The Future Is Calling Us to Greatness

Sermon by Rev. Michael Dowd

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Isaiah 43: 18-19: "Forget all that I have done in the past; it is nothing compared to what I am about to do. Indeed, I have already begun doing something unprecedented. It is springing forth now. Do you not see it?"

Thomas Berry: "All human activities, programs, policies, and institutions must henceforth be judged *primarily* by the extent to which they inhibit, ignore, or foster a mutually enhancing human-Earth relationship."

Carl Sagan: "A religion, old or new, that stressed the magnificence of the universe as revealed by modern science might be able to draw forth reserves of reverence and awe hardly tapped by the conventional faiths. Sooner or later, such a religion will emerge."

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What I will offer here is a brief outline of a growing perspective that many of us, religious and nonreligious alike, find inspiring and empowering. Significantly, this perspective is grounded in knowledge, not beliefs. I like to call it "The Evidential Reformation." And, in my view, once we step into the Evidential Reformation, once we experience the trajectory of our religions and secular worldviews in a new way, it is an easy step to not only grasp that the future is calling us to greatness, but to feel impelled to make our mark.

The Evidential Reformation

Religion is undergoing today a massive shift in perspective. It is a shift at least as wrenching as the Copernican revolution, which required humanity to bid farewell to an Earth-centered understanding of our place in the cosmos. Ever since, we have had to discount immediate perception and accept that it is Earth's own rotation that makes the daytime Sun and the night-time stars seem to revolve around us.

The religious revolution on the horizon today might well be called the Evidential Reformation. At the heart of this theological transformation is a profound shift in where we find the most authoritative guidance regarding two fundamental orientations: *How things are* (that is, *What is real?*) and *Which things matter* (that is, *What's important?*). Facts and values. The shift ongoing today is all about facts and values—and that means the shift is ultimately about everything.

While I speak of religion's "Evidential Reformation," other scholars, most notably Karen Armstrong, suggest that our time might also be called humanity's "second Axial Age." (For those unfamiliar with the label "Axial Age," it refers to the 600-year period between 800 BCE and 200 BCE when, according to Karl Jaspers, "the spiritual foundations of humanity were laid simultaneously and independently around the world". Consider that it was during this time that Confucianism and Taoism arose in China, Hinduism and Buddhism were born in India, Monotheism emerged in Judea, and rationalism ruled the intelligentsia of Greece.)

The good news—the *really* good news, in my opinion—is that tens of millions of us around the world, secular and religious, share a common passion for living in right relationship to reality, as evidentially known and collectively discerned, and in ensuring a just and healthy future for all.

What do I mean by "right relationship to reality, as evidentially known and collectively discerned"? That phrase, "as evidentially known and collectively discerned" is at the heart of what I am calling the Evidential Reformation. And here is how I personally know it is happening.

For nearly two decades I have been privileged to work closely with people of very different backgrounds and beliefs on issues related to human and planetary wellbeing. In 1995-96, after having spent the previous decade pastoring churches in Massachusetts, Ohio, and Michigan, I began organizing Jewish, Roman Catholic, Protestant, Evangelical, and Unitarian Universalist leaders across America on key environmental issues that were coming up for a vote in Congress. For the next five years I headed up the first government-funded program in the United States designed to help individuals and neighborhoods adopt more sustainable ways of living. And since April 2002 my wife, Connie Barlow, a science writer and evolutionary educator, and I have crisscrossed North America addressing nearly two thousand secular and religious groups, evangelizing the evolutionary significance of religion, the inspiring side of science, and an honorable relationship to the future.

In each of these settings I experienced firsthand what a number of scholars have chronicled independently—namely, that a worldwide movement has been emerging for decades, largely unnoticed, at the nexus of science, inspiration, and sustainability.

While hedonists and fundamentalists are absent from this group, tens of millions of the rest of us now share a striking number of values, priorities, and commitments. These orient our lives in a common direction—regardless of what language we speak and on which continent we reside.

Our religious practices and metaphysical *beliefs* are all over the map. What we share is *knowledge* about the greatest challenges facing humanity and a *resolve* to work together to ensure a healthy planet for our species and the whole of life. We cohere because we are grounded in an *evidential* worldview interpreted in a variety of meaningful ways. We honor evolutionary and ecological processes at the root of life and human culture. To disregard, to dishonor, these processes through our own determined ignorance or self-focus is an evil that will bring untold suffering to generations upon generations. It is a legacy we denounce. It is thus a call to action.

Now that the threat of climate change is not only undeniable but also manifesting in frightful ways throughout Earth's lands and waters, the fact that tens of millions of religious and secular people share this common, evidence-based understanding of *what's real* and *what's important*, and are joining together in just cause, is surely good news.

If a key role of *religion* throughout human history has been to offer a shared sense of who we are and a motivation to sacrifice for the common good, then perhaps the "religion" of which Carl Sagan spoke in the epigraph has been emerging for decades. More a *meta-religious* than a religious perspective, we all are charged with a deep conviction—regardless of belief—that *the future is, indeed, calling us to greatness*. Truly, this is the time and we are the people: *Let's get to work!* And we shall do so with hope that rises out of despair. We do so with joy that is not bound by any certainty of outcome. We do so because it is who we have become. The urge is as large as life. It is bigger and even more compelling than any religious conviction that has ever impelled us to act, to change, to make a difference.

Is there a way of giving voice to the core tenets of this meta-religious outlook? Is there a way of presenting the facts and the values that unite us—without offending our differences of belief?

This is a task I have made my own for the better part of a year now. Let me share the six short declarations I have come to. As you will hear, each statement pairs a secular term with a religious term—which I sense can transcend the theist—atheist divide. See if you agree.

Here are the six:

Reality is my God, Evidence is my scripture, Big History is my creation story, Ecology is my theology, Integrity is my spiritual path, and Ensuring a healthy future is my mission.

Beyond the Theist-Atheist Debate

Far from diminishing religious concepts, the Evidential Reformation un-trivializes, even factualizes, God, guidance, and good news. The Evidential Reformation, I predict, will also evaporate the theist—atheist debate. It will do so by highlighting the evolutionary significance of religion and the revelatory significance of science.

Let me say that again because this coupling of concepts is core: The Evidential Reformation evaporates the theist—atheist debate. It does so by highlighting the evolutionary significance of religion and the revelatory significance of science. Here is why:

Evolutionary scientists themselves are discovering the fitness value of religions. Notably, religions have played a crucial role in fostering cooperation among peoples of widely divergent ethnicities and who speak different languages. There is a fitness value to religions that promote a sense of solidarity and a willingness to sacrifice for the good of the whole.

The Evidential Revolution thus highlights the evolutionary significance of religion—sidestepping altogether inquiry into whether any particular tenet of religious conviction is *factually* true or, more importantly from an evolutionary perspective, *practically* true.

Now, turning to what I call "the revelatory significance of science": does the Evidential Reformation invite the faithful to regard the understandings born of science as having revelatory potential? Can our religiously inherited notions of God, guidance, and good news be updated, transformed, even energized by incorporating the fruits of science?

As I am speaking here in church, that is a question for each of you to mull over. Rest assured that I will do my best to have your answers trend toward an enthusiastic "Yes!"

Big History Is the New Genesis

Let us begin by reflecting on the 20th century fruits of our scientific understanding of origins. I can think of no shorter (yet poetic) version of this universal origin story than that expressed by an American philosopher of religion, Loyal Rue:

"In the course of epic events, matter was distilled out of radiant energy, segregated into galaxies, collapsed into stars, fused into atoms, swirled into planets, spliced into molecules, captured into cells, mutated into species, compromised into thought, and cajoled into cultures. All of this (and much more) is what matter has done as systems upon systems of organization have emerged over fourteen billion years of creative natural history."

ANECDOTE: Here's a more down-home version of the story of origins as revealed by science. Rev. Marlin Lavanhar, pastor of the largest Unitarian church in America (in Tulsa, Oklahoma) — and a dear colleague of mine—once quipped in a sermon, "You know, we've all heard some fundamentalist-minded person say, 'Don't tell me I'm related to monkeys!' But now that we understand DNA and have cracked its code we know that we're not just related to monkeys, we're related to Zucchini. So let's get over it." ©

What do we call this fresh and amazing creation story? What do we call this saga that applies equally to elephants, dinosaurs, common vegetables, and us? Harvard biologist Edward O. Wilson referred to it as "the Epic of Evolution." Geologian Thomas Berry and physicist Brian Swimme celebrated the evolutionary journey in a 1992 book, with the title "The Universe Story."

The most widespread term in use, utterly straightforward and utterly secular, is this: "Big History." *Big History* was coined nearly three decades ago by historian David Christian, who began teaching a survey course of this title to college students in Australia. Now, thanks to Bill Gates' wild enthusiasm for Big History, high school students around the world are learning Big History. And in late 2013 The History Channel 2 aired a 17-part series by that name.

Truly, Big History (by whatever name) is the new Genesis. Ever updated, ever correctable, this universal creation myth—our common creation story—is the source of new facts of our long and storied existence—facts our ancestors could not possibly have discerned. Interpreted meaningfully, inspiringly, Big History promotes a profound sense of kinship and fills us with awe. When we call upon Big History to ignite our zeal to confront the challenges of our times, we easily discern lessons that add zest to the values we already deem vital and vitalizing.

What matters in how we *use* this new origin story is what has always mattered in the framing and tweaking of a people's sense of inheritance and kinship. What matters is how well that story leads us toward *living in right relationship to reality*.

Hence, *Reality is my God*—not wishful thinking, not what ought to be, not what a loving God would and should provide us with if only we prayed hard enough. But Reality as it is, as it *really* shows up, and Reality as our best scientific minds can describe, explain, and sometimes foretell.

Thus, Reality is my God, evidence is my scripture, and Big History is my creation story. Might Reality be your God, evidence your scripture, Big History your creation story?

Cultivating an I-Thou Relationship to Reality

To the extent that I have already made the religious a bit uncomfortable, it's time for me to challenge a key assumption of those who stand solidly on the secular side of the divide.

Here is the challenge for secularists: What if God-talk and other forms of personalizing the powers of this planet, this universe, time, and mystery are not unfortunate spin-offs of an evolutionary imperative to err on the side of animation? What if personification, personalizing, is a plus not only for ancient times but for these times too—not only for our peasant ancestors but also for their scientifically sophisticated descendants?

To use a classic example: There is no disagreement—by the religious or the secular—that when our ancestors were tracking game through the forest or savanna, it was far better to proceed cautiously toward an ominous shape that might be alive than to assume it was a static part of the landscape. If wondering boulder or bear, err on the side of bear.

Equally, when faced with an enemy or a frightful turn of the weather, courage is summoned for bold action if one can believe, and trust, that invisible powers will lend a hand. Yes, the individual may die for acting boldly, but his or her relatives will survive as a result. Aligning oneself with the powers of the universe, with personalized powers, is thus evolutionarily advantageous—for one's people if not always for oneself. All of the ways in which world religions and indigenous practices foster personal relationships with forces great and small are thus to be recognized as practically useful—factual truth be damned.

Thus, believing that "Reality is on our side" or "We are God's chosen people," or "The Universe is conspiring on my behalf" would have been evolutionarily selected for. Individuals who held such beliefs would have been happier, healthier, and more attractive to mates. Groups that held such beliefs would have easily outcompeted those without such a personal and intimate relationship to reality.

Beyond belief, throughout human history, personal and group survival has *always* depended on cultivating an ecologically sound and respectful relationship with what is fundamentally and inescapably real. The 20th century Jewish theologian Martin Buber referred to this stance as an *I-Thou relationship*, as opposed to an *I-It relationship*. Those of us who encountered his book long ago might have assumed it was merely a spiritual offering: we could become more spiritual by following his I-Thou lead. Today, however, we also see the deep ecological wisdom in bringing that ancient practice into our very modern lives.

Thus, ecology is my theology. I celebrate my personal relationship with the powers that be!

For example, whenever possible at dawn and sunset I not only greet the sun, Connie and I sing to the sun. And the sun is not just *the* sun for me at those times. It transforms into "Great Sol"—spelt 's-o-l' but shining at that moment deeply into my own soul, carrying me out of commonplace awareness into the realm of the sacred, the ritualized connecting of little me with all that be; especially the literal source and sustenance of my life and all life on this planet.

In sum: Whatever else one may tack onto an understanding of *how things are* and *which things matter*, long-lasting religions could not ignore the ancient wisdom of place and the importance of cultivating I-Thou relationships with the more-than-human world. This is the kind of wisdom for which indigenous cultures are renowned today. It is also the kind of practical wisdom absolutely vital for a people wedded to one planet and determined to pass the health of the lands and waters (and atmosphere!) forward to the generations in waiting.

Ecology is my theology. Might it also be yours?

God-Talk That Is Not Good

Where and what we personalize is just as important as that we do. I-Thou spiritual development is necessary, but it can all too easily thwart a sense that "ecology is my theology" if it is misdirected—and that means, if it tends toward the otherworldly.

Otherworldly, I am sad to say, is too often a focus of religions of the Book—of religions elevating above all else ancient, static books. Owing to a kind of idolatry of the written word that manifests today as scriptural literalism, some denominations of major faith traditions not only are autistic to the ecological imperative but outright against it. Bible-based apocalyptic thinking is among the worst offenders.

Until that idolatry is identified and laid to rest, "ecology as my theology" will not only remain a backwater viewpoint; it will be labeled as heresy. And that creates a big problem for the rest of us—because dire warnings about the effects of global warming and species extinctions will fall on deaf ears tuned only to I-Thou relating to a God limited to back then, up there, or someday.

Gregory Bateson said it well fifty years ago,

"If you imagine God as outside and separate from creation, and if you have the idea that you are created in his image, you will logically and naturally see yourself as outside and against the things around you. And as you unrightfully claim all mind to yourself, you will see the world around you as mindless and therefore not entitled to moral or ethical consideration. The environment will seem to be yours to exploit. Your survival unit will be you and your people against the environment of other social units, other races, and the brutes and vegetables. If this is your estimate of your relation to nature and you have an advanced technology, your likelihood of survival will be that of a snowball in hell. You will die either of the toxic byproducts of your own hate or simply from overpopulation and overgrazing."

Thomas Berry, one of my great mentors until his death in 2009, warns us along similar lines,

"The world we live in is an honorable world. To refuse this deepest instinct of our being, to deny honor where honor is due, to withdraw reverence from divine manifestation, is to place ourselves on a head-on collision course with the ultimate forces of the Universe. This question of honor must be dealt with before any other question. We miss both the intrinsic nature and magnitude of the issue if we place our response to the present crises of our planet on any other basis. It is ultimately not a political or economic or scientific or psychological issue. It is ultimately a question of honor. Only the sense of the violated honor of Earth and the need to restore this honor can evoke the understanding as well as the energy needed to carry out the renewal of the planet in any effective manner."

Indeed, *ecology as my theology* is such an imperative for the time we live in that as soon as one opens to a more immediate understanding of where and what we think God is and what is deserving of an I-Thou allegiance, we automatically arrive at the final two declarations in the six-part credo I offered at the outset. Recall thus far:

Reality is my God, Evidence is my scripture, Big History is my creation story, Ecology is my theology.

And so, of course, we arrive at:

Integrity is my spiritual path, and Ensuring a healthy future is my mission.

(Can I get an amen?)

So let's recap: *Reality is God*—my primary concern: not reality as I wish it would be, or hope it could be, but reality as it is now *and* how will be in a future impacted by climate chaos and a post-peak-oil world.

Evidence is my scripture—now more than ever, for this topic more than any other, we need to honor humanity's global collective intelligence regarding how our actions already and will continue to shift the climate—and the thresholds of risk that we absolutely do *not* want to bequeath to the future.

Big History is my creation story—a deep-time understanding is essential for understanding how far, say, the forests will have to shift north with just 2 degrees C rise in temperature. We don't want to step into a situation of runaway feedback by which alligators end up on Ellesmere Island—which they have done in Earth's past!

Ecology is my theology—given climate choas, this should go without saying. Ours is a time of space telescopes, electron microscopes, supercomputers, and the worldwide web. It is also a time of smart bombs, collapsing economies, and rising seas. This is not a time for parsing the lessons given to a few goatherds, tentmakers, and camel drivers. Like everything else under the sun, religions will either evolve or go extinct. "Getting right with God," means coming into right relationship with Reality—and that includes our planet and its gloriously diverse species and cultures ... which leads to the last two points that center on action in the world.

Integrity is my spiritual path. Whatever any of us considered and put a lot of effort into as a spiritual path of the past, we can keep doing that—but it is no substitute for all of us to take on the new spiritual path of integrity. By integrity I mean the practices and habits that help us live in right relationship to reality and improve our legacy ... which brings us to point six.

Ensuring a healthy future is my mission. I've found no more powerful means of focusing my action in the world—for putting my heart in the right place—than to personalize the future. As of three years ago, it became really easy for me to personalize the future—just as it is for many of you. My first grandchild was born. If Ayela Rene lives to the end of this century, she will have experienced all the way through the farthest scenarios of climate change that scientists are positing today—some of those scenarios are horrendous. So yes, it is easy for me to personalize the future. For me, the future's name is Ayela. And, though she does not know it, she is calling her grandpa to greatness.

(PAUSE) Do you feel it too? Can you feel that future calling *you* to greatness? (LONG PAUSE)

I'd like to close with one final quote from Loyal Rue:

"The universe is a single reality—one long, sweeping spectacular process of interconnected events. The universe is not a place where evolution happens; it is evolution happening. It is not a stage on which dramas unfold; it is the unfolding drama itself. If ever there were a candidate for a universal story, it must be this story of cosmic evolution. ... This story shows us in the deepest possible sense that we are all sisters and brothers—fashioned from the same stellar dust, energized by the same star, nourished by the same planet, endowed with the same genetic code, and threatened by the same evils. This story, more than any other, humbles us before the magnitude and complexity of creation. Like no other story it bewilders us with the improbability of our existence, astonishes us with the interdependence of all things, and makes us feel grateful for the lives we have. And not the least of all, it inspires us to express our gratitude to the past by accepting a solemn and collective responsibility for the future."