

When I read Lisa Sideris' piece—*The Problem With Big History: Turning Science Into Myth*-- I was puzzled about the point of the article. So I went on the net and found two videos of Ms. Sideris' talks.

The first was a talk she gave to students at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia. It was a longer version of this present article. The second was a talk she gave on a panel with James Miller and Mary Evelyn Tucker at the Chautauqua conference in July of 2013. The three panelists were responding to Swmme and Tucker's film *The Journey of the Universe*.

After I finished my review I concluded that her position was this:

Some scientists are trying to turn science into some kind of religion or spiritual experience—even a Meta Religion. They want to replace the need for religion and provide science as a viable alternative. Some religious leaders are doing the same thing in reverse. They are trying to use science to help “prove” their religious views. This is dangerous for both science and religion.

But then comes the disconnect. She says the cause of these problems is that the scientists and the religious leaders she mentions are doing this because they have adopted the concepts of Big History and the New Cosmology. She argues that they don't need a new story. They have their own stories.

She goes further. She notes that adopting Big History and the New Cosmology creates an ethical problem. Ms. Sideris does not show how Big History and the New Cosmology create an ethical problem. But her talk in Virginia gives us an indication of her thinking about ethics.

She quotes extensively from Rachel Carson on the need for a direct contact with nature. She seems to blame the devotees of this new approach with denying or denigrating this relationship. Thomas Berry, with his need for a New Story, is singled out as one of the major offenders. But she tends to cherry pick quotes to illustrate her preconceptions. She ignores Berry's many statements like this one.

*“Our difficulty is that we have become autistic. We no longer listen to what the Earth, its landscape, its atmospheric phenomena and all its living forms, its mountains and valleys, the rain, the wind, and all that the flora and fauna of the planet are telling us.”*

This sounds like Rachel Carson. We all have a great deal of respect for Rachel Carson. But since her death in 1966 the world has changed radically. She did not live in a world where children wander around in summer camps or go for hikes with cell-phones up to their ears.

Though Ms. Sideris mentions that there is need for a common ground she does not indicate what it might look like or how this might be accomplished either for religion or for science in an environmental context. Instead, her emphasis is the conflict between science and religion, an issue that reaches back, in one form or another, to the days of Galileo.

What is at the core of the difference between those of us who see the need for a New Story and Ms. Sideris who believes that religious and environmental groups have their own stories and have no need for a new story? I think it is a different understanding of the nature of story.

Story is not just a recounting of historical events, anecdotes and myths. *Story provides a context-- a framework within which we send and receive messages, establish relationships, see the world and give it meaning.* It frames our way of thinking about the world and acting within it.

Everyone needs a viable story. Up until the beginning of the Twentieth Century physicists had a story that guided their activity. It was based upon the Newtonian synthesis and the insights of Descartes. But they soon discovered that the old story could no longer be used to deal with the questions they were raising in the world they were facing. This gave rise to a new story based in part on Einstein's relativity theories and the work of quantum physicists. Many of us with backgrounds in religion, science or the environmental movement find ourselves in a similar situation today.

Many faith groups, especially mainline Christian churches, are locked into the old story based upon the cosmology of Thomas Aquinas and Aristotle. They have not adopted a new story reflecting a quantum world. Thus many people, especially the young, see churches as out of date and irrelevant. There is an exodus out of churches with only the elderly folks remaining.

The science community is now facing a similar challenge. Their old story is based upon discreet disciplines with rigid boundaries and a demanding scientific method. They have difficulty adopting an integrated approach to deal with globalization and "wicked problems." Scientists have been talking about climate change for forty years but they are not getting their message across—especially to the decision makers. Many of them believe it is impossible to get into politics without getting out of science. It is a risky business for a scientist.

We are deeply indebted to environmental groups, but they also have the need for a new story. Their old story is built upon the creation of Earth Day forty years ago and the belief that that people will recognize the importance of stewardship. Stewardship is about the environment that is still something "out there." They often don't see themselves as earthlings—part of which they are trying to save. Meanwhile climate change is wreaking havoc and eco systems are being destroyed. The single issue environmental groups have difficulty dealing with an infinitely more complex world than the one that gave birth to them.

In the climate change world that is changing everything many of us see the need to move beyond our old stories to a comprehensive New Story—a story that will meet the modern needs of religions, science and the environmental movement. As Thomas Berry has noted, we are between stories. The old story is no longer relevant, but we have not developed the new story. "We need a new story that will educate us, a story that will heal, guide and discipline us."

For those who wish to explore in more detail this interesting issue that Lisa Sideris has raised I would recommend watching the [Chautaugua](#) panel discussion.

