

# Evolutionize Your Life: Michael Dowd and Connie Barlow

## Week 1 Course Session

Michael: Welcome to Evolutionizing Your Life. This is Michael Dowd.

Connie Barlow: And Connie Barlow. And this is Session 1 called Your Larger Story: Big History and the Power of an Evolutionary World View.

Michael: Yea, we'd like to take just a few moments here and give you the big picture both in general but also of this course. This first week we are going to be covering sort of the evolutionary context, our bigger story, our larger common creation story, humanities creation story that we now know through science.

Connie: So now we are going to get the overview of looking beyond ourselves for our story that really is our story too before we delve down into our own personal lives; our physical, relational and other challenges we may have for the simple reason that we have Stone Age instincts and we are living in a modern world.

Michael: And so the other four weeks really deal with our brain and our instincts. Week 2, our physical instincts. Basically, our reptilian brain's hunger for safety, sustenance and sex. Week 3, our social instincts. Our old Mammalian brains longer for bonding, status and play. Week 4, our interpretive instincts, our neo-cortex's drive for meaning, morality and making sense. And then the fifth week our co-creative instincts. Our pre-frontal cortex's zeal for wholeness, transcendence and contribution.

Connie: And from an evolutionary perspective, these four weeks of physical instincts and then the social instincts and then the interpretive instincts and then finally, the co-creative instincts, it mirrors the way our brains actually evolved over the course of millions of years and our ancestors.

Michael: So over the course of the next hour or so, what we will be doing, actually a variety of things Connie, why don't you speak to –

Connie: Yea. What we will be doing is introducing you to a way of learning in which this particular teaching session here is pretty much a way of guiding your way through. We are going to give you some of the main content, certainly the benefits that we are hoping that you will be able to bring out within yourself as you move through this session. And then the online resources and the practices. So there is really three components to this first week as there will be for every week and that is the overall context and direction that you will be hearing here, the practices and exercises that help you take it deeply in your life and; the online resources where the content and the possibilities for transformation are fully flushed out.

Michael: I would like to say at the very start that in order to get the most out of this course it really is going to require you to not just listen to these sessions but also to do the practices or exercises and also to really take a look at the resources, to listen to what we're suggesting, to watch what we're suggesting, to read what we are suggesting. We are not giving you a lot. It is not an overwhelming amount although we will point those people

who have a lot of time on their hands and really want to go deeper will show you how to do that but sort of the core resources that we suggest. We really do invite you to take the time, to make the time, to carve out the time because you will really benefit as a result of it. We promise.

Connie: And we've made sure that those core resources are fun. We have entered an age now where many of us are moving away from text ways of learning and more towards audio and video ways of learning. So you are going to see a lot of resources that are video ways of learning online, others that are audio and some text as well for those of you that want to do that.

Michael: Said another way, we will have YouTube clips, podcasts, blog posts, a variety of things.

Connie: And again, we think that once you start delving into these resources you are basically not going to be able to stop.

Michael Dowd; That's our intention.

Connie: I know. They will lead you places and you will just be going wow and wow I mean what these resources are, some of which I have created in both audio and video form and collages of other things. What these are is the amalgam of what for Michael, me and other people in this epic of evolution, universe story, Big History movement over the years have found awesome and we are giving them all to you in week one. So I mean get ready to have your brains just blown out. I mean I can't even imagine what it would have been like had I encountered all this stuff all at once. I mean.

Michael: So again the title of this first session is Your Larger Story: Big History and the Power of an Evolutionary World View. So let me take just a moment and talk about Big History.

Over the course of the last 25, 30 years or so a number of different terms have been used for the universe story or the epic of evolution. Our physical, biological and social history that is the history of everyone and everything that is now going by the academic term Big History, in other words, it is the history of everyone and everything. It is basically the whole shebang from the beginning of the universe to this moment, our best evidential understanding of that.

Connie: And we imagine that quite a few of you on this course are already familiar with the great story, the epic of evolution, the universe story. Perhaps you have encountered it through Brian Swimme's writings or Thomas Barry's writings or Ursula Goodenough's work and her Sacred Depths of Nature there is just a lot of people who have been contributing to this. But what has happened over just the last couple of years is finally this has penetrated academia.

Michael: In other words, this course is being taught, all of the world now in Big History in this epic of evolution and it is a really exciting time because this really is humanities common creation story. And the reason why it is so important or one of the reasons why it is so important is it really helps us know who we are, where we are in time and space, who we are related to, what are the patterns and trends that have been at work? Sometimes

millions and billions of years old trends and so it gives us realistic hope, hope grounded in a factual understanding of reality so that we can see our lives in a more meaningful way. It can engage us to be an action in our world and to be of service to the world in more empowered ways. It can make sense of chaos and difficulties and challenges it just, that is what a cosmology does, that is what a world view does and we now have one that can unite us as a species. It doesn't divide us as traditional world views have it unites us all and it does so not at the expense of the traditional stories, it actually brings them altogether.

Connie: So what we are going to be doing first is introducing you to the person who named Big History, this is David Christian, he is an Australian, he has also taught in the United States for a while but he is the one who is, whose venture into this understanding of the 13.7 billion year universe where all scientific and historical and cultural disciplines are brought together and patterns are shown to the student and students are then asked to find themselves within these patterns and to see they are part of the grand journey. He is really the first one who has been moving it worldwide with other professors that he is working with and there is a very significant thing that happened just over the past two years.

Michael: Yea, it has been very exciting he did a teaching company course that has been one of the best courses and Bill Gates got turned onto it and then he was invited to do a TED talk and Al Gore got excited about that I just got an email from David Christian actually this morning saying that he was being invited to Boston for a group of leaders for the world, the challenges that the world will be dealing with in the last 50 years so it is a terribly exciting time. I first got a chance, in fact, Connie and I both got a chance to meet David for the first time six years ago. We organized a evolutionary salon which was we had about 38 of the world's leading evolutionary thinkers that came together and we spent four days together and just talked and just really got into stuff and David was one of the people that we invited for that. Anyway, here we are going to let David speak in his own words. Connie and I interviewed him recently and you can hear some of his excitement about this topic.

David Christian: Big History is an attempt to grasp as a sort of single, scientifically based story, the history of the entire universe. And by doing that you understand how we and our planet fit into that story. So it is very much like an origin story, it has all the power of an origin story but the great difference is that the rules are scientific. We accept all the rules of modern science. So the story is evidence based, it is rigorous and it is subject to change as new evidence kicks in. The way I got into Big History was just asking questions about what my fellow students needed to know. I taught Russian history, which was great. But I always had this nagging feeling that they didn't need to know just about Russia, they needed to know about humanity. So could you teach the history of humanity and then once I started thinking about that I thought well, to do that you have to talk about evolution, how humans were created and to do that you have to talk about the history of the Earth and very quickly that took me back to the idea of the history of everything. And at first, given the way that education is constructed these days the idea sounded completely lunatic. But the more I thought about it, the more I thought wouldn't it be fun to try the history of everything. It might be, it might be a bit of a mess, but let's try it.

So my colleagues, God bless them, at MacQuarie University, Sydney, allowed me to try it. Not just in a sort of little graduate course where if it was a disaster it wouldn't matter, but actually in a big first year course. We were feeling our way for several years but what was wonderful was that the students presented with a course that tried to teach the history of everything, beginning with the origins of the universe describing the creation of stars, the creation of galaxies, the creation of the solar system of the earth, the evolution of life on earth, the appearance of humans and then teaching human history in that context, the students loved it. Even if we couldn't give them terribly clear answers. I think what they loved was that at a university these big, big questions, which are questions about your place in the universe, and the meaning of life, and the meaning of everything questions every kid should be answer. Finally a university course was validating the question. That was the important thing.

Whether or not the answers we gave were the best; I am a historian, so I am pretty sure some of the things I said about biology were not that precise but the students, I think, loved the questions. And that is what kept us going is realizing how exciting it was not just for the students but us, as well, as teachers to try and teach this through. And now I have been doing this for gosh, 22 years and I still find it exciting trying to use the vast amount of information that has been generated by modern scientific scholarship in field after field after field including history to put together a coherent kind of universal story.

By the way, at the Big History project website there is a nice little sort of cartoon introduction to Big History which is worth looking at. And that sort of explains how I got to Big History.

Connie: So that clip you just heard of a conversation that Michael and I had on Skype just a few weeks ago with David Christian, was because we had just discovered that David Christian had done a TED talk. Those of you who may not know what TED talks are, just Google TED talks and you will find them on YouTube it is a fabulous way to learn.

Michael: Some of the most exciting teachers and thinkers in our world presenting to some of the most influential people in our world.

Connie: So we would like to play for you now a clip of just the audio of a few minutes taken from his 18 minutes TED talk. But you are going to want to see it. We will assign it to you in the resources you will be able to click right on it and get to it. Because Bill Gates is thoroughly excited by this.

Michael: In fact, as I mentioned in the preview call to this course if you just put into Google Bill Gates, Big History, you will see what Bill Gates is saying about David's Big History course and why he is saying he is working with him to create a curriculum for high school students around the world, free curriculum, I'm sorry. So here is David Christian in his TED talk.

David Christian: So here is a great puzzle: in a universe ruled by the second law of thermodynamics, how is it possible to generate the sort of complexity I have described, the sort of complexity represented by you and me and the convention center? Well the answer seems to be the universe can create complexity but with great difficulty. In pockets, there appear what my colleague Fred Spear calls Goldilocks conditions, not too hot, not too cold, just right for the creation of complexity and slightly more complex things

appear. And where you have slightly more complex things you can get slightly more complex things and in this way complexity builds stage by stage. Each stage is magical because it creates the impression of something utterly new appearing almost out of nowhere in the universe. We refer in Big History to these moments as threshold moments. And at each threshold the going gets tougher. The complex things get more fragile, more vulnerable, the Goldilocks Conditions get more stringent and it is more difficult to create complexity.

Now, we as extremely complex creatures desperately need to know this story of how the universe creates complexity despite the second law and why complexity means vulnerability and fragility. And that's the story that we tell in Big History. But to do it you have to do something that may at first site seem completely impossible. You have to survey the whole history of the universe. So let's do it.

Let's begin by winding the timeline back 13.7 billion years to the beginning of time.

Michael: Amen, David. Let's do it. So that is what Connie and I want to do this week is to give you the tools we want you to spend a lot of time on one of the resources which is the great story page, What Is the Great Story, because you will just follow your heart. Just watch or listen or read anything you want on that page and just notice what happens especially when you just sometimes close your eyes and just stop and allow yourself to feel what it is that you just listened to or what it is that you just watched. Or what it is that you just read.

So that is what we would like to speak to a little bit more now: what is this big story? What is this larger context and why is it important?

Connie: And why is it important, throughout the audio portion of this session we are going to be piecing in three more clips of three people who are massively involved in this epic of evolution, great story, Big History movement. We are going to be telling you their personal stories of how they awaken to this and what it has done in their lives. So Michael and I are going to start off with our stories as well because that is the reason we are doing this. Michael and I have each been involved in this understanding for about 20 years but why is it? Why is it that we are doing this? What motivated us to feel that this is our great work. That here we take all our experience, all of our skills that we have developed in other ways doing other careers over the years and why is this where we are putting our energy now? So as you know we have been on the road for nine years bringing this evolutionary understanding into churches and secular audiences and colleges all over the USA and some parts of Canada and it is our calling.

Since the mid1980's I began preparing myself to become a science writer following my a vocational bliss in just reading wonderful science text and the history of evolutionary biology and the history and philosophy of science and finally then preparing myself to take it back into the world so I've written four popular science books in evolutionary biology and what meaning it can give us in the world plus I have been an editor in science and I have helped other writers write books in popular science. But this understanding of evolution didn't really impinge on my personal life in a big way until I took in the deep time understanding of the role of chaos in the world.

For the previous decade or so my primary non-career interests of just moving out into the world have been as an environmental activist while I was living in Alaska, working on creating national parks in that state, wilderness designations, I was an avid kayaker but I got very depressed as many in my generation had about all the losses that we were experiencing there in that great part of the world. And it wasn't until I really took in an evolutionary understanding. The long-term perspective that I understood no matter how great our loss is in this moment. That Earth, a million years from now, if necessary, will be able to recreate the richness that we humans might take out. And that was vital. That was vital. I didn't burn out from then after. Because if losses occurred I took this deep time perspective, I just breathed into it and I said what matters is for me to be in action. It doesn't matter so much whether my actions are actually going to end up saving the planet, as I felt I wanted to do in my 20s. So that was really my first step.

I would say my second step came when I experienced the writings of Thomas Barry and also Brian Swimme, but primarily Thomas Barry, where I heard for the very first time that it wasn't just for me as an environmental activist that this evolutionary perspective was useful. But it was also for me as a human being, someone who loved poetry, someone who loved art, someone who loved music and stories. Thomas Barry said that we are not just the knowers of the universe story, we are not just learning about the deep time past so that we can become better co-inhabitants of this planet. But we are actually the universe becoming aware of itself. Our role is actually not just to know but to celebrate this universe story. That is through us, in a way, that the universe is marveling at and celebrating its own story and that took a while to come into me. You are going to hear a clip a little bit later of someone who is one of the great artists in this movement whose work has also brought that more into me.

So the phase I am in now is continuing to bring this to an adult level, as I always have. I have been spending more and more time of trying to influence how this story can be brought to children. Now obviously the Discovery channel and the History channel and Nova programs are doing a great job with the science. But again, until the patterns can be brought out, until children can see themselves within this big picture.

This deep time evolutionary understanding is still giving me a larger context for being able to continue work as an environmental activist. I am still involved, this time, working on a global warming issues and it really gives me a way to be able to be fully engaged, fully committed, but unattached to the results. And that has been a tremendous boom to myself, just feeling good about what I am doing but not going into crisis mode.

Now there are other aspects of this evolutionary story that have profoundly benefitted me in my personal life but I am going to talk about those in a later episode because that has to do with the understanding the evolutionary history, the ancestry of my brain and how I do still have stone age instincts and so do the people I love. But for now, in this session, we are talking about the larger story, taking on the sense that I have a larger story, a larger sense of who I am.

Michael: I want to jump in for just a second and speak about why a larger story is even important. It is like if you were to wake up one morning and you didn't know your story, we call it amnesia, much more is lost than just your memory. Your sense of identity, your sense of who you're related to, I mean you're entire life would essentially collapse in terms

of the meaning, the values, what gives you hope, gives you inspiration, what makes you feel bonded and connected and everything else. There is almost nothing worse than amnesia other than severe brain damage, but in a way, there is that. And we as a species have been suffering from amnesia. We haven't known who we are. And now we do and so that is why this larger context can make a difference and make a profound difference because for those of us who are religious it allows us to reframe and reinterpret and deepen our own understanding of a religious tradition. But for those of us who are not religious in any way, shape or form, what it does is it gives us a larger inspirational context and inspires us to work together so we can co-create a healthy future for humanity and a larger bodied life.

Connie: And as we will be talking about later in this course it is vital for being able to help us all shape our priorities.

Michael: So let me share a little bit about my personal story. My story in a nutshell is that I grew up Roman Catholic and then had a born again experience in my late teenage years. I struggled a lot with drug and alcohol issues and was involved in a Pentecostal fundamentalist context. Totally opposed to evolution I was threatened by evolution. I read the Bible straight through twice, I interpreted it literally, I believed that evolution was of the devil and that all the evils of the world could be attributed to Darwin, I mean I was about as opposed to evolution as anybody could get. And my own on the road to Damascus type of experience came as a student at Evangel College and I had this profound experience where the teacher held up the text book that we were going to use and it taught evolution. And I just freaked and I walked out of class and I withdrew from the course and I made a big deal. But I ended up embracing evolution. I ended up accepting it there at college and then in 1988 was introduced to the work of Thomas Barry and that is when I really got that humans are not separate from nature that we are an expression of nature. That the universe has been expanding and unfolding for billions of years and in this solar system the universe became complex enough that it began to understand it's own nature and that that's who we are. Humans are literally the universe. After some 14 billion years of unbroken evolution, now becoming conscious of itself. We are literally the universe becoming aware of itself. And we don't believe that. We know that. Ninety-nine percent of the scientists in the world would agree with what I just said.

And that sense that we are nature uncovering its own nature, that we are the universe becoming aware of itself is a profound shift of identity my sense of self expanded instantaneously. It no longer stopped with my skin and I realized I was related to all creatures. So now I have this profound sense of belonging, this sense of relatedness and I also have this guidance. It is not just my guidance in terms of what my parents taught me but there is billions of years of wisdom in my very genes that guide me and that can guide all of us and that is where we tap into this deep wisdom at the heart of the entire universe process.

Connie: So that is the whole purpose of this first session is to see if you too, might start thinking of your story as being larger than your personal story, larger than your story of your particular ancestry, larger than the story of your nation. Actually being able to go back in time and then being able to take from that story, dynamics understandings that you take into your own life and apply it in a way that has you able to deal with life's inevitable difficulties in ways that give you more strength, give you more wisdom in how you react.

So at this point, we are going to play for you a couple of clips from recent interviews that we have done with people. Actually conversations that Michael was doing as part of his evolutionary Christianity series where he specifically was asking people, how did you awaken to this evolutionary understanding as being something other than just science, but being something that actually fed you spiritually, being something that actually transformed your life in ways that you are grateful for now.

Michael: So we are going to begin with a clip from Reverend Bruce Sanguin, who pastors a church up in Vancouver, Canada, and he is a leader in integral Christianity he has got a real passion for evolution, evolutionary spirituality, evolutionary Christianity and integral philosophy and you will hear how he awakens to this universe story.

Connie: He is also a great author and a poet. His most recent *If Darwin Prayed*, is full of poetry that if I, as a religious naturalist, a nontheistic person makes me cry I mean there is something about what he does that can bring secular and religious people together under one roof.

Bruce Sanguin: I remember I ended up in seminary and I had this wonderful New Testament professor who looked at *me* (I felt) every time the class ended, and pointed to his temple and said “Think, think, think”—because he was dealing with a lot of us evangelicals or fundamentalists coming through [the system]. So it took me about a year and half, two years, to realize that I could no longer embrace that kind of literalist interpretation of scripture. The foundation collapsed for me.

The alternative to [literalism] in a liberal seminary was what we would call liberal theology (and nowadays we’re calling a progressive theology, a progressive worldview). On the one hand that was great, but on the other hand, something was missing for me. So over time, over a period of five to ten years, I lost a sense of conviction, a sense of passion for the faith—because part of this liberal postmodern perspective has to do with *everything* being about context and perspective, and there being no truth (what the Integral folks call “the myth of the framework”). Everything is the framework, but there’s no substance. There’s no truth within it. It’s all just a constructed narrative. And I found that I actually got to a place (after I was ordained and serving my second congregation) when I just felt that I was wandering in a desert, and my faith had no juice. I was trying to preach Sunday after Sunday and just had lost the passion.

So I ended up going to a silent retreat in Narragansett, Rhode Island—a ten-day retreat—and had this mystical experience of being one with the cosmos, being an expression of the cosmos, a manifestation of the cosmos after 13.7 billion years. I experienced a kind of radical connectedness and a kinship with all that it is, including what I call spirit or God. So I kind of staggered around the seashore for four days in this state. My mantra was “I am the universe, noticing the universe. I am the universe, feeling the universe.”

Michael: How did that come to you?

Bruce: The reason it came to me—I don't know if I've ever shared this story with you—is that on the silent retreat I picked up Brian Swimme's slim volume: *The Universe Is a Green Dragon*. You know, I read it in one sitting? And I got it!

It just was like, Oh my goodness! What cosmos have I been inhabiting? Where have I *been*? Who did I think I was? If I am not *this*, if I am not the presence of the universe in this human form, then who do I think I am?—this little bag of skin and bones?

What happened was that the dualistic worldview collapsed. [Before the collapse I felt that] there's Bruce over here, and the universe is out there—it's something I look at up in the sky. Or, there's the Earth, and then there's Bruce, and I'm walking on it. But the experience was that I walking as the Earth: as the presence of the Earth in human form. And as I say, this was an experience of enlightenment for me; it was no less than enlightenment.

In important ways it was different than the classical Eastern form of enlightenment, which basically is kind of an *escape* from the Wheel of Life. This was more an *evolutionary* form of enlightenment, a kind of a Western form of enlightenment where I realized that I was the presence of the universe after 13.7 billion years—and we *all* were [that]. Therefore, my essential vocation is to ask myself the question, What is the *future* that needs *me* in order to emerge?

Michael: Yeah, great, great.

Bruce: Right? So that kind of shifted everything for me. And, to come full circle, it gave me a reason to be in ministry again. I regained the passion and the conviction that's required to stand up Sunday after Sunday and do what I do.

Connie: So that was Bruce Sanguin. Bruce has become a dear friend and colleague of both of ours and we view him to be one of the leaders in this movement.

We are going to play for you now one more clip of how someone who is prominent in this movement, this epic of evolution movement awakened to the universe story. Funny thing is it was the same book as Bruce Sanguin mentioned. But as you listen to this, listen as well to what it has done for her and how she has taken it into her life. How she has now taken the dynamics that she sees expressed outwardly in the universe story and sees that those very same dynamics are ongoing in her.

This is Mary Southard. She is a Sister of St. Joseph in Illinois and for several decades she has been the painter and the sculptor that many of us go to as having the expression artistically, visually of this universe story and our place within it. Mary Southard.

Mary Southard: It's quite a journey! I first met Brian Swimme's writing when one of our high school religion classes was reading *The Universe is a Green Dragon*. The teacher there gave a copy to all of the science teachers, and one of those teachers is one of my good friends. She was reading it and she said, "Mary, you've got to read this. You'll love it!" And so I was reading *The Universe is a Green Dragon*, and a wonderful thing began to happen. I had always been able or invited, you might say, into catching the vibes of the Earth; I always sensed a real kinship and presence. But reading about the wind and the sun and so on, I began to experience myself in a new way. I couldn't have said it then, but I can say it now: I think that was the beginning of *experiencing myself as Earth*—not separate from Earth. I realized that the dynamics within Creation are the same dynamics that are going on in me—growing me, alluring me.

It was then in 1988, a few years later, that I really faced the bad news. I was reading everything in sight (which I tend to do), while practicing *believing* that I am part of the Earth. I was able to live on a farm, in an old farmhouse by myself, for a year. That was the one thing I had wanted to do all my life: to live on the land. And the whole story of Creation was so magnificent, and the bad news was so bad! What I felt myself called to do—to participate in this Great Work, in this project of Creation, of evolution—was so beyond me that I decided the best thing I could do was, as soon as I woke up in the mornings, I would pull on my boots and my parka and so on, and I went out and stood on the Earth. That was to remind myself of the billions of years of creative energy, which is flowing through me *now*—that it's not *me* that has to do anything. But I need to allow it to be done *through* me. You know what I mean?

Michael: Yes, yes.

Mary: So there I would be, standing on the top of the hill, and that practice was a wonderful practice. I can see why our Indigenous people began the day that way. It's like remembering who I am: that I am the Earth.

At the same time, I thought to myself, well the way we're going to wake up and change the way we are doing things is we have to fall in love again with the Earth. So that year I worked on an Earth Calendar that I titled, "Let's Fall in Love Again." I think there's a kind of insight there that is really true—that we'll protect what we love.

I was teaching a course at Loyola one day a week called, “Self, Symbol, and Integration.” But after the summer with Thomas Berry’s thought, I said to the director of the masters program at the Institute for Pastoral Studies, I said, “I’d love to teach again, but I have to teach something else.” So I taught “The Universe Story, Our Story.” It was a wonderful experience because I told the class at the beginning that there were only two or three books available at that moment: one was *The Dream of the Earth* by Thomas Berry, another was *The Universe Is a Green Dragon* by Brian Swimme—and nobody knew where to put them in libraries or in bookstores.

I said, “This is so new that we’re going to create this course together.” There’s a sense of direction, but actually we kind of practiced evolution. That was the greatest thing that helped me to trust my intuitions. Oftentimes I wonder, what would it be like if we could really *trust* that we have the wisdom of 13.7 billion years of evolution within us—that we have these dynamics, that we can rely on that creative energy, that fire that’s within us since the fireball?

Michael: Oh, preach it, sister!

Mary: *[laughter]* Okay! So those are the kinds of questions I walk around with. And how can we be a part of it? We can’t do everything, because there’s so much to be done—and I think that kind of overwhelms people. If we’re going to be able to let the truth in, we also have to have a sense of how we can *live* with that truth. Otherwise, we’ll be so overwhelmed. Sometimes we feel guilty to start with—that it’s all our fault. Well, that doesn’t help. We didn’t do it on purpose. But now, how can we creatively participate in creating alternative ways of being in a relationship with the planet?

Michael: One of the great opportunities of *our* time is to not only tell the story, but to enroll the artists in doing so: the musicians, the storytellers, the poets, the sculptors—all the people who can take the various forms of artistic expression and find ways of embodying this great story in those things.

Mary: You are reminding me of something else I would like to talk about, and that is the importance of the arts in this time of transformation, because it’s a way of learning the story, or being present to the story, or being able to experience the implications of this amazing time that we are in, at a level that is deeper than our verbal *Homo sapiens* can grasp it. We have so many more levels of consciousness that are deeper than thought, and that we are just beginning to discover and to access. I think the arts invite us to *go*

there and be able to receive the mysteries that are really beyond thought, beyond realization. Like one of the questions that I mentioned earlier: What does it mean to be the Earth? What does it mean that I have within my cellular reality all of these operations and dynamics that are going on—digesting my lunch and breathing and so on? How intimate the universe is! You know, sometimes we think of the universe as being so huge (which it is), but it's also more intimate than we ever imagined.

So, how can the arts bring us to that? Some of the best stories actually are coming out in film. That's a medium that speaks to people today. Poetry, more and more, certainly is. It allows us to go a little bit deeper than the head.

Michael: It also engages our feelings. It engages our emotions.

Mary: Of course, and our hearts.

Michael: We invite you to reflect on the stories of awakening told by both Bruce Sanguin and Mary Southard in this session here. And also to watch the music videos recommended in the resource tab for the first course module. And also to read my blog posts, Seven Big Picture: Our Great Story Affirmations. It is just one page. And then choose to memorize one affirmation either one of the ones offered there, or create one of your own. But something that really speaks to our truth of our nature as you now understand it. And actually repeat it over and over again. I have memorized a dozen of them. But just take one, two at the most. So that is the first practice or exercise something that has just been shared or one of the ones that you read that I have or one of your own. And to really internalize not just memorize it, but to internalize it. To maybe go outside and lay down or look at the stars or look at the trees or whatever. And just allow yourself to really feel it.

Connie: Remember in Bruce Sanguin's audio excerpt there he talks about how wandering around on the beach after he had his experience of who he really was he got his larger story, he got his larger self. What Thomas Berry calls the great self. And he invented a mantra right there, an affirmation. I am the universe, perceiving the universe. I am the universe feeling the universe. And so, again, for the people that we have just interviewed, Michael's and my story, it has come to us not because we have been told to do it; it has been our life circumstances. But here we are offering you an opportunity to take the lead from these people and see if you too might have a transformation and then of course please do use the community forum to report what if anything came to you as a

result of this practice of cognitively taking in, based on what you are saying now, what you are hearing, going to the resources and then starting to perceive the world when you go out into it. See if it goes even deeper to effective your identity of who you are. And perhaps even Mary Southards of not just affecting her identity of who she is but realizing the very dynamics of the universe are also being expressed through her. And Michael, why don't you mention something about one of the key understandings is this understanding that chaos leads to creativity which then allows us to trust the process outside of us and inside us.

Michael: One of the things that we now know through a whole range of sciences is that the primary catalyst for creativity like the main thing that for billions of years has brought about emergent creativity. New things, new possibilities, is chaos. That it turns out that chaos breakdowns, destruction, is the most important thing in catalyzing creativity. I talk about that in one of the other resources that we will invite you too that we will mention a little bit later more, is Chapter 2 in my book, thank God for evolution is up online. It is actually a sermon that I wrote for non-Christian audiences but it actually applies to everybody. It is called evolution and the revival of the human spirit. And please do take time to read that because that is going to give you a lot of content that Mary Southard is talking about and Bruce Sanguin and what Connie and I have been talking about and also the essential role. I give a lot of examples there of how chaos and breakdowns and destruction and violence have been absolutely essential to catalyzing creativity. And how that can build faith, how that can build trust within ourselves for the chaos that we deal with in our own lives. And in our culture.

Connie: So Michael just mentioned the first practice and exercise for you to do after you have listened to this audio and after you have experienced several of the resources that we are recommending. And then practice two we are suggesting for this first week, is actually quite simple; it's adopting a favorite quotation. Now, perhaps for many of you as it has been for me, I occasionally am so effected by a piece of poetry or some prose that someone has written that I make a practice of actually taking it in in a way where I can recite it to myself. Michael and I have also been in a career position recently where it has been useful to do that. We give so many talks that we love to be able to recite extemporaneously in front of an audience one of our favorite quotations or pieces of poetry to illustrate a point.

So over the past 10 years, just before Michael and I launched this journey of living a life entirely on the road, I realized that it was important to have a website and this was very early in the days of having websites. And so I initiated what is now called

TheGreatStory.org, and on that website I have a page where I have been collecting quotations, some of these great quotations. People like Mary Southard, Charles Darwin, Thomas Berry, Brian Swimme, one of these inspiring short quotations that people have said about who we are in the universe story and what this means to us. So you will see in the practices, practice adopting a favorite quotation, I send you to three different pages for you to go through and just see which of all these quotations speaks to you. Choose one, post it on the community forum so you can let other people in this course know what your favorite quotation is. Maybe say something about what it was about it that inspired you. And then see what others are saying on their favorite quotations. And then take some time to memorize it. Take it into your life.

Michael: Just to let you know how I have done that is whenever there has been a quote that I wanted to learn or an affirmation that I wanted to memorize and rehearse, I actually write it down on a piece of paper. I find that writing, hand writing, rather than typing, is useful for me. And then I just carry it around as a piece of paper. And then when I mow the grass or drive somewhere or walk and do the dishes or whatever, I just kind of glance at it a few times and try to memorize it. It usually doesn't take very long. It actually happened pretty quickly. And if you have real difficulty, just take a really short one. Like, for example, my favorite short quotation, it is literally one of my favorite quotes in the world, is from Carl Sagan. It is just real simple. Just one line, "*Science is at least in part, informed worship.*" Science is at least in part, informed worship. So it doesn't have to be a long quote.

Connie: That's great, Michael.

Michael: So, let's just take quick walk through the resources.

Connie: Now we are not going to overwhelm you with resources. And in fact one of the things that we are really excited about having our first opportunity to do an actual online course is that we can have video, audio and text and quite frankly, because I am more of an audio/video person, even though I have written four books. I just love taking things in in a more personal sort of way. So you are mostly going to find audio and video resources available to you but there is also going to be several texts that you have.

For this first module, module 1 on your larger self, we have five resources that we are not just recommending. We really, really want you to go through these. It should take no more than, during the week, an hour and a half to two hours of your time. Though, of course, you can go much deeper. As you know, once you get on the internet, one thing leads to another. But these are the ones that we'd love to have everybody participating in

this go through and then as you are so moved, comment on it. Tell the others of what you experienced about it or where you're feeling challenged.

So the first one it is a webpage again, that I have been assembling on TheGreatStory.org website for about 10 years and it is called "What is the Great Story?". And it looks like a single resource, but once you click on it just kind of scroll down the whole thing you will see embedded videos, you will see audios. This is where we are giving people what we consider to be available online the best short introductions from a variety of people's perspectives of what this Big History understanding is about.

Michael: And on that webpage you are going to see a ton of great stuff, just follow your heart. Just follow your heart.

The next resource is an audio it is Connie and I talking on one of the podcasts we have done called Humanity's Right of Passage into Adulthood. It's about a half hour and it is a really excellent overview. Now, I must warn you, we just listened to it the other day, and the content is fabulous. Although at one point I remember thinking to myself, I sound a little manic at some points. I wish I had slowed down just a little bit so please forgive me for perhaps speaking a bit too fast in a couple of places.

Connie: Michael, you actually three weeks later you really slowed down because that is when you got your cancer diagnosis.

Michael: Yea, yea, yea.

Connie: In fact, the historical perspective is important here. That is when you are going through the – Michael talked about the third online resource, Evolution and Revival of the Human Spirit that Michael already talked about. It is about eight pages in length. And as I was going through that a couple of days ago I realized that there was a metaphor that Michael used that given recent events, he probably wouldn't use anymore. And, again, this was written in 2002 and he talks about playfully, so the next time a 300 foot tsunami comes your way. I mean we just had the tsunami that just happened and then, of course, in 2004, with the Indonesian tsunami that happened. But again, Michael was talking from a deep time perspective about what happened when the meteor hit 65 million years ago and wiped out the dinosaurs. Chaos. Breakdown. Terrible. But again –

Michael: And tsunamis.

Connie; And tsunamis, much bigger than anything every experienced by humankind.

Michael: And finally, we have two music videos that we highly recommend.

Connie: They are each about four minutes long and if you go to the YouTube pages for these pages you will see that some people have had quite transformative experiences just watching them. The first one is called The Play, by singer/songwriter Peter Mayor. Now Peter Mayor is my favorite singer/ songwriter. He does quite a bit in this epic of evolution movement. And it is actually a music video that I created. So I love collaborating with Peter Mayor, and I got a chance to use some of the photographs that I have been taking on our journey throughout North America.

So Michael, could you talk about the second music video?

Michael: The second music video is called we are all connected by, Symphony of Science. Young man, John Boswell, has put together various scientists and some of the leading scientists and science popularizes. And he has them using auto tune, he has them singing their words. So what Carl Sagan actually said in Cosmos, here he sings and millions and millions of young people are being turned on to science in a sacred way, in a meaningful way as a result of these Symphony of Science videos. So we are really excited about them for that reason. And we have actually listened to them a lot and we love them.

Connie: When this particular one came out, We Are All Connected, it was John Boswell's second one which he started in 2009, this whole series just after graduating college. When I heard this one I put it on my iPod and I remember one afternoon it was in the fall, one afternoon I was outside gardening for our host, trimming the lavender and I put on my iPod play over and over and over again the audio of this particular music video. The music really speaks to me, the content speaks to me and I hope you enjoy it too.

Oh, incidentally, what you hear the lead in and what you will hear the exit music here comes from another Symphony of Science piece that the young John Boswell has created called Poetry of Reality.

Michael: That will be the theme music for our series.

Connie: So there is two more components that we would like to give you in this session one audio. The first is an exploration of what can go wrong when we learn the science of Big History or the science of the universe story. And we are not at the same time given an opportunity to reflect on possibilities for meaning. What can go wrong?

Well, personally, I know what can go wrong. I see it all the time. One of the most poignant experiences I had and this happened about five years ago when I was doing a religious education program for middle schoolers in a church in Wisconsin, is I began by asking the

kids, I began by asking them tell me some examples of creation stories around the world. That is these kids were getting a very good education in sort of world religions. And they were also given an education in understanding the Native American, the indigenous creation stories, couple of them were able to point out Greek Myths, and of course, they knew the Garden of Eden story in Genesis. And so they were great. They knew some creation stories. And then I stopped and I looked at them and I said, "What is your creation story? What is your creation story?" Not a single hand went up. So I started walking the room and I said, "In the beginning, 13.7 billion years ago, what scientists call the big bang, what we call the Great Radiance, everything came into being." And at that point, one of the boys shot up his hand and he said, "Oh, that's what we are learning in science class." Yes, that is what kids are learning in science class. On the Discovery channel. But they don't recognize that it's their creation story and this is where something can go deeply wrong.

Michael: One of the most important philosophers of religion and philosophers of evolution is Loyal Rue. And Loyal Rue one of his earliest books is called *Amythia*, where he talks about the fact that we are the first culture in human history not to have a deeply, meaningful, viable, believable myth that we all do in fact, believe. And this notion of *Amythia*, that we are without a myth that our culture is now without a unifying myth, really has at its roots an understanding of how collective intelligence has evolved. Human beings have always tried to understand the nature of their world. In fact, there is two questions that is at the heart of every religion: what's real and what's important. What's real or how things are and what's important or how things matter. And every religion or every philosophy, every culture has had that understanding. In other words, to the best that they can discern, what is best and what is important and then how to live out of that which is the question of what is wise. That is in light of what's real, what's important how do we live so that we are living in right relationship to reality. So we are living wisely.

And what cultures provide when they've got a viable myth, when they've got a viable sacred story that answers these questions of what's real, what's important and what's wise is they have a story that results in two fundamental things: personal wholeness and social coherence. There is not a religion anywhere in the world that is in a map of what is real and what is important that if you align your life and your culture with that map, you will experience personal wholeness and social coherence. But of course, reality keeps shifting. In other words, reality at a scale of a family or clan 50,000 years ago is not the same thing as the reality of a tribe 20,000 years ago. Nor is reality at the scale of a tribe 20,000 years ago the same as reality in a Neolithic village 5,000 years ago. So what happens is we keep finding ways of cooperating at larger and wider scale. This is the

trajectory of Big History in terms of its human expression, but we also keep finding that reality is different at each of these scales and our collective intelligence about what's real and what's important, keeps growing. In other words, collective intelligence, the scale of a tribe may not serve at the level of a chiefdom or a kingdom. And collective intelligence at the level of a chiefdom and kingdom may not serve at the level of a city state or an early nation.

So that's what really science is; science is humanity's global collective intelligence, where for the first time we have a story that can unite us all because the story itself is a story of what's real and what's important that actually has been generated globally. And we can move forward. It's only if we're operating on that map of reality that is accurately aligned with the nature of our best understanding of the nature of reality that we can move forward in a healthy way. Because otherwise we are going to be having understandings of what's important that are based on outdated maps of what's real. And as I often say in my evening programs it is not a surprise that America is not leading the world with regards to our response to climate change because one in three Americans believe these are the end times anyways. So why bother? In other words those are people that are operating on an ancient map of what's real. It is kind of like their inner GPS is way out of date so their understanding of what's important is skewed. So that's why we need evolving wisdom, we need collective intelligence at a global scale.

Connie: And that's why we are emphasizing this larger story, larger sense of self in this first session.

So again, what can go wrong is when students are learning science but it's not broadened to the patterns of Big History the meaning of evolution. They are still going to be Amythic. They are going to see it as science not as their larger story, not as their opportunity to develop a sense of a larger self. And of course, that can lead into an existential angst.

Michael: and so our final audio clip is from a dear friend and colleague, Ursula Goodenough. Who is a religious naturalist. She is the author of *The Sacred Depths of Nature*.

Connie: So in this final audio clip we are going to give you an example of someone who talks not so much about her story of awakening but her story as a young woman of falling into existential angst, the more signs she learned the smaller she felt. So this is Ursula Goodenough. She is one of the leaders in the epic of evolution movement. Her 1998 book, *Sacred Depths of Nature*, I've heard many, many people feel that they have

had an awakening to. She is a world class cell biologist as well. So this is Ursula Goodenough.

Ursula: I was on a camping trip and I went out and slept under the stars somewhere in Colorado, I believe. And I looked up and all of a sudden all of the stuff I had been hearing in my physics course kind of swept over me in this chaotic way and I realized I had no idea what the meaning of anything was or the meaning of my life and all of my little concerns and adolescent things were completely dwarfed by just this whole star thing. So instead of the star thing being something cute and kind of a little dome over my world, my whole world kind of fell apart. So I felt very bummed out about it, tried not to think about it and only slowly and in particular during my work in the religious naturalist movement when I went back was to come to understand that it didn't have to be the case that I had everything all figured out and that my life was a big important deal. That the whole emergence of the universe and emergence in life and the mini emergence in me was something that I could just celebrate and not try to figure out some overriding purpose for it. Instead I articulated what I called a covenant with mystery. Where if you really believe in mystery than mystery is something that you don't even try to parse out. You don't even try to give it a name or give it properties. You just get into the mystery that there is this mystery, that there is everything. That that has become my ballast against these kinds of concerns and feelings of terror.

Michael: You know, that leads me to – I want to ask you, when you think of the big picture when you think of this epic of evolution and humans as an expression of the universe, not separate from the universe, where do you find sort of the the core feeling states? Humans have always needed to thrive feeling states like trust when you look to the future, gratitude when you look to the past, inspiration in the moment, to be in action whatever the challenge or the chaos of the day may bring. What is it that gives you trust, gratitude and inspiration?

Ursula: That is a pretty big question. I think I could start by saying there is a way that your question was something that the book that Connie mentioned, *Sacred Depths of Nature*, is about in that I tell the story in 12 chapters quite briefly. And then at the end of each chapter I have something that I called a reflection where it's really a meditation on a particular feeling state that that particular feature of the epic elicits in me. So in each part of the book I was able to access a response mode that fit with that particular part of the story. It was kind of fun working it out mechanically just writer to writer to get it all to work. One of the things I didn't want to do was to have each chapter end with awe and wonder.

That is kind of a Gee, Gee, so I tried to have gratitude be something that I focused in a particular story. I can't remember which chapter gratitude came in but they all sort of fit.

One of the key ones, going back to this freaking out at the universe kind of thing, what I think is important, is something I call assent, where I see that as a very important traditional religion response as well that one gives one's assent to that which is and the whole notion that this is the way the universe is. It's not like we are given a great big choice about it and so rather than wish it were some other way to go ahead and give one's assent to it. And once one does that and once one makes that move then it is possible to access joy and celebration.

Michael: Yea, exactly. When I first read your book I remembered, the language that I had used up to that point, and I still probably use most often is making life right. But whether it is talked about trust in the universe, saying yes to what's real or celebrating reality as you say assent, it is choosing to say yes to reality as it really is not just as we wish it was.

Connie: In that book, Sacred Depths of Nature where you really give us an intimate look in your own journey and your own struggles, it is not an easy thing. And when you bring up the word assent there is a richness, there is a depth there that has an epiphany feel to it that is beyond good and bad, beyond feel good or feel there is something huge about that word and that experience of giving your assent when you really know how big and how old and in a way, how indifferent the universe is.

Michael: I am reminded that the Joseph Campbell and Bill Moyer conversation where they are talking about the sublime nature of reality. Where Joseph Campbell says, it is just saying yes to life just as it is.

Connie: I remember reading Ursula's take on assent and I remember that part. It was where Bill Moyer confronts Joseph Campbell and what about the suffering in the world, the Hindu story of needing to go into war even though you know that everyone is going to die and just participating in it and Joseph Campbell gets this smile on his face, raises himself in the chair and just says "Isn't that sublime." And using that word, it is beyond good and evil. It is just a sense of – I don't know it has its own word that nothing else – I don't know. Assent has no synonyms it is just there. So anyway, Ursula, thank you.

Ursula: I remember a skeptic friend of mine who read the book said he was going to write a sequel and he was going to call it The Dark Depths of Nature because he felt that I – hated it. Hated it all too sweetly.

Connie: So in this week or however long you are going to take to work through this first session, see if you too can come to the point of saying yes to the universe.

Michael: Just as it is.

Connie: Just as it is. So closing off with this first introduction session 1: what can go right? What can go right with the Epic of Evolution and we really take it in? We move beyond any possibility for feeling ourselves small and insignificant and everything is horrible. What can we do and this larger self is something that we say yes to?

Michael: Well, for me, what it has done personally is profoundly enhanced my faith. Not faith as beliefs, but faith as trust. Because I know for a fact how essential chaos and breakdowns have been throughout the entire history of life. I trust the chaos and the breakdowns of my life. It allows me to be present with those things for a very, very different place. I also trust the challenges that I experience. I pretty much get in the habit now, of asking myself, whenever things are tough or difficult I ask myself, "Okay, here is what's real. Now what's possible?" And that question of okay, here's what's real now what's possible, keeps me in a place of expectancy. And I get that from this understanding of the universe. I also know myself as the universe. I don't lose the perspective that I am connected to all of life, that my larger body and my larger self includes the planet, includes the Milky Way galaxy and includes the entire universe.

Connie: And as we will get to in the final and fifth session of this particular online course that understanding of who we really are, our great self, our large self, is going to be absolutely vital when we contemplate our own death.

So Michael and I wanted to let you know that we also are going to be doing the practices during the week that we suggest for you to do. And so I would like to read to you now a quote that I have selected I have actually used it a lot. I have presented a lot when I am doing presentations but I have never taken the time to memorize it. It is by Nancy Ellen Abrams, who is one of the authors of the 2006 book, *The View From the Center of the Universe*, and you will see Nancy Ellen Abrams when you go to the top resource we are recommending, *What Is a Great Story*, webpage. Here is the first embedded video that you will see there.

Here is one of my favorite quotations from the 2006 book, *View From the Center of the Universe*. "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."

Michael: Now, I too, will be learning a new quote this week. But here is a quote that I learned about 15 years ago, I memorized and it's one of my favorites. It is a way that Thomas Berry, who is one of our great mentors, he just died about two years ago and it is the way he ends Chapter 10 of his book, *The Dream of the Earth*. It will give you a sense of where I ground my faith, where I ground my trust. Goes like this, ““The basic mood of the future might well be one of confidence in the continuing revelation that takes place in and through the Earth. If the dynamics of the Universe from the beginning shaped the course of the heavens, lighted the sun, and formed the Earth. If this same dynamism brought forth the continents and seas and atmosphere. If it awakened life in the primordial cell and then brought into being the unnumbered variety of living beings, and finally brought us into being and guided us safely through the turbulent centuries. There is reason to believe that this same guiding process is precisely what has awakened in us our present understanding of ourselves and our relation to this stupendous process. Sensitized to such guidance from the very structure and functioning of the Universe, we can have confidence in the future that awaits the human venture.”

Connie: I am looking forward to seeing which quotes you pick and post on the community forum and Michael and I, we are both going to be in there. We are going to look forward to participating with you in this exploration.

Michael: And I'm sure the quote I picked for this week won't be nearly that long. So, signing off, Michael Dowd.

Connie: And Connie Barlow.

[Music]