



THE EPIC OF EVOLUTION

Raised on Star Stuff A Bruehl Family Dialogue

Editor's note: In conversation with Bill Bruehl a few months ago, I lamented that those of us now moved by the Epic of Evolution will, alas, likely never experience the depths of religious identification with Earth and the Cosmos achievable through this story—simply because we did not imprint on the Epic during our own childhood. What would be the adult experience of a child raised on the story? "I know!" Bill exclaimed. "Marty and I raised our two daughters on the Religion of Star Stuff—that's what I called it then." More, one of those daughters is now raising her own children on the same fare. I asked Bill to produce an essay on this experience. He turned the project into a family affair, conducted in part over email because a continent and an ocean now separate the family. Being a playwright, Bill then pieced together the family contributions into a dialogue.

First, some background on the family: Bill and Marty Bruehl were married in 1956; they live on Long Island, New York. Amelia was born in 1962. She and her husband, Koos Kroes, live in the Nether-

lands with their two little boys, Liam and Sean. Alexandra (Alec) was born in 1964. She lives in Oakland with her husband, Ward Brunato. Both daughters attended college, and both became very active in Greenpeace upon graduation. Alec later earned a master's degree in spirituality at the Institute of Culture and Creation Spirituality, at Holy Names College in California. Amelia received her master's degree in social work from New York State University at Stony Brook.

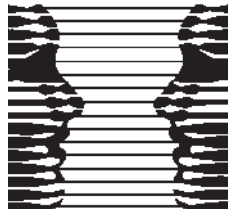
Bill: The basic tenets of teaching Star Stuff are simple. In addition to all the hydrogen atoms in our bodies, which came into existence after the Big Bang, we are made of materials that were compounded in the burning bellies of stars—stars that exploded and thrust those materials into space where, by the force of gravity, the materials came together again and formed our sun and planets. Eventually the chemicals created in that exploded star came together yet again to make up our bodies

(Continued on page 3)

CONTENTS



Also Raised on Star Stuff
"Profound pursuits" for children
Page 6



Board Forum: How Grand a Narrative?
Is the Epic best – and for whom?
Page 7



Experiencing the Epic
Creating a common, contagious unity
Page 12



The Cosmic Walk
Our most venerable Epic Ritual
Page 14



The Earth's Imagination
Summary of a new Swimme video
Page 16



Epic Sightings and Citings
The Epic in popular and academic media
Page 18

"Raised on Star Stuff"

(Continued from cover)

and the bodies of mammals and fish and trees and tomatoes and all the everything on Earth—all of which is literally "Star Stuff." We made the point over and over, saying we are all part of one thing: Earth. Later we extended the idea to the Cosmos itself. This telling now seems a bit dry, but I hope it was more theatrical and vivid at the time.

Marty: Dry? How could it be dry when we all stood out under the stars while you told the story? I remember that on clear nights in the summer and in the winter, we would trek to the backyard and look at the stars. You would point out the Big Dipper, etc., and talk about the distance these balls of fire were from our Earth and how long it took for the light of the stars to reach us. We tried to imagine what it was like when that enormous explosion took place—the star that blew itself apart and sent itself into our space.

Amelia: It always greeted me vividly too, Dad. I remember so many stories about Star Stuff. Sometimes it was a bedtime story, sometimes it was to answer my incessant questions about life, death and everything else. However, one bright sunny spring day comes to mind. We were sitting in the sun room, a room with windows all along two sides, and we were sitting together on the couch with blue and red flowers. I remember asking you what happened to Rosey, my cat and best friend. I guess I was about ten. She had died and I was mourning the loss. I remember you saying that Rosey wasn't really gone. That her body and soul had just changed form. You related the story again: how you and I and Rosey all came from Star Stuff, and how that Star Stuff made the sun and Earth and our family and friends and Rosey. And because we all came from the same thing, we are also all connected, forever.

And I did feel connected to my pretty white cat. That was one reason why I felt the loss so strongly. But you explained how, after we die, we come together again in different forms. Therefore, Rosey will always be with me, always be connected with me. I came away from that conversation feeling content. I knew that while she was my companion she gave me love. And now I could hold onto that feeling and know she was okay.

Alec: Well, I've tried to recall the first time we were introduced to the Star Stuff story. Somehow I don't think that these were bedtime stories. In fact, I don't think it was a story like a bedtime story at all. I think that maybe I was in my later elementary school years or early junior high when Dad sort of had a conversation with us at some point about how the Earth was created from the explosion of a star a long, long time ago. He was very passionate about it and his eyes lit up when he talked about it, like his mother's did when she told stories, and he used his hands to gesture, inspire, and dramatize the event. I know I was attentive!

It went something like this: If you can imagine a very, very long time ago, there was a ball of energy that was on fire out in the Universe. (He would put a certain dramatic emphasis on words like "energy" and "fire.") It was what we would call a star today. At one point in time this star exploded. All of these fiery pieces of the star broke away and spun out into space, landing at different distances from what would become our sun. The pieces that would become

Earth came to rest in just the right place to become the beautiful planet that it is today. Slowly over time, Earth began to cool. Water came to exist, and life started to form on the surface of the planet.

He then explained evolution in some simple way so that we could see how the many life forms came to be from their inception in the oceans and later crawling out onto land as land formed in different places on Earth's surface. We were told that humans were a natural extension of this same unfolding process over many thousands and thousands of years.

The basis of what he was telling us is that energy never dies; it just keeps changing form—from star, to hot earth, to cooled earth, to earth with life forms on it, and that those life forms existed and then died out, only for new life forms to come into being. This gave me a very clear way to understand death. To know from an early age that death is really about transformation was a cool thing. It allowed me to draw parallels and cope within my own life as I went through my own cycles of death and rebirth in my unfolding process of becoming—becoming an adult, a woman, a thinker, an artist, an entrepreneur, a conscious person (which is always an effort and commands my attention).

The example he gave was that when a human body was buried in the ground it would deteriorate and become part of the soil, nourishing the new plants that grew from the soil, thus incorporating the energy of the human. And then an animal would eat the plant, thus incorporating the energy of the plant. And so on. He also said that a human life is like a flower. It only blooms once, has its moment in the sun and then returns to the Earth from whence it came. I got from this that we were merely, and significantly, expressions that pulsed up from the Earth.

I think that our father probably started this "story" one day and continued it with us through later discussions. I don't necessarily remember being out under the stars, or being tucked into bed, with these stories. Our parents always talked to us like we were adults (and let us hang out with their friends to be involved in "adult conversations"); they didn't "make up" stories but rather tried to inspire us with reality in a way that would make us feel excited and passionate about life. And I'll tell you, I think it worked. I have never lost that spark and fascination.

I do remember having many later discussions with Dad about things relating to the Star Stuff story while he and I were driving in the

car somewhere together. We then often got into spiritual and philosophical discussions, which at that time occupied my mind 90% of the time. We talked of Zen and Buddhist ideas about fully living in the present. I was soaking up these ideas because they resonated with my own personal experience at a very young age. So the ideas and the experience became one and I felt that I was indeed living fully in the present.

I thought it was cool how the intelligence and sophistication humans have actually derived from the Big Bang. I developed a deep respect for the complexity, beauty, and intelligence that life is. And I also saw the paradoxes in life very clearly, since I grew up in New York. How could people be so pained, depressed, suicidal, greedy, power hungry, and angry on a planet that is so alive, so inspiring, and such a creative force? It was very easy to see how painful life was for humans and how much people tried to avoid pain, which of course only made it worse. I saw how superficially

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(Continued on page 5)

"Raised on Star Stuff"

(Continued from page 3)

people went through life, and this really bothered me. I was always yearning for the deeply connected kind of experiences that made me feel passionate and alive. As a teenager I developed a disdain for the superficial. I realize now, just in writing this, that all of this is why I probably developed a deep interest in psychology, spirituality, and philosophy. I became interested in right livelihood very early on because it became apparent to me that I needed to understand the world in a bigger way to embrace all of its paradoxes and still hold on to a deeply connected feeling that I inherited as my birth right, and that was supported by star-stuff discussions.

Bill: Alec, you mentioned "right livelihood." As you have shown, to connect back to the origin is only one part of religious responsibility. The rest is ethics. And it has always seemed to Marty and me that the ethics of Star Stuff are simple and direct, and that they flow inevitably and obviously from our origins. If we and all of Earth's children and stones and air and water and elements are Star Stuff, if we have emerged from this reality, we have a responsibility to use IT well. Thus our purpose is to use IT as well as we possibly can. I guess this is called caring, or perhaps stewardship.

Amelia: Which is the opposite from the ethics of Christian religions, as I understand them, which is to control IT and dominate IT. People don't understand that they are all part of the same thing. Rather, they see themselves as apart from IT.

Marty: That isn't my experience. But then, I have had the privilege of having contact with highly sophisticated folks as clients and colleagues. [Marty (Margaret) Bruehl is a senior consultant emeritus at the Alban Institute in Bethesda MD, a not-for-profit organization dedicated to nurture and to strengthen congregations. It serves primarily the mainline Protestant churches and Reformed, Reconstructionist, and Conservative Jewish congregations.—ed.]

Bill: But you work with an unusual group of people, Marty. I too see the sense of disconnection with Earth as commonplace in our culture. To me it is as though the great mass of humanity lives in the illusion of separation from Earth.

Alec: Well, I think that Christianity has as its roots a very different, more earthy set

of ethics. It's just that over time cultures have interpreted sacred text in ways that strengthen their own political agendas.

Bill: I see an entire system of ethics flowing out of the realization of our fundamental connection to Earth. In the future all customs, all behavior will flow from that simple and fundamental realization—I hope.

Alec: Yeah. And basically, when you are aware of the awesomeness of the Universe, you can't help but be inspired by it and feel humbled by it. You understand the sacredness. Once you have the sacred perception, your actions follow suit.

Bill: Anyway, Star Stuff was the substance of the religious instruction we

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passed along. We learned it from the discoveries of twentieth century science and from our own introspection and experience—which we trusted—together with the best we had learned as children. [Bill was raised Catholic and Marty, Lutheran—ed.]

Alec: I think the key is your—our—own introspection and experience. Looking to an outside authority on spirituality can sometimes point you in the right direction, but it will never get you there. The road there is an inward path, where you learn to trust yourself, your experience, and your intuitions. Truly.

Amelia: Exactly! I think it is very important for each person to really look deeply into themselves, using meditation [all the Bruehls were trained in Transcendental Meditation—ed.], walking, or whatever works to get in touch with their spirit. First, connect with yourself so you can connect with the rest of the Universe. I believe this

is a fundamental reason why so many people are unhappy. They don't know who they are, so they don't feel connected with everything else.

Bill: So we taught the Religion of Star Stuff, and we encouraged an ethical understanding of it as well. Meanwhile, you two were taking it in and fashioning your own spirituality from it and from other sources that appealed to you. But we never created rituals for Star Stuff, nor did we preach or delineate the philosophical fine points. We had no dogmas, as I recall, and no saints. We did exchange candles at the Winter Solstice sometimes, though.

Amelia: Dad, you didn't need to preach. Later, after college I began using some of the Native American rituals in my everyday life. The ones that made the most sense to me were those that helped me connect to the Earth (our mother), the Moon (our sister), and the Sun (our father). I knew they were analogies, but they gave a concreteness to the idea of Star Stuff.

Bill: So, the risk Marty and I took with your education was worth taking. Because the two of you have developed the way you have, our decisions have been validated. We really did not have to copper our bets and send you to traditional religious training out of a fear of being wrong.

Alec: It is absolutely right to connect children to their historical source and to the ethics that flow from that awareness. It is a connection that has come to imbue my general outlook with positive, life-giving textures and tones. I think this macrocosmic perspective of our place in the whole scheme of things allows me to have faith in life in a way that is active and vital. Life doesn't happen to us; we are co-creators on this journey who need to participate fully and to seek the outermost edges of our creativity and personal growth to manifest the full potential of our ever-being-created souls.

Marty: Co-creators! Yes! Hallelujah!

Amelia: You both are true adventurers, risk takers, and challengers. I love you very much. And this is precisely what I am doing with my two sons [ages 2 and 4]. I don't believe they are too young to begin this path. If they have questions now, why not answer them within the framework of Star Stuff? And so I do. ☺