

Evolutionize Your Life

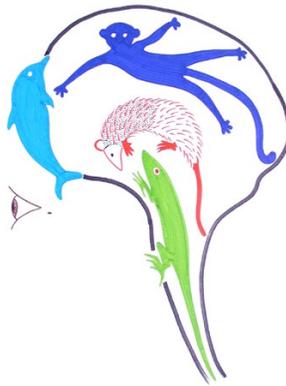
Session 5 Experiential Exercises

Unleashing Your Creative, Self-Giving Instincts

Our prefrontal cortex's zeal for wholeness, transcendence, and contribution

EXERCISE 5a: Menagerie of the Mind

by Connie Barlow



- Higher Porpoise
- Monkey Mind
- Furry Li'l Mammal
- Lizard Legacy

Learning that **our mind emerges from the interaction** of four sequentially evolved components of our brain gives each of us an opportunity to almost effortlessly “**witness**” our thoughts, our emotions, our urges, our stories.

The exercise is simple: Refrain from using the terms “I” “he” or “she” when recounting an event in your life. Instead, say, “When my Lizard Legacy ...” or, “When her Furry Li'l Mammal ...” The anticipated outcome is that self-reproach and condemnation of others should lessen — while compassion grows. Here's how to do it:

1. Call to mind **a frustrating or mildly irritating event**. Because we tend not to remember mild irritations for long, search your memory for something that might have happened in the past day or so.
2. Find a **partner** (or write in your **journal**) about the event that frustrated or irritated you. Do so using only the **playful names** of the four brain components when speaking about yourself or someone else who was part of the action.....*How does that feel?*
3. **Repeat the exercise**, but this time bring to mind a more significant event that you have carried negative energy toward for a longer time. Finally, carry this exercise into your life: *Use it whenever you notice yourself making a persistent complaint.* As well, gently transform any of your deepest, negative stories, by re-telling them using this technique.

EXERCISE 5b:

Your “Peace with Death Day”: Creating a Plan and Getting Support

by Connie Barlow

We’re all going to die. That’s a fact. One of the greatest tragedies of failing to celebrate the **sacred, necessary role of death in the cosmos** (and sometimes augmented by otherworldly beliefs about an unnatural afterlife) is that it so often leads people to **procrastinate** or avoid altogether doing the truly important work of their life. They miss out on fully living.

Here’s an undeniable truth too seldom celebrated: Few things are more evocative of **peace and calm and strength** than coming to celebrate your own mortality and living your life with full awareness that each year, each day is precious—for it might well be your last.

EXERCISE: **Set aside an hour** (and ensure no interruptions) when you can reflect and jot down notes (or journal) on what YOU would do **if you took a whole day** to come to terms with your own eventual death. Some of the points you might reflect on:

- **Setting:** *Where* would you most like to spend a “Peace with Death Day”?
- **Contemplative aids:** Photos of ancestors and loved ones who have died? Your own photos and memorabilia that depict your life journey? Poignant music? Relevant poetry or inspirational writing? Sensory reminders or peaceful stimulation?
- **Notes and queries for Death-Day reflection.**

Possible notes and queries might include: What deaths (especially of loved ones) have I already experienced? Did those deaths shift my awareness and acceptance of death? What unfinished business remains for me pertaining to any of those deaths? Have I been ill or in a dangerous situation that caused me to consider that I might not survive it? Especially, have I had occasion to already make peace with death—at least to some degree? If a lesson or transformation happened in the past, has it carried through to the present? If not, what practices might I adopt to keep awareness of death present for me, and in an enlivening, comforting way?

If I knew I had only one year left to live, what internal shifts or external actions would I most want to initiate? To whom would I express gratitude, and what would I say? To whom would I apologize, and what would I say? Overall, what would I think, say, or do that would allow me to approach my coming death with “the peace that passes all understanding”?

If I knew I were going to die tomorrow, with no opportunity to do or say anything other than what has already been said or done, *how would I tell my life story*—and how would I do so *generously*? How would I summarize my life in a way that felt honest to my actual experience but that focused on points of gratitude and that re-storied situations so that resentment and guilt could genuinely be shed?

Having worked through all the above, **what commitments, actions, and systems of support** ignite a spark of hope for me when I entertain thoughts about how to carry forward what I have learned, felt, and chosen in this exercise?

NOTE: Here’s a reminder, a very simple exercise, to bring into your **day-to-day living**. Say, “If I never get a chance to _____ again, I cherish this eternal moment” and then pretend in your imagination that this really IS the last time, and allow your natural feelings to emerge.

EXERCISE 5c: **Letters of Gratitude: Communication to Transform Lives & Relationships**

by Michael Dowd (excerpted from *Thank God for Evolution*)

Background: Why Gratitude, and Stories of Transformation

Volumes have been written on the importance, even the necessity, of nurturing an attitude of gratitude if one wishes to grow spiritually. It's impossible to love without being grateful. Gratitude strengthens trust and expands compassion. As **Meister Eckhart** put it, "If the only prayer you say in your whole life is 'thank you,' that would suffice."

Gratitude manifests in the midst of everyday life when we pause to take account of **how much we ourselves have been given**. We are present to the wonder of the simplest gifts: a glass of water, a bite of food, a breath of fresh air, the scent of a flower, the touch or kiss of a loved one. At such times, our hearts are full. **Thomas Berry** has movingly written that, for humans, it is ultimately our role, our calling, to become "celebrants" of the Great Story. Affirmations of gratitude we speak as individuals in our own reflective moments are one form of celebration. So too are our comings together in community to celebrate a holiday (holy day), a life passage, or the memory of a moment of transformation in the immense journey of life. **Celebrating life—as it is, not as we wish it would be—is an essential part of deep integrity**. In fact, singing and dancing are two of the more important things you can do, if for no other reason than that such practices will transform you and those around you.

Many years ago I watched a videotape of evangelical teacher **Winkie Pratney** speaking on the importance of expressing gratitude to the people in our lives who deserve it. As I soon discovered, virtually everyone deserves it and benefits enormously from being on the receiving end of **authentically expressed thanksgiving**. Pratney told a powerful story that I have been reciting to audiences ever since. I remember it this way:

A woman had worked at a newspaper for more than a dozen years. One Sunday morning, her pastor spoke on the subject of thanksgiving. After church, the woman felt led to express gratitude to her boss—a gruff, curmudgeonly fellow. The next day she walked into his office and said, "You know, it dawned on me yesterday that I've never told you how much I appreciate you for being my boss. You're hardworking, fair, you pay me well, and I really enjoy my job." She then went on to thank him for particular things he had said or done over the years. When she finished, he replied incredulously, "Is that it? You came in here just to thank me? You're not buttering me up for something?" "No," she said with a smile, "I just felt you deserved to hear how grateful I am for my job and for the fact that you're my boss. That's all." She turned and walked out.

Ten minutes later he came to her cubicle and asked if he could see her back in his office. He shut the door and motioned for her to sit. Voice wavering, he began, "As you know, I've been the editor here for forty years. In all that time, no one has ever thanked me like you just did." He fell silent, clearly fighting back his emotions. After a few seconds, he said, "You just validated what I've been doing here for four decades." His eyes moistened and he could say no more.

When I heard this story, I thought to myself, "To whom do I owe a debt of gratitude?" **My father** immediately came to mind. I sat down and wrote my dad a sixteen-page letter. I started with the earliest memory I could recall and went through my entire life, thanking him for all sorts of

things—some general, some specific. “Remember when . . .” and I would mention a particular memory. “I never thanked you for . . .” and I would write whatever my heart led me to say. What I was unprepared for was the impact that writing this letter would have on me. It was bathed in my tears. I soon learned it had the same effect on my dad.

Three years later, I had a conversation about gratitude with the business administrator of the seminary I was then attending. I retold the story of the woman and her boss, as background for telling about the letter I wrote to my father—and how that letter transformed our relationship. Three days later, as I was entering the building, the administrator called out to me and asked that I come into her office. As she shut the door and invited me to take a seat, I was feeling nervous. “What did I do?” I wondered. She began, “Remember the stories you told me the other day? Well, yesterday afternoon **I wrote my husband a letter of gratitude** and sent it to his office. It turned out to be twelve pages long, typewritten single-spaced.” “Wow!” I replied. She continued, “We’ve been married for 47 years. Once I started writing I discovered there was lots I was thankful for.” She paused, and then, “I just got off the phone with him a few minutes ago. It’s been **over 25 years since I’ve heard my husband cry**. Thank you for telling me those stories!”

EXERCISE: Write one or more letters of gratitude, being as generous as possible

Who is or was important in your life? Especially, who is (or was) important in your life **who may not yet know how grateful you are** for the difference they made? These people need not have been entirely helpful or nurturing, but the point here is to call up only the positive memories. As a spiritual practice, **take one person at a time and write a letter of gratitude**. In what ways did their influence make you a better person or set you on a path that has become central to your success and wellbeing? Be specific and speak from your heart. Focus on the good, only the good. Help them see that their contribution is much larger than they could have imagined, because it has carried into the world through you.

EXERCISE 5d:
Great Joy, Great Needs:
Discerning Your Calling and Mission in Life

by Michael Dowd (excerpted from *Thank God for Evolution*)

“That’s your cosmic task!”

More than a half-century ago, **Maria Montessori** encouraged teachers to help children think expansively about their lives by gently urging them, at every opportunity, to ponder what their “cosmic task” might be. What is it that they, given their innate gifts and unique way of being in the world, might contribute in service to their larger communities—even to the Universe as a whole? While guest teaching in a Montessori classroom in Minnesota, **Connie Barlow** was approached by a boy intent on showing her drawings he had made of all the dinosaurs he knew. One by one he turned the pages of his self-made picture book. When he was done, Connie looked him square in the eyes and said, “For 65 million years Earth had lost the memory of **dinosaurs**, and now, through you, Earth is once again remembering its glorious past. Good work!” She continued, “Right now, drawing pictures of dinosaurs: that’s your cosmic task!”

Discerning Your Calling Exercise

The following exercise will help you discover your life purpose, your mission—where your great joy and the world’s great needs intersect. Virtually everyone who invests the time to complete this exercise finds it to be significant, and for some it is life changing. It is one of the most effective tools I know for helping a person **clarify** how they can make the biggest difference on behalf of life. This exercise isn’t just for adults. There may be no questions more important to regularly ask children (at least through college) than these: “What is your cosmic task? What is your evolutionary role, your divine purpose at this time in your life?”

1. *Take a piece of paper and make three columns.* Then, while you’re in a nonjudgmental, accepting frame of mind...
2. *Breathe deeply; pay attention to your body and focus on your heart.* Why the heart? Because the heart, scientists have discovered, is as much neuronal tissue as it is muscle tissue—and it has relatively direct neuronal connections with the frontal lobes of the brain. It is not surprising that many cultures have intuited the importance of involving the heart in one’s decision-making. Indeed, when indicating oneself, we instinctively point to our heart—not our head. Now, after a few minutes of noticing, rather than thinking...
3. *Bring to mind those activities, creative projects, passions, or interests that bring you lasting joy and deep satisfaction.* Think, too, about times when you have offered a helping hand or contributed to others or to your community in ways that made you feel great. Basically, what do you love doing? What lights you up, gives you energy, or ignites your imagination?
4. *Title the left column “My Joys” and begin to list the words and phrases that articulate what you’ve just brought to mind.* Be sure to include whatever you’re good at and what other people would say you are good at. Periodically stop thinking and writing just to notice—notice your breathing, the sensations of your body, the beating of your heart, extraneous sounds. Then, as more possibilities come to mind, add to your list. When you feel complete...
5. *Close your eyes again, breathe deeply, and ask yourself: “Where do I hurt over what is happening to others—what is happening to my community or my world? What troubles me or causes my heart to ache? Where do I get angry or frustrated or depressed about what’s going on around me? What causes my heart to open with compassion?”*
6. *Title the column on the right “World’s Needs” and begin to create your new list.*
7. *Keep your lists handy, and add to them over the next few days.* Don’t worry about “getting it right” or putting everything down initially. Add to both lists as ideas spontaneously arise. Periodically revisiting and adding to your lists is a spiritual practice that can span a lifetime.
8. *Return to a contemplative state and let your imagination roam while you begin to creatively mix and match, guided by your heart.* Ask yourself: “What are some possible avenues (not just the practical, but also the outlandish) where my joy and the world’s needs intersect? How might I contribute my time and energy in ways that would make a difference to at least one other person or creature, and that would also give me great joy?”
9. *In the middle column, begin to list these intersections.* Perhaps draw diagonals to the items in the surrounding columns that would thus be connected. Don’t censor or judge the possibilities yet; write freely, periodically stopping to notice yourself breathing. Then, study the connections you have drawn and prayerfully imagine...

10. **YOUR CALLING:** Where your joy and the world's needs intersect will indicate the directions of your calling, your mission, your vocation—"God's will" for you at this time and place. This is where you can join with the impulse of evolution, with the flow of Life, and thus participate consciously in the unfolding reality of this stupendous time in cosmic, Earth, human history.

A POWERFUL WAY TO CONCLUDE the "Discerning Your Calling" exercise is to **articulate your life purpose in a single sentence**. It may take days or weeks of revising your draft sentence before you come to a time when you *know* that you've got it: you will feel in your gut that this sentence is *it*.

Remember that, while this is so today, **your life purpose will likely evolve** as the years pass and that such evolution is a good thing (albeit potentially disruptive and painful). Know, too, that you can revisit this practice when it is time to discern what your next stage might be.

Last, but by no means least, begin to **take the steps necessary** for your life purpose to reach into the world. This may require time for study or apprenticeship with someone already walking that path. Or you may be ready to launch your purpose into the world right now, assisted by the Higher Porpoises of those you enlist as colleagues, advisors, or accountability partners.

* * *

A person's great work, or Higher Porpoise, is more often co-created than it is discovered. A common mistake made in the effort to discern one's "calling" is assuming that one should wait until the path or direction is revealed from on high. Sometimes it is revealed; sometimes it even grabs us by the collar and drags us into our great work before we've given our assent. But often that is not how a sense of purpose manifests. Life waits to see if we are ready and serious about this—if we are willing to **make sacrifices, take risks, jump into the void**—trusting, ever trusting. Are we *really* ready to accept a Higher Porpoise that may require us to shed unhealthy habits and to restrain the excesses of our **Lizard Legacy**? Do we have the courage to proceed, even when our **Furry Li'l Mammal** wants to scamper back into its burrow? Will we be able to enroll our **Monkey Mind** in our Higher Porpoise, so that it will stop fussing about all that might go wrong and instead get to work imagining positive, empowering scenarios, while figuring out ways to actually manifest our new purposeful path? And who are "we" anyway—if not all of them, if not the entire *menagerie of the mind*. Can we all work toward consensus, give and take, rather than control, domination, and intimidation?

Co-creating your life purpose means being **guided by your heart**, noticing, listening to what life's circumstances are whispering, and then *making it up*—all the while **trusting** Reality (Life / God / the Universe). In the days and weeks and years ahead, you will know when adjustments need to be made, when a temporary tangent becomes the most alluring path. The important thing is to begin. Trust that by **saying yes to the invitation to participate**, doors will open and signs will guide your way.

"The moment one definitely commits oneself, then Providence moves too. All sorts of things occur to help one that would never otherwise have occurred. A whole stream of events issues from the decision, raising in one's favor all manner of unforeseen incidents and meetings and material assistance, which no man could have dreamt would have come his way. I have learned a deep respect for one of Goethe's couplets: *'Whatever you can do or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it.'*" — W. H. Murray

Being on purpose is allowing the wisdom of Wholeness to guide us toward action that will bless the present and the future. **Each of us is a part of the Whole, allured by the Whole, to serve the Whole.** By serving the body of Life of which we are part, we are really serving our true Self—our Great Self.

“My portion of the great work, like that of any other person, creates its own synergy. My job is to be vigilant to the fact that the world creates neither coincidence nor accident—only opportunity. I need only have the courage to ask for what I need and the valor to accept it once it appears.” — Ed Collins

“My life purpose”

Here is my life purpose in a sentence: “I serve the future by living in right relationship to reality, evangelizing big history, and heralding evidence as divine communication.”

EXERCISE 5e:

Mentoring: Teaching Another What You Know or Can Do

by Michael Dowd (excerpted from *Thank God for Evolution*)

For virtually all of human history mentoring was how skills, values, and knowledge passed from one generation to the next. **One-to-one instruction by way of example and co-participation** is still, by far, the most effective way to ensure this transmittal. Mentors can praise in just the right ways and the right times to foster a sense of possibility and self-worth in the apprentice. There are organizations devoted to pairing up mentors with mentees: **Big Brothers** and **Big Sisters** are examples. Virtually all religious communities rely on adult mentors to work with children and youth in religious education and coming-of-age programs. And there are plenty of opportunities in public and private school systems, too.

You surely already know enough to have something to offer someone new to your path (or fresh to life). **Make an inventory of your talents, your experiences, your character traits** that would be beneficial to pass on to others. What would you be thrilled to teach to another or to model for another? Now, call to mind all the communities in which you are active—and those you might like to be active in. Then, go for it!

EXERCISE 5f:

Honoring Your Instincts: Questions for Reflection & Discussion

by Michael Dowd (excerpted from *Thank God for Evolution*)

1. Lizard Legacy

- a. What do your reptilian instincts want that helped your ancient ancestors survive and reproduce but that now have negative consequences if you act on them indiscriminately, habitually, or in ways that are out of integrity? (List everything related to food, substances, safety, and sex that cause you problems or challenge one or more of your relationships.)
- b. What do you appreciate about your reptilian instincts? How do they serve your life and your relations?

2. Furry L'il Mammal

- a. What does your Furry L'il Mammal want that would have served your ancient ancestors but that now have negative consequences if you act on them indiscriminately, habitually, or in ways that are out of integrity? (List all your issues and challenges related to love, parenting, sibling relations, status, security, and wanting to look good or be right.)
- b. What do you appreciate about your mammalian instincts? How do they serve your life and your relations?
- c. How have your mammalian instincts helped keep your reptilian drives in check?

3. Monkey Mind

- a. What challenges does your chatterbox mind cause you? (List anything that typically takes you out of the present moment—things you habitually worry about, anxiety for the future, guilt or regrets about the past, whatever it is that clutters your mind with preoccupations.)
- b. What do you appreciate about your rational mind? How does it serve your life and your relations?
- c. How has your Monkey Mind's propensity to conjure worst-case scenarios helped you hold the excesses of your reptilian and mammalian instincts in check?

4. Higher Porpoise

- a. What is your life history of higher purpose? (List the pursuits that have given your life focus, beginning with your earliest memories of childhood hobbies and fascinations.)
- b. Reflect on the times in which you have lost focus, when you have floundered, or when life felt meaningless. How did you regain a sense of purpose?
- c. How has your higher purpose helped you lead a life you can be proud of, and helped you hold in check excesses of your reptilian and mammalian instincts?
- d. Where does your joy and the world's needs intersect?