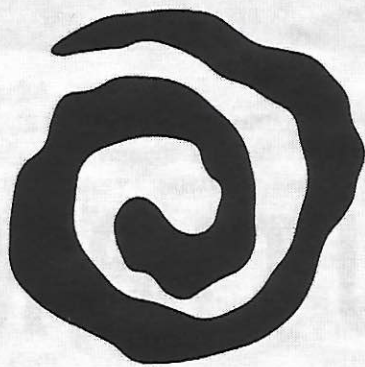




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Evolving the Epic

BY CONNIE BARLOW

Readers with an eye for detail and an exacting memory will detect a slight change from our inaugural (spring 1998) issue, both in the title of this editorial column and in the name of our publication. "Quarterly" is out. Our enthusiasm with the start-up of the Epic of Evolution Society quite simply overshot our ability to follow through as volunteers. Everybody you see on the masthead is a volunteer, and we all have day jobs. Nevertheless, we volunteers are determined to keep this movement going and enrich our communications. And so we are committed to producing a twice-annual (and, as you can see, thicker) publication of the news and ideas emerging in our midst.

The name of this editorial column thus becomes delightfully enigmatic. Am I speaking of how this publication (now abbreviated the *Epic*) evolves? Or how the movement evolves? Or perhaps how the scientific roots of the story and its mythic renderings each are changing—dare I say progressing? Even more boldly, *Evolving the Epic* calls to mind how this phase of the cosmic, earth, and life journey right now, at this moment, is reaching out and thus creating its own emergent future—and how our own growing community is eager to affect that path.

So, what do we offer in this issue of the *Epic*?

The cover article by Brian Swimme reveals why he has become such an inspiring leader in this movement. Brian beckons us all to think in the boldest ways, to set goals for ourselves and the healing of Earth that are exponentially greater than the sorts of things that you and I encounter each morning on our "To Do" lists. His words are an essential reminder that within us—with in each of us, and especially when acting in community—reside far greater potentials than expressed in our everyday selves.

Remember that statement when you encounter the subscription form. Yes, you are buying a publication, but you are also supporting and becoming part of a movement still so nascent that individuals—even those of us with modest skills and credentials—can make a real difference. And so, think about letting us know what you can do.

For example, if you have an idea for an experiential practice or ritual that evokes the Epic, or if you participated in such process of someone else's making and are moved to write a reflective piece on the experience, contact Ruth Rosenhek. She's in charge of the "Experiencing the Epic" department, which is launched in this issue with a reflective piece on Epic practice by Catherine Browning. In future issues we hope to launch the "Epic Arts" department, to be coordinated by Alan Tower and Gretchen McHugh, and an education department, to be coordinated by Jim Fitzpatrick. Please contact all these people directly. (Remember, I have a day job.)

One other department is launched in this issue, rather prosaically titled (for the moment) "Science Update." Larry Edwards and I are listed on the masthead as coordi-

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nators of this department, because of his background in physics and mine in biology. Biology is our focus in this issue, with an essay by me on several new discoveries directly relevant to the Epic.

Our movement thus feeds on human capacities as far-ranging as hard-core science and deeply subjective experience. We celebrate both the cerebral and the limbic. Some of us have a foot in both realms, others are more at ease in one or the other, but we are all supportive of (if not personally moved by) such diversity. And we love talk-

ing with one another about it—sometimes agreeing, and sometimes agreeing to disagree. So with each issue of the *Epic* you can count on at least one “Forum” discussion.

In this issue our Forum piece is “Epic, Story, Narrative.” This discussion was sparked by a posting I placed in early September on our Cosmogen listserv (which in turn was sparked by an IRASnet dialogue, an extract of which is also published here). I made the Cosmogen posting with no idea that it would garner responses brilliant and heartfelt enough to justify this transit from ephemeral cyberspace energy into the semi-permanent realm of matter. Like the lovely innovations of biological evolution, our Cosmogen conversation began with no foresight of where it might lead. Mimicking Ichthyostega, one of my evolutionary heroes, I meant to do nothing more than just crawl out of the water and hang out on the beach. The posting was not polished, just as my Paleozoic fish hero was far from fleet on land, but just watch what comes of it!

Also interactive, though not as wildly conversational, is Ursula Goodenough’s email interview with the “founder” of the Scientific Pantheism movement. Marvel here in a rich example of parallel evolution. “We” and “They” have been emerging and evolving to fill uncannily similar niches. Allopatrically, as it turns out, as We are mostly in the United States and They have roots in Britain. Only now have we encountered one another’s presence. (What will come of the encounter?)

Ursula contributes once again, but this time as expounder rather than questioner, in her article “Ultimacy,” which is adapted from a chapel talk she gave at the July conference of the Institute on Religion in an Age of Science—which, in turn, adapts an extract from her just-released book, *The Sacred Depths of Nature*. (Sound like evolution?) *Sacred Depths* is the Epic told as you have never heard it before, through the intellect and heart of a cell biologist. Fortunately, Ursula (who entered college as a literature major), has the ability to make guanine and galactose-glucose sound like a Mozart sonata. (Terrence Deacon likens her to Loren Eiseley and Lewis Thomas, in this regard, and I heartily agree.) She moves beyond the technical science to share with the reader the magnificent idea/feelings that emerge, and that emerge for her personally.

Save for the foregoing three sentences, you won’t find any book reviews in this issue, and you likely won’t in future issues. You already read tons of book reviews in the deluge of other magazines you receive, yes? Well, here, we give you extracts. And here we shall stay very close to our title theme, as a narrow-niche species. There are oodles and oodles of important and worthy books, but if they do not specifically manifest the Epic, you will not see them here. Abiding by that rule, the extract you will encounter here from the new cassette tape volume, *The Collected Works of Thomas Berry*, draws exclusively from his Epic statements. Thomas has ranged widely in his life work, but the Epic (the New Story, the Universe Story) is how we celebrate that work here.

Finally, on the back page you will find “Epic Events”—again, holding very close to our Epic theme. A wealth of important talks and events are happening in the science–religion dialogue and in the blossoming ecospirituality movement, but if they aren’t on the Epic, you won’t see them posted here. “Epic Events” is not just to keep us all informed of future happenings we might want to attend. Because it is also meant to record the birth and growth of this movement, by-gone events of the past few months are listed too. Quite simply, invitations are extended and presentations made at a pace that dances in the interstices of the sloggingly semi-annual.

So, until next time, I’m off to my day job—where I get to research and muse upon the ghosts of evolution. In the meantime, talk with you on Cosmogen! ☺

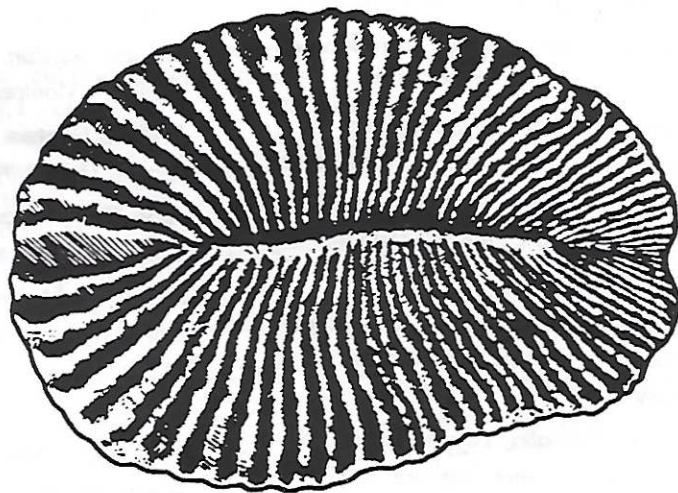
“Cultural Significance”

(Continued from cover)

into the interstices of the human cerebral cortex draws into its reach all the developments of the physical energies released from the universe into the hands of the human.

In this presentation I want to explore some considerations concerning the Epic of Evolution and its possible effects on the course of human history. By the phrases “Epic of Evolution” or “Story of the Universe” or simply “New Story” I mean to indicate our contemporary account of how fifteen billion years of universe evolution, five billion years of Earth evolution, and three million years of human evolution have led to our present condition of life within the Earth Community. This comprehensive narrative can be considered a single though complex idea that is the construction of millions of humans working ceaselessly for at least four centuries on every continent of Earth. It is without any doubt one of the monumental accomplishments of the human species, a crowning intellectual achievement of the modern age.

I would like to begin with a series of observations concerning the Epic of Evolution so that my thoughts as to its implications will have a context for understanding. The first is simply the obvious parallel between our discovery of fire and our discovery of the Epic. In both cases it was impossible for the humans to have any clear idea of what they were getting involved in. During the



four centuries of the modern science enterprise nothing could have been further from Copernicus’s or Newton’s or Curie’s mind than the idea that they were in the process of giving birth to a new and comprehensive narrative of the universe’s birth and development. Even today the vast majority of scientists, attending to their own specializations, have neither the time nor the inclination to ponder the trans-scientific and historic impact of this epic narrative. And in this we are entirely similar to the first hominids dealing with fire, unaware of the vast consequences of the thing they held in their hands.

My second observation concerns the relative permanence of the idea of the Epic of Evolution. No one can predict the future in any detail, but there are reasons to believe that some general features of our future can be pointed to concerning our discovery of evolution, and one of these is the unstoppable nature of this idea. I

(Continued on page 5)