

BECOMING COSMOS:

A Personal Journey

By Jennifer Morgan

You could say the oxygen of cosmology—the story of the universe and the human role within it—was in my blood and the air I breathed as a child. Little did I know that it would lead me to Montessori and Cosmic Education through a winding path filled with synchronistic encounters.

Growing up in a small town north of New York City, I was steeped from an early age in a profound engagement with the cosmos, art, nature, and the search for meaning. My grandmother Barbara Morgan, a renowned photographer, was deeply immersed in Native American, Eastern, and Western cosmologies. Her iconic images of dancer Martha Graham captured a worldview of origin and connection, and her friendship with mythologist Joseph Campbell and her passion for integrating emerging science with ancient wisdom left an indelible mark on me. Summers spent at an Adirondack camp reinforced my love of the earth—working on an organic farm, climbing mountains, canoeing. Meanwhile, my mother, Maureen Morgan, a liturgist, infused our church life with creativity—light shows, drumming, and dance—creating cosmic celebrations that sparked the imagination. These formative threads of cosmos and Earth, myth and ritual, deeply shaped my yearning for a larger context for understanding life.

AWAKENING TO GLOBAL INJUSTICE

In college at the University of San Francisco, I majored in theology, drawn to Anselm of Canterbury's vision of God as "that than which nothing greater can be conceived." Later, my work as a journalist in the Philippines during the Marcos dictatorship exposed me to the suffering caused by industrial agriculture—the so-called Green Revolution. I saw how hybrid crops and chemicals devastated traditional ways of life, and I began to recognize that the true problem was cosmological: a worldview that severed people from land and community.



Jennifer Morgan giving a keynote address at the AMS conference in Orlando, FL, 2013

I became involved in the Philippine pro-democracy movement, working with countless people who had been imprisoned and tortured under the Marcos regime. Witnessing firsthand how dictatorship worsened conditions in rural areas shattered any remaining illusions I had about political power. When I returned to the United States, I was subpoenaed to appear before a grand jury in connection with my work in the Philippines and pressured to reveal information about people I knew. Threatened with imprisonment if I refused, I nonetheless took the Fifth Amendment, standing firm in my refusal to cooperate. Fortunately, they ultimately chose not to pursue charges, and I was released.

Determined to act in an area where I felt I could make a difference, I moved to New Jersey and became executive director of the Northeast Organic Farming Association (NOFA-NJ), leading efforts to promote organic farming standards focused on soil health and holistic living.

A LIFE-CHANGING ENCOUNTER

A chance meeting utterly changed the course of my life: I was introduced to Sister Miriam MacGillis, a Dominican sister and founder of Genesis Farm in Blairstown, NJ. She had studied with the priest and historian Thomas Berry, whose profound vision of the universe story and the Great Work for our time had inspired her to offer a program entitled “Story of the Universe”—an integration of science, Indigenous wisdom, cosmology, and spirituality. Miriam insisted that I join. After some hesitation, I

agreed. Little did I know that this decision would lead to everything I'm doing now.

The program at Genesis Farm combined rigorous science with experiential practices like cosmic walks and meditation on the land. We read the work of Thomas Berry, Lynn Margulis, James Lovelock, and Brian Swimme, and explored how cosmological and bioregional stories shape our identity and sense of purpose. I was astonished by how the curriculum moved from the largest cosmological scale, through bioregions, and finally to the inner life of the self—connecting each level to our sense of Great Work in the world. It would be an understatement to say the program blew my mind. For the first time, I was part of a learning experience that wove together multiple ways of knowing into a coherent, breathtaking mosaic that connected my personal life to the larger transformational arc of the cosmos.

DISCOVERING THE POWER OF STORYTELLING

Toward the end of the program, we participants were invited to tell the universe story in our own way. I felt compelled to embody it, narrating as the universe itself—rolling on the floor, exploding into stars, birthing planets, living and dying. When I finished, I looked up in fear—only to find people with tears in their eyes. Sister Suzanne Golas told me it was one of the most beautiful things she had ever seen.

Telling the story in the first person was a deeply empowering experience, that I was the universe being Jennifer Morgan. I could actually feel myself vibrating.

At home, my 6-year-old son became my first listener. Night after night, I told him bedtime stories of stars being born and dying, of Earth emerging from stardust. I lit candles as I spoke, and I could see his eyes widen and flash in the dark, captivated.

“Let us give the child a vision of the whole universe.... No matter what we touch, an atom, or a cell, we cannot explain it without knowledge of the wide universe.”

—Maria Montessori (1948, p. 10)

A SYNCHRONISTIC ENCOUNTER WITH MONTESSORI COSMIC EDUCATION

At the time, my son was attending Princeton Montessori School. His Elementary teacher, Sue Steidel, read a manuscript I was drafting and handed it back to me with a note: “Fits right in with Montessori Cosmic Education. Would you like to sit in when we tell the First Great Lesson?” *What the heck was Montessori Cosmic Education?* I asked myself. I was flabbergasted to learn that Maria Montessori and her son, Mario, had developed a curriculum for elementary-age children, built around the child’s natural impulse to ask, “Where did everything come from?” In a darkened room, I watched as Sue told the First Great Lesson, developed by Maria Montessori and Mario long before scientific proof of the Big Bang, in 1964, and which embeds its listeners inside a cultural mosaic of origin stories.

Synchronicity had struck again: Just as I was learning to tell the universe story, my son was absorbing it through Montessori’s Cosmic Education.

WRITING THE UNIVERSE STORY TRILOGY

This affirmation sent me plunging ahead. I decided to write a series of children’s books narrating the story of the universe from the universe’s first-person perspective. I envisioned a multilevel approach: selecting key threshold moments from the scientific story; grounding every page in the most up-to-date research; including emotional and spiritual dimensions—meaning, awe, purpose; writing with an elementary-age voice; and meeting publishing standards (though I had no publisher yet!).

Drawing on both Brian Swimme’s and Thomas Berry’s narrative templates and the Montessori Great Lessons, I sought to create something children could *feel*—a sense of their own emergence within a living, evolving universe.

While developing the manuscripts, I immersed myself in the scientific foundations. Living in Princeton, I sat in on university courses—astronomy, cosmology, evolutionary biology, anthropology—and befriended professors like James Gunn, Jill Knapp, and Stephen Pacala. Even though much of the coursework was mathematically complex, I absorbed the big ideas, the dazzling new insights about the cosmos. The simple act of opening the door to Peyton Hall for the cosmology class made me ecstatic, like the universe itself was drawing me and revealing its secrets. It also dawned on me, day after day, that the pull within me was overpowering and unstoppable.



One joyous part of the process was reading drafts to children. When I asked a class of 8-year-olds if I should remove the part about the mother star dying in a supernova, they unanimously cried out, “NO!” One girl added, “It gives us a chance to cry.”

Still, finding a publisher proved difficult—over 30 rejections. My marriage was dissolving, and I was living in an apartment, relying on dwindling savings. A chance conversation with a local policeman led me to Rajiv Malhotra of the Infinity Foundation. After a 4-hour lunch, Rajiv handed me a \$25,000 check to support the project—a moment when it felt as though the universe itself was saying, “You go, girl.”

Not long after, Dawn Publications expressed interest in my books. Traveling to California to meet the team, I emphasized my need for an illustrator who could capture the energy of the cosmos. That very night, we stumbled into an art show and met Dana Lynne Andersen, whose galaxy paintings and spiritual vision were a perfect match. It felt fated.

Over the next several years, the Universe Story Trilogy was published: *Born with a Bang* (2002), then *From Lava to Life* (2003), and *Mammals Who Morph* (2006). The books have since been used in many Montessori classrooms, Big History programs, and secular and religious schools.

A COSMIC VISION ACROSS ALL LEVELS

When the books were published, I received many invitations to visit schools and give teacher trainings. In 2013, I gave a keynote address at the AMS annual conference, in Orlando. Shortly afterward, Dr. Betsy Coe



“It is not enough for the teacher to love the child. She must first love and understand the Universe. She must prepare herself, and truly work at it.”

—Maria Montessori (1948/1976, p. 20)

introduced herself and asked if I would help kick off the Houston Montessori Center’s teacher education program summer cohort by giving the Big Picture (the story of the universe and the human role within it) to their adult learners of all levels, Infant/Toddler through Secondary. Thus began an annual ritual—first in person and then later online—of opening each year’s training with the cosmic story and vision.

In alignment with Betsy’s vision, having all levels together to experience the Big Picture story in science and storytelling created a shared, unified beginning for their educational journey. Even more important, they were able to deeply *experience* together their embeddedness within an evolving cosmogenetic universe in which they would be creating the future as teachers. For many adult learners, it was the first time they got a glimmer of the magnitude of cosmic creativity and their role within it—it was an emotional experience. Many of them asked me, “Why has no one told me about this before?”

DEEPTIME STORYTELLING AND THE POWER OF AWE

When I’ve told the cosmic story in classrooms and for teacher trainings—sometimes dressed in a black cape with LED stars—I aim to transport participants to Deeptime, a term created by combining “deep time”

*Above left:
Jennifer with
Thomas Berry, a
cultural historian
and eco-theologian
who called for a
new story of the
universe to guide
humanity into an
ecological age*

*Above right:
Jennifer (at
right) with her
grandmother,
renowned dance
photographer
Barbara Morgan*

“Our goal is not so much the imparting of knowledge as the unveiling and developing of spiritual energy.”

—Maria Montessori (1996, p. 63)

into one word as a unique expression of our group’s work. While “deep time” has traditionally referred to geological time, on the Deeptime Network we’ve expanded it into the full arc of cosmic evolution, from the birth of the universe to the emergence of life, consciousness, and culture. In this vast context, participants begin to feel connected to the larger, time-dimensional cosmos, just as my grandmother’s photographs, my mother’s liturgies, and my own experiences at Genesis Farm transported me.

Storytelling evokes participation in the larger mystery of existence. It helps children and adults alike remember that they belong—not just to a place, a family, or a nation, but to a living, evolving cosmos.

Deeptime storytelling evokes a deep sense of awe by helping us feel part of something far greater than ourselves. UC Berkeley professor Dacher Keltner

(2023; Monroy & Keltner, 2022) has written that awe can trigger beneficial neurophysiological responses—lowering stress and inflammation, reducing self-focus, and amplifying a sense of connection. When stories are shared through music, nature, and spiritual reflection—core elements of Deeptime education—they foster prosocial behavior, deepen belonging, and inspire meaning and purpose, all of which contribute to improved mental and physical well-being.

BRIDGING COSMIC MOVEMENTS TO USHER IN AN ECOZOIC ERA

Through my work, I saw parallels between Montessori Cosmic Education, Big History, and the Journey of the Universe project. Big History brings together historians and scientists to construct an objective, science-based narrative of the 13.8-billion-year story of cosmic evolution, believing that to understand humans, we need to understand our origin. The Journey of the Universe project also begins with the science, but then explores the inner, personal meaning of the story. I connected with these groups and realized there was a deep need to weave these movements together. With a board, I co-founded the Deep Time Journey Network, in 2013, a nonprofit that sponsors the Deeptime Network—a platform where educators, artists, scientists, and seekers can connect, share resources, and deepen the integration of deep time into education.

We offer professional development for teachers, leadership training, and numerous programs that many have called “cosmic education for adults.” The aim is the same for all these programs—to transform our perspective and experience to come into alignment with the larger reality of an integrated evolving universe in which we play an important role and in which we can celebrate the truly astounding reality of existence.

The experience of awe and deep belonging for so many people has been profoundly moving, many saying that for the first time they feel like they’ve come home and have a sense of well-being. Repeatedly hearing this prompted us to expand the name of our leadership program to the Deeptime Leadership and Wellbeing Program.

I believe the cosmic task of our time is to co-create an Ecozoic Era, in which humans come into a mutually enhancing relationship with the earth and each other, as Thomas Berry and Maria Montessori instructed us to do.



Jennifer with her son, Morgan Martindell, age 7, participating in a Cosmic Walk ritual

“The first peace, which is the most important, is that which comes within the souls of people when they realize their relationship, their oneness with the universe and all its powers.”

—Black Elk (Heháka Sápa), as quoted by John G. Neihardt (2014)



FINDING MYSELF AND EVERYTHING INSIDE AN EXPANDING UNIVERSE

One year ago, we offered a course on cosmogenesis with Brian Swimme, in which we invited participants to write their own autocosmologies—personal stories of discovery and the experience of being embedded within an evolving universe.

In preparation, I read Brian Swimme’s *Cosmogensis: An Unveiling of the Expanding Universe* while visiting Orla Hazra, a Deeptime Network board member, in Florida. Each day, I would sink into a deep red vinyl booth at a beachside restaurant, the sound of waves nearby, and disappear into the text.

Reading about the intense pull Swimme felt to leave his professorship in the Pacific Northwest and head to New York to study with Thomas Berry—not knowing where it would lead—I saw myself mirrored in that leap of faith. I realized too that I had been drawn forward by unseen forces, trusting without full understanding.

As I read, something even larger and more profoundly moving opened up. I saw myself, more than I ever had before, as woven into a cosmic lineage: Teilhard de Chardin, Maria Montessori, Brian Swimme, Mary Evelyn Tucker, and countless others. Most powerfully, when I read about Brian Swimme meeting Thomas Berry for the first time in Chicago, a connection that would shape the course of his life, I also saw myself coming into the larger story, as if it was inevitable. In a deep sense, these thinkers and the larger reality constructed me. It was overwhelming. I saw how my work today is a natural expression of what the universe needs now. I understood how my parents, my grandparents, and every experience have shaped me—and how this shaping stretches back, not just through human generations, but through stars, galaxies, and the very birth of the cosmos itself.

And now, I offer this story to you—as a kind of commissioning. Just as I have come to see myself as woven into a vast cosmic lineage, so too are you. You are part of this great unfolding, shaped not only by

mentors, family, and culture, but by the stars, the galaxies, and the deep time of the universe itself. The work you do, especially as educators, is not separate from this story—it is a vital expression of it. The universe needs your voice, your care, your creativity—right now. May you see your life and your work as part of something profoundly meaningful and necessary. May you help others awaken to their own place in this cosmic story.

[Editor’s note: Parts of this article were first published in the essay “A Cosmology for Our Time,” which appeared in *From Big Bang to Galactic Civilizations: A Big History Anthology*, vol. III, *The Ways that Big History Works: Cosmos, Life, Society and Our Future*, Eds. Barry Rodrigue, Leonid Grinin and Andrey Korotayev. Primus Publishing, 2017: pp. 298–307.]

JENNIFER MORGAN, president and founder of the Deeptime Network, is an award-winning author, storyteller, and educator inspired by the work of Teilhard de Chardin, Maria Montessori, Thomas Berry, and Brian Swimme. Her Universe Story trilogy—*Born with a Bang*, *From Lava to Life*, and *Mammals Who Morph*—is used in classrooms around the world, particularly in Montessori schools, and has received the Teachers Choice Award and highest ratings from the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), was a Nautilus Book Award semifinalist, and garnered endorsements from Jane Goodall, Neil deGrasse Tyson, astronaut Edgar Mitchell, Thomas Berry, Brian Swimme, and others. Learn more about Jennifer and the Deeptime Network at dtnetwork.org.

References

- Keltner, D. (2023). *Awe: The new science of everyday wonder*. Penguin Press.
 Monroy, M. & Keltner, D. (2022, August 22). Awe as a pathway to mental and physical health. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 18(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/17456916221094>
 Montessori, M. (1996). *The child in the family*. ABC-Clio, p. 63.
 Montessori, M. (1948/1976). *From childhood to adolescence*. ABC-Clio, p. 20.
 Montessori, M. (1948/1989). *To educate the human potential*. ABC-Clio, p. 10.
 Neihardt, J. G. (2014). *Black Elk speaks*. Bison Books, pp. 33–34.

Above left: Jennifer as a child with her father, Douglas O. Morgan, at the family printing and publishing companies, Morgan & Morgan and Morgan Press, publishers and printers of fine art photography books

Below: Jennifer Morgan, when she was executive director of the Northeast Organic Farming Association of New Jersey (1993), with then NJ Secretary of Agriculture Arthur Brown

