow them. My challenge is this: **Any approach to Evolutionary Spirituality that does not primarily concern with integrity—with growing in right relationship with reality—is not evolutionary in a deep sense.** This pertains whether one's orientation be mystical, New Thought, Eastern, Western, Integral, or anything else. The practical, relational benefits of Evolutionary Spirituality are available to everyone, not just those who meditate daily, or even at all.

The integrity model of Evolutionary Spirituality, while not mystically based, can foster profound **mystical experiences.** While not meditation-based, it embraces meditation and other **centering practices.** While not philosophically based, it is consistent with, and benefits from, **integral thinking.**

An integrity-based approach to Evolutionary Spirituality is just that, **integrity based.** It is a pragmatic and relational approach grounded in awareness that humanity is a recent expression of 14 billion years of divine creativity. **We are the Universe becoming conscious of Itself.** We are also the Universe bringing into conscious and practical awareness **the modes of creativity that have emerged naturally** from this divine unfolding: unintended, unguided—intuitively, one might say. We are the beings through whom these powerful, intuitive processes are acknowledged and (more and more) deliberately chosen and accessed.

The heart and soul of an integrity-based approach are **practices that are transformative for anyone of any tradition because they target human universals.** They can help anyone take responsibility for their negative wake and thereby help them leave a positive legacy. They can help anyone unburden themselves of fear, guilt, resentment, and other disempowering emotions. And they can help anyone, of any faith tradition or no tradition, grow in trust, authenticity, responsibility, and service.

These four character traits (**trust, authenticity, responsibility, and service**) are what I call "the DNA of evolutionary spirituality," or "**DNA of deep integrity.**" They are at the heart of every religious tradition and core to the recovery movement for good reason: they are human universals. You simply cannot attain right relationship with reality if you're not growing in trust (or humility), authenticity, responsibility, and service.

Spiritual experiences, mystical communion, and states of oneness are beside the point if they don't translate into improved relations. More, as many of us have experienced, they are highly **addictive.** Once you've had one such experience, you instinctually want another, and then another. There's nothing wrong with this; It's just something to be conscious of and accountable around. After all, dancing and running can be done in ways that consistently generate dopamine flows, which encourage us to engage in these healthful activities on a regular basis.

I myself have had profound mystical/spiritual experiences via nature's beauty and magnificence, meditation, tantra/sacred sexuality, empathogenic substances, drumming, dancing, chanting, singing, worship, and speaking in tongues. My experience of the divine in each of these contexts has been wondrous. I recommend them all. But **"So what?" is always a relevant question.** *So what* if I have mystical communion experiences? *So what* if I attain the highest states of enlightened consciousness or feel ecstatic bliss or serenity in meditation? **What matters is whether a spiritual practice yields results that actually enhance my ways of relating to others, my sense of the divine in everyday life, and my pursuit of an evolutionary calling.**

The bottom line is this: *If our spiritual practices do not tangibly help us grow in integrity—that is, in right relationship with others, our world, and the future—then the pursuit of enlightenment and the quest to free ourselves from troubling emotions (via witnessing them to death) can lead to narcissism.* Spiritual practice thereby morphs into metaphysical masturbation.

THE DNA OF EVOLUTIONARY SPIRITUALITY

For millennia, in every tradition, "spirituality" has been about how individuals and communities can thrive in light of **three givens of the human condition: chaos, death, and mismatched instincts**. The spiritual path has thus been largely about cultivating qualities such as gratitude, compassion, love, trust, generosity, humility, authenticity, responsibility, and service. Why? Because these are precisely the character traits that lead to peace, joy, thriving relationships, and healthy communities. They end our estrangement from Reality. To use traditional religious language, they allow us to abide in **God**.

Why HUMILITY?

Because **the Universe is primary and you are derivative**. Said another way, you are not the center of the Universe. Your ego, your small self, does not run the show. We were not thrust *into* the Universe; we were born of it. You could not survive without the Universe, whereas the Universe would do just fine without you. Humility and its twin sister, trust, are thus essential because only when you're coming from a place of humility are you in touch with reality as it actually is.

Why AUTHENTICITY?

Because **only by striving for authentic presence are you aligned with reality**. Honesty, transparency, and other manifestations of authenticity enable the feedback necessary for individuals and groups to evolve in healthy ways. We may sometimes be tempted to lie or present ourselves in false ways because of a concern for safety or ease—or the promise of a cheap thrill. Deception never, however, provides lasting joy, and it can set in motion conditions that ramify into major misunderstandings, even crises.

Why RESPONSIBILITY?

Because **there is only one person responsible for the quality of your life, and that person is you**. As **Jack Canfield** advises in his book *The Success Principles*,

If you want to be successful, you have to take 100 percent responsibility for everything that you experience in your life. This includes the level of your achievements, the results you produce, the quality of your relationships, the state of your health and physical fitness, your income, your debts, your feelings—everything! This is not easy. In fact, most of us have been conditioned to blame something outside of ourselves for the parts of our life we don't like. We blame our parents, our bosses, our friends, the media, our co-workers, our clients, our spouse, the weather, the economy, our astrological chart, our lack of money—anyone or anything we can pin the blame on. We never want to look at where the real problem is—ourselves.

Only by taking responsibility for our lives and our wake can we know heaven—or enlightenment.

Why SERVICE?

Because **the communities within which we reside (from family to the entire Cosmos) are everything to us**. These communities are our source and sustenance, our Alpha and Omega, beginning and end. Whatever we may choose to call **the Wholeness of Reality**, and whatever metaphors or analogies we use to describe it, the undeniable fact is that this Reality rules. To the degree that we fight against reality, or deny it, we suffer and we cause suffering to others.

Guilt, fear, and resentment are three of the most paralyzing emotions. Gratitude, trust, and love are three of the most empowering emotions. If your spiritual practice is not measurably lessening your guilt, fear, and resentment, and increasing your gratitude, trust, and love—if it's not helping you fulfill your evolutionary mission—then I would argue that it is not Evolutionary Spirituality.

Forcefully said,

- **You can meditate until your legs won't move**, but if one or more of your significant relationships suck, or if you don't *get* that the quality of your life is largely determined by your habits of interpretation and ability to value the interpretations of others, you'll never be free of suffering.
- **You can pray or chant until you're blue in the face**, but if you're not growing in trust, authenticity, responsibility, and service, you're missing the power and purpose of the spiritual path.
- **You can fast until you're skinny as a rail**, but if you're burdened by resentments and secrets, or have unfinished business, you'll never enjoy real freedom—the peace that passes all understanding.

CELEBRATING DEATH AND LEGACY

A form of spirituality that grounds itself in evolution, while engaging spiritual practices toward evolutionary ends, turns some of our long-standing concerns on their head. Notably is how we regard and relate to the inevitability of **death**—death of loved ones, death of ourselves. Indeed, **there may be no more alluring portal for discovering the benefits of Evolutionary Spirituality than death understood in an inspiring and integral way**. Thanks to the sciences of astronomy, astrophysics, chemistry, geology, paleontology, evolutionary biology, cell biology, embryology, ecology, geography, and even math, we can now not only accept but celebrate that

- Death is natural and generative at every level of reality.
- Death is no less sacred than life.

An evolutionary appreciation of death is crucial precisely because **spiritual seekers can all too easily be drawn into pathways that indulge our narcissistic cravings** for self-improvement or addictive (if soulful) experiences as ends in themselves—as if it's all about us. The evolutionary adventure is *not* about us—at least, not about our small selves (that is, our own individuated personalities and even souls). Rather, **the evolutionary adventure is about our "Great Self."** The more we nurture this sense of a larger self, the more that spiritual practice becomes neither work nor renunciation—but the ultimate form of self-fulfillment.

Spiritual practice, whatever the form, is thus ultimately about clearing the decks and crafting relationships such that the impulse of evolution can most effectively work through us for the good of our larger communities—our larger self—both now and rippling outward into the future.

It really doesn't matter how many mystical, unitive, or orgasmic experiences we each may have in our lifetime. **When we're dead, our spiritual experiences won't matter to anyone.** Subjective experience is not what lives on. One's enlightenment, or lack of it, will be irrelevant to everyone else who lives on or comes after us. What *will* matter is our **legacy**: the actions and **ripples of relationship** that not only survive our death but which can expand and magnify for generations.

Whether or not you **healed your relationships** with your parents, your siblings, and your children: this is what matters. Whether or not you **took responsibility for your wake**: this is what matters. Whether or not you in some way **contributed to the betterment of the world** (or at least died trying!): this is what matters.

Thus, from the perspective of the communities you leave behind, here is the take-home message of any form of Evolutionary Spirituality that merits the name: **Your meditation, prayer, or other spiritual practices matter only to the extent that they help you grow in ways that bless others or inspire actions in the world.** These will be actions that serve your larger self: the Great Self within whom you live and move and have your being.

SUMMARY

5 KEY PRACTICES FOR COMING HOME TO REALITY

1. Learn and celebrate **the Great Story** of your identity and ancestry, of **life's trajectory**, and of the **infinitely meaningful** nature of reality.
2. Pursue where your joy and the world's needs intersect—that is, follow your deep bliss (the bliss of your Great Self) and be a blessing to others and to the future by cultivating your calling: your evolutionary mission.
3. Appreciate your instincts and unburden yourself of guilt, secrets, and resentments by attending to unfinished business through mastering the arts of empowering interpretation, generous listening of others, and finding and expressing gratitude.
4. Follow those practices and paths that enhance your trust and your ability to show up in the world authentically, as well as those that help you grow in responsibility and the motivation to serve.
5. Develop the habit of "making life right" (i.e., interpret reality in generous rather than stingy ways) and remember that it is always possible to view even calamities as contributing toward the making of a mythic life.

RESOURCES

WEBINAR AND COURSE. I am in the process of creating a free webinar and online home study course titled, "**Evolutionize Your Life: Coming Home to Reality.**" **To be notified when these are available, click [HERE](#).**

MY BOOK. *Thank God for Evolution* has several chapters that reinforce or supplement this essay. Part IV (chapters 11-13) is where **I explore Evolutionary Spirituality as the practice of coming into right relationship with reality.** I claim that evo-spirituality is not merely about prayer or meditation, mystical experiences, or, indeed, anything ethereal. It is about cultivating right relationships at every scale of reality, whether we are religious or not. Chapter 11, "Evolutionary Integrity Practices," provides **exercises that can bless your life and the lives of everyone with whom you are in relationship**—no matter what your religion, philosophy, or beliefs. These are tools that will help you embody Evolutionary Spirituality in healthy and empowering ways. Each practice is crafted to support your growth in deep integrity—that is, in trust, authenticity, responsibility, and service. This is the book's most practical and potentially life-changing chapter. Chapter 12 explores the essential elements of "Evolving Our Most Intimate Relationships." Chapter 13 offers a smorgasbord of affirmations and visual images to support your growth in Evolutionary Spirituality. Here you will find **practical suggestions for nurturing lifegiving attitudes & habits of thought.**

ALSO SEE: "**What Reality in Human Experience Do We Point to with the Word, 'God'?**", a pdf of a short chapter by evolutionary theologian and bioregionalist, **Gene Marshall**. This piece is **foundational to an evolutionary understanding of the divine.** (The pdf shows up sideways, so you'll need to print it out. It's only 10 pages.)

The Big Integrity Movement - a blog post I wrote a few months ago.

This essay/manifesto was actually written by "Jasmine", the name that Michael Dowd and Connie Barlow have given to their union. Jasmine is a mythic personification of their relationship. (In other words, it was a co-created project.) Connie wanted only Michael's name on the first page because she felt the piece needed a singular voice - "I" rather than "we".)