

Evolution Now: A Manifesto for Our UU Congregations

sermon delivered by Connie Barlow, August 31, 2008 at
Cedar Lane Unitarian Universalist Church, Bethesda MD

READINGS: all drawn from epigraphs in Michael Dowd's book, *Thank God for Evolution* (Viking, 2008)

1. Catholic nun, Sister Mary Southard: "How important it is that we learn the sacred story of our evolutionary Universe, just as we have learned our cultural and religious stories. Each day we will do what humans do best: Be amazed! Be filled with reverence! Contemplate! Fall in Love! Be entranced by the wonder of the Universe, the uniqueness of each being, the beauty of Creation, its new revelation each day, and the Divine Presence with all!"

The second and third readings are both drawn from the 2006 book, *The View from the Center of the Universe*, by astrophysicist Joel Primack and cultural historian Nancy Ellen Abrams (both now colleagues and dear friends of ours):

2. "The history of the Universe is in every one of us. Every particle in our bodies has a multibillion-year past, every cell and every bodily organ has a multimillion-year past, and many of our ways of thinking have multithousand-year pasts."
3. "Without a meaningful, believable story that explains the world we actually live in, people have no idea how to think about the big picture. And without a big picture, we are a very small people."

Six years ago, just nine months after we married, my husband and I embarked on another great shift in our lives. You see, Michael Dowd and I set out to change the world, one church at a time. We gave away our libraries, pared down our possessions, and hit the road—permanently.

We had, in fact, gotten married primarily because of a deeply shared mission, a mission that each of us had been pursuing on our own for more than a decade, but which would blossom when we combined our very different talents and personalities.

Our shared mission is this: We are determined to do all that we can to bring the religious side of our culture full square into a worldview shift.

This is the same worldview shift that, beginning two centuries ago, would become the ground of all the geological sciences. One hundred and fifty years ago, following the lead of Charles Darwin, this same worldview shift transformed the biological sciences. It is now the very backbone of any scientific inquiry dealing with life. Then, in the 1920s and 30s astronomers and astrophysicists crossed the divide, too. Thenceforth they would peer into the night sky through the same lens that biologists and geologists had grown accustomed to using: the lens of evolution, of change through time. Finally, beginning less than two decades ago and ongoing today, the disciplines of psychology and sociology are transiting the shift into a fully evolutionary worldview, grounded on the understanding that human emotions and behavioral inclinations were shaped in ancestral environments long gone and thus not always well suited to the challenges of modern, civilized life.

Six years ago, Michael and I set out to preach and teach an evolutionary worldview in religious and secular settings across America. We did this not so much because evolution is "the truth," but because we believed it was "good news"—saving good news. We believed that a cultural shift to a fully evolutionary worldview was absolutely essential for the wellbeing of individuals, of societies, and for the health of this planet.

Hence, my once-Pentecostal husband now boldly proclaims "the gospel of evolution" wherever he is asked to speak. He has been called "America's Evolutionary Evangelist."

As a UU evolutionary humanist, I am a bit more restrained than my husband in my declarations—but not by much. In fact, last February, Michael, myself, and a lay leader of First Unitarian of San Diego combined our energies to stage the world's very first "evolutionary revival!" Yes, evolutionary revival! And the music written for that occasion got everybody up out of their seats, singing and grooving to the beat. (Can I hear a Praise Darwin?!)
<http://thegreatstory.org/evolutionary-revival.html>

In the hundreds of churches, spiritual centers, and other venues where we have spoken while living on the road, Michael and I have always been searching for and testing out ways to make our telling of this Epic of Evolution as alluring as possible. Again, we do not wish to beat people over the head that evolution is the truth, and therefore "thou shalt accept it." Rather, our mantra is this: *May the best story win.*

May the best story win. And may we do *our* best to tell this Great Story, this Odyssey of Evolution, in inspiring, compelling, and ultimately useful ways.

We believe the stakes in this venture are very great indeed. For we have come to this rather shocking conclusion:

Until the majority of churches in America preach evolution from the pulpit and teach evolution in inspiring ways to their children and youth, we will

never see an end to the science versus religion war in America and the evolution controversy in public schools.

And yes, I *do* believe that it is possible for religious peoples and institutions here in America and throughout the world to be offered an understanding of this evolving Universe that elevates the core of each tradition. I have seen my husband do it in liberal Christian settings—and I have even seen him do it successfully in evangelical Christian settings. You can learn how he approaches this mission by picking up his new book or the audio version of it, *Thank God for Evolution*, or any of his DVDs.

What I would like to do in the remainder of this sermon is to provide some anecdotal evidence of how gratifying it will be for us Unitarian Universalists to take the lead in stepping into the evolutionary paradigm—to lead by example. I would like to propose that we bring evolution full-square into the UU pantheon of ideas and principles.

Let me tell you a story . . .

Four years ago, while in Florida, I got a chance to serve as guest teacher in a UU religious education class for an age-group I rarely speak to: middle-school kids. Usually I am in with elementary age groups—by choice. If I have but one opportunity to work with the children in a UU congregation, I always ask for the age group in which I have a chance to make the greatest impression at a most impressionable time of a child's life. But four years ago, I was in with a group of perhaps 15 middle school students. So I decided to test a hypothesis I had come to. I began by asking them, "Tell me some creation stories from around the world." The hands shot up and I heard about the Garden of Eden, of course, and about the classical Greek myths, and one Native American story.

My next question was this: "What is *your* creation story? . . . What is your creation story?"

Silence. No hands went up. So I walked over to one side of the room and began to lay out a timeline, visually, across the floor. I said, "In the beginning, what scientists call the Big Bang, what we like to call The Great Radiance, all that came from the great fireball were the simplest of atoms: gases of hydrogen and helium."

"Oh," one of the boys spoke up, "that's what we're learning in science class!"

Yes, that's what they are learning in science class, if they are lucky. The teaching of cosmic evolution, chemical evolution, geological evolution, human evolution, as well as biological evolution is not available to every child in America. And I hope you can understand why, from the parents' perspective, why that is so.

You see, we can expect that many parents and pastors and school board members will be highly motivated to continue fighting against the teaching of any science that seems to clash with a literal interpretation of the Genesis story. All sorts of ways will be found to keep the 14 billion year history of the Universe from being taught as a basic fact of science. Resistance will remain strong so long as parents fear that exposure to the science will erode the religious faith of their children. More, for those parents who still believe in a literal heaven and a literal hell as places one goes to for eternity, then they will feel that they are fighting for their children's eternal wellbeing.

If that is the belief of a parent or pastor or school board member, can any of us fault them for steadfastly rising up against the teaching of evolution as a basic fact of science?

Now, the root of the word *religion*, "religio," means to yoke together. As Joseph Campbell said, "Religion is that which puts one in accord with the universe." It is that which yokes together the myriad details of what one learns and what one experiences into a coherent Big Picture. This is a Big Picture that answers life's biggest questions and that is a crucial ground during times of crisis. . . . Where do we come from? Who are we, really? What is our relationship to everything and to every creature around us? How are we to live? Why do pets and people have to die?

Back to my anecdote about creation stories . . . The boy who said, "Oh, that's what we're learning in science class," had no clue that, as a Unitarian Universalist, he could yoke together—in fun and life-giving ways—what he was learning in science class with what he was learning in Sunday school.

Thus my proposal: Yes, let's continue to teach our children about other religions and to appreciate the religious holy days of the diversity of peoples they are likely to meet in school and beyond. But let us not neglect the importance of teaching our children *their* creation story. Let us not neglect giving them a coherent Big Picture.

If this religious heritage of all religious heritages cannot find the courage to say Yes to the evolutionary worldview—not as but one among a variety of choices—but as the solid, coherent worldview basis for our children, then any actions we may put into participating in school board decisions and textbook choices will make little difference in the long run. Here, beginning right here in our churches, is where we can make the crucial difference for our culture.

Yes, we as Unitarian Universalists can teach our children that evolution is our creation story. However much we as adults may personally gain from reflecting on the Greek myths, or Native American creation tales, our children do not live in a world of metaphor and abstraction. Elementary age children are at a developmental stage when nuances about reality are difficult to understand. If we don't give them solid answers to their big

questions, you can bet that the children they meet on the playground who go to other churches probably will.

When our children enter middle school and in the years beyond, *those* are the times for us to encourage them to question—to question everything we have taught them, everything they have heard from their peers and culture, and to come up with their own personal responses to the magnitude and mysteries of life and the cosmos.

Last winter I was talking with a religious educator at a UU congregation, and she recounted to me this telling story. The previous summer she had used a curriculum in which each week a different creation story from around the world was presented. She said she had a difficult time because several children, each week, would invariably break into the story saying, “That’s not the way it happened!” or “That’s not true!”

Only during the final session did the protests end. The reason? The final story presented was the origin story drawn from modern science.

Those of us who agree that it is vital to give our children a profound, trustworthy, and scientifically accurate creation story have a long way to go in providing congregations with inspiring, dramatic, and fun materials that volunteer teachers can easily use. But we are well on our way. A number of religious education directors and committees of parents at UU churches have already tried their hand at it, and we are all continuing to learn from one another’s efforts.

As to my own personal contribution, I struggle to find ways to package for teachers the programs that I, as a science writer, can so easily bring to children when I serve as guest teacher. I have had many, many opportunities to test and hone new topics and teaching methods in the religious education classroom. I know that they work. But it is an art to find ways to instruct other adults to be able to do the same—and with confidence and enthusiasm.

Those who’d like to sample some of the evolutionary programs that I (and others) have been able to come up with so far can visit one of our websites: www.TheGreatStory.org. From the home page, just click on Children’s Curricula. One of our DVDs—the one titled “Celebrating Evolution”—is another way to sample curriculum ideas for children and for adults.

Okay, you might say, a creation story that flows out of the sciences may be a very good thing to offer our kids. But what about the most important thing we do for our children here at church? What about the values teaching that we UUs are determined to give them? What about helping them understand their own lives in empowering ways? Won’t the evolutionary story take time away from all that?

Not at all. In fact, I challenge anyone to find a Bible story that is more engaging for kids today, and that does a better job of teaching values important to UUs, than the half-dozen "evolutionary parables" we've already posted on our Great Story website.

These evolutionary parables are in script format, so they can be performed for or by the children in dramatic ways. The parables all have playful titles, such as "The Lucky Little Seaweed," which is the story about plants evolving from the sea to land. That particular parable was written by a paleontologist, and it is funny as well as heart-warming and educational.

Another parable was contributed by the man who wrote Batman comics for two decades, Denny O'Neil. Seven years ago I fed Denny the science about how vertebrate life made the transition from sea to land, and from those materials he wrote the parable that has served as a template for all that came later. He called it "Ozzie and the Snortlefish."

This past week I had a chance to present an interactive program as guest teacher for a dozen UU kids, elementary age, while my husband Michael was speaking to the adults. It was exhausting. For an hour and a half we were singing; we were dancing; the kids were calling out answers to questions and riddles I posed. And all along the way, they were identifying the creatures they saw projected onto the wall, as a digital slide show is core to this particular program. (Incidentally, the science undergirding that program I got mostly from a 2004 book by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, titled, *Ancestor's Tale*.)

So, yes, the kids and I had lots of fun that night. But you know, I bet that more than a few of those children will carry into adulthood something that they learned during our 90-minute journey back through time . . . back through all their strange-looking ancestors, back to the origin of life. For the rest of their lives they will know *in their bones* that they are related to everything . . . absolutely everything. And maybe they'll even still be humming the song that carried us through the evening, verse by verse, from apes to bacteria.

I have presented this same program at least twenty times now; it is my newest teaching tool for kids and families. I call it "The River of Life," and it is something I sure wish I had been exposed to as a kid. More, it is something that I wish I could have experienced in Sunday school.

Which leads me to another story: A few months ago, a UU teacher told me that, after I did "The River of Life" program in her R.E. class, she watched one of the girls run up to her mother, saying, "Mommy, Mommy: I'm related to a Duck-Billed Platypus!"

Seriously, we can help our children joyfully connect to the whole interdependent and inter-related web. And that web of connection stretches out even to the stars.

For my first 4 years on the road, the main goal I had for kids was to help them learn in a fun and fulfilling way that their ancestors include even the stars. This is not fantasy. It is science. All the atoms inside our bodies and everywhere around us — every atom except for the H in H₂O — was created inside the fiery bellies of ancestor stars who lived, and died, and recycled themselves back to the cosmos before our own star, the Sun, was born. We are made of recycled stardust! Halleluiah!

Whatever your name for the creativity going on inside of stars—whether you choose to call that creativity God or the Goddess or Nature—that creativity is what gave birth to every atom of calcium in your bones, every atom of oxygen that you are right now breathing.

Wow!

This science-based story makes for a great story! You can learn all about the science of where the atoms came from — and the values teaching that goes with it — by googling “stardust parable.” That will get you to the parable I am most proud to have written myself: “Startull: The Story of an Average Yellow Star.” There, in addition to the science, you will see embedded in the storyline the values of friendship, apologies, mentoring, serving the future, and trusting the Universe, trusting time. (Also, you can download in PDF an 8 to 12 week curriculum I wrote for UU religious educators to use in the primary school grades: <http://thegreatstory.org/stardust-kids.html>)

There is one more very important value embedded in the storyline of the “Startull” evolutionary parable. That parable provides a comforting and connecting way to understand death. The characters in that story come to understand that death is natural and generative. Something very important comes from dying stars. As they move into the final stages of their existence, stars create the very atoms that now give us life.

Just like stars, people are born and people die. Along the way, we too create something important: we create the future.

I believe there is no better way to teach ourselves and our children to appreciatively grasp why it is that we live in a universe in which *everything* eventually dies. I believe there is no better way to do this than by giving them a chance to learn the story of stardust, especially by way of parable and song.

And there is so much more to give them, too. Tuesday night Michael will be offering you a taste of, what we like to call, our “Our Brain’s Creation Story.” He will do a version that both of us are on fire for presenting to adults. It

draws heavily from the new understandings born of evolutionary brain science and evolutionary psychology. This, too, I have found playful ways to teach, in age-appropriate ways, to our grade-school children and to our teens. And you will find two whole chapters on it in Michael's book, *Thank God for Evolution*.

I will close with one final anecdote to support my thesis that churches themselves must begin celebrating evolution, and that we UUs are the natural leaders in such an effort. After the story I will close with a song I wrote for the Evolutionary Revival last winter.

First, the story:

[Connie told this story extemporaneously. You can access it on p. 92 of *Thank God for Evolution*, or via Connie's "Stories of Awakening" page on her website. Go to <http://thegreatstory.org/stories-awaken.html> and scroll down to the first entry of the "We are made of stardust" category of stories.]

Song: "In the beginning"

[Connie sang this a capella. You can access the words and hear an audio of it by going to <http://thegreatstory.org/songs/in-the-beginning.html>]

CLOSING WORDS: by contemporary Native American poet, Joy Harjo:

"I can hear the sizzle of a newborn star, and know that anything of meaning, of fierce magic, is emerging here. I am witness to flexible eternity, the evolving past. And I know I will live forever—as dust or breath in the face of stars, in the shifting pattern of winds."

Visit Connie Barlow's website, including Children's Curricula:
<http://thegreatstory.org>

Visit Rev. Michael Dowd's book and blog website:
<http://thankgodforevolution.com>

