

The Future Is Calling Us to Greatness

with Michael Dowd + 56 Experts



The Sacred Wild Within and Without with Bill Pfeiffer

Big ideas from this session:

- The Sacred Earth Network
- How to nurture a deeper communion with Nature and Time
- Co-creating ecstatic culture in chaotic, challenging times

Michael: Bill, thank you so much for being part of this conversation series, The Future is Calling Us to Greatness. I've been looking forward to this for quite some time.

Bill: Wonderful, thank you for inviting me on the show.

Michael: Bill, could you please at the start just sort of I don't want to assume that everybody that's listening to this will know who you are and what you're best known for and that sort of thing. Rather than me try to do an introduction what I've been inviting all my guests to do is at the start just give a sense of your trajectory. Give us a sense of who you are, what you're particularly passionate about and that sort of thing. Feel free to take your time doing that.

Bill: Okay, wonderful. There's so many different ways to answer that question. I had a very powerful, mystical experience when I was 26 years old. There was a huge outpouring of support for I guess you could call it end the nuclear arms race. It was part of the nuclear freeze campaign in 1982.

Michael: Sure.

Bill: It was the largest demonstration in American history. Not a lot of people really know about it even though there were so many people there. I was one of the organizers. It kind of turned for me from a kind of well-meaning, political organizing event into this full-blown, mystical experience where on the day of, which was June 12, 1982, I found myself really walking in a sea of love.

The people at the demonstration were completely different than anything I had experienced before in terms of demonstrations, like during the Vietnam days. It was really an example of if we want peace we need to be peace. When you have so many people coming in from all parts of the world to do that it just came into my heart in a profound way.

Why am I saying this? I was drinking too much at the time and I didn't really have a sense of purpose. Everything shifted after that and I really had this sense of the word Gandhi uses is Satyagraha, the truth force. There was this evolutionary trajectory that he met and he was on to grow to deeper, deeper levels of love and connection and truth and joy and so forth.

I wasn't reading in this area. This just all sort of came through on a very intuitive level.

Michael: How old were you at the time?

Bill: I was 26 years old.

Michael: Wow.

Bill: Yes. By orienting me in that direction I saw that to have a life of service was going to be the most fulfilling and the most joyful that I could choose. I saw that being part of the big picture was where the juice was at. That's one of the reasons I love your work so much. You're always thinking along those lines, what's really going on here and how can we take part for the benefit of all beings.

About five or six years later I was invited to go to what was then the Soviet Union on a citizen diplomacy trip. I fell in love with the Russians and soon thereafter started a not-for-profit to work on environmental collaboration with the not-for-profits there that were just emerging.

Simultaneously, and this is how I think you and I know one another, John Seed and Joanna Macy who were on the Board of Advisors of Sacred Earth Network, were really influencing our little team in terms of going beyond just kind of standard environmentalism or political environmentalism and feeling into our ancient, infinite roots with planet Earth and the universe and actually helping us really feel what that means.

It's interesting that I would start out talking to you about that mystical experience on June 12. I feel like I experienced that again with Joanna and John Seed in kind of a different way, much more surreal and kinesthetic as far as the Earth plane goes. Really understanding at a deeper level what it means to be an Earth being, from the Earth, made of originally stardust.

Anyway, these two influences of this Russian environmental collaboration, which I could spend a whole hour talking about but I'm just trying to abbreviate it, was a profound

influence. What we called it at the time, which I still like, deep ecology, was the other major influence. Our organization kind of took those two directions or approaches and we did a lot of good service for 20 years.

I think that the piece that leads up to my recent book published last year called *Wild Earth, Wild Soul*, what kind of led up to that book was that within the last five or six years of Sacred Earth Network's life we work extensively with native peoples of Siberia and in this country and in Central America. The idea was to really get to know what they were still holding for the rest of humanity and how important that was.

I would say that that was the fourth incredibly seminal experience of my work life, starting to work with them. It influenced what the book is about. We can talk a little bit more about that later but I'm trying to lead the listener into both my motivation and a little bit of the history of coming to this point.

That's the only other thing I would say, is that Thomas Berry says very strongly that this aboriginal experience that is in our cells and in our DNA, that remembering that and embodying that is really a critical. He looked at it as the most critical piece that we need to reclaim for the survival of our species. I think given who Thomas Berry was and is, that's a fairly remarkable statement. I think I'll end my long introduction right there.

Michael: I appreciate everything you said. One of the things that I have appreciated and admired about your work is this passionate connection to Earth, to life, to reality. I do evening programs now throughout. Connie and I are supporting the Great March for Climate Action so we're speaking along the route of this eight-month journey that about 50 people are making, that are doing the full thing, from Los Angeles to Washington, D.C.

I just did a program last night. One of the quotes that I have from Thomas Berry is the sense that we no longer listen to the wind and the climate, we no longer have a conversation. We're spiritually autistic, is the language he used.

In attempting to articulate what all indigenous peoples, as far as I know, have had in common, it's an I-thou relationship. It's a personal relationship with what we call nature, reality. I agree, one of my favorite quotes from Thomas that I actually use in my evening program, I've got the whole thing memorized.

He says, "The world we live in is an honorable world. To refuse this deepest aspect of our being, to deny honor where honor is due, is to place ourselves on a head-on collision course with the ultimate forces of the universe." He said, "This question of honor must be dealt with before anything else. It's ultimately not a political, economic or even an environmental issue. It's ultimately a question of honor. Only the sense of the violated honor of Earth and the need to

restore that honor will awaken in humans the passion and energy needed to co-create, adjust in healthy future.”

Bill: Yes, right on. He’s one of the really important grandfathers. I know that he was a tremendous influence on both of our lives. I love that man and just listening to you sends the chills up my spine. Very powerful and right on.

Michael: Cool, thanks. Our mutual love and respect for Joanna Macy, also just this older sister, mentor on the path. One of the great joys for me as a father was that a couple years ago my youngest daughter, at the age of 21 I think at that time, spent a week training with Joanna Macy. To have my own child follow that path that’s been so soul-nourishing for me was really quite a treat.

Bill: Everybody births themselves in quite a remarkable time. I think what I’m moved about is our brothers and sisters and mentors and the incredible people we find ourselves with on this journey at this incredibly remarkable time.

We’ve been saying that for a while but at no other time have we been up against, as a species, that collision course that Thomas talked about.

Michael: Yes, and the last time I saw John Seed and Ruth Rosenhek, I think we went skinny dipping together, Connie and I and them, down in the Smokey Mountains, God probably ten years ago now. That was fun.

Bill: Yes, they’re beautiful people. We’re all in this together. It’s great to have this conversation. It’s for an audience but it’s also beautiful to connect with you as a fellow brother. We haven’t spoken to each other for a while, yet we share this very parallel journey.

Michael: Yes, Amen. This would be probably a good time. Talk about your book, *Wild Earth, Wild Soul*. Also, just let’s start there. Share sort of what you’re trying to accomplish in that book and what you’re proudest of.

Bill: Thank you. I gave the introduction about Sacred Earth Network. For 20 years there were quite a few powerful influences and experiences and impressions and insights that I realized five years ago, six years ago that really it was time to share them.

What the book is really, essentially about is that we are genetically coded to live in balance with the Earth. To use the Native American phrase, with all our relations. You spoke to it earlier, to have this embedded it’s more than deeply connected. It’s an understanding of our

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Michael: Bill, you dropped out. I can’t hear you at all. Are you back?

Bill: I'm back. I haven't stopped talking.

Michael: The last thing that I heard was as a Native American it's more than deeply connected.

Bill: Yes, it's more than deeply connected. There's a oneness and an understanding of our utter dependency upon Mother Earth, that we're children of the Earth, that we can't do anything without her constant care. It's one thing to understand that intellectually and it's another thing to experience it.

My life's work, I believe for the last maybe ten years, has been wanting to share that experience with as many people as I can so that people know that firsthand. Not know it as a sort of or necessarily a modern rehash of something very old and very ancient, that we have this very old and very ancient understanding of how to live in balance with the Earth. That's what the book is about. The book takes us through these, what would you call them, kind of cultural ways of living in harmony with the Earth.

For example, we started out with nature connection but there's music and art. There's play and there's the power of story. Each one of these is a chapter in the book. There's ten more. These are what I believe are kind of our original instructions of how to get along with each other and get along with the planet.

The book is not just theory, there's a lot of practice. It's designed for groups of people to get together and experience what I'm talking about, and to practice our genetic coding, practice our original instructions so that we realize our indigenusness and we reclaim our connection to the land that we live in.

The book uses a training that I've developed over that ten-year period called The Wild Earth Intensive. I was thinking about the idea that there's so much theory and so much philosophy out there but we all know that we don't take things to heart and we're not really moved until we experience them. The book is really a kind of training manual of how to practice these original instructions for our survival and thrival, to coin a term.

Michael: That's great. What it reminds me of, did you know Dolores Lachapelle?

Bill: I never met her but she's one of my heroines.

Michael: Yes, yes. I remember first encountering her probably 1988 or so. I read *Sacred Land, Sacred Sex: Rapture of the Deep*, concerning deep ecology and celebrating life. As you're speaking I'm reminded. By the way, just for the record I want to highly recommend anybody

listening to this conversation, Dolores Lachapelle, *Sacred Land, Sacred Sex*. It's a fabulous book.

Bill: That's a great book.

Michael: When you speak of a manual for an ecstatic culture, I'm reminded. This deep ecological you say coding, Thomas Berry talked about that, that we need to get underneath our cultural coding to this deep genetic coding where we know how to live in right relationship to reality and have a profoundly intimate relationship with nature. I'm glad that you're also sort of carrying that torch.

Bill: Yes, and I'm glad you mentioned the subtitle because when we're really in touch with that genetic coding which is our complete inter-being, as **Tikta Har** would say it, with the Earth and the cosmos, we have an ecstatic relationship. It's not always pretty. There's plenty of pain in the human experience.

It's reaching into that place where we're really completely alive with what is, this extraordinary, enchanting power that is with us and around us all the time.

This is often said so many times in different ways in the mystical traditions. I just happen to be very personally very moved by the aboriginal, the original peoples, which we all come from. They're our ancestors. That mode of looking at things.

I'll say one other thing. It's not ecstasy without responsibility and without really seeing that there's a whole almost protocol for living in right relationship with the planet and with nature. It's right here just waiting for us to take part in it and drink from that well.

It's really, Michael, for me a simple matter of us deciding to spend the time remembering who we are. I love the idea of doing that together with groups. So much of kind of the new age or spiritual movement is a little bit too ruggedly individualist. What I love about Buddhism in particular is the sangha. The sangha, the group of spiritual adherents who are looking for that deeper connection, we just extend that into the natural world. This is really nothing new.

Again, I guess a point I really want to underline and emphasize, and I say it almost ad nauseam in the book, is it's a decision. If we want the world that our children can be proud of talk is cheap, it's really a matter of us practicing it. I love the experience of the Wild Earth Intensive. That's one example of some newly emerging experiential training programs that have this whole nature community remembering original instructions as a kind of basis or foundation.

Michael: That's great. That's great, Bill. One of the things that I have been doing in this conversation series is asking people how they stay inspired in the face of some really scary stuff. Climate change, obviously, is enormous. Peak oil, the growing gap between the rich and the poor, species extinction. There's just some really, really scary stuff that we're already in the midst of, much less what's going to unfold in the years and decades ahead and what our kids and grandkids are going to have to deal with.

How do you personally stay inspired to be in action, to do the work that you do in the face of some really scary stuff?

Bill: Well, I think that one of the most beautiful things about working with Joanna Macy is that she validated my sense that my deep feelings about what was going on in the Earth, I needn't suppress them or keep them to myself. The way I'd answer the first part of your question is that we can't keep our hearts open to the pain of this world unless we allow ourselves to feel it. We can't feel it just by ourselves, we need to feel it with others.

I think Joanna Macy has given us a kind of priceless treasure in that. It sounds so simple but when you've broken down your sense of complete despair and terror at what we've wrought but you've come through it with a group of other people, you come out and you notice, hey, I'm still alive and the trees are still growing and the waves are still waving and the stars are still shining. By God, as long as that's happening I'm going to just keep at this thing because it's so much fun and it's so terrific to feel connected with other people who are taking part in the same thing.

It's like you cry and you rage and you feel your feelings because what you describe is real. That collision course is real, yet if we get stuck there we just get paralyzed and then that doesn't do anybody any good.

Michael: That was well said. I so agree because I, too, have found Joanna's work priceless, I think was the word you used, in terms of really not only not denying but really honoring. I like that word, to honor our despair, our fear, our anger, all the stuff, the uncomfortable feelings. To do so especially with a group of people, with others that we can then just wake up each day amazed by life and amazed by the grace of simply being alive in this incredible universe that we live in and that we are an expression of. To do the work that we do without attachment to how it's ultimately going to ripple out. We don't know.

Joanna has touched on the fact in the book that we probably sell more copies of as Connie and I travel North America. Her book with Chris Johnstone, *Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're In Without Going Crazy*, is just an amazing book.

Bill: Yes, that reminds me that one of the chapters in my book is Feeling and Healing. That's at the beginning of a Wild Earth Intensive, which is a ten-day program that I mentioned

earlier. It's critical that we meet at that place early on. It actually establishes safety with one another when we just see how fundamentally broken-hearted we all are. To open to the pain in this world, the suffering in this world, it's not just ecocide, it's the whole mess.

John Seed used to say that our hardware is in wonderful condition but our software is malfunctioning. I'm very excited about being a software technician and we're not talking about the computer kind.

Michael: I remember my first mentor around this whole new cosmology, he had studied one-on-one with Thomas Berry for five years, I think, Albert LaChance. He called himself a cultural therapist. I thought that was interesting.

Bill: Yes, exactly.

Michael: Bill, when you speak to young people what would you say to some young person who is just overwhelmed with the challenges when he or she looks into the future, how scary it is? What would you offer to a young person? Then a separate question, what would you offer to someone in their senior years?

Bill: That's a wonderful question. The part one is that the book is really aimed at the 20-somethings because it was in my 20s that I found purpose in life. It was in fact largely by accident. Or by grace. I would have loved the opportunity to have come into a program or something that would help me find meaning in life.

My thoughts in terms of a young person in despair, besides taking one of my programs or being part of any of the wonderful things that we're involved in, is very simply to how would I put it? It's largely how we focus. If we stayed focused on how terrible it is it can be overwhelming.

I would invite that young person to focus on things that they really love in life and to narrow things down a little bit to find out areas or an area that they feel like they can make a difference in.

I don't feel like everybody needs to be an activist in the sense that we think of it. Each person, and particularly young person, who can find their gifts and find what they most want to share, whether it's poetry or singing or dancing or mathematics or whatever, to the degree that a young person can find what it is they love to do, then that really balances out that awfulness of the kind of pain of the planet that we've talked about earlier.

I think that's a very deep, profound question because I think we care so deeply about how the young ones are going to come up. Again, I'd like to invite people to take a look at my book because a lot of the answer to that question is there.

The second part of your question was about older people. I think that one of the chapters in my book is called Elders and Mentors. I would invite older people to stand in their power as wisdom keepers. Their experience, certainly in the indigenous traditions, is a foundational piece. It's how we survive as a tribe within the larger society.

We have to have elder wisdom. It's a two-way street. The younger people need to invite the elders into the tribe and the elders need to be willing to have the courage to step into their power and serve the younger ones coming up. This is, again, coming back to what we're talking about before.

I think this is actually in some way might on the surface seem like cultural coding but I actually believe it's genetically encoded, this relationship between younger and older. Certainly, in this particular way, it's unique to human beings. It's so basic that the older ones are in a true teaching position with their younger counterparts.

Michael: That's great. I agree on both. In fact, I whole-heartedly agree on both the way that you coach the young person. I often invite people to actually create two lists: their great joy and the world's great needs. Then follow their heart where those intersections, where their joy and the world's needs or the community's needs intersect.

Joseph Campbell talked about following your bliss. This is sort of following your bliss bless, where your bliss is also a blessing to others in some way. Then with seniors, really define those places where they can step into that mentor role, that guiding wisdom based on their own experience.

There's very few people in their 50s, 60s and 70s that don't have several things that would be a real contribution to young people in a mentoring kind of way. We still learn most powerfully through mentoring rather than through online or classrooms with lots of students and one teacher or whatever.

Bill: Yes, Michael. I think that it's almost an art form that's laying dormant or has been lost. I think that relearning mentoring, I agree with you, it's a very foundational piece of human development.

Michael: Yes, Amen. There's a question that Connie has asked me to ask all my guests and I think I've only forgotten maybe once or twice. It's fun. That is that if you had the opportunity to invite any three people in human history either to a dinner party where all four of you are together or a one-on-one over a beer, glass of wine or meal or whatever, who would those three people be and why would you choose them?

Bill: I think that's a wonderful question. Before I answer it I just want to say please send my love to Connie. Tell me I've always loved her book. I can't remember the title offhand.

Michael: Probably *Green Space*. She's written several but the one, *Green Space, Green Time*.

Bill: Yes, *Green Space, Green Time*. It's in the bibliography of my book. She's really moved me and I have the utmost respect for her. Remember to send her my love.

Michael: I absolutely will.

Bill: It's no surprise that she would ask such a great question. That really gets the creative juices flowing. These are the first three people that come to mind, let's see. Buddha and Martin Luther King. Then the third one would be like, let's see, maybe you can help me with this because there's so many of them. Give me a female powerhouse who does like music and art and has a lot of fun doing it.

Michael: Well, that's good what you just shared. One of the things that's regularly happened is people will say, "Oh my gosh, I'm going to wake up tomorrow morning and others are going to come to mind. How can I possibly limit it to three?"

Bill: I'm trying to think of who that third person could be. I was actually thinking of some sort of modern entertainer who really looks like she's having a ball. Actually, what we can do is we can leave it up to the listener to decide who fits in that category. This woman, we can start with her. She embodies the joy of life and of expressing deep passion and beauty and sings the song of the creator and just reminds everybody that life is worth living and that despite the suffering there's still lots and lots of fun to be had.

Michael: That sounds like Dolores Lachapelle to me.

Bill: Okay, we can take her. I guess I was thinking of somebody even more well known.

Michael: Yes, of course.

Bill: She'll be fine. Does Dolores Lachapelle sing?

Michael: No, not that I know of. She was best known as an amazing deep powder skier as well as, of course, being a deep ecologist and all.

Bill: Right. That's exactly the play is what I'm emphasizing there, the play in the universe. Whether it's singing or deep powder skiing or whatever. I'd love to have a beer with

Martin. I sort of said that it was by grace that I had that experience in Central Park way back in 1982. I think grace is kind of built upon. Martin Luther King, it almost brings tears to my eyes viewing his speeches as a boy.

It was more of the power that was coming out of that man and what he was evoking in us all, this deep sense of truth and justice and sheer power of love that he evoked in all of us. Again, you could spend a whole hour on Martin Luther King easily.

Michael: When I talked to Drew Dellinger, the poet, he actually has done some serious thinking and writing on the ecological heart and mind of Martin Luther King, Jr. that a lot of people just aren't aware of that side of him. Anybody listening to this, check out the conversation that I had with Drew Dellinger.

Bill: I'd love to hear that.

Michael: He goes into it rather in depth. Bill, just in winding down, any last thing you'd like to say on this theme of the past rooting for us and the future calling us to greatness?

Bill: Could you repeat that please?

Michael: Yes, the sense that the past is rooting for us, the past is sort of urging us on, cheering us on, rooting for us and the future is calling us to greatness.

Bill: The person I didn't talk about at all in the three people was the Buddha. Here's a guy who lived, whatever, 2,600 years ago and has this profound experience of awakening to completely outside of the box, to an unconditioned perception of reality. He's one of the ancestors, just like the algae are one of the ancestors and the stars are our ancestors. We're standing on the shoulder of our ancestors who are rooting for us to be who we are and to not get caught up in that software malfunction. The future is calling us to do the same thing.

Here we are standing right at this incredibly pivotal point. Now, like right now. Behind us is all of this power from the past. Ahead of us is all this power calling us from the future. In some senses, how would I say it? Those things are just theoretical. The power from the past and the power from the future are only theoretical unless we're accessing them now, and I mean right now.

I think our conversation is an example of that and I'm hopeful that in sharing our passion and our enthusiasm and our love for life and our wanting to make a good way for younger folks, that will inspire other people to access. Eckhart Tolle is right, it's the power of now, to really access the power of now to awaken. I think it's a call to awakening, Michael, a call to awakening.

Michael: Amen.

Bill: To our true nature.

Michael: I think about it. For me, God isn't a supernatural person that you can either believe in or deny. The word God, as I experience it and use it, is a sacred, proper name, a mythic personification of what's inescapably real such as time, nature and mystery. So much of your work is helping people to live in an intimate rapport with our inner and outer nature as one nature.

What we're now talking about is this intimate rapport with time, with the past and the future. Of course, the only place you can do that is right here, right now in the present moment. Well, Bill, this is fabulous.

Bill: Michael, well said. Exactly.

Michael: Cool. If people want to go more deeply into your work where do they go?

Bill: They go to BillPfeiffer.org, that's P-F-E-I-F-F-E-R, Bill Pfeiffer dot O-R-G. They go grab the book *Wild Earth, Wild Soul*. I really hope people will just take a look at the reviews on Amazon even if they don't buy it from Amazon because the book has been quite well received and I'm very, very proud of it.

I didn't go into it earlier, but I view the book very much as one of those essential tools that we want in whatever our new version of Noah's Ark is.

Michael: Yes, Amen. Bill, thank you so much. Blessings on you and your work. I'm just thrilled that we were able to have this conversation and reconnect.

Bill: Michael, thanks so much. It's a great opportunity to express my deepest values. We all love to do that, so thank you.