

The Gospel of Evolution and the Revival of the Human Spirit

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I would like to begin this morning with a quote from the great philosopher and father of American pragmatism, William James. Addressing the practical difference it makes whether we view the Universe as benign or indifferent, James writes, "From a pragmatic point of view, the difference between living against a background of foreignness (an indifferent Universe) and one of intimacy (a benign Universe) means the difference between a general habit of wariness and one of trust."

Have you ever wondered what it would be like to feel such passion for life, gratitude and a sense of purpose that you could hardly wait to jump out of bed each morning?

What I'm about to share with you I call the gospel of evolution. I call it the gospel of evolution because "gospel" means "good news" and this message is good news. It's the good news of how you can be free of judgment and guilt and guided by the wisdom of the Universe on a daily basis, how you can have inner peace in times of accelerating change, and how you can have realistic hope when you think about the future.

For your effort, if you pay close attention to what I'm about to share with you and apply this message to your own life, beginning today, I guarantee you that this season and, indeed, this year, will be one of the best ones you've ever had, no matter *what* life throws your way.

I. The Universe Can Be Trusted

To begin, we all know that there now exists a vast, world-wide consensus within the scientific community about the nature and history of the Cosmos, from the very, very small (sub-atomic world), to the very, very large (the Universe as a whole). We are astonished, astonished by the picture of the Universe that scientists paint, by the grandeur and magic of our common creation story, the epic of evolution.

Consider this: 100 years ago we had no idea that atoms were created in the bellies of stars, nor that our very own Sun was a second or third generation star. We also didn't know that stars were organized into galaxies. Even a decade ago, before the Hubble Space telescope, we could not have conceived that galaxies

numbered nearly a trillion! Your grandparents and great grandparents did not know that the continents slowly slid around the Earth on vast tectonic plates, nor that genetic information is stored within the architecture of a double helix molecule. As I look around this room, I would guess that almost none of us learned in school that the dinosaurs were annihilated by an intruder from space. This knowledge is just too new, too new.

Yet how many of us live our lives with an awareness of the *story* of the Universe, a story of 13 billion years of the coming and goings of stars and planets and life? The Universe is just a *place*, right? A place where *our* stories unfold, right?

Wrong! There *is* a story, a great story...in fact, it could be called *The Great Story* because it's the story that embraces and includes every other story that has ever been told or ever *will* be told. Even if such a thing as Extraterrestrials prove to exist, it's their story as well because it's the *Universe* story, and everything that exists is, by definition, a part of the Universe!

Consider that no matter what happens in or to the Universe, the story can always be counted on to move in the same five-fold direction: the direction of greater diversity, greater complexity, greater awareness, greater speed of change, *and* greater intimacy with itself.

Because this is so important I want to go through these five points a little slower. But before I do, I want to help ground this discussion by offering a metaphor that applies to everyone in this room. I invite you to imagine a zygote: a fertilized egg in a mother's womb. When your father's sperm and mother's egg came together, you began as one, undifferentiated, living cell. That cell then doubled and doubled and doubled again. Some cells became eye cells, others became ear cells, kidney cells, bone cells, and so on. The important thing to remember is that, after a few months, when your fetus self in utero began to be able to distinguish light from dark, it would be silly to think of that as, "Well the eye cells can see now," or "The eye is seeing now." Rather, what we say is, "The *child* is now able to see." So, too, with hearing and all the other senses. When you began to distinguish your mother's and father's voice, would you have expected your parents to think, "Isn't it wonderful that her ear can now hear us?" or "Well, his ear cells seem to be hearing now." No. The excitement is, "Our baby can hear!"

So too with the Universe. The Universe, first and foremost, is a *Uni*-verse. It is a singularity. A whole. It started out as undifferentiated energy and has been expanding and becoming more complex, more aware - and thus more intimate with itself - throughout the last 13 billion years. So when the first eye was fashioned, when early creatures developed the ability to distinguish light and dark, shapes and movement, it wasn't just those creatures that were seeing. It was the *Universe* that was learning to see; it was the Universe becoming more aware of itself and experiencing itself in a more intimate way. When the first ear

developed, when living creatures began to distinguish different sounds, it was the *Universe* learning to hear. It was the *Universe* becoming more aware and more intimate with itself through the complexity we call hearing. So, keeping the analogy of a zygote in mind, let's now look at the five-fold direction in which the Universe is headed.

From the beginning of time until now, the Universe as a whole can be counted on - it can be trusted - to consistently move in the direction of:

- greater **diversity**—that is, more variety and novelty over time.
- greater **complexity**—meaning wholes becoming parts of larger wholes, and enhanced interactions among them—atoms-molecules-cells-organisms-multicellular organisms, and so on, all the way up to satellite telecommunications and the internet.
- greater **awareness**—yes, greater awareness too. As creatures became more complex over time they developed a larger sphere of consciousness. For example, a turtle is aware of more than an amoeba. A horse is aware of more than a turtle. A human is aware of more than a horse. Collectively, humans living today are aware of more than humans living a few hundred years ago, before the advent of telescopes and microscopes, and so on.
- greater **speed of change**. Did you ever notice how things seem to be speeding up? Well it's true not only for those of us living today but this has been a trend that's been in place for 13 billion years! Each creative breakthrough happens more quickly than the previous ones did simply because each evolutionary advance encourages further breakthroughs. Atoms, molecules, life, photosynthesis, multicellularity, vertebrates, mammals, primates, humans, agriculture, industry, computers, the internet. Whew! Each advance happening faster and making it possible for the next breakthrough to happen even faster. All I can say is don't expect things to slow down. It doesn't seem to be the direction the Universe is going. That doesn't mean, of course, that it's not possible to have a peaceful, centered life. It *is* possible to have peace of mind in the midst of *enormous* and fast-paced change. We'll talk about that in a few minutes.
- greater **intimacy with itself**—greater intimacy with itself. Now what might we mean by that? Well, as I mentioned a few minutes ago, when the first eye developed, and the first ear, it was, literally, the Universe learning to see and hear *itself*, and thus becoming more intimate with itself. Similarly, the development of sexual reproduction was a new level of intimacy. So too, when creatures started eating other creatures a billion years ago, this was a further deepening of the Universe's communion with itself. Mammals allow the Universe to begin to experience its own depths of feeling in ways that reptiles and earlier forms of life could not. And humans allow the Universe to reflect on itself with conscious

awareness. I mean, what is happening in this room right now if not a profound level of awareness and intimacy - the Universe reflecting on itself and its own journey. Isn't that what we're doing? We don't often think of ourselves that way but it's true, isn't it?

So there we have it: The Universe can be counted on over time, it can be trusted, *deeply* trusted, to move in the direction of more diversity, more complexity, more awareness, more transformation and growth, faster and faster, and, *and* more intimacy!

Now it is not *necessary* to regard these five trends as what I call "the five-fold purpose of the unfolding Cosmos." But it *is* possible. And, as I will argue, it *is* empowering to do so.

There are two other things the Universe can be counted on doing:

The Universe can be depended upon to feistily hold onto its learnings, creative breakthroughs and evolutionary advances. It's fiercely loyal. Once the Universe learned to create complex atoms from simple hydrogen, it's always been able to do so. Once it learned to eat sunlight, or form multi-cellular organisms, or live on land, it never forgot how to do these things either. In fact, there is no evidence that the Universe has *ever* lost a major evolutionary breakthrough. Sure, there's plenty of what scientists call "evolutionary dead ends," but as far as we can tell none of these contributed significantly to the five-fold purpose of the Universe we just discussed. The Universe has a stubborn habit of preserving its greatest achievements, especially those that contribute to greater diversity, complexity, awareness, speed of change, and intimacy.

Finally, the Universe can be counted on - deeply trusted - to provide every creature and every age with all sorts of...problems and breakdowns, stresses and difficulties, and occasionally full-scale cataclysms to deal with. What we've recently discovered, and what your parents and grandparents never knew, is that problems and breakdowns are normal, natural, even healthy for an evolving, maturing Cosmos. Indeed, they seem to be *essential* for creativity. As it turns out, *every* evolutionary advance and *every* creative breakthrough in the history of the Universe, as best we can tell, was preceded by some problem or difficulty, often of great severity.

Is this beginning to sound familiar? Is this beginning to sound like our own lives?

The difficulty for us is that so often we confuse what feels bad *to* us with what is bad *for* us, yet the two are almost never the same. As it turns out, what we often call "bad" things - such as disasters, chaos, and so forth - seem to set in motion events that eventually offer up "good" things in the long run - unless, of course, we hold onto our judgments or resentments. Life seems bent on taking what

manifests in the moment as bad news and transforming that into good news and further evolutionary growth. Let me give just a few examples.

One of the most violent and spectacular events that regularly occurs in the Universe is a supernova explosion. A star is a whole bunch of hydrogen gas, compressed by gravity, fusing into helium, which releases an enormous amount of heat, light and radiation. In large stars, at least five times as large as our Sun, when the hydrogen fuel is all used up and even the helium has been fused into carbon, a marvelous sequence of cosmic alchemy begins: carbon is fused into neon, neon into oxygen, oxygen into silicon, silicon into calcium, magnesium, and eventually on up to iron. Because iron fusion doesn't produce energy (it requires energy), the star's iron core implodes under excruciating heat and pressure, and heavier elements such as cobalt, nickel, copper, tin, gold and uranium are formed. The star then explodes in a display so spectacular and breathtaking that its brightness briefly outshines the entire galaxy, and it seeds the galaxy with a rich assortment of elemental stardust, essential for planets and for life. Except for hydrogen, every atom of your body and everything around you was once forged in the womb of a supernova star. Remember the 1960's song, "We are stardust, we are golden..." Well, it's literally true. We are stardust evolved to the place that it can think about itself and tell it's own story. Pretty amazing, huh?

A supernova explosion is about as violent as the Universe gets. A star is obliterated. Boom! And yet without these explosions the basic stuff of planets - and life - would not exist. The story would be diminished, and there would be no beings to learn the story, to tell the story, to delight in the stupendous story of creation! Can you begin to see why Edward O. Wilson, professor of biology at Harvard University and one of the most respected scientists in the world, refers to the epic of evolution as perhaps the greatest *religious* story we will ever have?

A supernova explosion? From my perspective, that's goodness. Here's another example of catastrophe become creativity:

Our planet's first pollution crisis was terribly bad news for virtually everything alive at the time. The early Earth's atmosphere was not at all like it is today. It was mostly made up of carbon dioxide and methane. One day, some clever bacteria figured out a way to extract hydrogen from water and passed this skill onto its descendants, who did the same. These bacteria just spewed their waste directly into the air, with obviously little concern for the environment. Pretty soon the Earth's atmosphere was so polluted with a deadly, toxic poison - oxygen - that life all over the planet suffered horribly. Bacteria were dying all over the place. But, as always, the Universe pulled another rabbit out of its creative hat. Because it was *precisely* this bad news that forced different kinds of bacteria to cooperate in ways that they had never done before, which eventuated in cells with a nucleus, then multicellular organisms, then communities of multicellular organisms.

So...no oxygen pollution crisis equals no cooperation, no community, nothing more exciting than anaerobic bacteria.

Another example calls up our memory of the dinosaurs. Dinosaurs ruled the continents for over 150 million years. During this time, what scientists call the Mesozoic era, mammals were small scruffy creatures who stayed in burrows and came out only at night, because, as you can well imagine, they were terrified of big, ugly, carnivorous dinosaurs. Then one sunny spring day, a terrible catastrophe struck. An asteroid 10 miles across, traveling at a speed of 50,000 miles per hour, crashed into the Earth just off the Yucatan peninsula of what is today Mexico, creating a crater 100 miles wide and releasing an amount of energy a thousand times more powerful than all the nuclear weapons we now have going off at the same time in the same place. The impact triggered a deluge of sulfuric acid rain and produced at least six tidal waves, several of which were more than 300 feet high, and a magnitude 12 earthquake, which is a million times more powerful than a magnitude 6 earthquake. It also caused a global firestorm that incinerated about a fourth of the living biomass, forced so much carbon dioxide into the atmosphere that the average global temperature rose by 20 degrees Fahrenheit and stayed that way for a million years, and forced 75% of the species alive at the time into extinction, including the dinosaurs. All in all it was not one of Earth's better days. But, thank Gaia, it was *precisely* this catastrophe which allowed those mammals who survived in their burrows to flourish and diversify, culminating in all the amazing mammals of the world today, including ourselves. So...no catastrophe, no whales or dolphins, no dogs or cats, no giraffes or elephants, no lions and tigers and bears (oh, my!), and, of course, no me, no you.

So the next time a comet crashes into your psyche or your life feels like sulfuric acid is raining on your head, or the next time a magnitude 12 earthquake rocks your world and you feel like you want to hide away in a dark hole for a several months...just remember...in a few million years things will be fine.

Seriously though, the next time you're greeted by a 300 foot tidal wave at home or at the office, just remember that you are part of an amazing, creative Universe that turns chaos and catastrophes into new growth and opportunities as regularly as day follows night. To my way of thinking, this is *very* good news.

Let's look at one last example of goodness that comes in a strange package—and an example a whole lot closer to us in time. One of the most traumatic periods in human history began in the fourteenth century when Asia and Europe were ravaged by the bubonic plague known as the Black Death. This plague, which reached Europe in 1347, was so devastating that within just a few years it had killed off some 25 million people - one-third of the population of Europe. Almost half the inhabitants of Florence died within three-months, and no one knew why. Even when the worst was over, smaller outbreaks continued, not just for years, for centuries. Survivors lived in constant fear of the plague's return, and the disease

didn't disappear from Europe until the 1600s. As you can well imagine, I'm sure, Medieval society never recovered from the effects of the plague. So many people had died that there were serious labor shortages all over Europe, which led workers to demand higher wages. But landlords refused those demands, so by the end of the 1300s peasant revolts broke out in England, France, Belgium and Italy. The disease also took its toll on the religious establishment. People throughout Christendom had prayed devoutly for deliverance from the plague. Why hadn't those prayers been answered? A new period of political turmoil and philosophical questioning ensued. So...bad news, right? Of course! Yet many scholars and historians believe that not only did the plague lead to major political and religious reforms but, apparently, it was also a key factor in the development of the scientific tradition which eventually gave us The Great Story, the epic of evolution. How so? Because many educated people during this time refused to believe that all this anguish and suffering and loss was simply the result of God's wrath. So there began a fierce drive to figure out how the world works, which eventuated in, among other things, the discovery that the plague was spread by fleas on rats. So...no plague, quite possibly no awareness of much of what we now know to be true about the nature of the Universe and our role in it.

What becomes obvious from these examples (and I could easily overwhelm you with dozens more) is that the Universe seems resolutely determined to take bad news and turn it into new creativity, always in the same direction. In fact, one of the reasons I refer to this as "the *gospel* of evolution" is because that's exactly the point! As I mentioned earlier, from the evidence that we now have available to us, it seems that all creativity and every evolutionary breakthrough for the last 13 billion years has been preceded by chaos or destruction in one form or another—what would have looked at the time like decidedly bad news.

And so this brings us to the first insight, the first affirmation of faith and confidence in the new Gospel of evolution: the Universe can be trusted. The Universe can be trusted. Specifically, the Universe can be trusted in three ways. It can be trusted to move in the direction of greater diversity, complexity, awareness, speed of change, and intimacy. It can be trusted to preserve its breakthroughs. And it can be trusted to provide a wealth of problems and breakdowns that fuel the creative process.

Well all this is well and good for stars and planets and life. But what about you and me? What about our own little stories within The Great Story. Can we trust that the wisdom of the Universe is at work in our own era, in our own little dramas?

II. You Are Part of the Universe

I'd like to begin this next section with a quote from Black Elk, a Native American elder. Black Elk writes, "The first peace, which is the most important, is that

which comes within the souls of men and women when they realize their relationship, their oneness, with the Universe and all its powers.”

Thanks to science, we now can see that a relationship with the Cosmos even more profound than the oneness Black Elk spoke of awaits us. And we begin to catch a glimpse of the awesome role of the human in the Universe process - and perhaps our true destiny as *Homo sapiens sapiens*, or doubly wise humans. For with us, the Universe just *very* recently brought into existence a creature by which it can begin to know—to reflect on—it’s amazing journey, its vastness, its beauty. You see, we didn’t come into this world, we grew out from it. Black Elk knew this, at least intuitively. Now we can add: we are the Universe awakening to its own awareness. What has the Universe become aware of? Just this: Four billion years ago planet Earth was molten rock. Now it sings opera! A human being looking through a telescope is *literally* the Universe looking at itself and saying, “Wow!” A student looking through a microscope is the planet Earth learning in consciousness, with awareness, how it has functioned unconsciously and instinctually for billions of years. We are a means by which Nature can appreciate its own beauty and feel its own splendor. We also, of course, contribute in our own inimitable way to the chaos and breakdowns that will inevitably fuel further evolutionary creativity. As we’ve already seen, if the Universe can be trusted to do anything, it can surely be trusted to do that!

So where do we stand?

Point one: the Universe can be trusted. Do you get that? Do you really feel it? What would it be like to spend the next day or week or month playing with that mindset? What would life be like if you viewed all your problems as good news in disguise?...knowing you were part of the Universe, a mode of expression of the Universe? If you got that far, then it’s just a stroll through the woods to come to embrace the third point in this gospel, this good news, of evolution...

Accept what is and follow your heart.

III. Accept What Is and Follow Your Heart

Accepting what is and following your heart is another way of doing what all other animals and species do naturally, without effort, without hesitation or foreboding. Other animals don’t judge things. They don’t tell themselves that this or that should or shouldn’t have happened. They just accept whatever happens to them and to the world, and then they make the best of it. They survive and learn and grow and make decisions by following their intuition and instincts, their feelings, and doing what their body tells them to do. For us, too, this may be the key to living a joyous, fulfilling life. Remember when I said that it *is* possible to have

peace of mind in the midst of enormous and fast-paced change? Well, this is the only way I know how to do it.

It all begins with trusting the Universe, or *making life right*. That's what fosters a peaceful heart and mind, and what allows for clear communication between us and the larger creative context in which we live and move and have our being. It's trusting that the same wisdom and intelligence that has brought the Universe 13 billion years, right up to this point, knows better than my little ego mind how things are developing. And it's trusting that all the difficult, painful, or discouraging experiences in my own life, and in the world as a whole, are part of the creative process, and can be embraced by the arms of faith.

What this means for me, personally, is that now when something painful, difficult or traumatic happens to me, or when something disappointing or frustrating occurs, I act *as if* it's really a gift and a blessing in disguise. I simply pretend that the Universe is conspiring on my behalf, and on our collective behalf, no matter what. Whether this is true or not, I'm not sure we can ever know. But it really doesn't matter. This way of perceiving is empowering! "The Universe can be trusted" is a *very* useful belief. What more could I want?

"Accepting what is," "trusting the Universe," "making life right"...these are all modern, inclusive ways of saying something similar to what many religious people and people in recovery mean when they speak of "having faith in God" or "trusting their higher Power," or "cultivating an enlightened mind." It really *is* the ticket to emotional, psychological and spiritual freedom.

So what I'm suggesting is that *the* key to having a powerful relationship with your own intuition and instinct—and having a clear channel of communication with the creating, sustaining Life Force of the Universe (whatever you may choose to call it)—is to not be so arrogant as to assume that you know best how things are supposed to go in the world but to be grateful for the challenges and difficulties in your life, and the challenges we face as a species. It's trusting that we're all doing the best we can, given what we have to work with at the time, and that, from the perspective of the Universe, everything is "right on schedule." This is a very empowering way to live. And it need not diminish the urgency to act, to be of service to the world. It need not diminish this at all.

Trusting the Universe and truth-telling go hand in hand. Some people seem to think that trusting means passivity or inaction. Nothing could be further from the truth. I trust that our Western consumer culture is not a cosmic mistake; but I am also doing all that I can to help it recover from its addictive patterns and mature beyond its present self-destructive and Earth-destructive habits. Looking within, I trust that my shadow - my prideful, arrogant, selfish side - serves a purpose, but I am also committed to becoming a more humble, thoughtful, compassionate person. We can trust that those who oppress others are less evil than they are

ignorant and at the same time do everything within our power to ensure that freedom and justice prevail. Trusting the Universe means trusting that everything is “right on schedule.” But it also means trusting that the anguish and anger that we sometimes feel over what is happening to the oppressed and to our world, and the yearnings we have for a more just and sustainable society, are part of the Universe too, and right on schedule as well.

You may want to remind yourself that “the Universe can be trusted” and that “you are part of the Universe” until this awareness is second nature to you, but, I promise, it won’t take long. The mind will almost always take the most empowering route available to it, when given the chance. But don’t take my word on it. Play with it yourself.

Accepting life on its own terms, just as life is—with all its challenges and growing opportunities—is to remove yourself from the judgment throne of deciding which things are good and which things are bad. It’s letting the Universe play that role. Once you do this, there’s an exercise I *guarantee* will add tremendous value to your life. I invite you to do this exercise before you go to bed tonight, or at least within a few days if today doesn’t work for you. The exercise is simple. Take a piece of paper and make three columns. Then, when you’re in a non-judgmental, accepting frame of mind, sit comfortably and allow your breathing to deepen naturally. Then focus on your heart. That is, close your eyes and put your attention on the center of your chest.

First notice the things that give you joy and pleasure and happiness in life. I’m not only talking about things like eating chocolate or lying on a beach in the tropics - sure you can include stuff like that - but I’m also talking about what gives you deep and lasting satisfaction, like when you’ve done something special for someone or in some way contributed to others or to the world in a way that made you feel happy, alive, or at peace. Think of things you’ve either done or seen or read about others doing, or what you can *imagine* yourself doing - actions that feed your heart and make you feel *great* about yourself. Write down whatever comes to mind in the first column, along the left side of the paper. Take your time on this. It’s important.

Then close your eyes again and put your attention back to the center of your chest, to the region of your heart, and ask yourself this question: “What causes my heart to ache with compassion? Where do I hurt over what is happening to others or what’s happening to my community or my world? Write these down in the third column, along the right side of the paper. Don’t worry about getting it right or getting everything down the first time. You can always add or subtract things later.

Then when you have a list of things that give you joy and a sense of satisfaction or fulfillment on the left side of your paper and all the things that cause you to feel

compassion for others and for the world on the right side, ask yourself: "Where are the places where my joy and the world's need intersect? What are some creative ways I can contribute some of my time and energy and make a real difference in someone's life, or make a difference in the world?" Write anything that comes to mind in the center column. Don't worry about whether it makes sense, whether it is practical or doable. Let your heart and imagination run.

Let's review where we are. We discussed the idea that the Universe can be trusted and you can see how this is good news, right?

Then we examined how each of us is part of the Universe. The good news here is that, while its possible to *feel* alienated from the Universe (due to disempowering conversations or judgments you may have going on inside your head), the fact is that is impossible to ever *be* alienated...no matter what. The Universe can be trusted. You are part of the Universe.

Then we learned how enlightenment, salvation, freedom, empowerment—these are all as simple (and as challenging) as getting in the habit of letting go of our judgments, opinions, beliefs and so forth, in the moment, accepting what's real, and following our hearts - our compassion, our bliss. You can see how that's good news too, right?

Now for the real kicker...and why it is that when you really "get" evolution, you can't help but celebrate. The fourth and final piece of this empowering puzzle:

IV. You Can't Get It Wrong!

Why? Because the Universe can be trusted and because you are part of the Universe!

You see, your shadow side: your mistakes, your shortcomings, your sins, the places you've been out of integrity...all these are part of the Universe as well, and can be trusted just like everything else. In fact, let me say it a little more strongly because most of us carry around a fair bit of guilt... Your sins and shortcomings, your vices and transgressions, are a *necessary* part of the creative process of the Cosmos. They're as essential as comets and earthquakes and plagues. (Isn't that a comforting thought!)

Now I can't speak for you, but for me...this is *really* good news. All my life I thought my problems and difficulties were evidence that either *I* was fundamentally flawed or *someone else* was to blame or *the world* was going to hell in a hand basket. Now I see that global-scale problems may be the only thing that unites us into a global-scale community. I see all my problems and difficulties, including those intentionally caused by me or others, and our world's problems as well, as gifts from the Universe, evidence that we're all alive and growing and

evidence that our species is maturing. BIG shift! GOOD news. Thank God, what a relief!!

So we can forgive ourselves for all the unloving, stupid, selfish, arrogant, ugly, petty, nasty things we've all said and done because the Universe has *already* forgiven us! In fact, I'm not sure forgiveness is even the right word. Let's just say our sins and failings - even when we've intentionally harmed another or violated our own or another's trust - can be used as compost for new growth, just like all the chaos and cataclysms that have been part of the process for the last 13 billion years.

You see, the Christians were right all along: ultimately, we are saved by grace through faith. But of course, the Jews and the Buddhists and the Taoists and the Pagans were right all along too. Every religious tradition on the planet, and every philosophical belief system, has its own unique gifts and limitations. Different religions are like different flowers: each with its own special fragrance and beauty. The Great Story, the epic of evolution, embraces them all for the simple reason that it's the *Universe* story, which, of course, includes the story of how each and every religion came into existence at a particular time and in a particular place, and how each has evolved since then.

The other reason why it's such good news to realize that "I can't get it wrong" is because, when we look back over time, unless we're still beating ourselves, it's usually not that difficult to see how stupidities and mistakes have led us right to this point...that I wouldn't be who I am or where I am today without them. Let me tell you a story to illustrate what I'm talking about.

It was the Fourth of July, 1990. I was pastoring my first church, in Granville, a small town in western Massachusetts. I was the only minister of the only church in a town of 1,500 people, nestled in the foothills of the Berkshire Mountains. Essentially, I married, buried and baptized anyone who wanted or needed me to do so. I was the "town parson" in the old New England sense. Like Rockland County but much more isolated, this place was paradise. And the people there are wonderful. My wife, Alison, and I and our two children, Sheena and Shane, who were 7 and 5 at the time, had lived in Granville for three years. We absolutely loved it there! Alison was due to give birth to our third child, at home, the following day, on the fifth of July.

Now one of the highlights of the year in Granville is the Fourth of July parade. It's a real down-home celebration. People dress up in all kinds of interesting patriotic costumes and put red, white and blue ribbons on their dogs and baby strollers, their bicycles and riding lawn mowers. Everybody in town either marches or rides *in* the parade or stands on the sidelines watching it.

It was about a half hour before the parade began and it was already 82 degrees outside. I got what I thought was a bright idea. I said to Alison, "Why don't you put on a bathing suit and let's march in the parade together. We'll celebrate the holiness of pregnancy and birth and new life." Well, she was a little reluctant, thinking that some folks might find it offensive. But not even seriously considering that possibility, I said, "Oh come on. Surely they'll take it in the spirit of the day!" So she put on a one-piece bathing suit and when I saw her I said, "Oh, no. I meant your bikini." So, against her own better judgment, I suspect, Alison put on a bikini and we painted in red, white and blue letters on her very pregnant belly..."Ooh baby!". Then she put on a mask that she had made a few months earlier when she was in a women's spirituality workshop and we headed out to join the parade.

Well, because we were a minute or two late getting to where the parade began, and since they were marching right past us, we just jumped in and pretty much led the parade through town waving and smiling and being completely oblivious to the fact that we were leaving a wake of utter disbelief. I mean, many of the people our age thought it was funny. But the elderly women, their families, and the fundamentalists in town were unspeakably outraged. One young woman, for example, who had left my church because she felt my preaching was too Earthy, too pagan, came up to me screaming at the top of her lungs, "You've gone too far this time, buddy. You're out of this town!" One of the deacons of the church, and a dear friend of ours, came up to Alison and me with tears in her eyes, trembling, and said, "Do you have *any* idea what you've done?" Well, of course, the answer was "No." I didn't have a clue what I had done. But I was starting to get a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. When we got home, within a few minutes the phone rang and it was another deacon from my church. She said calmly, "Michael, you know this is going to cost you your job, don't you?" My jaw dropped. I said, "What?!" She said, "Let me educate you a little about rural New England. I know you grew up in Miami, Florida and you've probably seen pregnant women in bathing suits before, haven't you?" "Yes," I said. "Well," she continued, "In rural New England, from the 1920s through the 1950s pregnant women were never even seen in public. Once a woman started showing, after a few months, she never left the home. Her husband did the shopping. She was said to be, "in confinement" for five or six months. So for the women in Granville now in their 60s, 70s, 80s and 90s, what you and Alison just did was shocking beyond description." Another parishioner put it this way. He said, "Michael, it was like the mayor and his wife walked through town naked. Except it was worse. Because you weren't the mayor, you were the spiritual leader of this community."

Needless to say, I was sick with sorrow. Here we're living in the most awesome place I'd ever lived in, my wife is due to give birth to our third child the next day, and now my whole world is turned upside down. So the following day, as I'm beating myself up one side and down the other, and writing a letter of apology and resignation to submit to the church later that afternoon, I got a phone call from a

parishioner my age. Genuinely, enthusiastically, she began, "Michael I am so excited for you!" Confused, I said, "Say what?" She said, "No, really. I mean, look at you—you're young and passionate and broad minded. In the right context, in the right setting, your gifts are going to match the needs and desires of the community and everyone is going to thrive as a result. But here in Granville, it seemed to me that you were never *really* able to preach what you believed. It's just too conservative here."

"Now I don't know," she continued, "but I'm willing to bet something like this happened. I'm willing to bet you had become *real* comfortable here in Granville. You were just going to settle down and live your life here. But at some deeper level of reality—call it God, call it your unconscious, call it whatever you want—but at some deeper level of reality it was obvious that that wasn't what was going to be best for you *or* for this community. But the only way you were going to get out of here was to do something completely outrageous and not even realize it was outrageous until after you did it."

I sat with my ear to the phone in silence for what seemed like an eternity, tears streaming down my cheeks. It was as if she had a doorway to my soul.

Fortunately, Miriam wasn't born until July 17th and by that time things had pretty much cooled down. And to their credit, the church voted to let me preach for the next several months, until we moved to Ohio to pastor my second church.

The point I want to make is that my parishioner was right, of course. And even though it was one of the most humbling, painful experiences of my life, I wouldn't trade it for anything in the world. I wouldn't be as free as I am now to preach "the gospel of evolution" if that hadn't happened.

You see, you really *can't* get it wrong. Even your mistakes and failings serve a purpose. So, fear not. Accept what is and follow your heart—your joy, your compassion, your deepest yearnings to contribute. You'll be glad you did, and so will everyone around you.

When we began, I called this message "the gospel of evolution" because I suggested that it can ignite a person's passion and sense of purpose. It's a message of *good news* - the good news of how you can be free of judgment and guilt and guided by the wisdom of the Universe itself. It's also the good news of how you can have inner peace in times of accelerating change, and how you can have realistic hope when you ponder the future.

I've suggested that there is a four-part sequence to the gospel of evolution: the Universe can be trusted, you are part of the Universe, accept what is and follow

your heart, you can't get it wrong. And the part about "you can't get it wrong" is especially important because so often we don't follow our heart because we're afraid of failure, or afraid of the judgment of others.

Here's an empowering affirmation that, when you commit it to memory and rehearse it throughout the day, will surely add tremendous value to your life: "I trust that everything is perfect for my growth and learning." I trust that *everything* is perfect for my growth and learning. Here's another one: "I trust the Universe. There's nothing I can't forgive, appreciate, or have compassion for." I trust the Universe. There's *nothing* I can't forgive, appreciate, or have compassion for."

Finally, brothers and sisters, I invite you to consider that this message is not only good news for us as individuals but it's also *great* news for us as a species. It's so easy to become fearful or critical, resigned or cynical, when we look around and see what's happening to others and to our world, or when we realize how much work needs to be done to create a just, humane, sustainable world. And yet, what if the Universe really *can* be trusted? What if the *enormous* challenges we will face in the coming decades are *precisely* what we need to unite us as one human family. What if these challenges are *exactly* what's needed to move us beyond our petty differences to embrace our destiny as conscious lovers of the Cosmos? Is it *possible* that all really *is* right on schedule?

As cultural historian and visionary, Thomas Berry, one of the leading thinkers of the twentieth century, has written:

"The basic mood of the future might well be one of confidence in the continuing revelation that takes place in and through the Earth. If the dynamics of the Universe from the beginning shaped the course of the heavens, lighted the sun, and formed the Earth. If this same dynamism brought forth the continents and seas and atmosphere. If it awakened life in the primordial cell and then brought into being the unnumbered variety of living beings, and finally brought us into being and guided us safely through the turbulent centuries. There is reason to believe that this same guiding process is precisely what has awakened in us our present understanding of ourselves and our relation to this stupendous process. Sensitized to such guidance from the very structure and functioning of the Universe, we can have confidence in the future that awaits the human venture."