

Earth's Challenging Childhood

An Evolutionary Parable by Connie Barlow

act 1

EARTH HAD A challenging childhood. Through its first several hundred million birthdays, the only birthday present Earth could expect to receive was another big asteroid impact. Boom! Torched again!

You see, the solar system was a messy place some four billion years ago. There were little space rocks, big asteroids, and icy comets everywhere. Until the planets fully used their gravitational attractions to pull in and sweep up the debris cluttering their orbits, it was just one darn asteroid impact after another.

But was it really a bad day for Planet Earth whenever an asteroid collided? Was it really a bad day when an uninvited visitor from space set off another humungous earthquake that shook the planet like jelly, setting off scores of volcanic eruptions that drowned the surface in fresh lava?

Consider: These very same asteroids were what helped Earth acquire its great mass. From the very beginning Earth was built from scratch from colliding asteroids. There was no Earth, no Mars, no Venus, until asteroids started coming together. But come together they did. Earth grew bigger and bigger and bigger as the asteroids crashed in from all directions. Boom! Boom! Boom!

Look at it this way: As soon as an asteroid collided with our Earth, that asteroid *became* Earth. And icy comets crashing into the planet later brought us the very water that now fills the oceans and rains from the skies.

SO, WHAT DO YOU THINK? Was it a bad day or a good day for Earth whenever an asteroid came a-callin'?

Bad news; good news. It's whatever we choose. What if we were to choose to trust the Universe?

act 2

EARTH HAD A challenging childhood. Asteroids, earthquakes, volcanoes: these were on the agenda most every day. One day, soon after Earth's two hundred millionth birthday, our planet



had an especially challenging day. Far more harrowing than any other day thus far, Earth lost rather than gained weight.

How was this possible? Well, this time, instead of an asteroid crashing head on into the planet, the biggest asteroid of them all—so big that we would call it a planetismal, a baby planet—this biggest asteroid of all struck a glancing blow to planet Earth, just brushing its cheek, so to speak. In so doing, the planetismal kept right on going. But it gouged out a chunk of Earth and launched that chunk into space.

shook the planet like jelly. Huge volcanoes erupted. Gathering up her wits, Earth realized what had happened. Earth cried, "Oh no!" "You can't take away my mass like that! I want it back!"

So Earth reached out with her gravity as far as she could. With as much force, as much gravitational attraction, as this feisty young planet could muster, Earth pulled that chunk back nearer and nearer. Oh, it was a struggle. It took all the strength Earth could muster. But our young planet wasn't quite strong enough. Earth couldn't pull that chunk back all the way. Just part way. And guess what?! That chunk of Earth is now what we call the Moon. The Moon has been peacefully orbiting Earth ever since.

SO WHAT DO YOU THINK? Was it a bad day or a good day for planet Earth when that planetismal came a-callin'?

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PARABLES WANTED

Connie Barlow and Michael Dowd are soliciting evolutionary parables from the community of scientists, religionists, and others inspired by the Great Story of cosmos, Earth, and life. They intend to make this collection widely available in print and on the web. For guidelines on writing and contributing such parables, go to www.spiritualecology.org or email GSParables@aol.com.

Earth Literacy Web



Linking Companions in the Great Work

act 3

EARTH HAD A challenging childhood. How to grow a planet full of life? That's a very big task. But Earth was up to the challenge. Our planet experimented with bacteria of every hue and color, then with squishy Ediacaran creatures, and with trilobites and all sorts of brachiopods and crinoids and worms and jellyfish.

Eventually, Earth got into its dinosaur phase. You know, playing with dinosaurs when it came home from school, dreaming about dinosaurs at night. This phase lasted for about a hundred million years, and during this time Earth was fashioning the biggest, the most ferocious creatures that ever walked the planet.

You know their names: Brachiosaurus, Triceratops, T. rex.

And I bet you know what happens next. That's right: Boom! One more visit from a giant asteroid, just like the long-gone days of Earth's very earliest childhood. This one landed along what we now call the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico, and it sent huge tsunami waves tumbling far into Louisiana and Texas. The explosion was a thousand times more powerful than the combined force of all the nuclear weapons ever built by humans.

Earthquakes shook the planet like jelly. Huge volcanoes erupted, especially in what we now call India, and we can still see the massive lava flow, 65 million years old, and rock solid in the western part of India today.

So. Was it a bad day for Planet Earth when the asteroid struck?

Well, it certainly was a bad day for dinosaurs. T. rex, Triceratops, and the rest of the great dinosaurs all went extinct. And it was a bad day for the little mammals alive at that time, too—but not for all of them. You see, some mammals survived. And now that the dinosaurs were gone, fabulous opportunities opened up. Millions of years would pass. Those little mammals would evolve into horses and dogs and cats and bears and elephants and pandas and whales and gorillas—and us.

SO. WHAT DO YOU THINK?. Was it a bad day or a good day for planet Earth when that asteroid came a-callin'?

Bad news; good news. It's whatever we choose. What if we were to choose to trust the Universe?

act 4

NOW WE COME to the present. Earth is past its challenging childhood. Earth no longer plays with dinosaurs. This planet has become a very adventurous adolescent, taking all sorts of risks, trying to show Mars and Venus that it is so much way cooler than they are.

Perhaps the riskiest thing Earth ever did was come up with the idea to make humans. At first we seemed a pretty tame, humdrum species. Walking about on the grasslands of Africa, we gathered some roots, ate lots of fruit, scavenged a little meat here and there.

Then one day, our species figured out how to chip rocks into tools and weapons. Soon, we figured out how to rub two sticks together to make fire.

You know what happens next. We multiply. And we learn how to do division and subtraction too. We learn how to write books and how to read them. We build cars and parking lots and soccer fields and churches. We learn how to do web searches. We come to occupy nearly every piece of land on the planet that isn't covered by polar or mountain ice. We push away other species. We pollute the air and the oceans. We torch the forests.

But we also do something very, very important: Some of us, especially the younger among us, still remember and play with dinosaurs. In a way, Earth once again plays with dinosaurs, honors their memory, because we *are* Earth—just like the trees and the grasses and the jellyfish are expressions of Earth.

And we do something else very important too: We tell stories—like this story. We tell stories of how the Moon came to be, how Earth came to be, and what Earth experienced during its immense journey.

We are the storytellers of Planet Earth. No creature who came before us ever went out and looked for dinosaur fossils in the rocks. No creature before us analyzed the chemistry of comets, counted asteroids, or visited the moon. Piece by piece, we humans have uncovered the deep memory of Planet Earth. We have helped our planet, through us, remember its own, spectacular story. It is our job, our privilege, to tell this story and to celebrate the wondrous story of Planet Earth.

SO. WHAT DO YOU THINK? Was it a bad thing or a good thing for Earth to have brought forth the human?

Bad news; good news. It's whatever we choose to do. Do we choose to help the Universe trust in the human?