

sermon template

Evolutionary Spirituality

Looking at Life with Deep-Time Eyes

Based on sermon prepared by Mary Hitch, which she delivered at
Comal County Unitarian Universalist Society (in New Braunfels, Texas) • July 10, 2011

NOTE: Mary Hitch, Michael Dowd, and Connie Barlow all have agreed to post this sermon template and to encourage other proponents of inspirational evolutionary messages to use it (or any portions of it) in this original form or as you may wish to edit it. Much of the text is drawn directly from Michael Dowd's book, *Thank God for Evolution* — but you will not find those quotations singled out here. The intent is to have the ideas of the sermon flow, rather than to distinguish prior writings. We do not regard that technique as plagiarism; rather, it is spreading the "Good News" of evolution, no less than evangelical preachers regularly borrow one another's sermons. So you need only provide attribution once; we suggest doing so near the beginning, as Mary Hitch has done.

You will, of course, need to personalize the beginning of the sermon: to introduce your audience to why you find these learnings compelling. Toward this end, the first 5 paragraphs of Mary's original sermon have been stripped away. So you will need to add your own story there.

Here is the sermon summary used for the Comal County UU church newsletter:

Recognizing and honoring all those who have gone before us, from our amphibian ancestors and early mammalian progenitors, helps us to realize our interconnectedness. Intuitive drives, which in our ancestors ensured survival, are still alive and well in us, and are often mismatched with our current culture. Understanding this is the first step in managing counterproductive behavior.

MARY HITCH received her B.A. in zoology from University of Texas at Austin and an M.S. in biochemistry from Texas A&M University. She is past president and current member of Comal County Unitarian Universalist Society in New Braunfels, Texas. She contributed her sermon as a lay member of the congregation. She recalls:

When *Thank God for Evolution* came out several years ago, I bought four or five copies. I gave one to our church library right away. I knew I wanted to spread the word about the great ideas expressed in the book. I saw Michael present in San Marcos about a year ago, and I kept up somewhat with the conversations with other theological leaders that he produced. The whole area is of great interest to me. When I started researching the web, I found thegreatstory.org and all the wonderful resources.

As I mentioned in my talk, I do believe that there is something akin to 'salvation' when one truly begins to appreciate our grand history. As well, we see each other and all other life as the wonder that it is. Respect and even reverence follow.

Click for information about the publications of [Michael Dowd](#) and [Connie Barlow](#).
For more on our very relaxed views about "plagiarism" consult our webpage titled:

["Plagiarism — Or Collective Intelligence?"](#)

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INSERT YOUR OWN INTRODUCTION as to why this topic is meaningful to you and what you hope your audience will experience during this talk.

The science-religion discussion is dealt with extensively in Michael Dowd's 2008 book, *Thank God for Evolution*. Dowd is an "evolutionary evangelist" of "religious naturalism." He and his wife Connie Barlow, an acclaimed science writer, have been crisscrossing the nation since 2002, living permanently on the road, teaching and preaching "the marriage of science and religion for personal and planetary wellbeing." Their website, thegreatstory.org, is an excellent resource in the evolutionary spirituality movement. My talk this morning draws heavily from their work. But I will touch on only a small part of it — specifically, on the practical and spiritual importance of understanding important discoveries in evolutionary brain science and evolutionary psychology.

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Unlike the Biblical Creationist's story that says we were created just as we are now, the evolutionist's Great Story tells us that we have been many things on the way to becoming who we are today.

Religious naturalist Loren Eiseley, from his classic essay "Starthrower," writes: "We are rag dolls made out of many ages and skins, changelings who have slept in wood nests, or hissed in the uncouth guise of waddling amphibians. We have played such roles for infinitely longer ages than we have been human."

In contrast one might hear a Creationist protest: "Now don't tell me I'm related to monkeys!" Well, truth be told, DNA research proves that we are not only related to monkeys; we are closely related to zucchini! So, let's get over it already!"

* * *

It is widely understood that the pieces of the evolutionary puzzle are found in the fossil record. But they are also found in our very own tissues. Our fetal brain also develops following patterns that were established by our forbears who were way down in the trunk of the tree of life. The human brain is an emergent phenomenon in which physical structures

and neurological connections developed in an additive and exploratory way over hundreds of millions of years.

Our rudimentary brain, the cerebellum and brainstem together handle our involuntary breathing, basic bodily movements and functions and our acquired “muscle memory”. This part of our brain, inherited from our reptilian ancestors, is the seat of instinctual drives related to Safety, Sustenance and Sex. These drives are least subject to conscious control. This is what Dowd likes to call our Lizard Legacy. (Cite graphic on back of OOS) Here resides also the seat of deep territorial defensiveness and aggression when our boundaries are threatened. If you experience road rage, it is likely your Lizard Legacy is the reason. Furthermore, if individuals are challenged by food, sex, drug, and other physical addictions, it is the reptilian brain that is the deepest (though not only) source.

As the reptilian line evolved toward greater physiological and social complexity, the rudimentary brain grew to include the amygdala, hippocampus, thalamus, hypothalamus, and insula, grouped together and known as the limbic system. Reptiles do not have a limbic system, but all mammals do. It is the seat of deep emotions, and its health and wellbeing seem to require periodic entry into the dream state. The limbic system evolved as a way to provide more nuanced behavior and experiential learning. Because mammals suckled their young, emotions for familial bonding were critical for survival. The primary mother-progeny bond was followed by further adaptation of social groups that protected the mother and young. Such non-kin bondedness prompted the emergent drives of status-seeking and reciprocal cooperation.

This Furry Li'l Mammal (or paleo-mammalian) part of our brain ramps up the reptilian drives into emotionally powerful, and thus consciously experienced, imperatives. Mind-altering substances that make us feel happy, unstressed, or powerful—or that simply numb our unwelcome emotions—can give rise to addictions for which this part of the brain plays a central role.

To survive in even more complex societies and environments, our ancestors developed skills for symbolic language, rational thinking and logical analysis. This neo-mammalian brain, our neocortex, is what Dowd (and Buddhists) call our Monkey Mind. It is a chatterbox and a calculator, jumping from thought to thought, incessantly talking to itself (fretting about the past and worrying about the future), performing rudimentary cost-benefit analyses and computing the balance of favors and debts in each of Furry Li'l Mammal's social

relationships. Monkey Mind is the part of the brain we need to quiet when we want to be in the present moment.

Here is where big-brained mammals have the capacity to consider alternatives and thus choose among the often-competing reptilian and paleo-mammalian drives. For example, imagine that you are an elk or an antelope. Do you choose to go down to that succulent patch of grass near the thicket, or do you stay in the open where you can easily spot approaching predators but where the food is less appealing? Here you have the competing reptilian drives of sustenance versus safety. Do you try to sneak a copulation with a female in the herd, even though that would put you at risk of injury by the big-antlered male who has claimed all the females for himself? Sex versus Safety.

Humans living in complex social groups and in a world co-created by symbolic language face additional dilemmas unique to our species: Do I keep my sexual infidelity a secret and thus risk being found out and living in fear of being found out, or do I confess to my spouse and risk being shamed, shunned, or divorced? Here our reptilian sex drive and our mammalian bond-seeking and status-seeking drives are in conflict.

Indeed, all the competing drives and the complexity of our lives in a civilized world can propel us into a state of incessant worry and despair: Monkey Mind and Furry Li'l Mammal team up in an endless loop of negativity that can escalate to disastrous ends, bringing on depression and even suicide.

The most recent part of the human brain to evolve is our prefrontal cortex. Here [touch forehead] is where the most advanced and complex functions in all of the brain are performed, the so-called executive functions. These functions are linked to intentionality, purposefulness, and complex decision-making. They reach the most significant development in our own species; arguably, they make us human. The prefrontal cortex is the brain's command post. Motivation, drive, foresight, and clear vision of one's goals are central to success in any walk of life. All these prerequisites of success are controlled by the prefrontal cortex. This brain region is the home of consciousness—the high-lit land where the products of the brain's subterranean assembly lines emerge for scrutiny. Self-awareness arises here. This area of our brain is not fully functional, on average, until the age range of 22 to 25 years.

It is here in our prefrontal cortex where a new drive can emerge that is strong enough to help us choose among competing mammalian and reptilian drives—and to do so with less

stress and far more conviction. It is here that we can create and nurture a higher purpose, which Dowd playfully calls our Higher Porpoise.

One of the concepts arising from this deep-time understanding of our instincts is the mismatch theory, which explains some of our most counter-productive behaviors. Our Lizard Legacy and Furry Li'l Mammal worked just fine in their contexts of origin—where salty, sweet, and fatty foods were prized for their mineral and calorie content, and where, maybe, you got a little buzz if you were lucky enough to find some fermented fruit. But today there is a mismatch in how they function in a culture of fantasy foods and mind-altering drugs easily acquired and in fabulous supply.

And then there is sex. Our instincts are telling us to pass on our genetic material. The more testosterone you have, the more you hear that message!

Studies show that people in leadership or high social status positions — like elected officials, athletic and entertainment stars, and ministers of large congregations — have higher levels of testosterone. One can almost imagine the leaders of the early church, as they continually dealt with this incessant mind-numbing sex drive, deciding that banning women from their lives by decreeing celibacy was the only way to get their mind and their life's direction back on track.

Also, consider the ridiculous excesses of the media's penchant to focus on heinous crimes, and dramatic testimonies from family members when a tragedy strikes. In the days when our instinctual priorities were shaped, there was no such thing as global warming and no possibility for forward-looking remediation. But there were many instances in which our survival depended on a developed curiosity about the human drama, and our drive to understand the causes and consequences of human fallibility and maliciousness.

Virtually every aspect of our species-wide psychological inheritance that seems troublesome today is part of a package that evolved to serve individual and collective wellbeing in ancestral environments. Forcefully trying to eliminate the shadow side of our reptilian, mammalian, and hominid instincts—what could be called our “unchosen nature”—is neither realistic nor desirable. Rather, evolutionary psychologists invite us to channel those troublesome energies in safe and productive ways, while consciously strengthening drives that promote our individual and collective wellbeing. More to the point, we can call upon our Furry Li'l Mammal — who directs us to form bonded relationships — to keep our reptilian drive for sexual adventure from unraveling our marriages. We can call upon our

mammalian obsession with status to trump the Lizard Legacy's quest for sex and sustenance. Finally, we can cultivate a Higher Porpoise powerful enough to step in and insist that it is time to do some yoga, put on a motivational CD, read some inspiring literature, pick up the phone and call our 12-step sponsor or our integrity partner or friend — or to otherwise engage in some activity that will dissuade or distract us from acting out in emotionally, physically, or socially destructive ways.

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So, in closing, let's think for a moment about what a deep-time perspective can provide us?

When we think about our Earth's four and a half billion year history and our species being such a minute part of that history, any sense of hubris disappears. The arrogance of the human species cannot stand against that stage. We are brought into a deep and abiding sense of connection to our brothers and sisters among the plant and animal worlds. Our sense of family or tribe extends to global proportions.

When we understand the true miracles of deep time, the development of systems of increasing complexity — from single celled organisms to Bengal tigers; from primordial ferns to the diverse ecosystems of the Appalachian mountains; from reptiles living a solitary existence to the grand diversity of humans living in Manhattan — we are awed and filled with gratitude that we (as individuals) exist at all! The complex systems that are necessary for us to just sit here and breathe and hear and see and comprehend are mind-blowing and worthy of worship. Such a sense of wonder and gratitude is energizing and a foil for depression.

When we understand and recognize our strong instincts — our inherited proclivities — those that served our ancestors well and are the reasons for our very existence today, we can accept them and then go on to develop new habits that we can call on when we feel drives kick in that are in conflict with our Higher Porpoise.

When we understand our place in the Great Story, we find a sense of peace. We are part of something grand and awesome. Our death is a part of the plan. We 'go' where the frogs, 'gators, dogs and mosquitoes go when we die — and that's not only OK; it is right. We will recycle. Our carbon and our calcium will be taken up into soil or washed into the sea to provide building blocks for the next wave of life. And so the beat goes on.

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The following was eliminated from the delivered presentation for brevity:

The public revelations of science teach another comforting truth: emotions evolved for many good reasons. Emotions are the means by which the parts of our brain that are unconscious communicate with the parts of our brain that “we” can readily access. Emotions are the way that our paleo-mammalian brain, with its powerful drives for bonding and status, communicates its wishes and its fears to our conscious awareness. Emotions are also the way that aspects of the reptilian drives (for safety, sustenance, and sex) are translated within the old mammalian limbic system into emotionally charged signals that our conscious brains then take as directives for acting in the world. Emotions are also the means by which a consciously chosen Higher Purpose is invested with the energy it requires to become a beacon in our lives. Indeed, without the deep motivations of these two ancient, unconscious realms—our Lizard Legacy and our Furry Li'l Mammal—we would have no drive to do anything at all.

We are, of course, responsible for how we act upon our emotions and for how we choose between competing drives. We are responsible for what we choose to say (or blurt out) as well as what we do. We are also responsible for how well we clean up the messes we make (and have made) just by following our instincts and doing what comes naturally. We are responsible for whether we put in place structures of support and accountability that will strengthen the positive drives that we pray will prevail. Nevertheless, progress begins with full acceptance of where we really are. So whenever we are challenged by our inherited proclivities, or when we are disappointed with the choices we make and in the mistakes we seem to keep repeating, we can take some comfort in this: Each and every aspect of our behavioral repertoire in some way served the survival and reproductive interests of our hominid, mammalian, or reptilian ancestors.

Sources

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