

Question & Answer | "The Great Story"

Christian preaches gospel

Michael Dowd, who once was a conservative fundamentalist, combines science with a reverence for God

By JILL SMITH
THE OREGONIAN

For the past three years, Michael Dowd has traveled the country with his wife, science writer Connie Barlow, sleeping in their van or at friends' homes and preaching a 14-billion-year-old gospel.

"The Great Story," as Dowd calls it, presents the epic of evolution as sacred and meaningful, rather than as a mechanized process of random im-

provements. It combines the discoveries of science with a reverence for God and a reinterpretation of Christianity.

Dowd, who lived in Portland from 1996 to 2000, was originally ordained as a United Church of Christ minister but is no longer connected with a specific denomination. Monday night, the self-described "evolutionary evangelist" will bring his message to the Unitarian Universalist Community Church of Washington County in Hillsboro.

Q: You started out as a conservative, fundamentalist Christian. But you're at a very different point today. Can you tell me a little bit about

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of meaningful evolution



Barlow
Presents "Epic of Evolution" Sunday

If you go: Michael Dowd, who describes himself as an "evolutionary evangelist," and science writer Connie Barlow will each give presentations in Washington County:

What: Barlow presents "The Epic of Evolution"

When: 10:15 a.m. service on Sunday

Where: West Hills Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, 8470 S.W. Oleson Road

Cost: Free

Contact: 503-246-3351

What: Dowd presents "Beyond Sustainability: The Marriage of Science and Religion"

When: 7 p.m. Monday

Where: Unitarian Universalist Community Church of Washington County, 22785 N.W. Birch St. in Orenco

Cost: Free

Information: 503-648-1720



Dowd
"Evolutionary evangelist"

For more information on The Great Story, go to www.thegreatstory.org.

RELIGION

Evolution: Evangel College helped Dowd form his views

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your spiritual journey?

A: I grew up Roman Catholic, oldest of four kids. But my parents divorced when I was 12. Then in my teenage years, I went with a friend to a Baptist youth camp and it was very conservative. It shaped my world view quite a bit. I tried to get everybody saved and nobody wanted to be saved, so I got really frustrated.

I struggled a lot with drugs and alcohol in my later teenage years. Then I joined the Army and spent several years in Germany. That's

where I had a born-again experience and was disciplined in a conservative evangelical context, in an Assemblies of God church.

I went to Evangel College, an Assemblies of God college. I was going to double major in biology and biblical studies. My first day, the biology teacher held up the textbook we were going to use and I just completely freaked. I walked out of class. I told my roommate that Satan obviously had a hold in this school. I could not believe a Bible-believing college could be teaching evolution.

Q: So what got you to your current position?

A: Two big factors. One, I met a hospital chaplain who (called himself) a Buddhist Christian. He was literally the most Christlike person I had ever met. My head said, "Get him saved" because he was theologically so liberal I was sure he was going to hell. My heart said, "Ask him to mentor you."

It was also the Evangel professors that were clearly embracing evolution and were clearly Christ-centered people. I couldn't write them off as being demonically possessed.

Q: So they showed you how to accept evolution and still be Christian?

A: The school's basic philosophy was: "All truth is God's truth, wherever it's found. If there's a conflict between science and the Bible, the conflict is probably our interpretation of one or the other." The professors taught us there was more than one way to interpret the Bible faithfully.

Q: How has your view changed?

A: In 1988 and since then, having embraced the universe story, I no longer see Christianity as the one right, true religion. Nor do I see God as primarily being outside the universe. I see God as a sacred name for the whole of reality.

We have an understanding of the nature of reality that could not have been known prior to telescopes, microscopes and computers. Creativity isn't just that reality at the beginning of time that made everything, but the universe is creative in a nested sense—that is, subatomic particles are within atoms, which are within molecules, within cells, organisms, societies, planets, star systems, galaxies. I'll use Russian nesting dolls in my presentation.

Q: That sounds very different from the idea many Christians have of a personal God who can be their friend.

A: Yes, but it's more intimate for me now. When I had a picture of God as being outside the universe, I imagined prayer as petitioning a supreme being to act in a certain way. Now, prayer is like a cell in the body communicating with the very body of which it's a part.

Q: Do conservative Christians show up to debate you on your speaking tours?

A: All the time. I always try to respond lovingly, respectfully, not defensively. When I speak to conservative Christians, the very first thing I say is: "You are absolutely right to have rejected evolution. Because the only version of evolution most of us have been exposed to is a chance, meaningless, mechanistic process. But I'd love to share with you why I'm passionately excited about a God-glorifying, Christ-edifying, Scripture-honoring way of thinking about evolution."

Some of the same guys (who come to my programs ready to do battle) have come up and literally given me a bear hug at the end. They say, "You haven't converted me entirely, but I'm not threatened by your perspective."

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