

Celebrating and Teaching the Epic of Evolution

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Visalia - Presentation 2-17-13

Exploring how we can celebrate and share the scientific story of the cosmos, of life, and of our human journey in meaningful and inspiring ways.

By Harold Wood

Today's service celebrates "Evolution Sunday," an annual day of worship begun in 2006 in which over 400 churches of all denominations celebrate evolution, in an effort to help reconcile science and religion. Thus, my message today is not only for our congregation, but a contribution to the wider movement of the "Evolution Weekend" inter-denominational program.

My presentation today relies heavily on sources from Connie Barlow and Michael Dowd and their website, thegreatstory.org, and Cathy McGowan Russell, and her website, epicofevolution.com. (Extensive passages from these two websites are gratefully used, with some adaptation.)

First let me tell a story about why I am so passionate about the idea of evolutionary spirituality.

In a *Visalia Times Delta* newspaper article dated January 4, 2013, the newspaper announced that volunteers were sought to teach a religious curriculum in an after-school program sponsored by the Child Evangelism Fellowship of Northern California, Tulare Kings Chapter.

The advertised Need: "Volunteers are needed to teach religious curriculum in an after-school program in public elementary schools throughout Tulare County. Called the Good News Club, the curriculum is ecumenical evangelical in nature.

Don Smith, board member for the Child Evangelism Fellowship, says this about the program: "The kids are very responsive. It's a way to get positive input into elementary-age kids." In Visalia, the Child Evangelism Fellowship has Good News Clubs at Conyer and Houston elementary schools and Valley Life Charter School.

You ask, "how did an evangelical organization get into our public schools without violating the principles of separation of church and state? The U.S. Supreme Court has ruled, specifically with reference to these Good News Clubs, that public school sites have, outside of school hours, an "open public forum" which is available to anyone who wishes to use them, and they are no less public than places like streets and sidewalks.

Now, if these Good News Clubs limited themselves to teaching the Golden Rule and Jesus' message of universal love, I would not be concerned.

But I fear they are not limiting themselves to that. According to a major website critiquing the Good News Clubs, <http://www.goodnewsclubs.info>, quoting liberally from their curriculum, The Child Evangelism Fellowship uses Good News Clubs to inject Young Earth Biblical Creationism, and fear of and contempt for science, into the public schools.

In Lesson 1 of Beginnings, the Child Evangelism Fellowship's lesson text advises instructors: "Since the theory of evolution is freely taught in schools, take this opportunity to help children see the problems with this theory and the logic of the biblical account." The lesson text also incites children to disrespect scientists — and teachers who teach their theories — as defiant "fools" who ["refuse to believe"](#) God, warns them that it is sinful to believe in scientific explanations for the origin of the universe, and reminds them that the punishment for the "sin" of "unbelief" is Hell.

And this message does not stop there. A recent article in Newsweek reports:

"The Christian Camp and Conference Association said 50 percent of the member camps reaching 6 million kids every year have a science curriculum about God's creation. At the summer camp at Timber-lee Christian Center in East Troy, Wisconsin, for example, campers go on a seven-room "Creation Walk" where each room showcases one of the Bible's seven days of creation. Says Karen Good, outdoor education director at Timber-lee, "The curriculum is designed to open their eyes so when they go back to school [and hear about evolution] they say, 'Oh, that sounds goofy!'"

According to Connie Barlow and Michael Dowd, this situation points to a huge need which can be addressed only by progressive churches, whether they are liberal Christian, Unitarian, Jewish, or other denominations. Neither public schools, private schools, or most churches can do what these progressive religious institutions can do. As U.S. Supreme Court Justice Brandeis told us in 1927 when ruling on an issue of censorship, the remedy to unpopular speech, or speech we dislike, is "more speech, not enforced silence."

Michael and Connie point the way to doing just that. They write:

"Liberal churches can offer young people an evolutionary worldview that delights children in their wonder years, offers immensely practical insights and guidance for those going through puberty, and empowers teens to ponder the meaning of life -- and their life -- as they edge toward adulthood.

"Young people find little of interest in the usual progressive-church fascinations with parsing scriptural passages to discern the actual utterances of the historical Jesus,

or, as in UU context, in our redefining what we mean by "God" when patriarchy and supernaturalism have been discredited.

“What young people are drawn toward is practical and scientifically proven assistance for living. Many youth suffer the traumas of divorced parents who treat one another as enemies. They have witnessed the stresses of life that lead older siblings into depression. Peers in their school have already been to rehab. They themselves may be slipping toward addiction or obesity. All this makes today's youth famished for help and hope -- a possibility that with the right guidance and resolve, they can do life better.”

And indeed Michael and Connie's wish is in fact being fulfilled in a few places. Some progressive churches and humanist organizations are offering summer programs which actually teach evolution. They recognize that many public and private schools delete evolution from the curriculum, or when it is taught, teach it as a set of dry facts rather than as the inspirational epic about the meaning of life that it actually is.

For example, in Camp Inquiry, a science-based camp in New York, campers participate in a "Creationism vs. Evolution" challenge, where they'll go on nature hikes to learn about adaptation and evolution; take plaster casts of animal tracks to start a discussion of how humans are related to certain animal lines; and study the arguments against "intelligent design."

Another summer camp, Camp Quest, a camp for “atheists, humanists, agnostics, freethinkers and others with a naturalistic world” has several branches throughout the U.S., including northern and southern California. Camp Quest also teaches campers about evolution. They explain, "Our sense is that evolution isn't being taught enough in schools or that people are becoming afraid to teach it," said Chris Lindstrom, director of Camp Quest West.

I know that Mr. Lindstrom's concern is true, from biology teacher friends of mine here in the Valley, who have told me that they gave up trying to teach evolution in their public school science classes because of all the conflict it creates.

Let's contrast these approaches with what Unitarian Universalists have to offer. UU's are in a unique position to offer a contribution to religious education that honors the scientific story of evolution, while simultaneously providing a view of the universe that provides meaning and purpose for our lives, simply cutting out all the debate about evolution vs. Creationism and intelligent design. For example, the Unitarian Universalist Church in Fresno (California) has been sponsoring a Chalice Camp for several years. Their Chalice Camp not only teaches about the Seven Principles, but in fun, creative ways, teaches children about scientific discoveries about human origins. Aubree Smith, their Religious Education leader, used to be a member of our Fellowship here in Visalia. She has designed a wonderful curriculum entitled: “Out of the Stars: Celebrating our Evolutionary Roots!”

The curriculum states its 5 goals clearly. It states that these goals will be met by each participant: not only the campers, but also the camp counselors and directors.

1. They will feel deep respect for the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part. They will fully understand that people are part of the universe and are connected to every part of the universe.
2. They will Understand that science can help us understand truths about ourselves, our past, and the universe.
3. They will Celebrate the miracle that is existence.
4. They will Feel at home in the Universe and special because each of us has amazing ancestors – all the way back to ancestral stars.
5. They will learn to love the universe, life, knowledge, Gaia, and each other.

The Epic of Evolution is an approach that shows how inspiring the full story of evolution really is. It is a grand view of the world we live in that makes mere Bible stories pale in significance.

The following is taken from epicofevolution.com, a website written by microbiologist Cathy McGowan Russell: She writes:

“The Epic of Evolution tells the story of the cosmos, of life, and of our human journey in meaningful and inspiring ways. The same story goes by other names, including “The Great Story” and “Big History,” among others. 20th century educator Maria Montessori called it "[cosmic education](#)." Historian David Christian recently gave a secular name to the interdisciplinary research that supports this big-picture form of education: "[big history](#)." This movement is now receiving major funding from the Gates Foundation - these topics are no longer just peripheral proposals from a few isolated experts.

“Science

“The phrase “Epic of Evolution” was coined by noted Harvard biologist Edward O. Wilson in 1978.

“The Epic of Evolution is the emerging cosmology of the universe based on the most robust and up-to-date discoveries from all scientific disciplines. While many people think of evolution solely in terms of biological evolution, the Epic of Evolution also includes the evolution of matter, stars, galaxies - and is still ongoing in human culture and imagination. This story begins with the Great

Radiance (a.k.a. Big Bang) and tells about the emergence of energy, matter, galaxies, stars, planets, chemicals, life, symbiosis, human culture, and our dreams for the future.

“Meaningful Story

“The Epic of Evolution is more than just science. It is science translated into a story that gives meaning and purpose to our lives. This is the story of our human origins. As a grand cultural narrative, it is like a myth that informs us of our place and purpose in the cosmos. It tells how the 13.7 billion year-old universe has come to know itself through the consciousness of human beings. For a growing number of people, the Epic of Evolution provides an interpretation of the scientific cosmology that is culturally and personally meaningful. This cosmology gives people reason to celebrate their place and purpose in the evolving universe. It also provides a useful map with which to navigate into the future. People of all cultures, religions and philosophies understand this universal Epic because people from all cultures, religions and philosophies contribute to the vast and growing mountains of evidence that support this story.

“Dialogue between Science, Religion and Philosophy

“The Epic of Evolution is a story that fosters dialogue between science, religion and philosophy. This story helps us see that science and religion are two windows on the same reality.

“Like more traditional epic tales such as those found in religious texts, the Epic of Evolution can serve as a roadmap to help people effectively navigate through life. According to astrophysicist Eric Chaisson, “. . . the integrated, coherent story of cosmic evolution – a powerful and noble epic – can act as a viable intellectual vehicle to involve all our citizens as participants, not just spectators, in the building of a whole new legacy.”

Turning back to CONNIE BARLOW and MICHAEL DOWD, they provide some particular points explaining further how teaching evolution can be not just abstract science, but something of meaningful assistance to help everyone - young people especially - cope with the issues of living.

To Connie and Michael, the story of evolution does much more than just helping explain our origins and our kinship with all life. It can help young people cope with our mis-matched instincts and become inspired to live more meaningful lives. They write:

“Our postmodern propensity to teach adolescents the facts of life in value-neutral ways made a great deal of sense in the half century in which the human mind

was regarded as a "blank slate. " We would tell our young people, "Learn how to make wise choices!" The implication was..... "..... and then you will make wise choices."

“But as all too many families have discovered, knowing right behavior does not make any of us impervious to serious lapses in judgment. Adverse consequences may darken a life for decades.

“Mismatched Instincts/Supernormal Allurements

“Today, the biological and behavioral sciences are painting a very different picture of what it means to be human in a fast-paced, high-tech world saturated by consumer and digital temptations. We learn that our rational powers are all too easily hijacked by our unchosen nature. Rationality is seduced into serving deep ancestral drives that no longer serve us.

“The fundamental challenge is this: We all have mismatched instincts and we are surrounded by supernormal allurements. Supernormal allurements are anything that our instincts say "yes" to ---- these are typically abundances and potencies that previous generations never faced. In her 2010 book, "Supernormal Stimuli: How Primal Urges Overran Their Evolutionary Purpose," Harvard psychologist [Deirdre Barrett](#) identifies a smorgasbord of ramped up allurements that our ancestors (even just a few generations back) never had to say no to: processed foods rich in sugar and fat, sitcoms and reality shows, Internet gaming and porn, romance novels, social networking sites, gossip-rich and fear-mongering "news" 24/7, as well as a plethora of mind-altering substances now available even at the playground.

“At best, these allurements waste our time or expand our waistlines; at worst, they become compulsions that trump any healthy priorities and dreams that happen to get in their way.

“Our animal instincts to survive and reproduce, and to bend our behavior toward whatever feels good, served our ancestors exceedingly well and for millions of years. None of us would be here were it not for those instincts. To them we bow in gratitude.

“Unfortunately, inherited instincts are no swifter in responding to cultural change than is the architecture of our vertebral column now that we sit 12 hours a day. Thus we can no longer expect our instincts to actually "serve" us and our communities if left to their own devices. Unlike all the wild creatures that fly and burrow and scurry around us, we alone must monitor our autopilot. To lead healthy, contributing lives, we need to choose against our instincts dozens, if not hundreds, of

times each day (less so if we carefully manage what we bring into our homes and with whom we interact). We have to scrutinize our natural urges; we may need to enroll the support of others; and we will sometimes need to make amends and forgive.

“This kind of world-view is substantially different than both traditional views of sinfulness and our secular society’s media telling us that “anything goes.”

“A Call To Action

“Thus, religious education in progressive churches must be first and foremost about realistic and resilient living grounded in "[public revelation](#)" -- that is, what [Reality/God](#) has revealed [through evidence](#). Progressive churches need to bring the fruit of the evolutionary and other sciences and humanities into the Sunday School classroom -- and do so in fun and artistic ways.

“Consider: If progressive churches do not pioneer relevant and motivating learning paths for our youth, who will? Where else are children and teens going to be given a broad and inspiring, evidence-based perspective for living and a sustained opportunity to reflect on their lives and cultural conditions?

“In our view, this is the primary reason why progressive churches should not be allowed to die. Half-empty churches are, of course, still doing important work in bringing elders together for their mutual enrichment and for serving the needy in their communities. But it is what churches can bring to young people that is the focus of our advocacy.

“The temptations of supernormal stimuli are guaranteed to capture all the waking hours of our youth above and beyond their scheduled classes, homework, and team sports. Why do homework or shoot a few hoops when there are so many other fun things to do: texting, Facebook friendships, music videos, fashion magazines, vampire fiction, video-gaming, Internet porn and endless sitcoms?

“Even so, many families still impose on their children (at least through Confirmation class) weekly church attendance.

“Therein lies the opportunity. So long as progressive churches continue to exist, parents who may not themselves be interested in church services will shop around for somewhere to install their kids on Sunday mornings. Their deepest hope: that their sons and daughters will pick up solid values, develop healthy habits of thought and action, engage in social action projects that move them out of self-

indulgence, and bond with peers in a healthy setting and with admirable adult mentors. Their deepest fear: that without this enforced opportunity, even the best parental efforts will be no match for the allurements and norms of frivolous and sometimes-dangerous popular culture.

“Toward A New Religious Education Platform

[See the PDF, here: <http://www.thegreatstory.org/progressive-re.pdf> if you'd like more detail and access to supportive curricula]:

“We propose a three-stage frame for revising religious education programs.

“Stage 1: Elementary-age children must be given the true story of their origins and identity from which they will acquire pride of ancestry and discover that they are related to everyone and everything -- even the stars.

“Stage 2: Children navigating the challenges of puberty must learn that the ancient instincts they inherit have not kept pace with fast-changing cultures and technologies -- and that caution, support and compassion are therefore essential. Learning to observe and witness each of [the four components of their evolved, quadrune brain](#) is a skill no less necessary for successful living than is basic literacy.

“Stage 3: Older adolescents should be encouraged to reflect on the cultural and technological gifts they have inherited from preceding generations -- and what satisfactions they, too, might achieve by contributing to this immense, unbroken journey of life. Philosophical questing, skeptical inquiry and meaning-of-life discussions are easily evoked and supported at this stage of life.

“Teaching Bible stories or debating philosophy is not the way for today's churches to discharge their formidable responsibilities to serve theologically progressive (and outright secular) families. Instead, our churches need to take on the worldview and self-cultivation tasks that public schools and religiously diverse private schools will never fully be able to do. The mere hour or so that churches have with children and teens on a weekly basis -- and unburdened by any need to drill and test -- is, after all, too precious to waste.”

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In conclusion, I would add, for many of us adults, we also can be informed by this evolutionary world view - the Epic of Evolution - in a way that is inspiring, yet derived from science and fully consistent with our Unitarian Universalists ideals and principles. We can all learn more about this Epic, and share it wherever we can.