

The Future Is Calling Us to Greatness

with Michael Dowd + 56 Experts



The Archdruid Report on the Big Picture with John Michael Greer

Big ideas from this session:

- The Long Descent and The Ecotechnic Future: Envisioning a Post-Peak World
- If Reality is the new God and ecology is the new theology, what's next for humanity?
- How to find meaning, purpose, and passion in a de-industrializing world

Michael: Welcome to this episode of *The Future is Calling Us to Greatness*. Today I'll be talking with John Michael Greer, who is a peak oil writer, a blogger, actually, to be quite honest, of everyone that I'm interviewing in this series, I've not read anyone more deeply and more enthusiastically than John Michael. In fact, my first introduction to him was just maybe eight months ago.

I read *The Ecotechnic Future*. Richard Heinberg was the one that introduced me to that book. Then I listened to it. Fortunately it was available on audio. Then I've read several others of his books that I'll talk about here. But John Michael, welcome to this podcast series, this interview series, on *The Future is Calling Us to Greatness*.

John: Thank you. It's a pleasure to be on.

Michael: So John Michael, could you begin just by sharing with our viewers and listeners a little bit about your own background, your accomplishments, and especially what you're particularly passionate about or interested in at this time.

John: Well, I reached adulthood at the end of the 1970's, the early 1980's, at the last time that American society was showing any signs of paying attention to the future or any future outside of Ronald Reagan's distorted imaginations. I was at that time very heavily involved in what we used to call the appropriate tech movement.

There's a phrase that doesn't get a lot of reference these days, but doing things like solar energy and wind power, but not taking over vast amounts of Nevada. Home scale

technology energy conservation, organic gardening in your own backyard. It was a really active movement in those days.

When that kind of collapsed in the 1980's when the political decision was made to pump the Alaskan north slope and the north sea oil fields at a breakneck rate to crash the price of oil and basically gutted the emerging sustainability movement at the time, a lot of people just kind of trickled away and went and did other things and became yuppies and so on.

But some of us didn't. I'm one of the ones who didn't. Of course, that involves taking a lot of heat from people who are saying, "Oh, that's just so old fashioned. We know America is back. It's morning in America. The new American century is dawning," all that drivel. Some of us just kept on studying and practicing organic gardening, conserving energy, all the things that you don't talk about anymore, all through those years.

It so happens that just before the turn of the millennium, word started trickling out from the various geologists and petroleum studies and this kind of stuff that we weren't out of the woods, that we'd simply postponed the day of reckoning for a quarter of a century. Oops, all those people back in the 1907's who said that we were going to be in a world of hurt unless we made some changes real fast, well, guess what, they're right.

So basically there I was. I got involved. I had become a writer. I've written in a range of fields. I got involved in what has become the peak oil movement when it was just getting off the ground. I think I belonged to what I believe is the first peak oil email list back at the time. It just kind of snowballed from there.

Of course, Richard Heinberg, who you mentioned, got his book, *The Party is Over*, published in I think it was 2004, something like that. That was the book that convinced me it was worth writing about this stuff again, all the things that nobody wanted to talk about during the aftermath of the Reagan-Thatcher counterrevolution, during the years when you didn't dare mention the possibility that the future wasn't just [Inaudible 04:23] forever.

All of a sudden, you could say something about that again. It kind of went from there. I started a blog, which I intended just to talk within a small circle of people with sharing some of the interests of mine. It just kind of blew up into a big—well, a minor Internet phenomenon, and it went from there.

All of this does—although it does in a roundabout way answer your question, what is it that makes me passionate? I think I've shown some of that. Your title, *The Future is Calling Us to Greatness*, is not at all inappropriate, because greatness requires a challenge, and we're facing a whopper.

My interest, the thing that fires me, is that that challenge is there and I want to help meet it.

Michael: Yes. Yes. Amen. Well, one of the things, John Michael, that I so loved about you, and do love about your writings is that you bring a deep time and a deeply historical perspective.

One of the things that my wife and I have been doing for a decade is traveling all over North America speaking in religious and nonreligious settings on big history or the epoch of evolution and sort of trying to help religious people into an ecological evolutionary worldview in a way that inspires all of us to work together across ethnic, religious, and political differences in the service of a healthy future for all of us.

What I found so refreshing in your writings—for example, just two of the little paperbacks that you've written, one of them called *Apocalypse Not: Everything We Know about 2012, Nostradamus, and the Rapture is Wrong*, which takes on the whole myth of the apocalypse, the myth of end times thinking.

What I loved so much about that book is you take a look at the 3,000 year history of apocalyptic or end times thinking and show, whether it's secular forms of apocalyptic thinking or religious forms, the damage, the tragedy, the suffering that that kind of thinking has had and has caused.

John: It's always a cop out.

Michael: Yes.

John: It's always a cop out. Yes.

Michael: Yes, exactly. It disempowers people to take action, because why bother being in action, because the whole thing is going to hell in a handbasket anyway. But then on the other side, in your little paperback, *Not the Future We Ordered: Peak Oil Psychology and the Myth of Progress*, you take on with equal effectiveness, in my opinion, the whole myth of perpetual progress, that, again, there's no need to be in action, because, hey, things are going to get better and better, and we don't have to worry about it.

John: Yes, exactly.

Michael: I love the fact that you are constantly in your writings—just for those of you that are listening in or watching this right now, I've got to say that not only have I read a half of dozen of John Michael's books, but every Wednesday my wife and I both wait on his next post on the Archdruid Report.

If six o'clock in the evening comes around and I haven't had my dose of the Archdruid Report, I start getting a little antsy. But you consistently steer clear of these two false paths, either the myth of perpetual progress or the myth of the apocalypse. I'm wondering if you can just say a little bit about that.

I see that as the essence of this idea that the past is rooting for us and that the future is calling us to greatness, because greatness, as you say, implies being in action, being in heroic action. So could you say a little bit about that?

John: Well, it's facing a challenge, a real challenge. Nobody is never heroic waltzing around Disneyland. If you're there sitting comfortably at home with a martini in your hand and nothing is happening, there's no room for heroism. There's no room for greatness unless there's a challenge to measure yourself against.

With regard to the whole progress and apocalypse duality, though, that has been the thing that I've been fighting since I began my blog in 2006. It's astonishing the extent to which people nowadays, especially but not only in America, have hardwired into their brains the idea that those are the only two options.

Either business as usual, going exactly the same direction that we're going now, straight off to some Star Trek future, metastasizing across the galaxy, or we crash and burn next Thursday and everybody dies. It's as though—I'm going to borrow a metaphor I've used more than once here. It's as though you're turned on to a weather report on the evening news.

There were two meteorologists, and one of them was insisting that summer is about to begin. This is in March or April. Summer is about to begin for you, beautiful blue skies. Then summer is going to be followed by uber summer. Then by uber, uber summer, and the weather is just going to get better forever.

Then the other guy is saying, no, no, no, the ice age is about to begin, and we're all going to be stomped by woolly mammoths. They're bickering back and forth about these two exceptionally improbable ideas of the weather, and nobody is stopping to say hold it, it's April. It's going to be 40 degrees and rainy.

The fact that nobody notices, or very, very few people notice, the raw absurdity in this progress and apocalypse binary, this notion that those are the only two options, fascinates me, and the fact that that binary is actually the single largest obstacle in the way of our responding to the growing crisis of our time.

That worries me, because a flight into delusion is a bad idea at the best of times, and these are not the best of times.

Michael: Yes. Yes. Exactly. Well, I'm wondering if you could take just a few minutes and explore—just let's sort of lean into what do you see as the characteristics of the myth of perpetual progress and why do you see from a historic perspective, what's that missing? How is that missing sort of the rise and falls of great civilization, for example?

John: Yes. The idea of the myth of progress is that all of history leads to us. We are the cutting edge of the future. We are everything that's important. All of the past can be judged based on whether it contributes to creating us. You watch cosmos or something like this, and you're going to get, "Well, what about these past civilizations? What could they contribute to the creation of a modern, industrial economy on the edge of space," as though that matters, as though that's the only thing that counts.

But in the myth of progress, it is, because we are the cutting edge of the future. Everything hereafter is going to be like us, but even more so, with even fancier gimmicks and gadgets, because all of history is flattened out into this single upward arc [Inaudible 11:06] to the stars. That is a delusion. There is no gentler word. That is not what history shows.

History shows civilizations rise and fall. Technologies are discovered, and then many of them are lost. Populations increase and decrease. This happens. The only reason we can flatten that complex wave form into that rising arcette into the stars is that we happen to be living on the peak of a really big boom time that was made possible by fossil fuels.

Flat out, that's what did it. Fossil fuels, figuring out how to extract them and burn them at a breakneck pace. That is why we have built the extremely complex global civilization we have now. As we run out of fossil fuels, and we are running out of them right now, that's going to go through the usual downward curve.

Up with a rocket, down with a stick. That's a very, very rough thing to contemplate. I understand. But it's not something people want to think about. But because we've blanketed ourselves into this notion that history only goes one way, that it goes our way, and that we are therefore destined to go tromping off into the hard, dead vacuum of space or something, where we will somehow be happier—we delude ourselves with that while the foundations of our society crumble beneath our feet.

Michael: Yes. Yes. I remember one of my—in fact, my most significant mentor was Thomas Berry until his death a few years ago. He used to say something—I heard him say it twice, actually, in different contexts, pretty much the same thing. It always sort of shocked people to hear him say it, to use this religious language in this way.

He used to say that to put too much energy and imagination and passion and time and money into the idea of space travel before we have learned to live in right relationship with

the air, water, soil, and life of this planet he called blasphemy. I thought it was interesting to use that religious term in terms of this idea.

It was. It was continuing to perpetuate this idea that not only does everything lead to us but that how we imagine our technologies are just going to keep getting better and better and smaller and smaller and smarter and smarter and more and more powerful and without end. It ignores—I must confess to my own embarrassment that it wasn't long ago, five or six years ago, when I was voicing that opinion, because I had bought into this idea that the entire universe is achieving greater complexity, greater interdependence and cooperation at a larger and wider scale.

I think in one sense we do see some of that. But it also denies the very real rising and then contracting. I'm sure you've found this, I've found this, that when I talk about contraction, economic contraction, people immediately go to, "Oh, you're just a doom and gloomer. Oh, you're apocalyptic."

They can't distinguish contraction from apocalypse. I wonder if you can say a little bit about that.

John: Oh, yes. The word that I use, because it gets everyone's hackles on edge, is decline. Nobody wants to talk about decline. In fact, I get the same thing. When I don't defend or don't accept the delusions of the blind optimism of progress, immediately I must be talking about the world ending next Thursday. There is no middle ground.

It's fascinating to me, watching people literally do mental back flips to avoid noticing that I'm talking about decline, not sudden catastrophe, not business as usual, but what I called in the title of my first book the long descent, the process that we're facing, the problem we debate, to judge by previous historical examples, one to three hundred years of economic contraction, population decrease, breakdown of infrastructure.

We can go down the whole thing, ending in a dark age several centuries long, from which new civilizations will rise. It's a fairly straightforward idea. It has happened many, many, many times to civilizations on many technological scales. But try showing that to people. Try asking people to fit their heads around that idea, and a very large number of them will lose it, just completely lose it.

They will either insist on slamming to either the apocalypse and/or to progress, or they will just get furiously angry and storm off of the conversation. It just means we can't think the idea that our culture cannot handle.

Michael: Yes. Yes. Well, on the other side, it's interesting. Connie, my wife, and I have been aware of climate change and global warming for decades, literally. In the mid-1990's, my

job was to help neighbors come together and support each other in using less water, driving less, composting, recycling, basically all the different aspects of living a more earth friendly, sustainable lifestyle.

Sustainability and living in right relationship to the planet has been a high value and part of my career. But just about a year and a half ago we woke up to the urgency of climate change in ways that we hadn't before. We really hadn't seen, for example, the importance, the necessity of putting a fair price on carbon pollution, for example, finding some way of not allowing the free or subsidized polluting of the commons.

So that does seem to be a wild card that's somewhat different than previous collapsing civilizations in that we could exacerbate or accelerate in some ways. Yet there are those within those circles, there are those who really get not just peak oil, but also climate change, who are now sort of the new apocalyptic folk.

Just one of your recent blog posts addressed that. I'm wondering if you can say a little bit more about sort of the longer scale—for any of my listeners who have sort of got the bejeebies scared out of them because of this idea that we could be bringing on a near time extinction or something really serious—and that is, of course, a possibility.

But there's a certain certainty with which some folks in those circles are speaking. So I'm wondering if you can address just briefly the ways that climate has changed in rather drastic and severe ways, and yet it didn't mean the end of the world.

John: The thing is, global climate is unstable. It always has been. You say this in many circles these days, and they say, "Oh, well, you're a climate [Inaudible 18:03]." Not at all. The Earth's climate is unstable. It is a very touchy beast that we're poking with sticks. This is not a bright idea. The fact that the earth's climate is unstable makes it all the more urgent that we stop dumping CO2 into it.

By the way, that includes the CO2 out of individual people's tailpipes and out of their chimneys. It's not just the [Inaudible 18:25] who are doing all that. That's one of those points. The think that I've come to call the Al Gore syndrome, the idea that everyone else has to stop emitting carbon, is a real problem here.

But the thing is, the Earth's climate is unstable. As you go back through paleo climatology, there have been many times in Earth's history where the planet has been much hotter than it is now, and many times when it has been much colder. It also tends to slam from one temperature regime to another very quickly.

Therefore, the more work they do with ice [Inaudible 18:58] from the Greenland ice sheet and things like that, the more they're finding that you can get these sudden jolts in

temperature up and down over a period of a decade or less. That's actually fairly common with complex systems. The atmosphere is a very complex system.

You can push it to a certain point, and then it snaps to a new stability somewhere else. Now, the thing is, our species has already been through several of these, the end of the younger Dryas period at the end of the last ice age where global temperature went up well over 10 degrees centigrade in less than a decade. There have been several other points.

It just slammed one way or the other. The species is still here. Can our current global economy survive that? Probably not. Can industrial civilization survive that? I have my real doubts. But the species is going to be around. The thing is, human beings are among nature's supreme generalists.

We're right up there with rats and cockroaches. We're very difficult to exterminate. I am not too worried about near term extinction. I am certainly concerned about the impact of drastic climate change on the ability of industrial society to hold together or to manage any kind of a transition other than the kind that you make by putting together—piling up rubble in the ruins.

That could make life very difficult very quickly in at least some parts of the world. But you could think near term extinction, people going, well, yes, there are these positive feedback loops. Yes. There are all these positive feedback loops. There are also a whole range of negative feedback loops which they are not talking about.

They say, "Well, we have these peer reviewed papers that prove that this . . ." Well, no, the peer reviewed papers are speculative, and they amount to about 3% of the total peer reviewed literature. Cherry picking scientific data to find the studies that support your preconceived agenda is a very common habit these days, and it makes a lot of very odd belief systems look superficially plausible, because people go, "Oh, wow, there's a peer reviewed scientific study."

What does the consensus say? What do most scientists seek? Most scientists in the climatological field are telling you, "Look, the global climate is changing because human beings are dumping CO2 into the atmosphere. There are going to be disruptions as a result." Absolutely. I think that's conclusive. We're already getting the disruptions.

But to go from there and drag that into the old weary fantasy of, "Oh, my God, the world is going to end next Thursday. We're all going to die, and therefore we don't have to change our lifestyles now," which is what it's all about, of course. Been there, done that, used the t-shirt to clean up the mess. Let's not go back.

Michael: Yes. Yes. Well, one of the things this leads me into is wanting to ask you, which is really I think the heart of what I want to focus on, in this series, *The Future is Calling Us to Greatness*. One of the things that I love about your writings is that you are largely generous in

your assessment of others and the role that others are playing and that others may have a different perspective, but I don't see the sort of trashing of other perspectives in the way that I do find with some.

What is it that keeps you inspired? When you wake up on any given day, what is it that inspires you to be in action? How do you feel your place in this large expanse of time and space such that you are inspired to leave a positive legacy, to play your role in this unfolding future? What inspires you?

John: Well, the first thing that inspires me is the recognition of just how small of a scale I'm on. That's the great thing about deep time, the great thing about grasping the sheer vastness of the cosmos and of the evolutionary history of the Earth, is that this is a road bump. Things like this have happened many times before in the history of the planet, sudden climate changes, species rapidly expanding and then rapidly contracting.

This is not something new. This is not something where all the future is breathing down my neck demanding that I make the right choice. I think we have inflated ourselves in our imaginations. We have tried to be these grandiose inflated figures like so many Thanksgiving parade balloons. We're just another life form.

Tackling global problems as some kind of vast, gargantuan, giant figure, that will be a real bear. As another life form living in one particular geological period, in one particular corner of the Earth, that's something I can tackle, and that's something that I can tackle by taking action in my own life.

So there's that sense of scale, and that's huge advantage to me, and, of course, nature. My own spirituality focuses very tightly on nature, and I find the cycles of nature, the resilience of nature, the [Inaudible 24:13] of nature to sneak up. You try to push nature out the front door, and she pops into the back. This fills me with hope. This prevents me from falling into despair.

I know that even if humanity wipes itself out by some means—how many species have gone extinct before now? We're just another species in just another ecological crisis. It's not that big of a deal. Nature will deal. You get people who are going, "Oh, my God, we have to save the Earth, this poor little planet here that's desperately for it."

The Earth is a tough old lady. She has brushed off comet impacts and global glaciations and all kinds of stuff. She is a lot tougher than we are. She's a tough old broad. We need to start worrying—it's not the Earth as your mother, treat her with respect, put her in a nice nursing home. The Earth is your mother, and she is getting really peeved and is reaching for the ruler with which she is going to paddle you black and blue.

We have forgotten. We have forgotten that a good-sized hurricane releases more energy than the entire world's nuclear arsenals. We have forgotten just how tiny we are compared to this planet, how tiny the planet is compared to the cosmos. We're basically a bunch of children who have gotten paper crowns and tied towels around our necks to look like capes, and we're strutting around claiming to be lords of creation.

The planet is going, "I wish you'd grow up and get over it. You might want to clean up the mess."

Michael: I love your—here you're doing it in this interview, that I keep just loving when I read your writings, are these metaphors that just stick with us. I remember one of the metaphors—I think it was in *The Ecotechnic Future*. In my opinion, the two most substantial books that you've written in terms of big picture—I loved your book *The Wealth of Nature: Economics as a Survival Matter*.

I thought that was one of the best books I've ever read on economics. But *The Long Descent: A User's Guide to the End of the Industrial Age*, and then followed by *The Ecotechnic Future: Envisioning a Post Peak World*, those two went so well together. I think it was in *The Ecotechnic Future* that you used the analogy of the overturned truck, grain truck. Was that where that was?

John: I think that—yes. You overturn a grain truck in a meadow where there are mice. The mice go, "Wow, plenty of food," and so they eat and they breed and they eat and they breed. They don't notice that the grain is running out. Oops.

Michael: Yes.

John: That's the history of humanity and fossil fuels.

Michael: Yes. Could you say—because this is where I'm fascinated in terms of a lot of people that I talk with, because I'm sort of reaching middle of the road America—virtually every Sunday I'm preaching in some church around North America and doing evening programs. It's sort of your average folk. Many people have bought the line that, "Well, no, no, no, things are going to get better and better. We're just going to keep finding new energy sources."

So for example, fracking right now. They're not aware of some of these bubbles, including the fracking bubble. Could you say a little bit about that?

John: Well, one of the problems with the whole myth of progress is that it makes people suckers, in the strict old economic con man variety. People become gullible. There's no shortage of bunko artists and con men and grifters who are willing to sell them the Brooklyn Bridge on

the basis that, well, of course, things have got to get better, so why don't you buy shares in this perpetual motion machine or what have you.

People are really, really gullible right now, because they're stuck in this fantasy of perpetual progress. The fracking bubble is just a classic example of that. Fracking technology has been known since the 1970's. The Bakken shale, the Marcellus shale, those were all discovered decades ago. It wasn't cost effective to bring them online yet, because prices were relatively low.

Once the price of oil got above \$100 a barrel, that was a different matter. But what happened then was you had people zeroing in on the known sweet spots, where you can get a lot of oil in a hurry or a lot of natural gas in a hurry. So they opened things—they got the wells drilled, got stuff pumping, showed a steep increase in oil production and proceeded to take that to Wall Street and Main Street and cash in by insisting that it was just going to keep on going that way.

Those of our listeners and viewers who experienced the housing bubble will remember the claim that housing prices were just going to keep on going up forever. That's always the logic of a speculative swindle, and that's we're talking about here. People will get deeply invested in this delusion.

We've had all these pundits talking about how the United States is going to use its abundant natural gas resources to free Europe from Russian control, since Russia supplies a third of Europe's natural gas these days. Nobody was bothering to look at the facts and figures. The US has no natural gas to spare.

We import over 100 billion cubic feet of natural gas a month. That's comes over export. That's our net import. We're a net importer. We burn more than we produce, even now. Even if you look at the most wildly optimistic claims, it's going to be 2020 before we have any of the export, and yet in the Wall Street Journal and in the New York Times, all of these mainstream periodicals, people are blustering along about how we have all of this natural gas and we just need to build terminals and ship it to Europe and crash the Russian economy, blah, blah, blah.

What a sucker's game. I honestly think that thousands of years from now the grifters and con artists and bunko men of civilizations that aren't even born yet are going to look back to our time as the golden age of fraud, the age when people were desperate, so desperate to be convinced that they could have whatever they wanted that you could sell them on anything.

We are so gullible. We swindle ourselves. That's what the fracking bubble is. It's the latest con job. It's the latest swindle. It's going to end up with large sections of rural America with water you can't drink, with rusting remains of dead frack welding equipment, the usual series of bankruptcies and so on, and a certain number of con men who are sitting there counting their ill gotten gains going, "What will we do next?"

Michael: Well, there are two different paths that I want to go right now, because one you reminded me of that is really near and dear to my heart and to Connie's as well, which is a form of what gets called spirituality that is really about living in right relationship with life and sort of—whether you call it nature or spirituality, deep green or dark green religion, as Braun Taylor talks about it, but it's a form of religiosity or a form of spirituality or spiritual practice that is deeply ecological, that sees our relationship to life and to what sustains and supports life as being paramount.

When I read your book *Mystery Teachings From the Living Earth: An Introduction to Spiritual Ecology*, what I loved about that was that I felt that you had really articulated some of the core principles of what it means to live with a spirituality that is ecology. I often say ecology is my theology. Of course, you are the archdruid of that as the sort of chief or presiding officer of the ancient order of druids in America, which is obviously clearly a nature honoring spiritual path.

Could you say a little bit about sort of ecology as theology or right relationship to the planet?

Michael: Yes. It's fairly straightforward. Every age and every culture derives its understanding of the big picture of the cosmos, its relationship to the divine, its relationship to the deep places of the human spirit, and so on, from some other body of human experience, because we don't have—well, we have some degree of direct access to that, but it takes work, and it's irreducibly personal.

So we usually borrow metaphors. For a very long time in the western world, the standard metaphor was drawn from basically feudal politics. You have God, who is at the top of the feudal pyramid. Then you have the various other beings below that, and humanity fairly well up there. It's all very hierarchical and it's all very social and organized.

It made a lot of sense in terms of the time. The problem is, as with any hierarchical feudal system, it only works as long as you remember noblesse oblige, nobility has its obligations, the fact that you are at point X in the hierarchy means that you're responsible to whatever is below you. We've now turned that over to the Wall Street idea, where wherever you are in the hierarchy gives you the opportunity to loot and rape what lies below you.

That's not a very good approach. Unfortunately, to an embarrassing extent, that's what that kind of theology has turned into. You get people, who claim to be Christian at least, who are out there insisting that God gave us the world to plunder. I have a hard time finding that, even in the Christian Bible, which I've read extensively.

It has some things about how we're supposed to—we have dominion over the Earth, although the Hebrew can be translated in a range of ways, but that doesn't mean that this world that God created isn't there for us to strip to the bare walls and trash. I don't see that. But more generally, we're starting to realize that the old feudal metaphors don't work too well anymore.

We don't live in a feudal society. We haven't lived in a feudal society for a long time. When people insist at the top of their lungs that Jesus is Lord, again, that's a feudal terminology. They're saying, "I've pledged my fealty," as a knight to this Lord, which is great if you live in a feudal society. You understand things that way.

What does it mean now? So our metaphors are shifting. Our metaphors have to shift, just as in the origins of the feudal era the great challenge of the time was establishing some form of social order in the aftermath of the Bavarian invasions. Europe was in chaos. So the greatest need was to come up with some way to reestablish social order and will of law.

Feudalism did that. Those metaphors were the obvious things to borrow through a religious context, because they reinforced that necessity, the thing that was meeting that necessity. Our necessity right now is coming into a right relationship with nature. That's the nonnegotiable requirement of our crisis these days.

So our theologies will inevitably, those theologies that work, those that last, those that don't simply get chucked into the dumpster with the passage of time, they're going to be equal [Inaudible 36:24] theologies. They're going to be on the relationship between the part and the whole, on the relationship between the individual and the cycles that sustain our lives.

There has been some very serious work done, both within and without the Christian mainstream. But there needs to be much more, and it needs to be based on actual understanding of scientific ecology, by the way. I've seen a lot of people for whom ecology just amounts to feeling warm and fuzzy about nature as you drive past it in your SUV. That does not cut it.

Michael: I completely agree. In fact, I often say it's evolutionary ecology that needs not only a spatial understanding of the interrelation of living forms and what's called the environment, but also a deep time understanding, that with the passage of time climate changes, glaciers come and go, and these regimes shift and species shift, not just individuals, but entire populations.

John: Very much so. Very much so. In the process of—this is kind of a pet peeve of mine—we have got to get out from under the notion that evolution equals progress. We have got to stop—my favorite example: I was giving a talk on a subject not too far from this in a small town, a small, actually sort of yuppie exurb in southern Oregon once.

In the question and answer session thereafter, somebody says, “Well, but don’t you think that children are just so much more evolved than adults are?” I started asking questions, that it turned out by evolved she meant basically nicer, by which I [Inaudible 38:08] children of late. But, yes, you get this idea that, well, we’re going to undergo an evolutionary leap.

Evolution doesn’t go by leaps. It may go by punctuated equilibrium, but it doesn’t go by leaps, and it doesn’t involve solve—an evolutionary leap to solve all our problems and maintain our current state of privilege, that’s just the myth of progress in drag. No, evolution is adaptation. It’s adaptation to changing circumstances.

Sometimes it moves toward greater complexity. Sometimes it moves toward less complexity. Trying to impose that linear notion of progress and a whole bunch of other baggage onto evolution has, I think, done a lot of damage. So, yes, we need to start by getting back to what is evolution actually about.

The thing that I recommend to people is that they actually pick up a copy of Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* and sit down and read it. He was a good writer. It’s not hard. Yes, evolutionary theory has advanced since that time, but if you read Darwin you actually realize what it’s about, and you can pry yourself loose from all the various yelling and delusions and nonsense that’s clustered about on all sides, the debate about evolution.

Michael: Yes. Yes. Amen. Well, Connie wanted me to ask you a question that I thought was a fascinating one. It’s if you could invite to dinner, individually, one at a time, but if you could invite to dinner three people who are either alive today or from any point in the distant past, any time in human history, who would those three people—what are those three dinners that you would like to have a dinner conversation with someone either alive now or in the past, and why would you choose them? What is it you’d love to discuss with them?

John: I would probably have to spend a while thinking about that. I know one person that—actually I would not want dinner with him. I would want to have some beers with him—would J.R. Tolkien.

Michael: Yes. Yes.

John: I’ve been a fan of Tolkien’s writing since I was quite young. I know he was partial to downing a beer or two at his favorite pub in Oxford. I would love to have had the chance, actually just to show up. Give me a time machine, let me show up at the Inklings having some beer at their favorite pub in Oxford some afternoon in the late 1930’s or something. Oh, man.

That would certainly be—that's a purely sentimental thing. That's because Tolkien's work has contributed very substantially to my thinking. It has also been a consistent source of enjoyment to me. He'd certainly be on the list.

Michael: Before you go to another one, I'm just curious if you could say just a little bit about what it is about Tolkien's writings that have inspired or been a value to you.

John: Okay. It has really changed over time. The thing that it gave me when I was young, when I was very young growing up in a disintegrating suburban family in a suburb of late 1960's, early 1970's America was a vision of evil. Evil was what the Russians were up to. Okay, we get that. The idea that there—I don't know.

It's hard to put a finger on it more precisely, but Tolkien over and above Sauron the dark lord, you have this sort of basic shadow protection shape. Okay, we've got that. But the individual—but the watching individuals in his story, rising or falling, encountering challenges and either surrounding them or being crushed by them.

There's a great deal of depth there that I think has not been well understood by a lot of his recent critics. Also, he had the idea of decline. He had it down cold. Middle Earth is a realm in decline. You're at the tag end. In the war of the ring you're at the tag end of the whole long bitter story of the elves.

All of these great historical processes that have trickled down to a part of the world, a land that is mostly empty. You have the Shire here. You have Bree there. You have Gondor and Rohan, a few kingdoms here and there. But you're traveling across a lot of empty land where people used to live. The contrast between that and the whole vision of onward and upward and populations growing and all the stuff that was standard in that time, I think that really helped me pop loose from the fantasy of perpetual progress and grapple with what our future might actually be like.

Michael: Yes. That's great.

John: I could probably write a book about Tolkien, and I may one day. There's a lot of richness there. So Tolkien would certainly be one.

Michael: Okay. Feel free, instead of dinner, feel free, who would you love to have beer and a conversation with.

John: Yes. Beyond that, of course, there could be some language issues. I don't have anybody alive today in mind. Partly that's because I mostly read books by dead people. Partly that's because I mostly enjoy books by dead people. Partly it's because it's a very deliberate attempt to stay out of the collective consciousness, to think thoughts that are not the thoughts that everyone else is thinking right now.

Let's see, one person who I would really be interested—although probably he wouldn't be into the beer, so we'd have to do dinner, a typical ancient Greek dinner with the wine being passed around and so on—would be Proclus Diadochus, who was the last really major figure in the history of pagan Neo-Platonism in ancient Greece.

He was a philosopher. He was a mystic. He was into a lot of what was going on in the last great age of pagan thought before the intolerant and Christianity got control of not merely their religion, but of the classical world and stomped it out. He was an interesting guy. He wrote some fascinating stuff.

He also knew what it was like to live in a society that was dying, and in decline, and to look around and say, "Okay, what can be saved?" Then, if I had to pick a third it would probably be—and here, the beer would be an option, or dinner, or almost anything—would be William Stuckley, Reverend William Stuckley.

He was British. He lived in the 18th century. He was one of the founders of the modern druid movement. He was also a clergyman of the church of England. He was also one of the first really good archaeologists in England. He did studies at Stonehenge and some of the other things like that, that people are still looking at and going, "Okay, this is really good. This has a lot of detail," including things that are no longer visible today.

He was a thoughtful guy. He had some very—he had some odd ideas. He had some interesting—he would be interesting to me because he was very much active in creating the early stages of the spiritual tradition that I'm now involved in. It would be kind of interesting to share some news and find out what he—I'd be very fascinated to know what he would have thought of the next 300 years of modern druid history.

Michael: Well, I'd like to be in on that dinner or that beer, because I pastored three churches over the course of a decade. The first one was in Granville, Massachusetts, where I was the pastor of the only church in a town of 1,500 people. I literally married, buried, and baptized everybody who wanted it. I was the town parson in the old New England sense.

While I was there, I connected with the Earth Spirit community out of Boston. It's a neopagan group, and I went to several of their once a year sort of large pagan festivals. There was a period of about a year and a half, maybe even two years, where I wore a clerical collar and a pentagram. I called myself a Christopagan.

My congregation, I'm sure their prayer was, "God, why couldn't we have gotten a normal minister?"

John: Yes.

Michael: But that integration of sort of a deeply Earth honoring faith tradition with sort of a classical religious orientation is something that I've been fascinated with for decades now.

John: There have been a lot of people doing that sort of thing, and there are a lot of people nowadays, although at this point the Christopagans who are out there typically get a lot of heat from the Christians and a lot of heat from the pagans. They're still trucking ahead, and they may achieve some interesting things.

Michael: Yes. Yes. Well, my first book, written back in 1990, was called *Earth Spirit: A Handbook for Nurturing an Ecological Christianity*. That's just it, it did okay. It sold about 12,000 copies over 10 years or so. But it was too pagan for the Christians and too Christian for the pagans, in my experience.

Now, you did mention, of course, having beer with Tolkien and that sort of thing. I remember listening to an interview I think that you had with—oh, gosh, who was it?

John: It could have been almost anyone.

Michael: Yes, there was an interview that you had where you discussed if the four horsemen of the apocalypse come off . . .

John: Yes, that was with Peak Prosperity. Okay, yes. If the four horseman of the apocalypse show up, offer them beer.

Michael: Exactly. Just say a little bit about that, because I found that funny.

John: Oh, it's simple. People always come to me and say, "Oh, my God, what should I do?" If in fact industrial society is clattering down the slope of the long descent we're facing a one to three hundred year period of radical economic decline, infrastructure collapse, all this stuff, ending in a dark age. "What should I do?"

The piece of advice that I tend to give them first is learn a useful skill that people will pay you for even in the worst possible times. The obvious example is learning how to brew good beer. If Attila the Hun rides up to your front door and you hand him a cold one, he's your friend. Seriously. In the pirate societies of the Caribbean, the most lawless, brutal, murderous communities, probably in the history of the planet, human life was worth nothing.

People who had necessary skills, doctors, shipwrights, blacksmiths, brewers, people who could distill rum, led a charmed life. Nobody would mess with them, because everyone had—these brutal pirates who would kill somebody just for the fun of it would not

harm them, because you knew your life might depend on this person being, A, alive, B, able to carry out his profession, and, C, willing to help you.

The thing to do is make sure you have skills that people will find necessary even in the worst possible times. Beer brewing is one of those, of course.

Michael: Yes. Yes. I think it was in your conversation with Chris Martenson. Cool. Well, John Michael, just sort of beginning to wind down here. Anything that you'd like to share with my audience in terms of what you're sort of most passionate about now? Do you have a book that has just recently come out? How do people learn more about your work and going more deeply into it?

John: Okay, in terms of my work, obviously the place to be is Wednesday nights at—it's <http://thearchdruidreport.blogspot.com>. I post—it depends on when I get the essay done, of course, but every Wednesday night anyway it goes up. I will probably be taking a break later this spring for maybe a month or so, but I'll announce that.

Generally speaking, that's kind of the up to date place. That website also has immediate access to all of my peak oil books. You can click right to and buy them from the publisher, which is, of course, better for authors, too, since we get more royalties that way. There's that. My latest book, which is just out, is titled *Decline and Fall*. There's a cheery title for you.

The End of Empire and the Future of Democracy in 21st Century America. Over and above the stuff that we've talked about, the end of the industrial age, the sort of rattling down the slope toward the dark ages of the industrial future, there is also the far from minor point that the United States since the end of the second world war has been balanced at the peak of the global political structure and has profited hugely from it.

The 5% of us who live in America right now use about a quarter of the world's energy resources. About a third of it is raw materials. About a third of it is industrial product. This does not happen because everyone loves us so much, of course. It is considered highly impolite to mention that it might have something to do with the fact that we've got troops garrisoned in 140 different countries.

Unpopular though it is, the word empire really does describe the situation quite nicely. But the problem with empires, as the British found, of course, in their day, and the Spanish before them, and so on back through history, is that empires are a self-terminating phenomenon. They don't last. They fall. When they fall, unless the country that had the empire is able to get in good with the next one—it ended with us—the fallen imperial center is in for a world of hurt.

So there are the specific consequences of our age of imperial excess that we're going to have to deal with. There's also the fact that we've basically trashed our democratic institutions in the rush to global empire. Now that the rush to global empire is ending up awkwardly in decline and fall, the usual consequences, maybe we might want to think about learning how to be a democracy again. What a concept.

So that's basically what this book is about. I'm excited by it. I think it will be interesting to see what kind of reaction it gets. I've had copies sent out to a lot of the big highbrow journals. All of them have pretended they never got it. It should be fun to see what comes of that. So that's kind of the hot title right now.

Michael: That's great. At the beginning of this conversation, before I turned the recorder on, one of the things that I asked you, because you had mentioned it in email, that you are Asperger's. One of the things we began talking about—I just wanted to know if you wanted to share a little bit—is to what degree do you find that your being Asperger's has assisted you in really focusing?

Frankly, the way you use the human language, the English language, I just find—my wife and I both find—just so beautiful and brilliant.

John: Well, thank you.

Michael: So anything you'd like to say about that?

John: Well, basically, the problem is that these labels that we have, such as Asperger's or autism spectrum disorder, what have you, cover a very broad range of human neurological phenomena. I have what I think is currently is adult residual Asperger's. I'm nowhere near as geeky as I was when I was like 12.

I've developed a coping routine so that I can handle dealing with ordinary human conversations and things like that. But one of the oddities of my particular version, I think entirely in spoken language. Everything that goes through my head is like a conversation or a monologue. Most people with Asperger's apparently think in pictures or things like that.

They don't think verbally. I do. Most of what I needed to learn to become a competent writer was just learning how to write the way I talk, learning how to write the way I think. Of course, that's something they teach you. I had to blunder my way to it. But that on the one hand—the other great advantage I think Asperger's syndrome and things like it have is that you're not part of the collective mind.

Human beings, we're social mammals. We're herd animals. We tend to think the thoughts that our neighbors are thinking. To some extent, that gets us into a sort of sheep

mentality. There are times when I'm trying to discuss let's say the whole issue about progress or apocalypse, and the response, you can practically hear the bleat in it, what have you.

People repeating that kind of catchword, that kind of buzzword, as though it means something, because it's something they've been repeating to themselves that everyone else has told them. You can't stop progress. Well, yes, you can. But that's one of our catch phrases. That's part of our collective mind. I don't tap into that.

That makes me socially awkward, and there are a range of drawbacks to that. But one of the payoffs is that I'm not blinded by the collective consciousness. I don't think what everyone else is thinking, and so I can actually shake myself and look around and say, "Oh, I guess we're in a decline, aren't we," when nobody else can say that, because nobody else is saying that, because the collective is going progress or apocalypse, one bleat or another.

Michael: I love it.

John: I know. It's rude, and I'll probably get a [Inaudible 57:08] from some sheep.

Michael: Well, what this is reminding me was there was one important question that I was going to ask a half hour ago, and I totally forgot, but now I'm reminded, which is that I was reading a book last night, and I literally at this line I had to close the book and I just lost patience, where the woman who was writing—and she'll go unnamed—was saying that technology will always be with us.

She then went on to give some examples. I'm wondering if you could say a little bit about what we've learned from a historic perspective in terms of how—you alluded to it before. But I wanted you to spell it out a little bit more, technologies that have been lost and sometimes are rediscovered, but sometimes they're not.

So say a little bit about sort of the—this is part of that myth of perpetual progress, but in terms of technology. You can say a little bit about that.

John: Okay. One of the best examples is currently sitting in a museum in—I think it's in Athens these days. The antikythera machine. The ancient Greek and Roman world developed a very, very extensive mastery of gears and of geared machinery. The antikythera machine was a device for calculating the position of the planet.

People had been reading these references to geared clockwork devices and so on. Nobody had been able to figure out how to make them work, because attempts to do so with our kind of gears had failed routinely. Somebody finally was able to do it. I forget whether it was x-rays or what. They would look through this corroded lump of metal to see that all the gears had triangular teeth.

We don't use gears with triangular teeth. Our gears have square teeth. This little detail, and an entire world of technology based on it, which works when you have this particular kind of gearing. It had been completely lost and was not rediscovered until—well, I mean clockwork at all. It had to be reinvented from scratch in the Middle Ages.

Now, it so happens that we did recover that technology. There are other examples. We have no idea how the pyramids were built. I'm sure it was not flying saucers lifting stones or anything, any piece of nonsense like that. I'm sure that the Egyptians had some kind of clever bronze age device. We don't know what it is.

We will probably never know what it is. In fact, if you were to try to cut a contract to build the great pyramid today, it would be a real mess trying to make something like that happen, even with existing technology, it would not be an easy thing. It would be incredibly expensive, and there would be some aspects that might well challenge anybody's capacity to do them.

Here's another example. Bryan Ward-Perkins I think is the guy's name. He's a historian who has written a very interesting book about the end of the Roman world. *The Fall of Rome: And the End of Civilization* is the title. He notes that in post Roman—in certain other parts of the western Roman world, wheel thrown pottery went out of existence.

Nobody remembered how to make a pot on a wheel anymore. We're talking a device with one moving part, and they couldn't even sustain that one. Now, of course, people will say, "Well, yes, but it kept going somewhere else." That's true. That's absolutely true. But notice in those days, societies did not have global reach.

There were other places where things like that could be sustained. There were also talking devices that had one or a few moving parts. We're not talking about technologies that involved say a couple of million transistor junctions and integrated circuit chips using raw materials that have to be rare earth metals that have to be imported from the far corners of the planet, the clean rooms, the complex solvents, all this kind of stuff.

That phrase "technology will always be with us" is a thought stopper. It doesn't actually mean anything. It's a statement of faith. It doesn't actually refer to anything relevant to our current situation, because in fact technologies can be lost. Technologies have been lost. Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilization in China*, pointed out that back in the Tang Dynasty the Chinese figured out how to extract sex hormones from urine, from human urine.

Michael: How to extract what?

John: Sex hormones.

Michael: Oh, right.

John: Testosterone. Estrogen. Okay, and were using them medicinally to treat hormone insufficiency. That was then lost and were only references in papers, in surviving documents that allowed Needham to put together what this had been about. That probably wouldn't have happened except that western science figured out how to do the same thing in a different way in the 1950's.

Technologies can be lost, especially when they're incredibly complex technologies that can only exist because we can throw incredibly extravagant amounts of fossil fuel energy into maintaining them. Just muttering as a credo "technology will always be with us"—a stone hand axe is technology.

Doubtless human beings will always have some kind of technology. That doesn't mean we're going to have the technology we have now.

Michael: Yes. Yes. Well, that's one of the things I've enjoyed about some of your recent blog posts, exactly that, bringing back to mind people who really got that all technologies—or that it's important to sustain certain technologies, because if they're lost, there's a huge cost in trying to bring them back.

John: Yes. Yes. Of course, that's one of the main strategies that I have in my blog and more generally, is trying to encourage people to adopt technologies, to adopt practices, things that may be useful for the future. Save them now, teach them to others, pass them on. That's how it's going to get there.

Michael: Yes. Well, this whole notion that the future is calling us to greatness, I wonder if we could conclude this conversation with just a little bit—anything you'd be led to say about green wizardry.

John: The green wizardry project—that was kind of a metaphor that went crazy on me. I was talking about it in a blog back in 2010. I was talking about the old appropriate technology movement, which I mentioned earlier in this conversation. I said what we need are green wizards. What we need are people like the wizards of the dark ages, folks who knew some specialized stuff and could put it to use, even when it wasn't popular, even when most people thought it was like ew, icky, or spooky, or something like that.

People just kind of jumped on the metaphor and ran with it, so I did also. The idea is in my book *Green Wizardry* is that the techniques that were devised during the 1970's and early 1980's, before the tech movement, are very well suited for our needs just now, because they operate on a home scale or small community scale.

They're basement workshop projects. They're things that do not require huge capital investment. They don't require the government to cooperate. They're things you can do for yourself. They're things that have to be done on an individual level, and so they can be done on that level, so you can do them right now.

That really helped me bring together a lot of ideas that I've had and a lot of enthusiasm built around it, because so many people, they're looking at the crisis of our time, the rising waves of crisis that surround us. All that most pundits, all that most of the media says you can do is contribute some money to this big organization that will spend it on lobbying.

Okay, big deal. "What can I do?" is the question I field very often. There are lots of things that we can do, but they start with changing our own lives. That, by the way, is one of the keys to greatness. That's one of the keys to the magnificence that we are all capable of. You have to start with your own life. You have to start by transforming your own life.

Until you change your life, you can't change anything else. But once you change your life, once you realize that you don't have to do the same thing, you don't have to live the same way, there's freedom that comes from that. It's in that freedom that we gain the capacity to accomplish great things.

Michael: Yes. Yes. Amen. I've experienced that up front, up front and personal, because for 12 years Connie and I have been effectively homeless. We live out of the generosity of people who open up their homes to us. Yet we actually have the subjective experience that we're the richest people on the planet, that we get to do this work at this amazing time with all these incredible colleagues.

We get to live with each other traveling the continent sharing this sort of bridge building hopeful perspective grounded in an ecological worldview. It just doesn't get any better.

John: No. When you take what you're supposed to do and chuck it in the compost and go do what you know you need to do, the freedom and the power that is released by that, it's really quite amazing. That has really been the story of my adult life. There have been a lot of rough patches. There are.

But if you're going to be great, you're going to face challenges. If you're going to face challenges, you're going to have to work, and it's going to hurt now and then. That's simply the way it is. Tolkien, who we referred to earlier, had that one down pat. The journey of the fellowship with the ring was not a picnic.

It was a rough road with a lot of very hard times, and it accomplished something great. I think we can all look at our lives in that sense and look at it and say, "Okay, what do I

need to do? What do I need to walk away from? What do I need to head toward in order to achieve something great with my life?”

Michael: Yes. Yes. Exactly. Well, John Michael, thank you so much for this conversation. I hope that in late October, which is when Connie and I will be passing down from—we’re participating, or actually we’re cheer leading and supporting the great march for climate action this year, so we’re going from Los Angeles to Washington, DC over about eight months.

We’ve got about 90 speaking engagements lined up. But we’ll be coming through the Cumberland, Maryland area, and I hope to see you and Sarah at that time.

John: It sounds like a plan.

Michael: Great. Thank you, John Michael.

John: Thank you. It has been a pleasure to be on.

Michael: Thank you.