

OUR PLACE ON EARTH

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Ed Piper

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Today I would like you to meet **Michael Dowd**. He is not the kind of person you would ordinarily hear about in a UU sermon, because he is an **evangelist**. Before you skeptics head for the exit, let me explain. He was raised Roman Catholic but, like many of his peers during the 1970s, he struggled with alcohol, drugs, and sexuality. Later, while he was stationed with Army in Germany, he underwent a dramatic “born again” conversion. In his own words, “Six months later I experienced what Pentecostals call ‘baptism in the Holy Spirit,’ evidenced by speaking in tongues. For the next three years, the people I fellowshiped with, the books I read, the television programs I watched, and the music I listened to all reflected a fundamentalist perspective strongly opposed to evolution.

“I was taught that evolution was the devil. It was antithetical to the Word of God and would seduce people away from godly thinking and living. I believed that Darwinism was the root of most social problems, and I was deeply concerned for my friends and family—especially those caught in the snares of a secular humanistic worldview. I even distributed anti-evolution tracts and was eager to debate anyone who thought the world was more than six thousand years old.” [Michael Dowd, *Thank God for Evolution!* p. xxv] Then things began to change. Even at conservative Evangel College in Missouri, his professors instilled an appreciation for evolution. He developed a friendship with a Roman Catholic hospital chaplain who identified himself as a “Buddhist-Christian” and embraced evolution as part of his personal theology. The next critical step in Michael Dowd’s spiritual journey occurred when he attended a course titled “The New Catholic Mysticism.” The course leader, Dowd explains, “began by telling the scientific story of the Universe in a way that I had never heard it told before—as a sacred epic. Less than an hour into the evening, I began to weep. I *knew* that I would spend the rest of my life sharing this perspective as great news.” [p. xxvi]

The final step in Michael Dowd’s personal transformation took place when he married Connie Barlow, a self-described atheist and author of several books on evolution. For the past five years, the two of them have been traveling as itinerant evolutionary evangelists—speaking at more than 500 churches, spiritual centers, colleges, and schools all across North America. Most of you are familiar with the array of Darwin-related fish emblems displayed on the rear of Glen and Pat Patterson’s Ford Explorer. On the van that serves as home on the road for Michael and Connie is displayed a Jesus fish and a Darwin fish—kissing!

This dynamic duo is among a cluster of writers—many of them listed on the back of the order of service—who are bridging the gap between science and religion. Cosmologist Brian Swimme says, “We are in the midst of a revelatory experience of the Universe that must be compared in its magnitude with those of the great religious

revelations. And we need only wander about telling this Great Story to ignite a transformation of humanity.” [quoted by Dowd, p. xxix] These bridge-builders are offering a middle ground between two extreme positions: the Creationists who regard the Bible as a geology textbook and the hard-line critics who view fundamentalist religion as the greatest obstacle to human progress. Michael Dowd’s book, *Thank God for Evolution!* offers an attractive alternative to these two extremes.

What I like about the approach of Dowd and Barlow is its **accessibility** to a broad audience. With his evangelist’s ear, Michael Dowd is not above using catchy words to convey complex ideas. They call their position “**creatheism**.” (Supposedly, Michael pronounces it “cree-uh-THEISM” while Connie considers herself a “cree-ATHEIST.”) “For creatheists ‘God’ is a holy name for Ultimate Reality—the all-encompassing Wholeness—that which includes yet transcends all other realities. Creatheism regards Nature as a revelation or expression of the divine—particularly in its *emergent creativity*. Creatheism understands humanity as a self-reflective aspect of Creation that allows the Wholeness of Reality, seen and unseen, manifest and unmanifest—i.e., God—to be honored in conscious awareness and to guide our own deliberate manifestations of that divine creativity.” [Dowd, p. 119]

Dowd explains, “When I say ‘God,’ I am not talking about something or someone that can be believed in or not believed in. I’m talking about the Ultimate Wholeness of Reality, seen and unseen—the whole shebang—which is infinitely more than anything we can know, think, or imagine.” [pp. 113-14] Both science and religion rely on **metaphors** to describe Ultimate Reality. Scientific metaphors such as *Big Bang*, *black hole*, and *charmed quark* help translate enormously complicated facts into understandable terms. Religious metaphors for God such as *Father*, *Mother*, *Lord*, or *Grandfather* translate our understanding of Ultimate Reality into the more familiar terms of human relationships. Problems arise whenever metaphors are taken literally. Michael Dowd is especially critical of biblical literalism. “To continue to insist on a literal interpretation of the Bible in this age of science is to make an idol of human language, while underestimating both the extent of divine revelation and the depth of human fallibility.” [p. 311]

The core of the gospel being preached by Dowd, Barlow, and others is a **sacred view of evolution**. Connie Barlow says, “Tell me a creation story more wondrous than that of a living cell forged from the exploding stars. Tell me a story of transformation more magical than that of a fish hauling out onto land and becoming amphibian, or a reptile taking to the air and becoming bird, or 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.” [quoted by Dowd, p. 130] One of the Creationists’ main arguments against evolution is that it is “only a theory.” Copernicus’s proposal that Earth orbited the Sun was **only a theory** until it became a fact confirmed by astronomers’ observations. Albert Einstein’s general theory of relativity was **only a theory** until it was confirmed during a solar eclipse that gravity influenced the trajectory of light waves in space.

“Similarly,” says Michael Dowd, “less than two hundred years ago, when Darwin proposed that the complexity and diversity of life on Earth were not the result of supernatural and instantaneous creation, that proposal was *just a theory*—an outlandish, scandalous theory at that. Today, that life on Earth came into being over a vast span of time, and complex forms emerged from simpler forms is *fact*. [Some people] may not feel comfortable calling this biological history of life on Earth *evolution*. . . . Nevertheless, Darwin’s *theory* that life emerged over a long history, and by means internal to natural Earth processes, has now become *fact*.” [Dowd, p. 69] The visionary evolutionary biologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin wrote, “Is evolution a theory, a system, or a hypothesis? It is much more: it is a general condition to which all theories, all hypotheses, and all systems must bow and satisfy henceforth if they are to be thinkable and true. Evolution is a light illuminating all facts, a curve that all lines must follow.” [quoted by Dowd, p. 68]

Evolutionary spirituality has profound **ethical** implications for our relationship to our home on planet Earth. “Our present urgency,” says Thomas Berry, “is to recover a sense of the primacy of the Universe as our fundamental context, and the primacy of the Earth as the matrix from which life has emerged, and on which life depends. Recovering this sense is essential to establishing the framework for mutually enhancing human-Earth relations for the flourishing of life on the planet.” [quoted by Dowd, p. 122] During the Q&A period following one of his presentations, a man in the audience raised his hand to speak. “I’m an oncologist. I work with cancer patients every day. From my vantage point, we are inadvertently destroying our larger body because we lack evolutionary guidance. We’re acting like cancer cells, rather than immune cells. . . . A cancer cell is a normal cell that, for one reason or another, loses its genetic memory. Cut off from the wisdom of millions of years of developmental guidance, it stops cooperating with the rest of the body. It experiences itself as separate from the body, overpopulates, and proceeds to consume the very organism that supports it. . . . We call our society a consumer society, and to consume something is to eat it up, right? I believe we are consuming the planet because, like cancer cells, we’re trying to live without evolutionary wisdom.”

What an unforgettable metaphor! Must we continue to consume our planet like cancer cells? In my next monthly installment in this sermon series, I will discuss “our place” in the evolution of intelligence on Earth, and how that has affected our sense of morality. In the meantime, let me end with this quote from Albert Einstein: “A human being is part of the whole, called by us ‘Universe,’ a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest—a kind of delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a prison, restricting us to our personal desires and to affections for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.” [quoted by Dowd, p. 315] That to me is the challenge we must all face in the present, and the legacy we must pass on to future generations.