

Imprinting Is *Not* Indoctrination

An invitation to parents and religious educators
to present a coherent cosmology to our children

by [Connie Barlow](#)

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(Comments and suggestions welcome at connie@thegreatstory.org)

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The [Parenting Beyond Belief](#) movement, whose originator and chief spokesperson is [Dale McGowan](#), is doing important work by promoting [freethinking](#) as a virtue to be nurtured in children. Unfortunately, the books and videos that define this movement cast “indoctrination” as so lamentable that parents and educators may be tempted to run to the other extreme. In so doing, they will fail to provision children in their charge with a basic human requirement: a coherent cosmology (creation story / worldview) through which to enjoy and securely navigate the years of childhood wonder, learning, and innocence.

Two weeks ago I watched online the [video of Dale McGowan](#) presenting the Sophia Fahs Lecture at the nationwide gathering of my own religious tradition: [Unitarian Universalism](#). The practical implications for parents and educators of his style of freethinking were unsettling. After [eight years of presenting children’s](#) (as well as adult) programs in hundreds of Unitarian Universalist and other progressive settings throughout the United States, I could no longer ignore that my “cosmology-first” emphasis was, in truth, incompatible with the “explore all perspectives” approach of liberal religious education and, more generally, of our science-phobic, postmodern celebration of diversity. So long as religious liberals fail to distinguish responsible *imprinting* from manipulative *indoctrination*, our children will suffer.

At the risk of oversimplifying, here is a two-sentence description of Dale McGowan’s view, in his own words, drawn from his [“Parenting Beyond Belief”](#) series of YouTube videos:

When it comes to choosing a worldview, I really want my kids to make their own choices and I trust them to do so. . . . The foundation of my parenting is freethought, not atheism.

My own contrasting perspective can be summarized in two sentences drawn from a chapter I wrote, [“We Are Stardust”](#), which appears in the 2010 Skinner House book [The Whole World Kin: Darwin and the Spirit of Liberal Religion](#).

A grand narrative that pertains to everyone—and that we would therefore teach our children wholeheartedly in religious education/exploration settings—seems antithetical to the postmodern ethos of identity politics and religious tolerance championed by religious liberals. Nonetheless, to remain on the vanguard of progressive perspectives and values, it is time for religious liberals to place our celebration of diversity within a wider arc that offers the promise of universal relevance and a sense of global community.

The Wider Arc

It is a sure bet that most adult freethinkers ground their thinking on the same science-based platform I do. Where we part company is that I want to encourage freethinking *on top* of that platform (that “wider arc”) — not alongside it. The [“Epic of Evolution”](#), or [“Big History”](#), as the science-based story of creation is sometimes called, is not one possible item on the menu of worldview choices that 21st century kids need to understand. It represents freethinking at the scale of the planet. The scientific community is a communal brain, a global mind. It is a fresh emergent in the evolutionary saga, facilitated as much by new technologies for gathering and assessing data as by the rigors of methodological transparency and peer review. Because of external checks and balances that apply between the individual flawed brains that compose it, that communal brain is far better positioned to avoid the pitfalls of emotionally charged self-deception than is each of us alone.

It therefore makes no sense for liberal religious educators and freethinking parents to offer children the world’s creation stories and the science story on equal footing (or worse, to ignore our evidential [“Great Story”](#) altogether). As my husband, [Michael Dowd](#), often remarks, “No one in their right mind would let a first-century dentist fill their children’s teeth. Why, then, do we allow first-century theologians to fill our children’s minds?”

Questions of how the world came to be and of our deep-time genealogy are simply not up for grabs. Any child with access to the Discovery Channel and who is taken to a natural history museum knows that. Indeed, I recall a religious educator telling me how frustrating it was to use a curriculum based on creation stories because each week when she began reading a new story, some of the kids would pipe up, “But that’s not true!” or “That’s not the way it happened!” Only when the final story, the science story of creation, was read would those naysayers settle down.

In my own discipline of [evolutionary ecology](#), I might use my depth knowledge and field experience to question the latest sexy headline in the least trustworthy popular science magazines. But when it comes to any other area of scientific inquiry, I don’t do my own freethinking. Rather, I search out the results of freethinking manifest in the practice of peer-reviewed and always updatable modern science. In effect, I have adopted the worldwide, self-correcting enterprise of science as my larger brain for questions pertaining to how the world came to be and how it continues to function and change today. (I recommend my recent [podcast interview](#) with [Michael Shermer](#), editor of [Skeptic magazine](#), on this point.)

Imprinting a Big Picture

“What’s your basis of authority?” is a standard question posed by scriptural literalists to religious liberals. I used to think this was a silly question. Who would want to cede one’s decision-making to *any* authority? Actually, I now realize we all do it. For example, regarding local and state elections in Michigan, where I am registered to vote (but, as an itinerant, do not actually live), I don’t investigate the candidates and the propositions. I ask a trusted friend who does live there, and whose values generally align with mine, to suggest who and what to vote for. If somebody strongly recommends a book to me, I may or may not check the Amazon reviews, but I pay a lot of attention as to whether the advocate is someone whose judgment I trust and who knows my reading priorities. Our children have inherited an instinct to do exactly the same.

We all know that children are not miniature adults. One of the most distinctive features of early childhood is that our kids pop out of the womb programmed to believe what parents and trusted elders tell them — that is, so long as our nonverbal communication (facial expression and tone of voice) convey that this is serious business. The lion behind the rock would have made dinner of any child who regularly questioned rather than promptly acted upon what he or she was told. (Hence the seriousness of debate among freethinkers about whether Santa Claus has a place in family holidays.)

An instinctual form of free-thinking does, of course, emerge naturally. Freethinking flowers in tandem with puberty, when a surge of hormones reshapes a dependent body and mind for the exercise of independent choice and responsibility. Said another way, only when our offspring actively begin to push back, to look for rational reasons to ignore our guidance, will a version of freethinking kick in on its own.

I am suggesting that freethinking has a place, but not a central place, in early childhood. Critical thinking, yes! Freethinking, not fully. Early childhood is about imprinting, giving our kids the “big picture.” In fact, few things are more important than this.

“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.”

Astrophysicist [Joel Primack](#) and cultural historian [Nancy Ellen Abrams](#) made that claim in their 2006 book, [The View from the Center of the Universe](#) (p. 84). They explain, “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.” They speak from personal experience. Both offer testimonials as to how encounters with the grand narrative of cosmic, biological, and cultural evolution as adults rescued them from existential angst. Now they are sublime, and fully scientifically rooted, meaning-makers. In their book and [videos](#), they offer adult readers soaring opportunities to flourish in a view of the Universe in which we humans are by no means trivial.

I am thus not alone in proposing that we give our children a grand narrative. The Epic of Evolution that I and others espouse is not just one possible creation story among many. It is *our creation story*, reflecting our best collective intelligence, and we can tell children outright that it is *their creation story*, too. And, yes, unlike the myths and stories frozen in the past, this one comes with the expectation of [errata sheets](#). Halleluiah!

As astrophysicist and NOVA host [Neil deGrasse Tyson](#) says in a short, compelling [video](#), “Let us offer our children the Universe” — as best we know it. Let us offer it forthrightly, playfully, meaningfully, responsibly, and repeatedly. Let us not leave the business of imprinting to the whims of the world outside the family home, outside our church community. Imprinting in one way or another *will* occur. If there is a substantial gap in a child’s relational bond with the world at large, that gap will be filled — perhaps when their best friend says, “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so,” and then extends an invitation to church camp.

Emotionally, Sensually Imprinting a Big Picture

The behavioral biologist [Niko Tinbergen](#) (a mentor of [Richard Dawkins](#)) wrote popular books that contained amazing stories of baby birds imprinting on whatever animate object they first beheld beyond the eggshell. Professor Tinbergen on one occasion inadvertently imprinted a batch of goslings on his own booted foot, which the little fuzzballs thenceforth insisted on following. Humans and other primates are not birds. Nevertheless, the textures and ideas of our childhoods do indelibly mark us. Smells tagged with emotional comforts set up shop in powerful areas of our “old mammalian brain.” We imprint on the aroma of the pot of chicken soup that grandma always had ready for us. The scent of freshly mowed grass becomes deep mammalian code for “summer.” I imprinted on particular hymns and Christmas carols that, even as an atheist, I belt out unashamedly in season.

It is imprinting that I have foremost in mind when I stand before an expectant group of kids, with just one precious hour to work magic. On such occasions, I pull out all the stops. Yes, the rational mind, the neocortex, is fully engaged in the group processes I lead, but I am also on a parallel track to affect the deep, emotional part of as many brains as possible. In these one-time encounters, it is not my job to love and nurture, but to challenge and inspire. Journeying back through time along the line of our pre-human ancestry, I know I am succeeding when half the class howls “Yes!” and the other half looks horrified when I ask, “Who’s *proud* to be related to a flatworm — which eats and poops through the same hole?” (See my [“River of Life”](#) children’s curriculum, also listed on my [children’s curriculum webpage](#).)

I like to imagine that, for at least a few of the kids, our brief time together is not only fun but life-shaping — if not immediately, then at some pivotal time in the years to come. I’d like to think that these kids will all grow up to value the discoveries of science as collective intelligence and to never lose their sense of [kinship with the cosmos](#). I’d like to think that many will ensure that their own children learn about their relationship to tree shrews and flatworms, about the story of the asteroid wiping out the dinosaurs, and about the atoms of actual stardust within their own bodies. And I’d like to think that any who enroll their kids in Sunday school or Hebrew school will *insist* that these stories be part of the curriculum.

Two weeks ago, as I listened online to author Dan [sic] McGowan deliver the Fahs lecture, I was haunted by an image. It is a cartoon image of a child inside a spacesuit, with a bewildered look, floating free in the blackness of space. This is not freethinking. This is a free float that might turn into a free fall, especially during the challenging teenage years. We must insist that our children be outfitted with a coherent, alluring, and robust worldview during the life stage when children beg to be imprinted. As I wrote in my 1997 book, [Green Space, Green Time: The Way of Science](#), I want to help each child “sprout an umbilical cord to the cosmos.”

Nancy Ellen Abrams agrees. In the [fourth and final installment](#) of the [2009 Terry Lectures](#) that she and her astrophysicist husband delivered at Yale University, she offered,

Today's children could be the first generation ever raised in the universe they actually live in. Don't teach them silliness. And don't teach them that the universe is vast and we're so tiny—that's not true either. ... Childhood is when most people acquire the picture of the Universe they will carry in their intuition all their lives. We have an obligation to teach children the *real* story, as early as possible.

[Maria Montessori](#) made the same point in her 1948 book, [To Educate the Human Potential](#):

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.

Failing to give our children the [Big Picture](#) story of this amazing Universe in ways that help them feel held by, not lost in, its vastness will compound the Western malady that philosopher of religion [Loyal Rue](#) calls "[amythia](#)." Never before in human history have individuals had to step out into the world without the guidance and comfort of a grand narrative that could pull it all together — a story that supports us with a magnificent ancestry and urges us to play our role in the continuing saga.

When [speaking to adults](#) about the importance of bringing the Universe Story to our children, I often implore:

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.

Or, I might choose a gentler approach and recite this poem by [Thomas Berry](#):

The child awakens to the Universe
The mind of the child awakens to a world of wonder
Imagination to a world of beauty
Emotions to a world of intimacy

It takes a Universe to make a child
Both in outer form and inner spirit
It takes a Universe to educate a child
It takes a Universe to fulfill a child.

And the first obligation of any generation to its children
Is to bring these two together
So that the child is fulfilled in the Universe
And the Universe is fulfilled in the child
While the stars ring out in the heavens!

Highly Recommended Resources

ONLINE VIDEO:

[Neil deGrasse Tyson: "Kinship w/ Cosmos"](#) (8 minutes)
[Symphony of Science: "We Are All Connected"](#) (song) (4 minutes)
[Carl Sagan's Cosmos: "Star Stuff"](#) (8 minutes)
[Carl Sagan: "Then Where Did the Big Bang Come From?"](#) (2 minutes)
[Nancy Ellen Abrams: "Cosmic Society"](#) (3 minutes)
[Loyal Rue: "Religion Is Not About God"](#) (6 minutes)
[Brian Swimme: "The Generosity of the Sun"](#) (5 minutes)
[Brian Swimme: "Birthplace of the Universe"](#) (10 minutes)
[Primack and Abrams: 2009 Terry Lectures "Cosmic Society"](#) (1 hour)
[Primack and Abrams: The View from the Center of the Universe](#) (2 minutes)
[Connie Barlow: "In the Beginning"](#) (song) (3 minutes)

ONLINE AUDIO:

[Jon Cleland-Host: "Inspiring Naturalism for Families"](#) (38 minutes)
[Jon Cleland-Host: "It's All Really There!"](#) (30 minutes)
[Jennifer Morgan: "Born with a Bang"](#) (54 mins)
[David Christian: "Big History"](#) (52 minutes)
[David Sloan Wilson: "Evolving Beliefs and Other Motivational Systems"](#) (57 minutes)
[Connie Barlow and Michael Dowd: "America's Evolutionary Evangelists" podcasts](#)
[Bible Stories Your Parents Never Taught You](#) – Parts 1 and 2 (OT and NT)

ONLINE TEXT:

[Raised on Starstuff](#) (Bruehl family dialogue w adult children recalling their experience as kids)
[What Is The Great Story?](#) (webpage)
[Evolutionary Curricula for Children and Youth](#) (downloadables compiled by Connie Barlow)
[Evolution Now: A Manifesto for our UU Congregations](#), **sermon** delivered by Connie Barlow
[We Are Stardust: The Epic of Evolution in Children's Religious Education](#), chapter by Connie Barlow in *The Whole World Kin: Darwin and the Spirit of Liberal Religion*
[Great Quotations from the book, The View from the Center of the Universe](#) (webpage)
[Stories of Awakening](#) (anecdotes collected by Barlow and Dowd on the road)
[Evolutionary Parables](#) (16 short stories and dramatic scripts)
[Sacred Sites of the Epic of Evolution](#)

Appendix

The Risk of Business As Usual in Liberal Religious Education

by [Connie Barlow](#)

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(Comments and suggestions welcome at connie@thegreatstory.org)

If you or your institution are absolutely wedded to presenting Bible stories and teaching the diversity of religions, then you may want to stop reading here. After all, you can build [the Great Story](#) into your overall program without having to jettison any of the familiar pillars of religious education. This appendix aims to make you uncomfortable with business as usual in liberal religious education, for the simple reason that I have recently become so. Yet I can offer no quick and easy relief for that discomfort. I am just beginning this quest, and I earnestly seek your input.

Note: In July 2012, I received a superb suggestion from Rev. Gary McCaslin (American Baptist), and thus offer a possible solution at the end of this appendix.

This last section of my essay (formatted as a stand-alone appendix) thus shifts focus from why I vigorously promote [the Epic of Evolution](#) to why I have recently shed my tacit, and heretofore unexamined, support for having our kids superficially learn fun stuff about religious holidays and holy days and Bible stories.

The fundamental issue for primary grades religious education is this: ***Do we continue to highlight just the attractive aspects of ancient religious stories?***

For example, do we continue to promote “religious literacy” in children by using the picture book Bible story of Noah’s ark, with a rainbow overhead and cute creatures filing onboard two-by-two? Or do we share the dark and horrific side as well — and at what age? After all, if we invite children to put on their thinking caps, isn’t one obvious outcome a gasp of horror when they recognize what happened to those left behind? There, floating around the ark as the waters subside would be billions of bloated bodies: drowned bunnies and dead puppies and all the millions of boys and girls who were not taken aboard. Freely thinking, we begin to see that it is God who was responsible for this terrible crime against nature, against sentient life forms, and against innocent children. Consider this [post](#) by a contributor to the [Parenting Beyond Belief Forum](#):

A few weeks ago I read my son a book on Noah's Ark and my brain started to hurt. It just never really hit me before how truly awful this story is. It's usually sanitized and presented to kids as a cute little animal story. My oldest even had a Noah's Ark themed crib and high chair set as a baby. We've still got the blanket around somewhere with cute little cartoon animals sitting on the ark and smiling. . . . I was reading [the story] to my 7 year old and it was literally the first time it occurred to me what a downright mean god that would have to be to kill so many people just because he was angry at them. What kind of a lesson is that for kids? Or anyone? And what kind of a horrible opinion on humanity does someone have to hold to make up such an evil god like that?

I confess that I didn’t notice the dark side of Bible stories until I was listening to an audiotape by one of the earliest New Atheists. Not as well known as Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris, Mike Earl

nonetheless turned my world upside down seven years ago, as I listened to his *Bible Stories Your Parents Never Taught You* (now [freely accessible online](#)).

Sometimes it is the kids themselves who notice the disparity between the morality portrayed in a holy book and the morality they (and their modern culture) take for granted. [Nancy Ellen Abrams](#) recounts [her run-in](#) with the liabilities of freethinking in Hebrew school:

My career in Hebrew school began and ended in the second grade. The first story we read was about Abraham smashing all the merchandise in his father's religious idol store, and we were supposed to sympathize with Abraham when his father consequently threw him out. The next story was about Abraham not batting an eyelash at taking his son to a mountaintop to kill him. This was too much for me. "Who is Isaac supposed to pray to?" I asked, in perhaps a less than respectful tone of voice. This question elicited an icy stare and a long silence. I was never called on again and eventually I stopped going. That was the end of my Hebrew education.

Nancy goes on to say:

But that story continued to haunt me, and over the years I read many interpretations of it, none of which made sense to me. I wrote the first part of my song, "Abraham Was Listening", long ago, up to the point where Abraham hears the voice say, "Stop!" But I couldn't figure out what I wanted to say after that and the song sat unfinished for years. Then I read Michael Lerner's book, [Jewish Renewal](#), in which he argues that although Abraham thought he heard the voice of God telling him to sacrifice his son, it was in fact the voices of his own society and their religious practices, and that it is all too easy to confuse these with the will of God. Lerner concluded that the key to the story was that Abraham stopped the sacrifice, and this was the beginning of Judaism as a religion of transformation. The moment I read that, I knew how the song had to go.

The point of my including the story resolution here is that it illustrates how even brilliant, caring adults sometimes struggle to find a metaphorical interpretation of ancient stories that not only make sense to modern ears but that they can then turn around and cite as exemplary moral guidance. [Rev. Marlin Lavanhar](#), senior minister at All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma, is among the best at taking morally unsettling biblical passages and stories and reworking them for the modern mind. I regularly listen to his [sermon podcasts](#), and I marvel at how he can make a biblical story meaningful to these unbelieving ears. Marlin's church makes the teaching of Bible stories a core component of children's religious education, too. Yet I wonder how this can authentically, integrously be done for children—few, if any, of whom are capable of metaphorical thinking.

You can see the slippery slope. Do we present children with only the shiny bright side of ancient religious stories and teachings? Wouldn't that be unfair to them (and us!) — perhaps encouraging them to regard religious scripture as good and "holy", like many of their friends do, rather than as just one more book to which modern critical and moral reasoning must be applied? Yet if we do choose to introduce the dark side, how in truth can that be done? Doesn't God look awful in these stories? Wouldn't he seem about as scary as the evil witch in *Hansel and Gretel* or *Wizard of Oz*? Consider, for example, the underbelly of two religious holy days that liberal churches and synagogues assume cannot be shed without a loss of religious identity.

Consider **Passover** and how we might responsibly present that "holy day" to children. Is Passover primarily about a week of meals with matzo? Or is it about what happened when a powerful deity favored one tribe over another, and then decided to punish the offending grown-ups by sending a supernatural emissary to go from home to home killing all the firstborn sons, but passing over and thus

letting live the children of the favored people?

And is there anything honorable to be done with the religious underpinnings of **Easter**? Is an alleged supernatural resurrection from death anything we want to have our kids take seriously enough to ponder and make up their own minds about? Do we want to expose our children to the fact that human beings not only used to torture people by nailing their hands and feet to wooden planks but that the cross that some of their Christian friends wear around their necks is an even more barbaric symbol of capital punishment than a noose? As one of my favorite preachers, [Rev. Ian Lawton](#), recently told the press (when explaining why [his congregation](#) was [removing the cross](#) that had towered over the church for decades), “For me, the cross is no more a symbol of what Jesus taught than is a bullet a symbol for why we honor Martin Luther King.” Thank goodness the Easter Bunny gives us a secular alternative.

As my husband [Michael Dowd](#) (an ordained Christian minister) has begun [boldly preaching](#), “The elephant in the sanctuary, what most people see but no one talks about, is this: Nothing is driving young people away from religion more quickly and surely than the Bible.”

If the goal of liberal religious education is to help children grasp the major tenets of religious worldviews so that each child can, in time, choose what to believe (or not believe), and if we also wish to nurture our children’s ability to think critically, then we cannot shield them from the logical gleanings that [Sam Harris](#), [Richard Dawkins](#), [Mike Earl](#), and the other [New Atheists](#) throw in our face. And if the kids do not arrive at conclusions similar to those of the New Atheists on their own, would we freethinkers and [religious naturalists](#) thereby be inadvertently promoting traditional religion by failing to provide our children and youth with all the relevant data?

Yes, of course, we adults know that values were very different back in biblical times. We are adept at reinterpreting so-called scripture metaphorically. But do we really want to have to go there with a seven-year-old? Or with a 13-year-old, for that matter, whose internet companions urge her to google “Take my virgin daughters,” through which she will arrive in two clicks at [Genesis chapter 19, verse 8](#): “Behold now, I have two daughters which have not known man; let me, I pray you, bring them out unto you, and do ye to them as is good in your eyes: only unto these men do nothing; for therefore came they under the shadow of my roof.” That’s the *King James* version. Here is *The New Living* translation: “Look, I have two virgin daughters. Let me bring them out to you, and you can do with them as you wish. But please, leave these men alone, for they are my guests and are under my protection.”

Let’s just not go there. We’ve got plenty of our own territory to cover with kids in our charge in the one hour per week usually allotted us. We’ve got our own more recent and relevant stories about people doing good things in the world and making important discoveries. And I will say it: We’ve got the best and only evidential creation story of the bunch!

Closing words are those of Nancy Ellen Abrams and Joel Primack:

“It feels unacceptable to many people even to think of having a cosmology based on science. They misinterpret freedom of thought as requiring a refusal to believe anything. They see fanciful origin stories as spicing up the culture. The problem is, however, that spices, even in the most artful mixture, cannot compensate for the fact that there is no food — no data, no evidence. Such stories are not actually about anything beyond themselves. We are not arguing to throw away the spices but to start with some food and then only use those spices that improve the food at hand. Scientific reality is the food. Aspects of many origin stories can enrich our understanding of the scientific picture, but they cannot take its place.” (*View from the Center of the Universe*, p. 85)

NOTE: To learn **Dale McGowan**'s thoughts on religious education in freethinking families, see the short videos posted on his [Parenting Beyond Belief YouTube channel](#). I highly recommend reading Richard Dawkins' gentle, yet potent, letter addressed to his 10-year-old daughter, "[Good and Bad Reasons for Believing](#)". My husband, Michael Dowd, was so taken by this letter that he received approval from Richard to include this letter in its entirety as an appendix in his own book, [Thank God for Evolution](#).

Scroll down to the next page for Dale McGowan's reply to this essay.

APPENDIX UPDATE (by Connie Barlow) July 2012

*Ever since I wrote this document and appendix two years ago, I have been asking ministers and religious educators about whether they can envision a way to teach Bible stories without intentionally neglecting the stories that are morally repugnant to us moderns. This month, **Rev. Gary McCaslin**, of First Baptist Church of Painted Post, New York, offered me not only a workable solution, but a downright exciting one! Here is my response to him:*

Gary,

I want to especially thank you for providing me with a sound solution to the question that has troubled me for two years — and that nobody else has given me a satisfying solution to: *How (and when) to ensure that kids in R.E. get exposed to and have a chance to discuss, what I call, "the dark side of Bible stories."*

THE SOLUTION: Now I see that, so long as the kids are given the "Big History" story of everyone and everything (as you already do in your confirmation classes), their foundational learning is that everything evolves — not just biology, but cultures too. Thus, it should be no surprise to them to learn that (1) human morality has evolved greatly since the Bible stories were recorded (indeed, hugely too even in your and my lifetimes!) and (2) that if the books in which ideas are recorded are not given an opportunity to evolve (or, at least, to be read with an evolutionary perspective), then of course those books will include some examples of moral norms and values that are repugnant to modern minds.

If you can already do this in a Baptist confirmation class, then surely I can get to work helping to ensure that my **Unitarian** tradition adds this to our own "coming of age" classes. How lovely that the solution to this problem entails my own emphasis on "the Great Story"!

One thing that I can, of course, easily add into a Unitarian curriculum is something that may be difficult to do in a Christian church. I can remind the kids about the Jewish dictum against "idols" and "idolatry" — and then introduce Michael Dowd's concept of how scriptural literalists are inadvertently committing idolatry in a new form: "idolatry of the written word." Ever since he came up with that meme, I have been a huge advocate of it. To my mind, it instantly shows the dangers of adhering to scriptural literalism — indeed any obeisance to authority or tradition that is not constantly revisited and re-evaluated for its utility in current conditions. At the same time, Michael always does his "of course, of course, of course" clause — so that we do not unfairly judge ancient

texts and the long-dead creators of those stories and the scribes who reverentially recorded them. Rather, I call to mind an image of a learned traveler, visiting villagers, carrying a scroll. Arriving into town, a group gathers around him; he unrolls the scroll and begins to recite. Then he shows the strange marks on vellum and the villagers are in awe. Of course, of course, of course humanity, wherever writing entered, recorded their foundational stories and rules, and then those early recordings became “scripture” — ever after to be passed forward by scribes, with as few departures from the original as humanly possible.

At the same time, I consider the myriad cultures throughout the world who never experienced writing until traders or conquerors from literate cultures arrived in their territories. Even though “primitive” by literate standards, surely their own sacred stories had an advantage over ours — that they had continued to evolve right up to the time the invading culture first recorded the oral stories of the elders. And then, of course, those recordings became just as holy and unchanging as any from the conquering cultures. The plains Indians sacred stories that include horses are superb examples of stories continuing to evolve in oral cultures, because there were no horses in America until the Spanish invaders brought them here!

Overall, then (I am thinking as I write), the point of discussion is even bigger than simply gaining exposure to and developing a healthy compassion for (not knee-jerk revilement of) the dark side of “holy” scriptures — including the Koran. The bigger point is to help the kids develop a hugely important moral consideration that will be important throughout their lives: the necessity to bring forward the best of the past cultural accomplishments, while being ever ready to discuss, experiment with, and collectively evaluate prospects for continuing improvement.

Certainly the scientific enterprise itself is a superb example of this. Those of us in the sciences greatly honor Charles Darwin, and many of us (myself included) have felt deep reverence as we have read his 1859 classic, “On the Origin of Species.” But Darwin had no idea of how genetics actually works to create new possibilities while also passing forward the best of the past. There could be no modern science, no progress in our knowledge of reality, if there was no writing: the human mind simply cannot hold and accurately assess and pass forward all that learning based on oral stories and memory alone. We need written/digital texts!

So, in a way, since writing is so powerful, there was probably no way for humanity anywhere in the world to make that threshold step without also stepping into its shadow: having the written word become an idol, rather than something that, like everything else, keeps evolving.

Dale McGowan's Reply to "Imprinting is *Not* Indoctrination" (by Connie Barlow)

by [Dale McGowan](#) 21 July 2010

I'm alternately fascinated and frustrated by the difficulties of clear communication – the way in which a speaker can say A, and another, listening through the filter of his/her perspective and experience, hears B.

About 15 years ago, I was pleased to discover an entire field (hermeneutics) devoted to the issue. We often hear a speaker make points or use key words that are similar to prior speakers with whom we have disagreed, then begin interpreting all subsequent points in that light, disagreeing in the end with a position quite different from the speaker's actual one. I do this all the time myself.

In this case, my [Fahs lecture](#) seems to have failed at communicating something to you that I had hoped would be *especially* clear. You call it the difference between imprinting and indoctrination; I use the word **influence** rather than imprinting, but make what I see as the same essential point. In the end, it seems our paradigms are very similar indeed.

Example: I decidedly do **NOT** "offer children the world's creation stories and the science story on equal footing." I present the Big Bang and biological evolution as matters of exceptionally strong scientific consensus, subject to change as all science is, but not even in the same conceptual universe as religious claims.

But I do not demand that my children accept these on pain of losing my love and respect. On the contrary, I think these theories are so exceptionally well-grounded that children properly equipped with curiosity and critical thinking will independently agree with them, and that their opinion will be all the more grounded and durable because it was not handed to them by fiat – because they were in control of the process.

Religious Education

As for religious education, I advocate a broad exposure for several reasons:

1. A corollary of the above: If children are to reject religious claims, that rejection will be all the more grounded and durable if it was not handed to them by fiat -- if they were in control of the process. I believe religious claims of fact fall apart easily and quickly under examination. So I don't knock down houses of cards for my kids -- I give them the tools and the desire to do it themselves so they can own the process.
2. Religious stories are some of our most deeply felt reflections on what it is to be human. They help us to understand ourselves, good and bad, even when they have no connection to fact or history. From my talk:

I can yearn for immortality along with Gilgamesh, whether or not there was any such person, because like Gilgamesh, and the author of the story, and those who have told and retold it, I am a piece of the universe that woke up. And one of the things that comes with that scary and wonderful fact is the deep desire to stay awake. I can love and understand the story of Jesus' sacrifice without needing it to be true. I can feel gratitude to Prometheus for his defiant gift and his terrible sacrifice because I share the human yearnings that gave rise to the story. They are all my stories as well. I can hear the story of Abraham and Isaac, possibly the worst story ever loved, and marvel in what it reveals about me and my species even as I bemoan that same discovery.

3. Ignorance of religion disempowers children in discourse and makes them more susceptible to emotional hijacking by the more malignant forms of belief.

Influence vs. Indoctrination

In my talk, I defined indoctrination in a way that I'd hoped was clear. It is teaching that demands unquestioning acceptance. It also generally offers an array of punishments to enforce that acceptance. Since I doubt very much that you advocate shunning or otherwise punishing a child who differs from you on the Big Bang, our positions seem to agree.

I do not advocate radical relativism about these things – a shrugging "who knows" that puts all systems of thought on an equal footing and considers anything less to be indoctrination. From the talk (I diverged here and there from the text but am pretty sure this made it through):

It's important to recognize that **influence is not the same as indoctrination**. All parents can and should influence their children, and that influence is bound to be huge. Influence becomes indoctrination only when we forbid them to question what they receive from us. For extra insurance, we should explicitly invite them to do so.

I came to my current views on my own. It's the thing I value most about my worldview. It's really mine. Why would I deprive my kids of that authenticity? If we impose our opinions, we are also discounting the strong possibility that our children and their children can improve on what we've done.

My kids know what I believe and why. But they will also know that I invited and encouraged them to overturn every rock and question every assumption. And that's all I would ever ask of a theistic parent—that they share the experience of their faith, but then say, "Here's what I believe with all my heart, it's very important to me and I think it's true, but these are things each person has to decide for herself, and I want you to talk to people who have different beliefs so you can make up your own mind. You can change your mind a thousand times. There's no penalty for getting it wrong, and I will love you no less if you end up believing differently from me." Imagine if that was the norm. Imagine kids growing up with an invitation to engage the most profound questions there are freely and without fear.

I work hard to instill a ravenous curiosity in my kids, then present my own heartfelt views and invite them to seek out those of others, trusting that they can manage it in the long run and (again) that their convictions will be all the stronger if they are in control of the formation of those convictions.

I'm unable to find a single sentence in your descriptions of your approach that differs meaningfully from my own. Only your descriptions of my own perspective are unrecognizable to me, especially the cartoon of the child, bewildered and adrift (well, and calling me "Dan" in the previous sentence). I agree entirely that amythia robs our children of an essential framework for exploration. I agree that children must be "outfitted with a coherent, alluring, and robust worldview" during that exploration. Neither of these is incompatible with an invitation to freely explore alternatives and to differ from my conclusions.

I would not have appreciated it if my parents insisted that I reflect their views. Instead, they let me know what they believed was true and encouraged me to find my own way in the long run. I'm grateful for that, and I daresay I owe my kids no less.

Note: Dale McGowan's website is :

<http://www.parentingbeyondbelief.com/>

Note: "Imprinting Is Not Indoctrination" by Connie Barlow is online at:

<http://thegreatstory.org/imprinting.pdf>

Additional Comments and Responses

- 7/14/10: **Rev. Tom Thresher**, Ph.D., pastor, Suquamish United Church of Christ, Suquamish WA and author of [*Reverent Irreverence: Integral Church for the 21st Century*](#)

This is wonderful article. I fully agree that "freethinking" is one of those postmodern, politically correct fallacies. I find the notion a bit absurd. It imagines that somehow our thought is free and not foundationally conditioned by our culture... but that's another issue. Thanks for making the point that kids are not ready for free thinking, and in fact, free thinking can only come in response to some previously held vision of the world and our place in it. Where I challenge your premise is the idea that the universe story is the right one for children, especially young children. I have yet to see the universe story presented in a way that is really compelling to young children. It always comes out too impersonal. My sense is that the universe story gains traction as kids begin to move into adolescence, somewhere in middle school. In the younger years magic and myth are developmentally appropriate. They need magical, fantastic characters with warriors and bad guys and princesses, etc. That's why we use bible stories very literally with our youngest kids and give them the big mythological stories as they move through elementary school. When they start to move in to adolescence they are ready for the universe story. So, while I fully agree that free thinking only becomes appropriate at a certain stage of development (and then overstates our capacity to actually think freely), it is certainly not in childhood. But I also think that the universe story needs to wait or be woven into the big magical/mythical stories of western culture.

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- 7/18/10: **Russ Genet**, Ph.D., author of [*The Chimpanzees Who Would Be Ants*](#)

Very nicely written and also thought provoking. Of course I'm glad to offer a few comments.

By explaining many religious cultural traditions, Unitarians tend to accomplish two things for many people:

** First, thinking children are inoculated against taking any tradition overly seriously.

** Second, tolerance of other views is fostered.

These are both good things.

The problem is that most religious traditions are, of course, cultural fairy tales. Taking them literally or too seriously is bad, especially if they are aggressive "we are right everyone else is wrong" traditions or, "you have to behave like we do even if your life has no real impact on us" (gays, abortion, etc.).

But cultural traditions are deeply engrained and strong, and are not easily taken apart. They tend to come as a whole. Teaching Mormon children the Great Story would probably not help their lives. The function of religion is not truth or saving the planet, but more cultural glue that makes things work.

While freethinking for children is probably great for smart children of well educated parents, I'm not sure how well it would work for children of blue collar fundamentalists or strict Catholics. I know what it was like to be raised as a non believer in a very religious family. I could handle it, but most people could not.

I've been a bit opposed to missionaries of all stripes unless done with a very light hand and a great deal of respect for established cultural traditions. I must admit that when I teach the great story, I teach it as a story and try to minimize that it is "true" which it certainly partially is, but the full story is not yet known.

As David Sloan Wilson suggested in his book, *Darwin's Cathedral*, figuring things out for yourself takes lots of time and energy, okay for a pointy headed PhD, but not appropriate for the great masses that want something easy to understand and believe that gives sure guidance. The Great Story isn't the easiest to grasp or the most human friendly, although you are doing a lot to move it in those directions. Keep going!

• 7/19/10: [Jennifer Morgan](#), author of the *Born with a Bang!* trilogy for children

"Often I'm asked how we decide what is true? And that's a profound opener that leads us to the conclusion that we CAN'T treat all stories as equal. We need to explain the criteria for judging origin stories, how to evaluate their inner logic and consistency with the natural world."

Note: Connie Barlow and Michael Dowd recorded and posted a vibrant AUDIO interview with Jennifer Morgan in 2011, where she makes this point: "[Jennifer Morgan: Born with a Bang](#)".

• 7/21/10: [Dale McGowan](#), author/editor of *Parenting Beyond Belief* and *Raising Freethinkers*

Hi Connie,

Thanks for your note and most of all for your wonderful engagement with this topic. I'm quite familiar with your work and a big fan, both of content and approach.

I've attached my reply, which I hope clearly expresses my conviction that our positions are essentially the same -- more clearly, I hope, than I apparently did in the Fahs lecture. At the very least, they are not "very different" as you suggest.

All the best in your important work! Dale

Dale McGowan
Author/editor, *Parenting Beyond Belief* and *Raising Freethinkers*

Note: Dale's reply is pp 12-14 above.

• 7/21/10: [Connie Barlow](#), author of this essay, reply to Dale McGowan's email directly above

Dale — Great reply! I still think we differ in two fundamental ways.

1. IMPRINTING IS MORE THAN INFLUENCE

The first is the reason I use the word "imprinting" and you use "influence." By imprinting I mean sensory, emotional tags and experiences that go way, way deeper (into the limbic system, the Old Mammalian brain) than a rational or logical thought. That is why I spend my time attempting to translate the cosmic narrative into stories, songs, dramatic scripts, and emotionally resonant fare that can hold its own against emotionally resonant experiences that kids surely will encounter in a traditional religious setting.

After all, many of us know or have read the works of thinking adults (the Catholic author John Haught is tops in my eye in this regard) who are incredulous that anyone could not believe — in his case, as I recall, because of how stark the concept of death would be, and how horrific that would be to have to accept. It is not a rational reason that he believes, so much as an emotional lifeline. That's why I produce so many child-friendly stories and experiences that convey death in a beneficent way. Time will tell, of course, whether they produce their intended results.

Freethinking has its merits, and so does influence, but for kids I am an outright proponent of imprinting in ways at least as potent as religions have evolved ways of doing. The most powerful edge I have, as a religious naturalist, is that, unlike the supernatural beliefs, I get to show kids that everything they learn on the Discovery Channel is part of their "religion" — indeed that is a focus of religious education as they are all Children of the Universe. Just this morning I was on the Atheist Media Blog (<http://www.atheistmedia.com/>) and watched the embedded video "ABC Nightline: De-Baptism by Blow-Dryer" http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XTv1tt2PkIE&feature=player_embedded which profiles atheist Jerome Kagan. The 7-minute clip ends with the news that his son is now a fundamentalist preacher.

Okay this is just one example, but while we're visiting Unitarian churches it is not uncommon for people to come up to us and ask what book they might be able to purchase for their grandchildren — who are being raised fundamentalist, as their own son or daughter, though raised Unitarian, became that. Liberally religious, yes, fundamentalist — of course they are still loved, but there is a lot of unsavory baggage that goes with that, including a belief that their parents are going to hell. That is, to my mind, a very sad outcome for one's offspring. And so, yes, I am intolerant in that way.

2. TEXTBOOK-LEVEL SCIENCE IS OUR TRUSTED LARGER BRAIN.

Long ago, the world was so little known that it made sense for freethinkers to formulate their ideas about everything. But today, the worldwide, self-correcting (as you agree) enterprise of science deserves to be regarded as our sometimes fallible, but still necessary, larger brain. It does the freethinking for me at the level of understanding beyond my own sensory and thinking capacities. Having so little time with kids in a religious education context (as I am in and out as a one-time guest teacher), I have placed no emphasis on developing fun curricula that helps kids understand what makes science distinct. But now I can see that that is just as important as telling the cosmic story itself. So, I thank you for giving me the nudge to start working in this way.

Late this afternoon I'll be on the road for two days headed to our next destination, so I won't be opening email for awhile (as now I must clean the home we have been housesitting!)

Very much enjoying this dialogue -- and know that I am aching to get to the point where you and I come to some agreement about where we do genuinely differ, because I still surmise that we do (at least in ways that are very important to me).

• 7/22/10: **Chris Grostic**, member of Plymouth Church (UCC), Shaker Heights, Ohio

I greatly enjoyed reading your essay (and appendix) - timely, thoughtful, challenging, and oh-so-necessary. One point in your appendix caught my eye in particular:

"And if the kids do not arrive at conclusions similar to those of the New Atheists on their own, would we freethinkers and religious naturalists thereby be inadvertently promoting traditional religion by failing to provide our children and youth with all the relevant data?"

I think that's absolutely right. Children naturally grasp onto stories, myths, cultural norms as they grow, and we need to do far more than sit quietly. I wrote a letter to leaders in my own church recently expressing a similar point (and don't worry, I'm not just sitting back and hoping my church leaders take action):

"We welcome traditional believers, and rational believers, but we also tolerate and accept those who don't believe in the literal truth of any supernatural Biblical events.

"In my mind, though, tolerance and acceptance isn't enough. I want us to be a place that openly welcomes doubt as a path to higher understanding. I want to celebrate when a child tells us that they're starting to think some of this stuff isn't true. I want to be at a church where questioning young people find a home for their questions. In my experience, when we stop at tolerance and acceptance in this environment, the message too easily becomes: we accept you, even though you're wrong."

I have such gratitude for the work you and Michael are doing. I've always expected that, as my stepdaughters (now 7 and 4) grow older, we'll talk more and more about science, metaphor, and ancient peoples understanding the world as best they can (but without knowledge that we have). Now I can see how, even now, we can begin to tell them not just the stories I learned, but a Great Story :)