

North America, Our Home

2010, Jon and Heather Cleland Host, adapted from script by Connie Barlow

Cast – Nonspeaking Actors (red), 2 Narrators, plus digital slide show and props

Name of person playing role of:

_____ Turtle
_____ Gastornis bird
_____ Horse family
_____ Camel family
_____ Dog family
_____ Squirrel family
_____ Little ancestral mammals
_____ Plants (several different plants at different times)
_____ Bear family
_____ Elephant family (Mastodons, Mammoths, etc)
_____ Cat family (including the Cheetah)
_____ Pronghorn family
_____ Giant Ground Sloth
_____ Human (Native American)
_____ Landforms (person to raise Rockies, carve canyons, etc.)
_____ Narrator #1 (**Death**)
_____ Narrator #2 (**Life**)

The cast is designed to be flexible. If there are more actors (kids) than this, split up roles or increase the number in one role (like have 3 kids be turtles, etc.). If there are fewer kids, then simply have the narrator mention the action, with no actors.

Materials:

- **Rope** large enough to create an outline of North America on the floor
- **Blue cloth** long enough to reach from Arctic Ocean to Gulf of Mexico on floor
- **White sheet** to represent snow after the meteor impact.
- **Asteroid** (crumpled brown paper bag with self-illuminating light within it?)
- **Fern fronds** and **conifer branches** and **grass** (hay, or tall landscaping grass stems)
- **Dinosaur toys or stuffed animals** (especially **Triceratops**)
- **Sound-effect equipment** (Gong, piano, drums, percussives)

Overview

Start with the window blinds pulled closed, North America traced in rope on the floor with the Bearpaw Seaway in place, a visible Yucatan Peninsula, the Appalachians in place, no Rockies yet, and no Isthmus of Panama. Make sure there is room to enter and exit both at the Bering Strait and at Panama. Ensure that those filling the roles above have their costumes/face painting done, including the narrators' costumes. The projector is cued with the clock slideshow, and the opening scene/title page is up.

In this script, reading by **DEATH** is black, that by **LIFE** is green, items in red show when actors come out or do something, and other non-spoken instructions are in *italics*. Of course, at any point, add to or change the text as needed to make a good, enthusiastic, spiritual, and personal experience for all. The (W) indicates when to encourage the audience to make “welcome” sounds.

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SLIDE (Mammoths)

DEATH: Welcome to North America! Today we will reenact the birth of our continent, North America. Our home has an amazing history, and knowing that history is spiritually fulfilling for me in several ways. . . . *(Adapt to fit the person playing DEATH)* . . . As a human, my connection to my local part of our planet Earth is a source of power and inspiration. As an environmentalist, knowing this history motivates me to shape its future. As one who loves our home, I want to know as much as I can about it. We hope to share that love with you today. I will be playing the part of death and extinction, the catalyst of life, no more evil than the darkness of the night or the waning of the moon. I make room for new life.

LIFE: *(Life actor excitedly runs up to microphone)* And whose role is more fun? I will be playing the part of LIFE *(sneer at DEATH)*, always victorious after death, although that victory sets the stage for death. When we begin our journey through time, and as new groups of animals arise on this continent, I will invite you to welcome them — either by making their sound, or by saying “welcome,” as you wish.

So now, let us journey back through time. I invite you to close your eyes and view this landscape through your imagination instead, as the years roll back. . . .

SLIDE (black)

... imagine that everything around you is moving back in time. . . . Decades and centuries roll back to the time of your great-great-grandparents — and their great-great grandparents. The highways around us are all gone, and there are absolutely no cars. Faster still, we tick back millions of years to before humans existed anywhere on earth. *(talk everyone through slow reversal of time, adding to this as you wish).*

We are going all the way back to a time even before North America existed as a single continent. We are now back at a time 65 million years ago. . . . and you may open your eyes. *(Landforms stands by rope and begins to mime.)*

. . . The rope on the floor designates the shorelines of our continent that we are familiar with: the East coast . . . Mexico . . . California . . . Alaska . . . Canada

65 million years ago: the Appalachians are already old, but the Rockies are still only a dream. The Bearpaw Seaway fills the central part of our continent with saltwater, from the Arctic ocean to the Gulf of Mexico. Giant mosasaurs swim this inland seaway, pteranodons swoop through the skies, flowers grace the land, and vibrant life is everywhere. (*LIFE places dinosaur toys across North America*) This is when our story shall begin . . .

SLIDE (Triceratops)

DEATH: It is a warm morning (*use slides, practice to get timing right*). A triceratops forages nearby, then glances up to see a small point of light, a morning star, appear in the eastern sky.

SLIDE (Comet)

In an instant, this point grows to a blinding, searing flash that blazes across the sky. This *asteroid (landforms “flies” 2-3’ asteroid over audience, and sets it on the Yucatan)* is larger than many of today’s cities, and moving at over 40,000 miles an hour. It slams into the Yucatan Peninsula– yes, our own continent is chosen as the harbinger of worldwide change.

SLIDE (Yucatan explosion)

The impact is over 1,000 times greater than today’s entire worldwide nuclear arsenal, blasting hundreds of cubic miles of rock into space, and the reentering debris ignites fires across the globe. The flash permanently blinds animals within thousands of miles, and the shock wave permanently deafens many as well. (*lights at full brightness*) The searing inferno is followed by darkness as the debris blocks out the sun for a year or more. (*lights out, use black slide – use flashlight to read, or memorize next line*)

SLIDE (black)

Without the sun's light, snow falls in the tropics, and death comes to nearly all the inhabitants of North America, including **Triceratops** Plants survive mainly as seeds and spores. (*Landscapes lays out white sheet to represent snow, and removes all the dinosaur toys except one*).

LIFE:

But this is **not the end** of life. Eventually, the particles of **smoke** and ash have all been swept out of the air inside of **snowflakes**. Sunlight warms Earth's surface once again, and the snow **melts**. . . .**Death has given me the opportunity to triumph again!** . . .

SLIDE (orange sky)

. . . A few **tiny mammals** (*Ancestral mammals scurry around*) and other creatures have survived the desolation. Maybe they survived the dark time by eating frozen **dinosaur corpses** — dino dinners, so to speak.

LITTLE MAMMAL scurries around, finds the dinosaur toy and pretends to munch on it.

Let us welcome them with the sound of squeaking, like they did **(W)**! (*Lights slowing grow back to normal*) . . .

SLIDE (hazy fern)

The sun again shines on the devastated landscape, and **Ferns** (*Plant person comes out, dancing and placing ferns*) quickly take over. . . . **Turtles** (*Turtle wakes up and moves slowly*) survived by hibernating deep in the mud, and now, with the dinosaurs gone, they thrive! . . .

SLIDE (hazy ripples)

The Golden Age of Turtles is here! Let us welcome them with a turtle hiss **(W)**. . . . Forests return. **The Rockies** (*Landforms acts*) begin to rise, draining away the **Bearpaw Seaway** (*Landforms removes blue bearpaw seaway*), leaving only today's Great Salt Lake, and so, in the Golden Age of Turtles, this island of North America is born! (*thunder*) . . .

SLIDE (hazy ripples)

Native Americans will later name this continent “Turtle Island” – how fitting!

DEATH: Now at 60 million years ago, it is time to introduce our clock . . .

SLIDE (clock 60 mya)

This clock will be moving forward through time for the rest of our story. We’ll proceed through the epochs of the Paleocene, Eocene, Oligocene, Miocene, Pliocene, Pleistocene, and the present: the Holocene.

Let’s zoom forward another 5 million years to 55 million years ago.

SLIDE (clock 55 mya)

At 55 million years ago, we’ve just completed the Paleocene, and we are starting into the Eocene.

LIFE: A tiny marshbird flies onto North America. (*Enter Gastornis, huddled to ground*). . . . Over many generations, this bird evolves to be larger, Larger, **LARGER!** (*Gastornis stands, fierce*) . . . Now over 8’ tall, flightless, and armed with a vicious beak, Gastornis eats the small ancestors of horses! . . .

Let us welcome Gastornis with a fierce **RRAWWK (W)**. . . Gastornis is one of North America’s first “gifts” to the rest of the world, bringing terror to Europe and elsewhere. (*Gastornis leaves via Alaska*)

But Gastornis doesn’t eat all the ancestral horses. Some will evolve into horses big enough to outrun Gastornis. Oh, I think I hear the whinnying of **Horses** in the distance . . . Do you? . . .

(*Horse begins to gallop around the continent*)

Yes! . . . North America’s horses are actually the first horses anywhere in the world. And so are the Camels! (*Camel undulates neck as moves slowly*) . . .

Horses and camels both evolved right here, on this continent, from tiny mammals who survived the asteroid impact that killed off the dinosaurs. Let us whinny their welcome! **(W)** . . .

SLIDE (clock 40 mya)

It is now 40 million years ago, and another family of mammals is taking shape here on our continent. *(Dog begins to act.)* Who might that be? It is the **Dog** family! The dog family will eventually produce descendents that include the wolves and foxes and coyotes that we now have in North America. Let us howl and bark their welcome **(W)**. . . .

SLIDE (clock 30 mya)

DEATH: The Clock moves forward to 30 million years go. We've entered the Oligocene, and the Golden Age of Turtles has come to an end. Thousands of species of **turtles** go extinct, though some, of course, do survive. *(Turtle act out.)* **chime**

LIFE: During the Oligocene, the horses, camels, and dogs that already evolved here are joined by another major mammal family that evolves right here in North America. Who might this new mammal family be? . . . *(Squirrel acts)*

Squirrels!! Let us welcome them with the sound of gnawing **(W)**. . . .

Squirrels are more than just cute. They made it possible for **nut trees** *(Plant person acts)* to evolve — such as beech nuts and acorns, and hickory, and walnuts. Later, North American squirrels will spread around the world.

DEATH: Let's pause before introducing anymore animals and consider North America's mountains for a moment. *(Landforms acts.)* Our Rockies and Appalachians both run North to South (rather than East to West). This means that cold air from the North and warm air from the South can travel for vast distances in both directions — crashing into one another. When really cold air meets really warm air, something pretty devastating can occur. *(Landforms swirls.)*

Tornados!!!! 90% of the world's happen right here in North America! Aren't we lucky!!!

SLIDE (clock 17 mya)

LIFE: Moving forward through time, we come to 17 million years ago. We are now in the Miocene epoch. The Miocene is drier and warmer than the previous epoch, and something marvelous is going to happen to plants. (*Plant person acts with the animals mentioned . . .*)

Rhinoceros, Horse, and Camel all co-evolve with the plants they consume, giving birth to a whole new ecosystem: grasslands!!!! . . . The Great Plains (*Landform person shows location, places grass there*) are born! Let us welcome the grasslands by making the sound of wind and swaying our arms above our heads (W). . .

DEATH: Who's that coming into North America from Asia now? . . . Oh good! Some big, fierce predators! Lions and Tigers and Bears, OH MY! (*Bear gets into position and begins to move in fiercely*)

LIFE: The Bear family, Ursidae, which evolved in Asia, begins to send bears across the Bering Strait, into North America for the first time. One kind will continue to evolve here into the biggest mammalian land carnivore of all time: the giant bear: **Arctodus simus!** Oh Great Bear, let us see you stand and reach up to your full 10' height! Bare those ferocious teeth! Let us welcome Arctodus simus with bear sounds (W). . . .

(*Cat gets into position.*)

Another gift comes across the Bering Strait – Cats! The felids will evolve into truly ferocious creatures here, too, especially a very powerful cat with **sabertooth** teeth. North America will also evolve a lion that is more than a hundred pounds bigger than the African lion. Let us welcome these members of the Cat Family with cat sounds (W). . . .

(*Elephant gets into position.*)

Oh, I have very exciting news to report, news of a new and magnificent immigrant! *(Elephant bends over and swings arm like a trunk as it enters.)* Who is that lumbering across the Bering Strait from Asia, trumpeting with joyful anticipation? Why, it is an ancient member of the **Elephant** family, which evolved in Africa many millions of years earlier. Finally, the Elephant family makes its first successful journey into North America, where it will soon evolve species completely native to this land. Oh, this first elephant is the **MASTODON!** Let us all trumpet our greetings to these arriving elephants! **(W)**. . . .

DEATH: Ah, for now, Life, you get all the fun! But I too play an important part in crafting incredible creatures! The **Pronghorn Family** evolves right here in North America during the Miocene.

(Pronghorn quickly enters continent and hunkers down; then slowly rise and act as evolve.)

Alas, only one species of this magnificent family will survive into modern times — and only here in North America. That species is the **Pronghorn antelope**, and it can run at 60 miles an hour! Why did Pronghorn evolve to be such a fast runner? Well Pronghorn runs so fast today because it used to have to run from the fastest predator on Earth: the Cheetah. *(Cat run after pronghorn but never catch it.)* Cheetah evolved right here in North America. *(Cat and Pronghorn stop and bow together)* We honor you, Pronghorn and Cheetah for co-evolving into the fastest mammalian runners on Earth! Bravo! [invite applause]

SLIDE (clock 10 mya)

LIFE: Time passes, and our clock moves to just 10 million years ago. We pause here because North America is about to send another gift to the rest of the world. **Dog Family:** please rise and face the Bering Strait. Wolves and foxes: Go forth and multiply! Bless the other continents with your presence! **(W)**

DEATH: Since 17 million years ago, a river has been eroding a little land every year in the uplifting American Southwest. Now let's move up to 5 million years ago,

and see what this process of erosion has wrought! The Grand Canyon is here!
(Landforms acts out erosion of the Grand Canyon)

SLIDE (clock 3 mya)

LIFE: Let's move forward to just 3 million years ago. North America will now send more gifts to the rest of the world. **Horses, Camels, and Cats**, please stand and face the Bering Strait. Your descendants will include zebras, camels, and Cheetahs in Africa! [invite applause]

DEATH: *(Landforms prepares to act out)* Around the same time, geological forces at the southern tip of our continent bring about an amazing change. South America had been an isolated island continent since the dinosaurs were alive, but now, the **Isthmus of Panama** rises up, and our two continents join together. No big deal? Just watch!

LIFE: Look who's coming north to join us now! **Giant ground sloths** lead the way, towering twice the height of a modern bull elephant! What sound does a giant ground sloth make? Take your best guess, to welcome them! **(W)** . . . Possums, armadillos, porcupines, and giant armadillo-like Glyptodons come north, as well. Diverse lifeforms flow in both directions!

DEATH: Yes, North America sends dozens of animals southward. The reason I am presenting this news is that death will surely follow.

I invite the **Cat, Dog, Bear, Camel, Elephant, and Squirrel** families to please stand and face South America? . . . Now send your gifts southward. . . .

This Great American Interchange of mammal species results in too many forms to fill too few niches. The North American wildlife overwhelm the South American mammals, and we see a mass extinction take place in South America. Hundreds of species of all types — grazers, carnivores, marsupials, and more — all go extinct in South America as the new arrivals from the north adapt to a whole new continent of possibilities. **(Chime)**

Now let us turn our gaze toward the Arctic. Beginning just 2 ½ million years ago, we see **glaciers** advancing and retreating, advancing and retreating more than a dozen times up to the present. (*Landforms*). Although many individual creatures die as climate shifts back and forth, very few species go extinct. Amazingly most species in North America also survive horrific volcanic eruptions that happen right here, whenever the **Yellowstone supervolcano** explodes. (*Landforms*). Sometimes the eruption in Yellowstone ejects 2,000 times more volcanic ash as Mt. St. Helens did in 1980. When will this supervolcano erupt again? No one knows.

LIFE: The clock turns again to just 13,000 years ago. I see another animal migrating into our continent from Asia. Who might that be?

SLIDE (clock 13,000 ya)

DEATH: That animal looks like a wimp! It's just a big monkey. It has no claws, its teeth are blunt, and it weighs only about 150 pounds. (*cue Native American intertribal music*)

Humans have arrived! (music for about 10 -15 seconds as *Human acts*) Humans can talk, so you can now go ahead and **say** welcome to this newcomer! (W) . . .

These humans soon have whole villages to feed and clothe, and the animals here have never experienced something that can actually kill without teeth or claws — and that can kill from a distance. And so, evidence suggests that too few of North America's great mammals bother to run when a group of two-legged hunters appear on the horizon. Alas, many of our great Ice Age mammals go extinct.

Let us in silence, bid goodbye to each in turn . . .
(*Human spears each as their name is called, and the animal crumbles to the floor*)
(*Narrator solemnly speaks each name and **chimes***) . . .

Giant Ground Sloth

Horse

Camel

Elephant

(*After last chime, all quickly rise and leave the stage*) . . .

Also, while the largest species of some other types of animals are killed, too, smaller species do live on. And that's why today we still have species of

Dog (*fall, but rise again and stay on Turtle Island*).

Cat (*fall, but rise again*).

Turtle (*fall, but rise again*).

LIFE: Look there (*point*) . . . coming from Asia . . . here come some replacements! . . .

(Bear gets into position and begins to move in fiercely)

The grizzly Bear is coming into North America to replace the extinct Giant Bear. And I see a herd of large grazing animals moving in this direction, too. They are smaller than the species we lost at the end of the Ice Age, but they are still a magnificent beast! They will become our plains Bison!

Imagine that! The ancestors of today's Native American peoples have been here longer than the grizzly bear and bison.

SLIDE (clock 500 years ago)

Now, moving up to just 500 years ago, we see another replacement, this time from Europe! Spanish ships bring the horse back (*Horse acts*), which soon establishes a wild population, becoming culturally and spiritually important to Native Americans.

DEATH: The arrival of the Europeans also brings European diseases, which kill most of the Native Americans who have no natural immunity to the measles, smallpox, the flu, and even the common cold . . . **Chime**

LIFE: Those native peoples who did survive the disease and the killing had to learn — whether they wanted to or not — to share this continent with immigrants from Europe, and then from Africa, too. Asian peoples followed, as did other people from all parts of the globe. These diverse streams of human culture mix to form our North American Human population. But let us never forget that the original inhabitants once fully populated the landscape, speaking their own languages, and celebrating their own ways of honoring this land and its creatures. **Chime**

SLIDE (North America title slide)

North America today, as it always has been, is a land of both natives and immigrants. Please stand when you hear at least one strand of your ancestry called out:

The indigenous first peoples of North and South America
Asia, Polynesia, or Australia
Middle East or India
Africa or Europe
Unknown Ancestors

As we all remain standing, I invite you to close your eyes for a moment of silence and reflection. . . .

SILENCE

We honor our ancestors — known and unknown — who first came to this continent, and whose sacrifices and perseverance made our own lives possible. We are grateful for learning the deep-time story of this magnificent land — a story that puts our own human journey in perspective. So regardless of whether our ancestors have been here for 12,000 years or just 12 years, we know that this is our home. Here our ancestors gathered. And now here we have gathered, too.

(Sing # 360, Here we have Gathered)*****

Closing words:

The past stretches out behind us,
rooting our existence on this continent today.
We have reenacted the story of North America, of Turtle Island,
which is our ancient or adopted homeland.
We now go forth into our daily lives
Perhaps seeing more than meets the eye
Perhaps feeling more than just our daily bustle.

Note: Jon & Heather Cleland-Host wrote the original version of this script as an intergenerational service at their Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in Midland Michigan, which was performed April 11, 2010. Following

is the outline of how they worked it into Sunday morning's order of service.

Our Home, North America, April 11, 2010

Two Narrators: Jon & Heather Cleland-Host

Accompanist: Melanie Willison

Prelude

Chalice Lighting

Opening Words - "The Unbroken Thread" (music Video, Symphony of Science)

Opening Hymn - #303

Coming Home to North America, Act I

Offertory, Joys and Sorrows

Coming Home to North America, Act II

Closing hymn - #360

Extinguishing the Chalice

Closing words

Postlude

Note: "The Unbroken Thread" can be accessed/downloaded: <http://www.symphonyofscience.com/>