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# FORUM: Epic, Story, Narrative

## A Cosmogen Dialogue



*Editor's Note: This dialogue took place on our Cosmogen listserve, beginning with a September 1998 posting by Connie Barlow. Permission to publish these listserve postings has been obtained from the participants. See the article on page 18, Does the Epic Need Art?, for a summary of the IRASnet dialogue mentioned in Barlow's first paragraph.*

**Connie Barlow:** Hello Cosmogeners. The listserve of the Institute on Religion in an Age of Science has had some interesting discussion of late on the role of myth (and hence art) in conveying the scientific worldview, with "Epic of Evolution" sometimes being used directly in the conversation. I'd like to hear from Cosmogeners on a particular question I have related to that. There is likely no single right answer. It is, rather, a question of usage.

How do you/we use the terms, *narrative*, *story*, and *epic*?

Larry Edwards and I discussed this a bit on the phone today, and because *epic* is in the title of our group, it is an especially useful question. Larry and I seem to agree that *scientific narrative* is the most bare-bones. This is the sort of thing one encounters in a school textbook that tries to present in a few paragraphs or a chapter the sequence of events that constitute the history of the universe and life on Earth. Larry regards the next step as *story*—with a small s. Beyond that, moving into the mythic realm, is *Story* with a big S, as in the Swimme and Berry "Universe Story." *Story* with a big S is a culture's grounding origin story. I think Larry sees epic as a synonym for *Story* (right, Larry?)

My own personal usage is somewhat different. *Scientific narrative* is the first step one takes, beginning with the zillions of scientific facts and theories, as one has to make a choice of what to include and what not to include in the narrative telling. *Story* (big or little s; I make no distinction) has value mixed in with the facts. There is a reason one tells a story, and it might be to impart a sense of wonder, to make one feel at home in the universe, to inculcate ecological consciousness, to subtly convey that generosity is a good thing, etc.

I personally prefer to reserve the word *epic* to renditions of *story/Story* that boldly move into the realm of myth, aesthetic, art. What is myth? The IRAS listserve had a lot of discussion on that question. What do Cosmogeners think?

With the exception of the experiential ritual of the Cosmic Walk, I'm not sure the Story of the Universe has really yet moved into the mythic realm. And in order to move deeply into the epic stream of the mythic realm, there may need to be some sense of heroic action through time. Remember our listserv discussion last year on "Who's the hero?"

*Editor's note: see sidebar.*

The Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry book, *The Universe Story*, does present mythic heroes—with names like Tiamat and Kronos, drawn from world mythology—but it is not an exclusively mythic telling. It drops in and out of the mythic. It is not yet on the level of *The Odyssey*, or *The Enuma elish*, or *Genesis*. Part of the reason, of course, is that our culture is so unfamiliar with the scientific narrative that it is hard to tell the story in purely mythic language (and expect to be fully understood) without having to back off on occasion and give a little background—Biology 101.

For me personally, I like to think of the Epic of Evolution with full-blown, yes even personified, heroes. The Great Star Tiamat, whose supernova explosion brought forth the heavier elements now circulating in me is a hero figure. I love calling this hero Tiamat, rather than simply saying "the supernova." It was Swimme and Berry that made that leap in nomenclature. As it turns out, the word Tiamat is now very metaphoric, as apparently the current scientific view is that the heavier elements in our solar system may be the colliding outwash of not a single giant star but maybe fifty. Tiamat is thus an aesthetic manipulation of the likely real underlying story.

In our phone conversation, Larry mentioned the difficulties of using words like proton and electron in the Story and having that sound mythic. Those words sound too much like science. Somebody on the IRAS listserv conversation mentioned that they can't see how you can craft a myth out of the term "Big Bang." I don't think you can, but there is no need to anyway. That's why there are terms like "Primordial Flaring Forth," or "Great Radiance," or "The Big Bloom." But for protons and electrons, there is no alternative.

Optimistically, I hope the problem in those words sounding so secular is temporary. In my view, if the first place children hear the word proton is in the context of an Epic ritual they participate in every year, then by the time they encounter that word in their school textbooks it will sound like their religion to them—and only

secondarily like science. As I told Larry, I am looking forward to when my nieces encounter the CHNOPS formula in their biology books, because they will think, "Wow! I already know that! Carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, oxygen, phosphorus, and sulfur were the six elements we sang during our Tiamat ritual on Christmas eves!" (CHNOPS are the six most abundant elements in the human body.)

In my realm of evolutionary biology, I think the problem of secular words used for mythic purposes is no problem at all. Who among us has heard of "The Garden of Ediacara?" Yes, folks, that's a real scientific term for the first multicellular beings recorded in the fossil record, before the hard-shelled trilobites, and yes, one view is that their forms reflected a world in which predation—Kronos—had not yet evolved (hence, the allusion to the peaceful Garden of Eden). Here's another: Ichthyostega. Now how many of you have heard of that ances-

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tor? Ichthyostega, one of the first tetrapods (four-leggeds) to leave the sea for "the adventure of gravity and weather" is a ready-made hero figure. Just think how much kids, on their own, outside of any school assignment, groove with the names of dinosaurs? Real, hard-core evolutionary biology is ready-made for myth-making.

Anyway, I hope this stimulates some listserv conversation. Again, the basic question is how do you/we use the terms *narrative*, *story*, and *epic* distinctively?

**John Brewer:** Hello, Connie, and thanks for the infuriatingly provocative essay and questions. The following commentary is typical of my stream of consciousness.

Yesterday afternoon I chatted briefly with a fellow U.U. [Unitarian Universalist] member, a woman in her 70s who is an activist in the sense that she would like to see more "spirituality" (I would say "depth,"

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## Who/What Is the Hero?

*Editor's note: These extracts (all permissions granted) are drawn from a Cosmogen dialogue that took place very soon after this listserv was retooled to serve the fledgling Epic of Evolution community in November 1997. It all began when Jeremy Sherman asked, "In the Evolutionary Epic, who/what is the hero?"*

**Carl Barrentine:** Jeremy's question inspired me to rethumb the pages of E. O. Wilson's book, *On Human Nature*, where I find on p. 201, "The evolutionary epic is probably the best myth we will ever have." Wilson goes on to say (pp. 203–204), "Every epic needs a hero; the mind will do. Even astronomers, accustomed to thinking about ten billion galaxies and distances just short of infinity, must agree that the human brain is the most complex device that we know and the crossroads of every major natural science."

**Philip Kukulski:** Each of us is the hero. Every character in a fairy tale is part of the listener's psyche. Stories are to help us live our lives.

**Jim Fitzpatrick:** Who is the hero? The child. The next generation. The child in all of us. Those willing to step forward, to venture into the unknown, into the untried and the untested. The pioneers. Those balanced on the cutting edge, the ones willing to try, despite all reason and rhyme, perhaps even somewhat foolishly, attempting where others have failed or deemed the project undoable. Those are the heroes we teachers work with every day in our classrooms, where young children truly gaze at the heavens and really ask, Why is the sky blue?... The hero is within us.

**Connie Barlow:** One manifestation of the hero in the Epic of Evolution that I particularly like for its utter tangibility and presence is the manifestation that I like to call The Old Ones. Yes, Ursula, I know that all species alive today are equally old; nevertheless, it is some-

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others would say “mumbo jumbo”) included in our program offerings this year. I said that many of our U.U. members have a constitutional allergy to God-talk words such as communion, redemption, consecration, sacrifice, sacred (I really need to fill out this list). These words have been “owned” by ordained church officialdom and Sunday school teachers for so long that when you say them, people just roll up their eyes. And yet the words carry—or should carry, in my secular and iconoclastic opinion—vital and essential meanings. The trick is how do you revitalize them in an age in which the X generation is gradually assuming greater prominence?

Jesus had the luxury of not being burdened with protons and neutrons. He was at his best when talking about water, bread, wine, leaven, harvesting, and so forth. I cannot vouch for Buddha, Mohammad, Lao-Tzu, or other religious founders whose names I can barely spell, but I would guess that they also used down-home metaphors. Their focus has only marginally been on the physical universe. Rather, it has been on the proper relationship between humans and god(s), on the function of society, ethical behavior, human suffering, human limitations, human destiny, and so forth.

When, starting in the Renaissance, proto-scientists began taking leave of common-sense understandings of nature, this marvelous gap opened up between commonplace and elitist use of descriptive language, and the best we have been able to do to repair the damage is put electrons in Walt Disney science lessons and give them Texas accents.

But just as I have written this, I remind myself that Highly Abstract discussions (albeit elitist discussions) were going on in the 2nd and 3rd centuries A.D. about the “substance” of Christ. What Christ was “made of” was treated with as much dead-seriousness and intellectual ingenuity at that time as what dark matter is made of today. So the problem is not really whether protons and neutrons can be admitted to the sacred lexicon, but rather how many people should be expected to attain this level of sophistication and enthusiasm for dry stuff like Planck time when there is a home-run record about to be clobbered by not one but two Epic-caliber sluggers (“epic” from the values framework of professional baseball).

For literary-fogey reasons I will never be comfortable with *epic*. *Myth* is the right

word, but it has been flattened by flatulent overuse in the media and popular culture (what hasn't?!). Most of what is in the story is frankly theoretical and will always remain so—much to the glee of Creationists. We should in all honesty call our story a Thesis of the Adventure of the Universe. Boy, is that a big help or what?

**Ursula Goodenough:** I thought John Brewer's latest posting was fantastic, except that I'd love to take on his last paragraph/sentence. I don't think that it's the case that our understanding of biology is a thesis. No matter what else we may find out, it's going to be the case that genes do a huge amount, that they're encoded in DNA, that they dictate the structure of proteins, that life is driven by biochemical reactions, and that life has evolved. It's just not going

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to turn out some other way, on this planet anyhow, no matter what happens to our understanding of the nature of matter or the origins of the universe. So we do have something of a story here, a true story, that we can work with religiously should we elect to do so. For my money it doesn't do the whole job; for Connie it does the whole job (when infused). There are clearly all sorts of flavors right now, just as there were when e.g. Christianity was being put together, which took centuries to get the core in place and has been under revision ever since. Let's keep talking!!!

**Lauren de Boer:** Greetings everyone. I liked Connie's questions about narrative, story, and epic and would like to share a few random thoughts.

For me, the mythic is that which succeeds in connecting us with the deeper

truths of existence. The Cosmic Walk, as Connie says, certainly qualifies. This often happens on a nonverbal level, and thus the ineffability of what myth really is. Whether *The Universe Story* is mythic depends on the reader's readiness to experience it as such. It connects me. But Connie brings up a valid point about the level of knowledge in the culture at large of the scientific facts behind the story.

Part of the problem may lie in the fact that story, as the oldest transmitter of culture we have, is based in the human voice. *The Universe Story* is in a print medium, an entirely different form of creativity that relies much less on the emotional impact of facial expressions, voice intonation, etc. (Unless, perhaps, you're enthusiastically reading the book aloud to your partner in bed every night). I think it is harder for a print medium to be mythic for precisely this reason. Which is why it is so important for artists to enact the book in various art forms.

The term *Epic* is problematic for me from the outset because it's immediately connected to heroic narrative, which to many is connected to heroic consciousness. I prefer to think in terms of characters, or actors, or participants—not heroes—which is somewhat like Joseph Campbell's point that the Greek gods and goddesses correspond to various psychic states in the human and are a way of ordering cosmic forces within the individual in such a way as to be more comprehensible, or at the very least, not so overwhelming. The explosion of the star Tiamat, whether a single star or the “colliding outwash” of fifty stars, doesn't matter so much as the fact that it is an awesome cosmic event that is contained within me (and you and you) and can be expressed in a variety of forms. Mythically, it can be expressed as Tiamat. I rather like that. It could be expressed in other ways.

I think a little differently than Connie does in terms of the need for heroes in the Story (big S). I'm not so sure the heroic mode is a useful one today. In terms of interdependence, it doesn't fit for me. The Epic Society is an example, I think, of a group of people attempting to coevolve, to create new forms and ways of proceeding without having to rely on a hero to carry things. We each have something unique to contribute, and out of the creative tensions of varying viewpoints come the new forms required to be in connection with the reality of the unfolding evolutionary story. Some of us on this list tend more toward ritual embodiment. Some champion the rigors of science

and scholarship. Others are at various points along the continuum. But somewhere in the interstices, the idea is to support one another in creating new combinations that work. It's a kind of creative play, without which we'd be nowhere.

One of the dangers of the heroic mode for me is in the lurking tendency to think in terms of defeating the "other." It doesn't fit with the idea of co-creation. James Hillman suggests that heroic thinking leads to a fatalism, eventually, when the burden of carrying the heroic requirement can't be fulfilled. Tiamat is certainly an inspiring, seething, dramatic success story. As a sacrificial act, it involved zillions of actors, not one single heroic effort. One of my main problems with heroic consciousness is that it encourages the kind of individualistic thinking endemic to the industrial capitalism that is tearing up the planet—just as science colonized the domains of art and spirituality in its insistence that the scientific method is

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the only true measure of all knowledge, or as Christianity claimed to be the religion of the one true God. All three have been particularly crabby and exclusive in their claims on Truth—whether economic, divine, or material.

All of this doesn't mean I don't have my heroes or take comfort or inspiration in their example—one of those contradictions I can't explain. Perhaps hero as a word needs reinvention. For me, Swimme and Berry's naming of supernovas and microorganisms is an attempt not to personify but to *personalize* the rather cold, remote galaxies, waves, and "big bang" events of today's scientific cosmologies. The problem is not that they are in fact remote in terms of the dimensions of space and time, but that they have been presented in past scientific renderings of cosmic and Earth evolution as utterly alien and hence personally remote from us.

Myth transcends that remoteness by pointing up our interconnectedness in both

space and time—which is all the more reason to personalize the electron and the proton. Or microorganisms. (I suppose I'm opening myself to criticisms of anthropomorphizing—even a new kind of human hubris). A friend of mine, Gail Marie Kimmel, once did a wonderful theater rendition of the evolutionary story in which she referred to anaerobic bacteria as the "bubblers" and the emergent aerobic cell as "breathers" to great effect. The enactment included puppet figures behind a lighted screen. Mythically, it worked for me, partly because it was worked through art forms: storytelling and theater. It both instructed and worked on an emotional level. I would not have needed to know Biology 101 to have experienced this. However, Gail Marie, as the storyteller, would (and did).

I don't, however, believe we all have to be scientists to give an inspiring rendering of the story, even though we may need their help to do it with integrity. The mistake of science has not been in its focus on the physicality of the world but in its insistence that physicality is all there is, that religion had nothing useful to say, even about the deepest truths of existence. Or that art and aesthetics have nothing valid to say about Beauty because nothing subjective could ever be proven. I guess all of this is what we are striving to work out in the Society.

**John Brewer:** I was much impressed by the statement of Lauren de Boer on the "edge" of scientific epistemology: science can say that what it knows about empirically is definitely a part of the universe and of our lives, but it cannot maintain that all that is empirically knowable is necessarily all that is there. That is where various mystical frameworks are happy to take over. However, lacking the linguistic uniformity of science and lacking the methodological requirement of falsifiability, assertions about other realms of reality (well explained in Huston Smith's *Forgotten Truth: The Primordial Tradition* and in Ken Wilber's *The Marriage of Sense and Soul*) become testaments of faith. Now there is an old-fashioned concept for you! Could faith have a part to play in our enthusiasm for the cosmic adventure?

**Alan Tower:** Good to see the dialogue flaring forth again. For me the word *epic* carries with it both a scientific and artistic sensibility without the baggage of story and myth. Narrative is too dry. I think names and language are important, offering a portal or

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## Hero

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times useful to pay attention to those that are often called "living fossils." These are the organisms that took evolutionary shape long ago and managed to hang on through the present era despite mass extinctions. Nearly all of their colleagues are long gone, but yet here the Old Ones are with us today, looking pretty much as they did hundreds of millions of years ago. What a treat that such scientific knowledge brings to us! No other culture, in my view, has been gifted with such religiously profound knowledge of ancestors. For example, I am enraptured by the Ginkgo Tree, now that I know it is an Old One. I walk the sidewalks of New York City in awe of this denizen of the Jurassic that now thrives in an urban niche, this gymnosperm that bears broad deciduous leaves of a strange vein pattern, this "naked seed"-forming tree that nevertheless bears seeds like fruits. I collected the yellow leaves of Ginkgo this autumn, ironed them into wax paper, and plan to enjoy them on my windows all winter long.

**Olaf Nelson:** Gilgamesh is the hero of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. Odysseus is the hero of *The Odyssey*. Aeneas is the hero of *The Aeneid*. Sundiata, Roland, Beowulf, etc. Why can't Evolution be the hero of the Epic of Evolution? It is this process, after all, that we are eagerly watching, following, fearing, revering. If an epic celebrates the feats of a hero, then Evolution is our hero.

**John Brewer:** Swimme and Berry's *The Universe Story* gamely personifies some of the heroic events in the evolution of the solar system and in the evolution of life. The supernova that blew up (sacrificed itself) so that our bodies would have the carbon and other stuff they need; the first eukaryotic cell; the inventor of the chlorophyll molecule; and others. The names of these heroic actors are listed in the glossary of the book. I am guessing that Brian and Thomas came up with these names to help compensate for the absence of conventional heroes in the Universe Story. If the various parts of the

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a wall toward the mystery for us \_\_\_\_\_  
(fill in the blank with extreme adjectives)  
humans.

**Bill Bruehl:** Greetings all. Connie's questions about the use of the terms *epic*, *story*, and *narrative* and the responses that have come from others have hit me harder than I would have expected. I would have thought I could toss off a quick response because my business is to gather together settings, characters, and their actions and wants and to make plays, dramatic structures, out of these materials. But whoops! Not so! I had to think about this, and what is more, I find myself thinking very differently about these terms than Connie and those who have responded to her challenge. Ordinarily, I only think technically about these terms but I'll not burden y'all with that.

I gather that to Connie's responders the current, popular connotations of the terms *narrative*, *epic*, and *story* (big S or little s) place such burdens upon the words that they become nearly useless for the purposes of spreading the "Good News." There are, however, other words related to story besides epic and narrative. Would they work?

We might speak of a tale, for instance, but that doesn't do it either, does it? The connotations of *tale* are of a rather light, fanciful fantasy often told for the purposes of teaching. What about *account*, as in "Swimme's account of the history of the Universe"? Not quite it either. Sounds like something that's come from a prosecutor. *Anecdote* doesn't rise to the level we'd like either. Anecdotes are usually quite short, and the scientific method has taught us to discount anecdotal materials.

There is one thing to note about all of these words; they are related to counting. So it is when we "tell" a story. *Tell*, *tale*, *account* are all used equally for purposes relating to counting and to *recounting* an oft-told tale. I think of tellers in the bank gossiping. My guess is that the relationship goes back to a time when stories were told verbally using metric formulae to help the memory. Of course there is also the act of "gathering together" the information used in a story.

*Narrative* doesn't carry any of that cargo, but in recent years we see the word used frequently by writers on a somewhat popular level of social science, psychology, anthropology, and other related fields when they speak about something that they seem to regard as a fundamentally bio-

logical need, i.e., the need of individuals, societies, cultures, corporations, ball clubs—you name it—to develop their own narratives. The term is thus meant to be rather dry and technical and to impress us with an importance that the usages of *story* just don't have.

*Myth* is the most interesting of all these terms. On the one hand, it carries two opposing and contradictory meanings in the popular culture. It is either a false notion or a profound expression of archetypal human needs. It is interesting to ponder how this contrary usage has developed. I would suggest that it is a twentieth century phenomenon, a usage that comes with the new knowledge developed by science, which renders the traditional cultural myths at best metaphoric, at worst literally ridiculous. For example, how will a Roman Catholic scientist deal with the dogma of the Assumption? As a dogma it is meant to be a literal truth that Mary was lifted bodily

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into heaven. Does one accept the power of the metaphor and discount the dogma?

Twentieth century science has given us that choice, although many do not see the choice, seeing only what seems to be a curious demand that one blindly believe in the impossible. Too much of that makes the word *myth* seem like a false notion for many people. For myself, I'll continue to use *myth* as Joe Campbell would have it, or Claude Levy-Strauss. Myths for me do express profound, archetypal human needs. And they do it metaphorically. I think Tiamat comes as close as anything we have yet discovered to express an element in our story that touches upon a profound, archetypal need: the answer to the question, "Where do we come from?"

But the problem with most of the *Universe Story* is that it is not metaphoric. It is literally true. It is history and history ain't mythic. This is a bigger problem for us than we might realize. Can we create a twenty-first century myth? And if we do, will

we know it when we create it? Campbell liked *Star Wars*. He pointed to *Star Wars* as a twentieth century myth. I'm not so sure. I think it is too consciously based on a putting together of mythic elements. When that happens, the result always seems shallow—obviously cooked up to seem mythic. My conviction is that myth as an expression of profound human need arises out of the unconscious of the storyteller whose intention is to bring together the elements that best express a profound human truth. These elements are not always logical, rational, documented. They work best when they become allusive, many chambered, poetic.

There are those who will argue persuasively that there is a greater chance of twentieth century myths coming from Hollywood than any other source, that *Casablanca* is rising to the level of a twentieth century myth about the conflict between love and duty. Maybe. Others will firmly defend the mythic character of *Alien I* as an archetypal feminist expression. Could be.

Then there is Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, which I only need to mention. Who thinks that *Godot* is not mythic? And if it is, what makes it so?

When myths are alive and vital—i.e., infinitely resonant—artists have everything they need to work with. And so it was for the great painters and sculptors of the Renaissance, for example. When those great myths dried up, painters and artists had to look elsewhere for images that tap into their unconscious, and so it was for Picasso and the other great Modernists. Indeed, one way to look at Modernism is to see artists (of all genres except the Hollywood genre) breaking up the old images and ways of making images until they were exploring only their own internal unconscious and until that became the expression of ordered chaos as in the work of Pollock.

So what do we do? What are and where are the images? A Hubble shot of a galaxy? Great, but there is nothing like it on Earth, which means that it is hard to relate to. Will the story of an environmental hero make the grade? I don't think so. Their stories are history, and myth demands more than history. It demands entry into the ineffable. Poetry. Damn hard to do that in our time—but not impossible.

**Connie Barlow:** Hi Cosmogener. I've been eating up the exchange on Epic, Story, Narrative. Cosmogen conversation makes me so proud of us! Oops, Lauren, pride probably reveals my spiritual underdevelopment even more than does my declaration

that I want my origin story festooned with heroes (I'll maybe settle for *heroic*, the adjective, just as someone on the IRAS list-serve recently suggested that IRASians might well think of the scientific story as *mythic* rather than myth.) Seriously, Lauren, I was bowled over by your piece, as with the others. Because of you, I intend from now on to speak of *personalizing* rather than personifying the key characters/events in our Story (I cap that word for Larry).

**Patricia Gordon:** I have two responses to Frederic Wiedemann's disappointing experience in trying to get those following one of the Eastern paths excited about the Epic.

*Editor's note: Frederic Wiedemann and John Brewer had started up a fascinating, though somewhat tangential, subdialogue on Cosmogen that Patricia Gordon here weaves back into our Epic, Story, Narrative discussion. Frederic's report on his failure to ignite in his friends an excitement in the prospect of story has been adapted into a stand-alone essay, published on page 26 under the title, Celebration of the Story.*

On the one hand, if someone (no matter what their spiritual path or lack of path) is acting in their life in such a way that the planet's species and ecosystems can flourish and evolve, perhaps we should not be concerned if the Epic is not their cup of tea. Besides the desire to share the Epic's intrinsic beauty and awesomeness, isn't the main reason for sharing the Epic the desire to save the planet's biodiversity and ensure its continued evolution? I strongly agree with John Brewer's statement that "we need to figure out a way to recruit extrovert/sensates to our cause or we will never make it past the millennium. They are in the driver's seat." Should our outreach efforts be focused on those in the driver's seat? What kind of approach would it take to get to these people in an effective way?

On the other hand, because the Epic is a framework organically rooted in our global scientific culture and our historical period, and because it could serve as a meta-framework within which particular religious and nonreligious frameworks could possibly find common ground, it would be wonderful if we could bring everyone on board, both drivers and passengers. People yearn both for community and for uniqueness within that community. The Epic would seem to have the potential to meet both of these desires on a global scale.

Perhaps we could focus on the drivers because time is short, and species and ecosystems are rapidly going down, and yet, secondarily, give some thought to ways of bringing all frameworks on board. In this way, we could contribute to healing both the human/nature relationship and the human/human relationship. I agree with Lauren de Boer's view that we should focus on co-creation (and I would add community) in our presentations of the Epic. However, this may not be the best way to approach the drivers. They may prefer to think of themselves as the next individualistic heroes.

A specific note on approaching those who follow one of the Eastern paths: It might be helpful to point out that experiencing awareness of and identifying with the Absolute and transcending the world's maya (in this case, stories) is not incompatible with celebrating and loving the beauty of the universe and its unfolding. The point is to avoid becoming identified with partial phenomena (in this case, the universe or the Universe Story) and clinging to them. Avoiding stories

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is a sure sign that one is secretly clinging to them. An enlightened person can freely move in and out of immersion in partial phenomena as is appropriate to the situation.

**Connie Barlow:** Patricia's recent posting on Cosmogen ignites me to reenter the dialogue. Her first point about not needing to get everyone into the Epic is right on; so long as a worldview promotes a deep commitment to ecological values, that is all that really matters in the end. My own "ministry" is to appeal to the science-minded and to secular environmentalists—those who normally wouldn't think of themselves as being religious—and to help these groups see that a scientific worldview can carry the same emotional depth and artistic richness as supernatural paths.

Now to Patricia's point about "individualistic heroes." I sure am getting bashed by Cosmogener on my inclination toward

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## **Hero**

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Universe Story are ever to become campfire storytelling material, they will need to have a personal face. Personal relationships, intrigue, passion, suspense, risk, sacrifice are all common elements in classical epics such as Gilgamesh, Mahabharata, the Royal Epic of the Old Testament, and the Homeric epics. Gods serve admirably well in such stories because we can at least imagine what Gods might look like, how they might feel and behave (for better or deliciously worse). Not so with the bizarre, sexless, quantum phenomena of the early billionths of the first second of the Big Bang. With the Bible, for example, I can at least imagine something I don't believe. With scientific cosmology, I am asking myself to believe something I cannot imagine. But I keep reading these books and hoping. The question I would ask, rather, is "Is there enough personal drama for people to relate to in a story that otherwise resembles an updated, quasi-spiritualized remake of Carl Sagan's *Cosmos*?"

**Ursula Goodenough:** Seems to me that the dictionary definition of *epic* offered by Jeremy and worked with by Brian and Thomas is not the only way to go. As our human consciousness emerged, the workings of Nature were deeply mysterious compared with the motivations and behavioral strategies of our selves, and we therefore fashioned our cosmologies and our epics in our own image. With our current understanding of how things really happened, we realize that such pervasive anthropocentrism, while understandable, is something we need to deconstruct so that we can see ourselves as a part of the whole. One way to move toward that goal is to transfer our need for human heroes to our own histories and imaginative fiction, and slog away at the very difficult task of fashioning/accessing religious responses to the Epic of Evolution without first imposing anthropocentric constructs on it. No question, any progress made along these lines will not sweep the imagination of the planet with a few press releases, but then, neither did any of the great world religions. ☺

## FORUM: Epic, Story, Narrative

(Continued from page 15)

heroes, but I am not willing to give them up! Tiamat is a hero figure for me, and so is Ichthyostega: “I salute thee, Ichthyostega: It was you who explored for my boned ancestors the land way of life, seeking out the adventure of weather and gravity.” (I borrow that last phrase from Larry Edwards’s version of the Cosmic Walk.) I wish to make here three defenses for the use of heroes (or, less provocatively use of the heroic) in some versions of the Epic.

First, my own psyche thrives on heroes, and so I suspect some others do, too. I believe it would be best for the movement if various versions of the Epic become available that appeal to different stages of chronological and spiritual development. I am perfectly willing to have my version appeal most to ten-year-old boys!

Second, just as I wish to reclaim the word *religious* to apply to an atheist like me, I want to claim the word *hero* in its full breadth of meaning. Notice that the two heroes I mentioned did not have to smote enemies Odysseus-like in order to follow a heroic path. All Tiamat did was explode. All Ichthyostega did was crawl up onto a dry spot of bank and hang out there for a while. Heroes need not all be red in tooth and claw. Remember that Darwin’s great book was interpreted by others in a way that tilted the message toward the red-in-tooth-and-claw school, making of natural selection a seemingly nasty business. Peter Kropotkin tried to balance out the perspective by his own book, *Mutual Aid*, which pointed out that a lot of the “struggle for existence” is with the elements, not with one’s own kind. Indeed, herds and flocks and so forth band together in community in order to best survive harsh climates.

Third and finally, remember that we are talking about Story here: that is, our creation story. I wonder if there is any creation story that does not entail a hero of one kind or another. Larry Edwards sent me a wonderful Native American creation story that had Silver Fox and Coyote dancing Earth into existence. His intent was to show me that heroes are not necessary. Yet, to me, Silver Fox and Coyote look very much like heroes! Just because they don’t do violence doesn’t make them free of heroic action.

**Mary Lou Dolan:** I really liked Connie’s message about heroes, and agree with her point that the definition of hero is probably what needs reconsidering. I mean really, is there anything more heroic than a “weed” coming to life in the crack of a sidewalk?

**Larry Edwards:** Hi everyone. Sorry I am so late in replying. I have been in New Jersey at Genesis Farm for the past five weeks. A little over two weeks ago the connection to my email in Santa Cruz decided to stop working.

I have really enjoyed the discussion of the terms surrounding the Epic of Evolution. As Connie said, I use *narrative*, *story*, *Story*, and now *Epic*. I like *narrative* to refer to the sequence of events as understood by most scientists—that is, a connected series of events/processes that have been discovered over the last centuries, but especially in the last few decades. These processes are “facts” insofar as the interconnected models are reliable. They range from very reliable and consistent with other models (consistent meaning both internally and externally, in the sense of E. O. Wilson’s *consilience*) to the highly speculative. Ursula pointed out the concept of genes as an

### *The difference between the scientific narrative of the development/evolution of the universe and the Universe Story (Epic of Evolution) is in the ear of the behearer.*

understanding that is so well documented that genes are considered real and factual in themselves. The other extreme might be the ideas of our universe coming out of a previous universe. But most of the models are quite reliable. When we get into much speculation, there tends to be more than one model, and it is often arbitrary which model we choose to include in the narrative.

I like to use *story* to refer to the way that we humans have educated ourselves, especially our young, for a very long time. Stories have many purposes besides education; for instance, having fun. Humans have told stories about the powers of the universe (the gods and goddesses), about the community of life of Earth (why the turtle has marks on its back), and what great things our ancestors accomplished (heroines and heroes). Even though, as many of you have pointed out, the word *story* has now been associated with personal human issues, I still find the word useful in the sense above.

But there is a special story, the origin story (the Story), with which all the other stories must be consistent. This Story, paraphras-

ing Thomas Berry (*Dream of the Earth*, page 123) provides a context in which life can function in a meaningful manner. Daniel Quinn in *Ishtmael* has an interesting take on Story. He writes (here I paraphrase), “A Story is a narrative about the gods, humans, and the Earth. A culture is a group of people acting as though the Story were true.”

I made the vocabulary switch from Universe Story to Epic of Evolution after hearing Thomas Berry say that he wished he had named his book with Brian Swimme *The Epic of Evolution* instead of *The Universe Story* because he was unhappy with the way bookstores had categorized it. Some put it in the science section, some in history, some in literature, some in religion. He thought it should be categorized as epic literature and placed with books like *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad*.

The way I think of it, the difference between the scientific narrative of the development/evolution of the universe and the Universe Story (Epic of Evolution) is in the ear of the behearer. The scientific narrative is a fascinating understanding of how the universe, the earth, life, and humans work. The Epic of Evolution is the same “facts” but understood as Story—that is, as capable of providing a cultural and personal context in which we can live meaningfully (if we so choose). ☺

*Editor’s Note: The Cosmogen dialogue continued in time, but because our spatial universe here is finite, I need to impose closure. I am, however, saving the remaining dialogue—which Bill Bruehl prompted by a long and provocative exegesis on the death and (now) rebirth of story in modern and postmodern times. Patricia Gordon responded to Bill’s posting, as did Jean Houston. That dialogue was moving into the realm of the art of storytelling, which is a compelling theme for a future issue of this publication. Meanwhile, as Ursula so well put it, let’s keep talking!*

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