

	<p><i>Thank God for Evolution!</i></p> <p>Support for leading BOOK discussion groups</p> <p>SECULAR & MIXED RELIGIOUS for White Cover (Viking) edition</p> <p>4 or 5 sessions</p> <p>(updated) May 2008</p>
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www.ThankGodForEvolution.com

www.TheGreatStory.org/dvd.html

Suggested use: This guidebook is intended for leaders who will use *Thank God for Evolution!* as the basis for a **4 or 5 session** book discussion course. This curriculum is highly recommended for BOOK CLUBS, covenant and cell groups of religiously liberal CHURCHES, and other discussion forums. A longer (12-session) Study Guide, as well as versions aimed at Christian audiences, are downloadable at the same website: <http://thegreatstory.org/tgfe-dvd-study.html>

Intent: This study guide was prepared by Connie Barlow and Michael Dowd, with the aim of encouraging participants to engage their **intellect**, make connections to **their own life experience**, and to **speak from the heart**. We intend to help participants **discern and enrich their philosophical or spiritual/religious worldview and everyday lives** by offering an over-arching story for situating one's sense of the divine, one's values, and the very meaning one makes of life. Crucially, for those who do resonate with the multi-billion-year journey of our evolutionary heritage, there are a multitude of ways to interpret and find meaning within it.

The approaches suggested here are also intended to promote **wide participation** and to counter the natural tendency for a few individuals to monopolize discussion time. The guide provides enough structure to fully support groups that prefer to be led at every step. But it also encourages leaders and group members to take initiative in fostering topics and paths of discussion.

In this program, even those who didn't read the assigned chapters will be empowered to participate because each session begins with a series of **short recitations** from the book.

Materials:

- *Thank God for Evolution!* **BOOK** purchased by each member of the group
- 1 copy of this **Study Guide** for the group leader (free PDF download)
- **timer** and **chime** or **bell**

Suggested Group Size and Duration: We suggest that participants be seated living-room style or in the round. To ensure an intimate size of circle and an opportunity for everyone to speak, recommended group size is **4 to no more than 16** regularly attending participants. Suggested duration for each session is **1.5 to 2.0 hours**.

Program Elements

1. In-Gathering. Groups that encourage bonds of fellowship (such as church cell groups) will begin with their preferred methods of in-gathering, such as check-ins, covenant readings, or other ritual elements. NOTE: If some participants express an interest in contributing their creativity to session creation, shaping the In-Gathering specific to each session would be the ideal place to encourage such initiative.

2. Recitation of samples from the BOOK. After the in-gathering, participants will volunteer to recite selected short readings from the assigned chapters. Leaders are encouraged to ask for different volunteers to read each passage aloud, so that as many voices as possible are heard. This guidebook will specify recommended selections for each session.

3. Silent reflection. (signaled by a bell or chime)

4. Discussion in the round. Leader usually invites participants to each briefly share responses to a question designed to invite even the shyest to contribute. Consider recruiting a volunteer to use a timer (and ring a bell or raise a hand) when the allocated time for each person has passed.

5. Discussion in open format . This guidebook will offer additional questions for discussion specific to each session. The leader, however, will sense if the group is already deep into meaningful discussion, requiring little (if any) additional guidance.

6. Reading assignment.

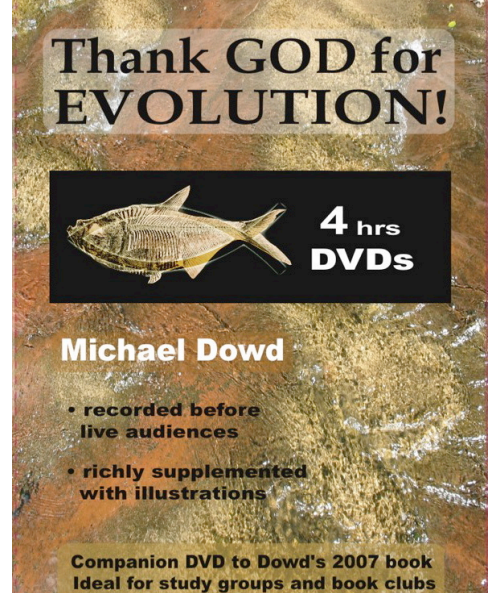
7. Closing recitation.

Thank God for Evolution! **Study Guide for Mixed Religious, Secular, and Religiously Liberal Groups**

(version May 2008)

Calendar of Sessions & Reading Assignments

- Session 1:** Prologue, Introduction, Chapters 1–3 62 pages
- Session 2:** All of Part II (chapters 4–7) 74 pages
- Session 3:** All of Parts III and IV (chapters 8–13) 69 pages
- Session 4:** All of Part V (chs. 14 thru Epilogue) 100 pages
- Session 5 Supplement:** [optional] view Disk 1 of **companion DVD**

	<p>The companion DVD</p> <p><i>Thank God for Evolution</i></p> <p>can be purchased at</p> <p>http://thegreatstory.org/dvd.html</p>
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Session 1

Prologue, Introduction, Chapters 1–3

62 pages

1. In-Gathering (chairs in circle)

2. Recitation (15 minutes) – *call for volunteer readers*

- Page 7: full page except for last two lines
- Page 19: recite the epigraph
- Page 21: recite the entire page
- Page 28: just the para that begins, "Imagine parents . . ."
- Page 31: all, to new section title on p. 32
- Page 32: last paragraph on p. 32, up to the gray box on p. 33
- Page 44: para "As we have seen" to p. 45 section head
- Page 56–57: entire section titled "You are Part of the Universe"

3. Silent reflection: (2 minutes) "Before we begin our discussion, let us pause for a minute of silence to help us participate in the dialogue in such a way that both our head and our heart will guide our remarks and our listening of others."

4. Discussion: [It is important to encourage everyone to share briefly before discussion is opened. Based on the number of participants, determine how much time each person will be given to respond to the opening question, which is to be answered by all. Recruit someone to be the TIMEKEEPER and to chime or ring a bell gently when a person's time is up.] The suggested opening question:

Q: "In his book, Michael Dowd asserts that an overarching story that tells us who we are, where we came from, and how we should live in the world is vital to personal and cultural wellbeing. Let's begin our discussion with a question related to this point — a question that each of us may answer in turn, to give us all a chance to speak before we move to a less structured format. You may of course decline the opportunity to speak, if you wish.

So here is the question: ***What creation story did YOU receive as a child? Was it important for you then, and is it important for you now?***"

5. Discussion continues (open style). Possible questions:

Q: ***"What came up for you most powerfully in your reading at home or in the recitation that began this session?"***

Q: **Chapter 2 is an overview of the science** underlying biological evolution. Let's first invite those who normally would NOT pick up a science book to share with us whether they found that chapter helpful, perhaps even exciting in some way. For example, *did you learn something new that helps you make sense of the world or something in your life?*

Q: [After all the nonscience people have responded . . .] *Now let's hear **reactions to Chapter 2**, the science chapter, from those who regularly enjoy reading about science.*

Q: Let's now turn to the theology in **Chapter 3**. Rev. Dowd is clear that he is using metaphorical language when he talks about **"trusting" the Universe**. *Did anyone have a powerful response — positive or negative — to this notion of trusting the Universe?*

6. Reading assignment – 74 pages:

all of Part II (chapters 4 through 7)

7. Closing recitation. Call for a volunteer to recite the gray box at the bottom of p. 26 (or choose ahead of time some other segment of the readings that appeal to you).

Session 2

Part II: chapters 4–7

74 pages

1. In-Gathering (chairs in circle)

2. Recitation (20 minutes) – *call for volunteer readers*

Chapter 4: Private and Public Revelation

- Page 65: begin at first para of text, “We are at a turning point”; continue onto p. 66, up to where the gray box begins.
- P. 73: recite only the first paragraph
- Page 75: begin last para “Too many . . .” and finish near top of p. 76, just before the para that begins “To begin to craft”

Chapter 5: Nested Emergence

- Page 84: Just the bottom para of 84 to where it ends on p. 85
- Page 89: Begin with the section title, “We Are Made of Stardust,” and continue through the end of 3rd para, “as Sagan enthused.”
- Pages 93–94: Begin at the last 2 lines of page 93 and finish after the 2 starred sentences on page 94.

Chapter 6: Words Create Worlds

- pp. 104–5: begin last 2 lines of 104 and continue up to section title on p. 105
- Page 106: the middle 2 paragraphs, beginning “Every metaphor”
- Page 110, para that begins “The monotheism” and continue through first two lines of p. 111
- Page 113, last paragraph through its end on p. 114
- Page 115, recite only the final paragraph, “We cannot solve . . .”

Chapter 7: What Do We Mean by the Word God

- Page 119, bottom para, “God, from this”, thru its end on p. 120
- Page 126, recite just the first paragraph, “I am presenting”

3. Silent reflection: (2 minutes) “Before we begin our discussion, let us pause for a minute of silence to help us participate in the dialogue in such a way that both our head and our heart will guide our remarks and our listening of others.”

4. Discussion:

Q: "Let's begin with a question for each of us to answer in turn, just to give us all a chance to speak before we move into a less structured discussion format. Let's each of us to take just a minute or so to respond from the heart to this question: **"What came up for you most powerfully in your reading at home or in the recitation that began this session?"**"

5. Discussion continues (open style). Possible questions:

Q: In **Chapter 4**, the distinction that Michael Dowd makes between PUBLIC and PRIVATE revelation is core to his version of "evolution theology." So here is the question: *Does Dowd's distinction between **public and private revelation** help you understand science or understand religion in a new way?*

Q: Chapter 5 is all about the topic of **"nested emergence."** Central concepts are that "We are made of stardust" and that "Death is natural and generative at all levels of reality." *Who among us was particularly moved by the picture that science gives us of our relationship to **stars and to death?***

Q: Chapters 6 and 7 take us squarely into the realm of religious language and metaphor. So here is a question: *Consider Dowd's description of what he means by **the word "God"** and why he personally chooses to use God language: Do his choices in this regard make sense to you — and do they seem helpful?*

6. Reading assignment – 69 pages:

All of Parts III and IV (chapters 8–13)

7. Closing recitation. Who will volunteer to recite the one-paragraph story that is in the middle of p. 92? (It begins, "Southwestern Colorado.")

Session 3

Parts III and IV: chapters 8–13

69 pages

Note to leader: Photocopy the BRAIN CHART appended to this session. Make enough copies give to everyone who attends.

1. In-Gathering (chairs in circle)

2. Recitation (20 minutes) – *pass out brain chart to all; request volunteer readers for each of the following*

Chapter 8: Growing an Evolutionary Faith

- Page 140: begin with para “What I mean by REALize” and close with the end of the 4-part list.

Chapter 9: REALizing “The Fall” and “Original Sin”

- Page 146: entire page, continuing to section head on next page.
- Page 154: begin with para “It is a truism” and end on p. 155 just before the starred “Nature versus Nurture” paragraph.
- Pages 155–56: entire starred “Male/Female Differences” section

Chapter 10: REALizing “Personal Salvation”

- Page 171–73: Begin with the section title on p. 171 and end after the first paragraph on p. 173.
- Page 175–76: Begin reading the paragraph that starts “Fortunately” and continue up to section title on 176.
- Page 176–77: Begin section title on 176; end at gray box p. 177.
- Page 185: Begin with section title near the bottom and continue through end of p. 186.

NO RECITATION for these chapters:

Chapter 11: Evolutionary Integrity Practices

Chapter 12: Evolving Our Most Intimate Relationships

Chapter 13: Transformed by the Renewal of Your Mind

3. Silent reflection: (2 minutes) “Before we begin our discussion, let us pause for a minute of silence to help us participate in the dialogue in such a way that both our head and our heart will guide our remarks and our listening of others.”

4. Discussion:

Q: “Michael Dowd calls this section of the book (beginning on p. 137), “The Gospel According to Evolution.” The word “Gospel” means “good news”. *Does the **Story of Our Evolved Brain** strike you PERSONALLY as good news? Why or why not?*

Let’s each of us to take just a minute or so to respond from the heart to that question, before we open up discussion. You may of course decline the opportunity to speak, if you wish.

Again, the question is this: *Does the **Story of our Evolved Brain** strike you PERSONALLY as good news?*

5. Discussion continues (open style). Possible questions:

Q: The readings gave us an evolutionary look at **food, substance, and sex addiction and codependence**. For those among us familiar with how these challenges are normally dealt with in recovery programs, *Do you think an evolutionary perspective would be a helpful addition? Specifically, do you think Dowd’s framing of addictions and codependence as **expected rather than aberrant** responses to modern life might be helpful in encouraging sufferers to more readily move beyond denial and thus to seek assistance? Would it be helpful for sufferers of these afflictions to first appreciate how these very same drives once served their distant ancestors — how none of us would be here without them?*

Q: Let’s shift now to the perspective that evolutionary psychology brings to the trauma of **marital infidelity**, especially those instances that follow on the heels of an increase in status and thus an increase in the sex-drive hormone: testosterone. *Is an evolutionary understanding a liability in this regard? That is, does it just give the unfaithful partner a good excuse? Or can it be healing?* To lead into this question, who will **volunteer to read aloud the gray box that begins on p. 194? . . .**

Any comments?

Q: Did anyone **try out one or more of the practices** presented in chapters 11, 12, and 13? . . . Who would like to share with us their experience in that regard? [Note to leader: a one-page list of these practices, keyed to page number, is appended here.](#)

Q: Dowd suggests that an evolutionary understanding of our brain does not so much suggest new practices as **help us understand WHY existing practices work** — and how we might evolve them to work even better. It provides a kind of **framework** into which we can place the practices that are important to us. It does this by encouraging us to assess **which part of our evolved brain is causing us trouble** in a particular instance, and which parts we might engage to lessen the trouble.

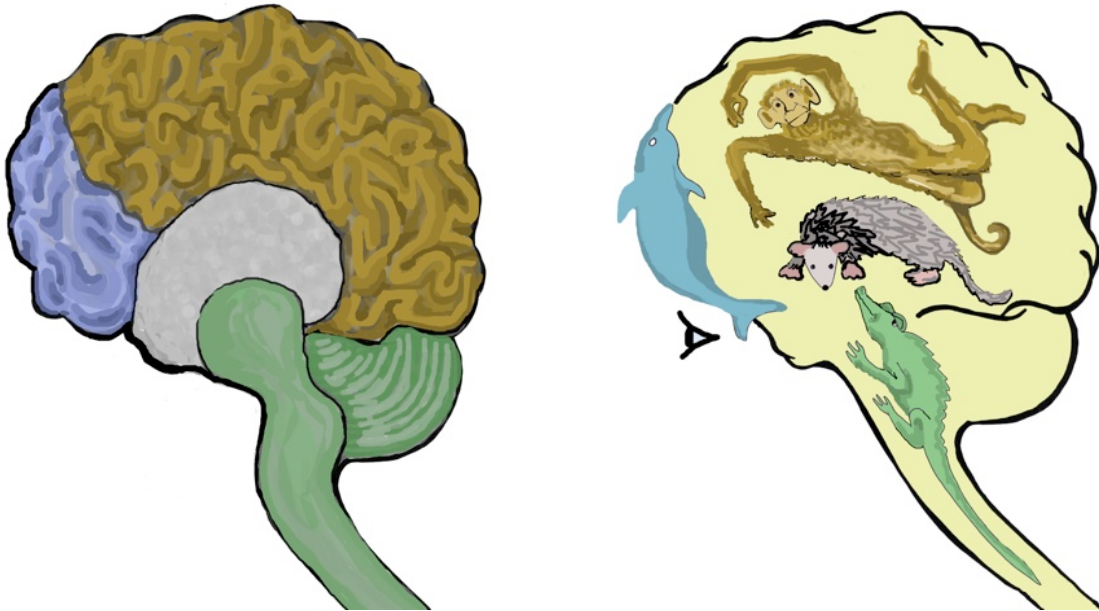
So here is the question: *How does this evolutionary perspective **enrich your appreciation of the spiritual and self-help practices that are already part of your life?***

6. Reading assignment – 100 pages:

All of Part V (chapters 14 thru Epilogue)

7. Closing recitation. Who will volunteer to recite the gray box, “The Parable of the Pickle Jar” that begins on p. 163 and ends on p. 164?

Your Evolved Brain



Reptilian (brain stem, cerebellum) "LIZARD LEGACY"

Old Mammalian (limbic system) "FURRY LI'L MAMMAL"

New Mammalian (neocortex) "MONKEY MIND"

Advanced (frontal lobes) "HIGHER PORPOISE"

*Note: The same charts appear on page 149 of Michael Dowd's book:
"Thank God for Evolution!"*

These charts can be downloaded in color at:

<http://thegreatstory.org/charts/triune.html>

PRACTICES

- Page 189 – “Growing in Deep integrity”
- Page 211 – “Noticing 2 or More Sensory Stimuli”
- Page 212 – “Speaking in Tongues”
- Page 215 – “Integrity Circles”
- Page 216 – “Soliciting Feedback”
- Page 217 – “Reframing the Past”
- Page 220 – “Looking for Opportunity”
- Page 222 – “Inventory Your Character”
- Page 222 – “Come Clean”
- Page 222 – “Light-Hearted Integrity Checks”
- Page 223 – “Taking Responsibility for Your Wake”
- Page 225 – “Magic in any relationship” (the gray box)
- Page 228 – “Letters of Gratitude”
- Page 228 – “Cultivating Generosity”
- Page 229 – “Discerning Your Calling”
- Page 230 – “Mentoring”
- Page 235 – “Heart to Heart Talk” (gray box)
- Page 236 – “Playfulness and Humor” (tried for more of?)
- Page 237 – “Meaningful Songs and Ritual”
- Page 238 – “Where’s My Avocado?” (gray box)
- Page 242 – “Deep Integrity Affirmations”

Session 4

Part V: Chapter 14 through Epilogue

100 pages

1. In-Gathering (chairs in circle)

2. Recitation (15 minutes) – *pass out brain chart to all; request volunteer readers for each of the following*

Chapter 14: Collective Sin and Salvation

- Page 251: Begin reciting first paragraph of text and continue onto next page, just the first 3 lines (before the new section)
- Page 254: Read just the italicized paragraph at the bottom, then continue the end of the top paragraph on p. 255.

Chapter 15: The Wisdom of Life's Collective Intelligence

- Page 270: Begin para "Any of us" and continue onto the next page, up to where a new paragraph begins ("What is precious")

Chapter 16: Knowing the Past Reveals Our Way Forward

- Page 289: Recite just the final two paragraphs.
- Page 292: Begin with the para, "Why are we here?" and end on page 293 just before the Miriam MacGillis blockquote.

Chapter 17: Beyond Sustainability: An Inspiring Vision

- Page 316: Recite the 3 paragraphs between the 2 sets of stars.

Chapter 18: Our Evolving Understanding of God's Will

- Page 323: Begin at the indented, italicized paragraph, continue onto next page thru the end of the first paragraph, "web of life".

Conclusion and Epilogue

- Page 341: Recite entire page.

3. Silent reflection: (2 minutes) "Before we begin our discussion, let us pause for a minute of silence to help us participate in the dialogue in such a way that both our head and our heart will guide our remarks and our listening of others."

4. Discussion:

Q: "Let's begin with a question for each of us to answer in turn, just to give us all a chance to speak before we move into a less structured discussion format. Let's each of us to take just a minute or so to respond from the heart to this question: **"What came up for you most powerfully in your reading at home of these final 100 pages of the book, or in the recitation that began this session?"**

5. Discussion continues (open style). Possible questions:

Q: Here is a question that pertains to **Chapter 14**, the chapter that Dowd calls, "Collective Sin and Salvation." *Do you resonate with the author's agenda of **using an evolutionary perspective to help solve societal problems** and to inspire active engagement in the solutions?* For example, at the bottom of page 254, he has an indented, italicized paragraph in which he talks about "the fundamental immaturity of the human species." Who volunteers to recite that paragraph? . . . *Are these applications of evolution to the societal level insightful for you?*

Q: Let us talk about Who We Are, as the human—a topic that Dowd addresses in **Chapter 16**, beginning on p. 188. The idea that we humans are the Universe **awakening to its own story**, celebrating its own glory, has generated religious awakenings in people. Dowd tells us that this has been going on ever since **Julian Huxley** and **Pierre Teilhard de Chardin** in the mid-20th century, and then **Thomas Berry** in the late 20th century, started teaching in this way. *Did anyone here have a sense of awakening, renewed inspiration, from Dowd's portrayal of our species as the Cosmos awakening to its own majesty?*

Q: In **Chapter 17**, Dowd provides a quick survey of what he calls "Major Challenges in the Next 250 Years." After his analysis of **"the bad news"** trends, he talks about "wildcards." Wildcards are unpredictable but possible events that would cause severe harm to humanity (such as asteroid impacts and supervolcanoes). He then surveys the **positive trends** and what he calls, "the likely good news." *Did you find this chapter distressing, hopeful, or some combination — and why?*

Q: In **Chapter 18** and **Appendix A**, Dowd quotes (with approval) from the writings of some of the New Atheists, including Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins. *Any reactions to Dowd's use of those and other such passages?* (Examples include pages 319–321 and 330.)

Q: Let's turn to **page 316**. We already recited the last half of the page, but would someone volunteer to read just the italicized paragraph again? . . . So here is the question: *Might embedding your own life within such a frame of **heroic participation** give you, too, a sense of deep calling?* . . . Any responses?

6. Announce if there will be a Fifth Session to view the 1.5 hour Disk 1 of the companion DVD, "Thank God for Evolution". If not, you might want to tell people that it is available for purchase online:

<http://thegreatstory.org/dvd.html>

7. Closing recitation.

Choose one of these two quotations for the final recitation:

- Thomas Berry epigraph, beginning on p. 310
- Brian Swimme quotation, bottom of p. 367