

MY UNIVERSE STORY [IN PROGRESS, 1/2 COMPLETE]

Curriculum by [Connie Barlow](#) • Connie@TheGreatStory.org

original 12 July 2010; revised 14 September 2010 • <http://thegreatstory.org/beads-curric.html>

- Full school-year (less holidays) weekly curriculum, ideally for **3rd – 4th grade**
- For **liberal religious education, freethinking families, Montessori and private schools**

SUMMARY: Over the course of **32 weeks**, children learn about the major events, in chronological order, of the full story of the Universe, as best understood by science. **28 major events** have been chosen, relevant to a child's experience and interests. Most events interconnect in some way, such that the narrative builds from week to week. Each event will be represented by a **bead**, with one bead acquired each week, culminating in each child stringing all 28 of their beads into a **loop or necklace** to take home. A typical session includes (1) Review of prior week; (2) Newcomer catch-up time; (3) Interactive Storytelling/Discussion in which primary content is delivered; (4) Movement, Song, Game, or Dramatic Activity related to the story element; (5) Choosing the EVENT BEAD; (6) Taping bead to Storyboard; (7) (if time available) solitary Crafts Activity.

OBJECTIVES:

1. To combat our culture's debilitating "**amythia**" by provisioning children with a deep sense that they are **children of the Universe**, and that the Universe Story is *their* story, their largest story of all.
2. To help participants **learn their Story**: the major events and the actual sequence. (For this age group, dates are not important; only the *order of events*, which makes a story.)
3. To engage students in the **creative art of storytelling** and to foster a love of **playful participation** in the new genre of "evolutionary parables," acted out in dramatic script formats.
4. To encourage a sense of **kinship and love** for all life.
5. To offer children the **security and wonder** that they arise from an amazing **ancestry**.
6. To subtly teach liberal **ethical and earth-caring values** and **traditional values** widely shared.
7. To have children engage in a **long-term crafts project (beads)** that fosters **patience** and that culminates in a sense of **accomplishment**.
8. To have them take home their **beads necklace/loop** and (hopefully) treasure it for years.
9. To help children understand that a **story based on science** (1) evolves as new discoveries are made, and (2) is based on actual evidence.
10. (**For liberal church settings**): To give children a sense that everything they learn about the natural world at school, on television, or through their own love of learning is also part of their "religious" understanding; everything is "**religio**" — that is, linked. What they "believe" and feel is not divorced from what they "know." Their world is not fragmented; it is whole. And they themselves are an integral part of it, with a sense of heroic possibilities for their participation.

1. Great Radiance	2. Galaxies	3. Stars / stardust	4. Sun	5. Earth & planets	6. Earth's moon	7. Rain & oceans
8. Life begins	9. Sea animals	10. Plants on land	11. Amphibians	12. Insects & flight	13. Trees / wood	14. Dinosaurs
15. Reptiles in Sea	16. Meteor/Extinct	17. Turtles	18. Little mammals	19. Primates	20. Grass	21. First humans
22. Ice Age / fire	23. Dogs adopted	24. Cats adopted	25. Horses adopted	26. Cities / reading	27. I am born!	28. My future?

MY UNIVERSE STORY

1. **The Great Radiance** (the “Big Bang”) happens, and our Universe is born.
2. **Galaxies** form, and small galaxies merge into bigger galaxies (like our Milky Way).
3. **Stars** begin to squeeze hydrogen gas into helium, then carbon and calcium and more.
4. **Our Sun** is born after ancestor stars explode and enrich the galaxy with stardust atoms.
5. **Earth** and the other planets form from stardust that swirls into ever bigger clumps.
6. **Earth’s moon** is born when a giant meteor splatters a big chunk of Earth into orbit.
7. **Rain** falls for the first time when Earth cools; then the rain gathers into **oceans**.
8. **Life** begins in the ocean when ancestors of bacteria find ways to eat stardust.
9. **Animals** such as sponges and jellyfish (and, later, clams and fish) evolve in the oceans.
10. **Plants** begin to grow on land when algae (seaweed) evolves ways to survive in dry air.
11. **Amphibians** (like salamanders) evolve from fish who learned to crawl and breathe air.
12. **Insects** evolve wings and become the first creatures to fly.
13. **Trees** grow tall when plants discover how to fill their stems with sturdy cells of wood.
14. **Dinosaurs** evolve and some grow long necks to eat leaves high up in trees.
15. **Reptiles** return to the sea and become mosasaurs, plesiosaurs, and ichthyosaurs.
16. **A giant meteor** strikes Earth; dinosaurs, ammonites, and marine reptiles go extinct.
17. **Turtles** survive the meteor by sleeping in mud; then comes The Golden Age of Turtles.
18. **Little mammals** survive the meteor in burrows; then they diversify into many kinds.
19. **Primates** live in the trees and evolve fingers and toes to hold onto branches.
20. **Grasses** evolve underground stems so that cows (and lawnmowers) can’t hurt them.
21. **Humans** evolve when primates in Africa learn how to walk on grasslands and to talk.
22. **The Ice Age** begins, and humans learn how to make **fire** to cook food and keep warm.
23. **Dogs** are adopted by humans to help them track down animals to hunt.
24. **Cats** are adopted by farmers who need to keep mice and rats away from stored grain.
25. **Horses** are adopted by humans to give us a ride, haul heavy things, and plow fields.
26. **Humans** learn to cooperate in bigger and bigger cities and we learn how to read.
27. **I am born** and now I am learning the story of all that came before.
28. **What will my future be?** And what role will I play in this Universe Story?

*Note: Events in **red** would be suitable for kids making their own bead from sculpey clay.*

● Obtaining Beads - *Do this well in advance*

Recruit a women's crafts group, or ask crafts women to form such a group, to use the list of 28 events as a guide for selecting and purchasing beads at a local beads store. Give them a budget to work with, and ask them to put on a fundraising event if they need more money. Also, decide in advance **which (if any) beads you might want to have the children create themselves**, using **sculpey clay**: http://thegreatstory.org/make_beads.html (Note: Beads made of sculpey clay are heavier and larger than the rest, so choose no more than 4 to 6 events to be sculpey clay beads, and best if there are no long appendages that might easily break. The events in RED in the 28-event list would be good as sculpey beads. This curriculum builds in class time for beads-making in those specific lessons,

See [TheGreatStory.org BEADS page](#) on selecting beads and appropriate beading string, and this page for using **sculpey clay**: http://thegreatstory.org/make_beads.html#sculpey

● The list of 28 events

Make plenty of copies of the list of the **B&W** version of the 28 events list (immediately below), as you will be passing out copies at your **second class session** for the kids to take home, and additional copies will be used during every class session. It is also a good way for kids and parents to see what **EVENT** they will miss if they skip a class session, and to bring children new to the class rapidly up to speed.

● Storyboard with the 28-square matrix

At **Session 2**, each child will glue the matrix to a slightly larger stiff piece of **posterboard** or **recycled cereal box**. Each session thereafter, every child will gain 1 (or 2) additional beads and will tape them to the appropriate square on the Storyboard. This Matrix will be kept in a **Storyboard Storage Box** between sessions, until the final sessions when the beads are strung together and children take home their **Universe Story beads**.

● Great for newcomers and missed classes

Children who missed a previous session can easily catch up by filling in the missed squares with beads designated for previous times. Students who begin attending weeks after the program starts may easily catch up just by reading the list of events they missed, selecting beads, and taping those beads onto the matrix.

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THE INTERACTIVE TEACHING MODEL USED HERE

- **AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY.** The author of this curriculum, **Connie Barlow**, was a professional science writer of adult books on evolution. Her four books (and many essays) were published between 1991 and 2001. In 2002 she and her husband (Rev. Michael Dowd) launched an itinerant lifestyle of evolutionary evangelism and/or teaching in churches, schools, and colleges throughout America. Connie still does research and presents multi-media programs on evolutionary themes to adults, but her core concern is producing curricula that can bring the evolutionary story to life for children in liberal religious education settings, family homeschooling, and private schools. She regularly tests her ideas in children’s religious education settings and Montessori classrooms while on the road.

Access online [Connie’s PUBLICATION LIST](#).

Access online [Connie’s LIST OF CHILDREN’S CURRICULA](#).

- **INTERACTIVE.** Connie’s personal teaching method as guest teacher in many classrooms over the years is **highly interactive**. Rather than telling or reading a story and then posing questions to the kids to foster discussion, Connie **recruits the kids to help tell the story as it unfolds**. **Inquiry and discussion are thus intermixed with the content teaching**, not reserved for the end. Connie likes to pose questions that invite kids to contribute what they already know—or can figure out, assisted by clues. This curriculum uses that same approach. It is also interactive in another way: There will be kids who regularly volunteer to research science questions that come up and then who report their findings in the next class. Also, some lessons end with an opportunity for children to **interview adults** during the week, and to report their findings the following week. Thus the classroom topics interact with real life and other age groups.

- **STORYTELLING.** As teacher/facilitator, you can either recite the “Storytelling” section of text and questions exactly as provided. Or you can spend some time reviewing it in advance, making notes to yourself, and then improvise in real time. The format **bolds keywords** to help you look up and not lose your place. Of course, use your judgment as to which of the many **tangents** the kids themselves will surely raise should actually be followed, and which should be gracefully diverted back to topic.

- **CONTENT-RICH.** Many of the lesson plans in this curriculum are **content-rich**. Few teacher/facilitators will already know even half the science content as they prepare to teach this course. Thus, **most of you will be learning** along with the kids. Children (more than adults, it seems!) are fascinated with science/nature facts. For example, many kids on their own will establish a practice of memorizing the long scientific names of dinosaurs. Teachers should recognize that, in most classroom situations, there will be **at least one child who knows a lot more** about the topics under discussion than you do. So *relax!* **Let those kids shine**. And if an unresolved science question arises, ask for a volunteer or two to research that question outside of class and report back to everyone at the next session.

THE CENTRALITY OF STORY, DRAMA, SONG, AND CHANT

The author's life work is to present **our grand evolutionary adventure in meaningful (while scientifically accurate) ways**. She also draws from the new disciplines of **evolutionary psychology** and **evolutionary brain science** to structure class time in ways that offer the kinds of learning opportunities that the human mind (especially, child's) innately craves. Hence the emphasis on *interactivity* and spontaneous *creativity* within a bounded and cooperative group setting,

For example, in Connie's years of guest teaching, she has discovered that **a powerful incentive for non or poor readers** to *want* to improve their reading is through the use of unrehearsed, in-the-moment, **scripted dramas**, with parts distributed to children on a volunteer basis. Watching their peers have fun reading and acting the parts, and watching how the teacher or another student actor will help out with the hard words, eventually becomes so enticing that the hesitant kids eventually volunteer, too.

Dramatic scripts are, of course, stories. Prior to the last hundred years or so, **all of our ancestors were taught important knowledge, along with values**, primarily through the use of stories. Modern **textbooks** (except for some of the sidebars within them) are radical departures from the learning modalities our brains evolved to prefer — indeed, crave. Thus, you will find a storytelling or scripted drama component near the beginning of each lesson, and this is used to deliver the primary content. **Sitting in circle** on a carpeted floor or with cushions is highly recommended for the storytelling section, as it evokes our **ancient heritage** of sitting in circle around a campfire.

You will find, as well, that many of the lessons include drama or songs that also use the story format. **Drama** and **song** signal to the listener that a time of **playful imagination** is about to happen. This signal is extremely important for children — especially in a classroom setting. Children in the early to mid primary grades tend to be in the “**concrete literal**” stage of development. While adults are usually capable of accepting and enjoying metaphor, children will insist on making no errors in the science that they already know. For example, if you tried to teach a fourth grader, in a didactic way, about the standard features of the Solar System, and then you inserted a sentence like, “Occasionally Pluto veers off from its usual orbit to go and talk to Jupiter and Mars,” the kids would stop you in your tracks! And yet that is precisely what happens in the dramatic play that accompanies the lesson about the formation of Earth and the other planets (Bead 5) — and the children will love it.

The **scientific worldview** has been criticized as devoid of **meaning** and **emotional** content. That is true only insofar as we adults neglect to *interpret* the science and engage children in artful renderings in which non-human entities are, indeed, made to talk. In this curriculum, there will be no talking snake. But planets will talk (Bead 5) and so will jellyfish (Bead 9), seaweed (Bead 10), fish (Bead 11), and many more.

Consider chant and song in particular. Words set to **melodic song** penetrate much deeper than our rational cortex; they **stir the emotional parts of our brain** that evolved when our ancestors

were still **furry little creatures** that scurried from tree to burrow. Melody resonates in the pre-verbal part of the brain. As we all have experienced, our emotional core in many ways runs the show. Thus, recognize that through the use of drama, chant, and song, you will in fact be **imprinting an emotional response** as well as scientific knowledge on the eager and ever-so-imprintable brains in your charge. Hence, **critical thinking** is very important to foster at every step of the way. But critical thinking is no substitute for well considered and respectful imprinting. Children *will* be imprinted and they will develop deep emotional bonds with particular ideas and ways of perceiving their world. It is in their evolutionary heritage to do so, largely by watching and listening to the adults around them. The children's parents have entrusted *you* to be among those adults. (For more on this topic of imprinting and how it dovetails with critical thinking, refer to the author's 2010 essay, "[Imprinting Is Not Indoctrination.](#)")

Strong repetitive movement or sound penetrates even deeper into our brain, and thus further back in time. **Chant** (or song that tends more toward **rap** than sweet melody) affects our **brainstem** and **cerebellum**, which evolved long before the first mammal, when our ancestors were still reptiles. This **reptilian brain** is the seat of, what might be called, our "**life force.**" It breathes for us. It regulates our heart beat. It alerts us when we are hungry or thirsty. And it can be counted on for all the **involuntary reflexes that save us from injury** when our sight, sound, or touch senses trigger a signal of danger. Our reptilian brain can also cause us **serious trouble** in the modern world, particularly **after puberty**. Hormones for **sexual** contact and **territorial** defense/aggression skyrocket. What begins as a heart-bonding chant promoting in-group solidarity at a sporting event or political rally can escalate toward dangerously irrational (even uncontrollable) conflict.

So, yes, working with chant and rap is not to be done lightly. Nonetheless, a boost to the brainstem can **roll back melancholy**, even deep depression, in all ages. **Drumming circles** are widely used by religiously liberal adults to jolt us back into life and give us a sense of bonded community. Such circles are becoming increasingly popular for youth groups, giving boys (in particular) an opportunity to work together and to be physical without the awkwardness of having to carry on a conversation (at which many girls excel). **Drumming is not an explicit part of any of the lesson plans in this curriculum.** Feel free to add them, however, if you have the time and equipment. **But rhythmic hand-clapping, chant, and even some rap is.**

As to movement, **participatory circle storytelling evokes spontaneous movement**, as does dramatic script reading. So does **chant** and especially **rap-style song**. In addition to these adjunct opportunities for movement, there are also places in some of the lessons where more guided forms of movement are suggested. However, because many boys tend to be less enthusiastic about having to move in ways they are explicitly told to move, and because guided movement exercises the rational brain more than the cerebellum, **this curriculum leans toward having movement emerge spontaneously while engaged in other participatory activities.**

CLOSING WORDS OF ENCOURAGEMENT

“The last child in the woods” issue and concern is not only a warning about the harmful consequences of the increasing isolation of modern children from (un-landscaped) nature but also about **the dwindling of free play**. Guided nature walks and family hikes, though hugely helpful on the “nature” side of the problem, are not free play. **School, homework, video games, and television** take a gigantic bite out of the time available in our culture for childhood free play. Moreover, **music or sports lessons** and practice are highly structured activities to which external criteria of evaluation are applied. These latter activities may be engaged in as individuals or in bands or teams, but they are **not self-organized**, and the rules of engagement are not open to evolution by the kids themselves. Thus, opportunities for creative leaps of spontaneity are limited at best.

In contrast, consider that much of **mammalian free play** (e.g., puppies) is engaging in physical movements and social interactions that in some way **mimic the very activities that adults** must be adept at in order to survive (including surviving in the dominance hierarchies intrinsic to social mammals). For humans, childhood free play has traditionally entailed **amazing leaps of imagination as well as basic survival pursuits playfully undertaken**: building forts, gathering berries, stalking animals, tending a jarful of polliwogs, play-acting a made-up story, and (more recently) spontaneously gathering the neighborhood clan for a summer-time game of kick-the-can.

Thus, in this curriculum, I have expressly chosen to structure the available class time toward the kinds of social interactions and imaginative opportunities that are **rarely available in the traditional classroom**. Early lessons are more traditional, but spontaneity is unleashed in later lessons as the kids cohere. Skills of **listening, speaking, and reading** (as well as **rational and critical thinking**) are promoted. *However, please never test the children on their recall of content or how well they perform in a drama or game. And never assign any “homework” to supplement class experience.* There are opportunities throughout for children to volunteer on their own to do “research” or conduct interviews and to engage in projects and “practice” time at home. Thus my aim is to give the children exactly the same kinds of experiences that **their human brains crave to participate in**. Consider, too, that for at least some of them, they may never get those essential experiences unless you make it possible. There are, after all, fewer and fewer “children in the woods.”

Most important: Know that **if you aren’t having fun, the kids won’t either**. And the less fun, the less learning that will actually stick. So don’t worry about getting it right. Yes, you are the facilitator, the leader, but you can play too. Let your creativity blossom and celebrate your own spontaneous ability to adapt on the spot to whatever opportunities or challenges present themselves.

Finally, **help evolve this curriculum**. Because it is not published in print, I can in an instant make changes and post online the updated lesson plans. So please jot notes along the way when you think of how to improve the lesson plans. Then send these to Connie@TheGreatStory.org or to: Connie Barlow / 5246 Mutiny Bay Rd. / Freeland, WA 98249

SUGGESTED CALENDAR OF CLASS SESSIONS

Note: The numbers below correspond to the Bead Number (hence, 28 numbered classes). But you will see that a total of **32 weeks** are required for this curriculum, with 2 additional weeks/classes optional for dramatic events. One week precedes distribution of the first bead, and 2 weeks are allocated at the end for each child to string their set of 28 beads and take them home. The first place where sculpey clay is to be used for *making* beads (in lieu of distributing store-bought beads) is given two weeks to ensure kids who miss one class will get the sculpey experience at the other.

Introductory session (1 class period)

1. **The Great Radiance** (the “Big Bang”) happens, and our Universe is born.
2. **Galaxies** form, and small galaxies merge into bigger galaxies (like our Milky Way).
3. **Stars** begin to squeeze hydrogen gas into helium, then carbon and calcium and more.
4. **Our Sun** is born after ancestor stars explode and enrich the galaxy with stardust atoms.
- 4b. **Perform Parable: “Startull: The Story of an Average Yellow Star”**
and end with “Stardust Glitter Ritual” (“Cosmic Communion”) directions on pp. 41–44 of a pdf at this url: <http://thegreatstory.org/stardust-kids-lessons.pdf>
5. **Earth** and the other planets form from stardust that swirls into ever bigger clumps.
6. **Earth’s moon** is born when a giant meteor splatters a big chunk of Earth into orbit.
- 6b. **Required Extra session** to finish the **Moon story** and to continue **making an Earth Bead and a Moon Bead from sculpey clay**. This session is required, as the sculpey clay beads-making of the Earth Bead and the Moon Bead took extra time, so catch-up story-telling and finishing beads-making requires an extra class.
7. **Rain** falls for the first time when Earth cools; then the rain gathers into **oceans**.
8. **Life** begins in the ocean when ancestors of bacteria find ways to eat stardust.
9. **Animals** such as sponges and jellyfish (and, later, clams and fish) evolve in the oceans.
10. **Plants** begin to grow on land when algae (seaweed) evolves ways to survive in dry air.
11. **Amphibians** (like salamanders) evolve from fish who learned to crawl and breathe air.
12. **Insects** evolve wings and become the first animals to fly.
13. **Trees** grow tall when plants discover how to fill their stems with sturdy cells of wood.
14. **Dinosaurs** evolve and some grow long necks to eat leaves high up in trees.
- 14b. **Invite Youth Group to perform: “Earth Had a Challenging Childhood”**
15. **Reptiles** return to the sea and become mosasaurs, plesiosaurs, and ichthyosaurs.
16. **A giant meteor** strikes Earth; dinosaurs, ammonites, and marine reptiles go extinct.
17. **Turtles** survive the meteor by sleeping in mud; then comes The Golden Age of Turtles.

18. **Little mammals** survive the meteor in burrows; then they diversify into many kinds.
19. **Primates** live in the trees and evolve fingers and toes to hold onto branches.
20. **Grasses** evolve underground stems so that cows (and lawnmowers) can't hurt them.
21. **Humans** evolve when primates in Africa learn how to walk on grasslands and to talk.
22. **The Ice Age** begins, and humans learn how to make **fire** to cook food and keep warm.
23. **Dogs** are adopted by humans to help them track down animals to hunt.
24. **Cats** are adopted by farmers who need to keep mice and rats away from stored grain.
25. **Horses** are adopted by humans to give us a ride, haul heavy things, and plow fields.
26. **Humans** learn to cooperate in bigger and bigger cities and we learn how to read.
27. **I am born** and now I am learning the story of all that came before.
28. **What will my future be?** And what role will I play in this Universe Story?

Class Finale! (2 class periods for beads stringing)

"Educationalists in general agree that imagination is important, but they would have it cultivated as separate from intelligence ... In the school they want children to learn dry facts of reality, while their imagination is cultivated by fairy tales, concerned with a world that is certainly full of marvels, but not the world around them in which they live. On the other hand, by offering children the story of the universe, we give them something a thousand times more infinite and mysterious to reconstruct with their imagination, a drama no fable can match." — Maria Montessori, 1948, [*To Educate the Human Potential*](#)

"Tell me a creation story more wondrous than that of a living cell forged from the residue of exploded stars. Tell me a story of transformation more magical than that of a fish hauling out onto land and becoming amphibian, or that of a reptile taking to the air and becoming bird, or that of a mammal slipping back into the sea and becoming whale. Surely, this science-based culture of all cultures can find meaning and cause for celebration in its very own cosmic creation story." — Connie Barlow, 1997, [*Green Space Green Time: The Way of Science*](#)

"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 very small people**. A human without a cosmology is like a pebble lying near the top of a great mountain, in contact with its little indentation in the dirt and pebbles immediately surrounding it, but oblivious to its stupendous view." — Joel Primack and Nancy Ellen Abrams, 2006, [*The View from the Center of the Universe*](#)

● Viewing or Downloading Lesson Plans

All Lesson Plans are in PDF format. Right-click (control+click on a Mac) to download or visit <http://thegreatstory.org/beads-curric.html>

TEACHER'S GUIDE SUMMARY

Overview: Introduction to My Universe Story:

Bead 1: Great Radiance (Big Bang)

Bead 2: Galaxies (and our own Milky Way)

Bead 3: Stars

Bead 4: Our Sun

Bead 5: Earth and the Other Planets

Bead 6: Earth's Moon

6B: (Earth, Moon, and Beads Making)

Bead 7: Rain falls / Oceans form

Bead 8: Life begins

Bead 9: Animals evolve in oceans

Bead 10: Plants grow on land

Bead 11: Amphibians evolve from fish

Bead 12: Insects evolve wings

Bead 13: Trees grow tall

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Bead 14: Dinosaurs evolve

Bead 15: Reptiles return to the sea

Bead 16: Meteor causes extinction

Bead 17: Golden Age of Turtles

Bead 18: Mammals diversify

Bead 19: Primates evolve fingers & toes

Bead 20: Grasses evolve underground stems

Bead 21: Humans evolve on African grasslands

Bead 22: The Ice Age begins

Bead 23: Dogs are adopted by human hunters

Bead 24: Cats are adopted by human farmers

Bead 25: Horses are adopted by humans

Bead 26: Humans cooperate in cities

Bead 27: I am born

Bead 28: What will my future be?

<http://thegreatstory.org/beads-curric.pdf>

<http://thegreatstory.org/beads-curric-00.pdf>

<http://thegreatstory.org/beads-curric-01.pdf>

<http://thegreatstory.org/beads-curric-02.pdf>

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<http://thegreatstory.org/beads-curric-21.pdf>

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