

# Evolution's Traveling 'Evangelists' Tell the Sacred Tale

*Unique ministry strings together the story of Earth*

By Eric Stark

Jesus did not really start Christianity; the Apostle Paul did. Paul spent his life traveling and starting churches by spreading the gospel — the good news — of Jesus. In that tradition, Connie Barlow and Michael Dowd are traveling across the United States, passionately spreading a gospel of the evolution called the "Great Story."

It takes a passion unknown to most people to sell all worldly possessions and embark into unknown country, live in a van and survive by faith and the good will of others. However, Barlow and Dowd are doing just that, with a passion for spreading their version of the gospel.

Lest readers think that they are crackpots, or even charlatans, the pair are well-educated, articulate, "great" storytellers. Both Dowd and Barlow are recognized leaders in the Great Story movement, a way of understanding the sacredness of the earth. Barlow's 1997 book, *Green Space, Green Time: The Way of Science* (featured in this month's "Classic Texts" on page 19), surveys the movement's birth and shows how evolutionary science can support a greening of religious faith and spirituality.

Dowd's 1991 book, *Earthspirit: A Handbook for Nurturing an Ecological Christianity*, was the first major work to popularize the epic of evolution for Christians, and to look appreciatively at the core tenets of Christianity from the perspective of the new cosmology.

Interestingly, Dowd's passion for telling the creation story is almost a second born-again conversion experience. The first occurred on a mountaintop in Germany. When he returned to the states, he enrolled in an Assembly of God college. When he discovered that evolution was taught in the school, Dowd assumed that Satan had a powerful foothold in the school. However, during late night talks that only college students can enjoy, a friend convinced him that evolution



Photos courtesy of www.thegreatstory.org

Michael Dowd and Connie Barlow have told their "Great Story" evolutionary tale in several states. They will take the presentation to Japan this fall.

was not really a tool of Satan and that one need not be anti-intellectual to be a Christian.

When Dowd met Thomas Berry in 1988, he became fascinated with telling the story of the universe as a sacred story.

This fascination continued after he became a pastor. Dowd wanted to use the science-and-religion dialogue to empower people to live ecologically responsible lives. Barlow, a longtime Unitarian Universalist, is a science writer who had written four books before meeting Dowd. When they met and fell in love, they knew they were supposed to make a ministry together, but were not sure what that ministry might be.

After one particularly frustrating day, he said to her, "You know what I most want to do with my life? I want to travel, preach and teach in churches and universities and retreat centers all across North America. That's all I want to do."

She looked into his eyes and said, "I'd love to do that." That is what they are now doing.

They began their journey last June, have already made stops in Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Vermont, New York, New Jersey, Ohio, Indiana, Kentucky, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and will be in Kansas in October. From there, they will travel to California, Japan, Oregon and Washington.

The amount of research that goes into their programs is astonishing. It is not a simple task to compile the data needed to piece together a comprehensive account of the Earth's creation.

Perhaps one of the most innovative aspects of their ministry is a method of personalizing the evolutionary epic using beads in a way that is tangible. Each loop of individually chosen beads of different colors, shapes and textures represent different events or "moments of grace" in the 13-billion-year story of Earth, the cosmos, the Milky Way, galaxies, life and the human story. The couple insists that the Great Story includes people's personal stories. Whether chosen and strung by an eight-year-old or an 80-year-old, a loop of Great Story beads is a reverential way to celebrate the major moments in a person's life. The significant events in an individual's life merit beads on the same loop as a bead for the formation of the Earth, the Milky Way, and the birth of the universe. It is a way to take the story of the universe, which has been relegated to "boring" scientific facts, and integrate it with the geological, life, cultural human, religious and an individual person's story. ♥

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Connie Barlow and Michael Dowd offer programs and presentations for a range of audiences and institutions. For more information, visit [www.thegreatstory.org](http://www.thegreatstory.org).

## Connie Barlow and Michael Dowd's Mission Statement:

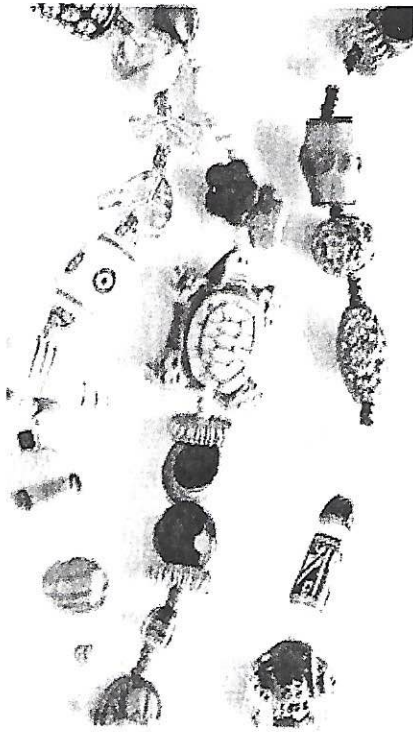
**Mission:** To teach and preach the Great News of the Great Story and promote the Great Work in colleges, universities, churches, synagogues, retreat centers, and private and public schools across North America. And to network with and support others who are committed to a just, healthy, beautiful and sustainably life-giving world for future generations of all species.

**Message:** The marriage of science and religion for personal and planetary well-being.

**Vision:** The clear and unmistakable emergence of the "Ecozoic Era" — a mutually enhancing human-Earth relationship — within our lifetime.

**Market:** North Americans (especially young people) who have never heard The Great Story or who have not yet fully realized its magnificence.

**Commitment:** To trust that all our needs will be taken care of and to go wherever there is interest, regardless of a group or organization's ability to compensate us.



The couple uses colorful beads to illustrate "moments of grace" in Earth's story.

## Preview of Upcoming Issues

- Forgiveness guru Everett Worthington's forecast for the future
- Update on Bush's faith-based initiative
- Learning about parish nursing
- Interview with Columbia's Robert Pollack
- Evolutionary origins of altruism
- Wade Rowland on Galileo's mistake