

The Future Is Calling Us to Greatness

with Michael Dowd + 56 Experts



It's Time for an Integral Islam

with Amir Ahmad Nasr

Big ideas from this session:

- The banning of "My Isl@m: How Fundamentalism Stole My Mind and Doubt Freed My Soul"
- The inside scoop on how the digital revolution is facilitating cultural evolution
- Integral Islam and embracing evidence as modern-day scripture

Michael: Amir, welcome to this conversation series on the *Future is Calling Us to Greatness*. I have been looking forward to this conversation for quite some time.

Amir: Thank you for having me, Michael.

Michael: Amir, it has been a while since we have caught up. We worked with you very closely on another conversation series that I did some years ago on evolutionary Christianity. Connie and I both worked with you and actually, we worked more closely with you than anything else.

I am sure you can appreciate this 53-person conversation around really how to face some of the challenging times that we are now in and that we looked to in the years and decades to come from a place of inspiration.

One of the things that I've been doing at the start is always asking my guests to help us get who you are. People who are not already familiar with you and your work, help us really get who you are and don't be bashful, just share what you are best known for, what you are most committed to or proud of and that sort of thing.

Amir: In April 2006, I started a socio-political blog called *The Sudanese Thinker*. I am originally from Northern Sudan, Afro-Arab of mix heritage. I was born there but I never really grew up there. I grew up in a small country called Qatar in the Middle East. Then I moved to Malaysia in 1997, then I went to international schools, including American school, hence the American-ish sounding accent.

Growing up, living in close societies, where media was controlled, information was controlled, I had a lot of questions that were never answered, questions about the nature of reality, the nature of life, justice, what is moral, who knows that it is moral and based on what?

I was never satisfied with the simplistic answers that I got and so in April 2006, after discovering social media and the internet while in university I became obsessed and I started my own blog, and I called it *The Sudanese Thinker*, not because I had this sense of self-importance like look at me, I am a thinker but just because I was thinking about a lot of stuff and I wanted answers, and nobody gave me those proper answers, so with the internet that changed.

Now that blog grew and at that speed, it was getting 10,000 hits per day and soon, the *Huffington Post* is paying attention, *USA Today*, *BBC* and when the Arab Spring happened and I am proud to say that I was involved in the core network of [inaudible 02:59], so as the blog grew and gained a lot of attention, it became a platform that really gave me a profile.

In 2011, when the Arab Spring happened, I had the chance to reveal my identity because I was still anonymous, talking about a lot of provocative things, so I had the chance to reveal my identity and speak of the Oslo Freedom form in Norway along with the Nobel Peace Prize winners, former presidents, people from Amnesty International, basically the top people involved in the human rights movements.

I took that chance and I said this is a historic moment, I will reveal my identity and go speak there. I did that and then I got a book publishing deal and I wrote about my story. The book is called *My Islam*, although the A in Islam does not exist, it's an "at" symbol to symbolize the importance of the internet.

Michael: Yes, exactly.

Amir: And how it allows free speech and free flow of information. So it's called *My Islam* but the A is a @ and the subtitle really kind of gives away my story and my journey. The subtitle *How Fundamentalism Stole My Mind and Doubt Freed My Soul*. Part of that journey of really embracing doubt as a positive thing, it had many parts of it but part of it was really also meeting you and coming across your work and getting really familiar with an evolutionary worldview and how enriching it can be while also enabling us to honor science and just get rid of all the nonsense dogma and the doctrines.

As you can tell, I still have strong opinions on that.

Michael: Yeah, you should.

Amir: Long story short, I am trying to keep it brief but the book got banned in my previous country of residence and I recently arrived here in Canada where I take political asylum because I was facing the threat of deportation where I used to live back to Sudan where I am wanted pretty much like I am a fugitive, I am considered treasonous, like what I did with the book, my speeches and my writings because now my identity is known and I am no longer anonymous.

That's really the core of who I am. I define myself first and foremost as an activist and as a writer who believes that writing is meant to be provocative, something that we use to perturb and to question power, and to really try to uncover answers to good questions, not bad questions.

That's that and then on the other hand, there is obviously me the entrepreneur who loves content marketing and I helped you with your series launch it previously, the one on Evolutionary Christianity, so that's another aspect of things that I do. That is the professional aspect. I hope that gives listeners and viewers a sense of where I am coming from.

Michael: That's great. That was a wonderful overview. For those who are watching and listening, just to put my cards out on the table, Amir is someone who I have held in highest esteem since I met him four years ago and we did work together both on Evolutionary Christianity series where I interviewed 38 of the world's most esteemed scientists, theologians, ministers who fully embrace an ecological evolution worldview, some of the top Catholics, the top Protestants, the top Evangelicals and so on, and I worked very closely with Amir in that process.

It wouldn't have been the same product without him, and then also Evolutionize Your Life. Connie and I did a course called Evolutionize Your Life which was on evolutionary psychology and brain science. Both of those were done with Craig Hamilton's organization Evolving Wisdom and I have felt toward you Amir like a spiritual son because you are only a year younger than my own son and you are trying to doing with in many ways in a very different world, mostly the Muslim world, some of what I try to do with Christianity, to bring in an integral, ecological, evolutionary worldview that is pro-science, that's pro-evidence yet also pro-mysticism or pro-experiencing of reality whether we use secular or religious names for reality.

One of the things we've talked about many times is that I don't really worry for my life writing very provocative things like Christians betray god and betray the gospel, if we privilege ancient mythic text over current evidential revelation, that's pretty bold stuff but I am not really worried about my life, whereas you actually have experienced where there is a threat.

Anything you would like to say in terms of how your book has been received and what you've found encouraging and what you see as your own next steps?

Amir: First of all, thank you for the kind words. I've really always looked up to you as a mentor and I think there is a lot of stuff that you are doing that I find very relevant and I am still in the process of trying to find ways of articulating those things in my context.

To answer your question about how the book was received, frankly, I thought that the book was going to get some level of backlash from readers and from general audiences. To my surprise, it's actually been very positively received, even by people who I would describe as fundamentalists or people who are extremely dogmatic.

The reason for that is that I deliberately wrote the book to convey all my stages of my journey. In the beginning of the book, I talk about how I was deeply devout and deeply religious, and very much fundamentalist and I talk about the positive aspects of that experience.

Then I get into how I discarded the doctrines and the dogmas, and the theological aspects that I find very troublesome and kind of embraced the more integral, more evolutionary and spiritual worldview, and so even though the critics by the time they get to that part of the book they go, "Oh crap, why did he have to go down that path?" by the time they get to the end of the book which is called the *Reconciliation*, I am very careful with the words that I choose there.

People who read between the lines, they pretty much understand that I am very much a free thinker, whereas those who don't read between the lines, they somehow kind of assume that I had a reconciliation of sorts and I am on my way to a deeper reconciliation and coming back to the path, so I let them think what they need to think but those who needed to get the message most got it and I wrote it for people who were really struggling with religion and they didn't know what to do.

They felt that I was either being religious or being an atheist, and the book was about creating an alternative middle path and so it's that target audience really benefited from the book.

Having said that, the authorities and government from the region in the Middle East, in Northern Sudan, the book is banned in Northern Sudan and now it's also banned in Malaysia which is where I used to live, because it was brought to the attention of the Malaysian authorities by the Sudanese authorities and hence it got banned by the Malaysian Ministry of Home Affairs in bookstores.

In fact, I found that by accident that the book got banned and that I was on the radar of the Home Ministry and that I had to get out of the country ASAP because my friends tried to buy the book and they came back to me and said, "Amir, we tried to get your book and dude, apparently it is banned and they are not selling it anymore."

I am like listen, if this is a joke it is not funny. You look at my face right now, I am not smiling in case you have not noticed, and they are like, “No, seriously. We went in there. They said it’s sold out and when we asked them why they aren’t re-ordering, they said they can’t because it is banned. Dude, your book is banned.”

I went to the bookstore to check for myself and I pretended to be a customer. In fact, I pretended to be a student and I said listen, my professor wants me to buy 30 copies for the whole class and I am like 30, maybe they will budge here and then the guys says, “I am sorry sir, we can’t,” and I am like why? It is 30 copies and I am a regular customer. He is like, “The truth is in the system here it says banned and if we try to sell it, we will get in trouble.”

I just stood there and I started hyperventilating and I am like holy crap, now I am one of those people that I used to read about in the newspaper like do they know that I live in the country? Do they know that I am the author of the book? Hold on, what is happening here?

Yes, long story short, I definitely had to get out, so thankfully here I am. Hello, North America.

Michael: Amen. One of the things that I’ve been doing since we’ve last talked is really leading with reality. I did a TEDx talk just a few months ago. I did one two years ago, as you know, but I just did one a few months ago called Reality Reconciles Science and Religion.

One of the points I make is that what we call reality the ancients called god, or if you looked in a polytheistic culture, the gods, and if religion is doing its job what it has always done in every culture is help people live in right relationship to what’s fundamentally inescapably real.

I find that when I lead with reality and the language reality, what does it mean to live in right relationship to reality and how can we honor reality. The thought that we can worship god without honoring reality that is honoring nature and honoring time is crazy.

I found that useful and this is one the places where in the same way that my own son has gone beyond me in many ways, I see in ways that you’ve already begun to do that. Your book, I found to be so courageous but also there was a generosity in the way that you told your story.

I am grateful for that, both because I think that will help bring along people who are still in those traditional mindsets and told basically with fear that if you believe in anything different you are going to burn in hell or in some cases, you are going to lose your life but also in terms of providing a lifeline for people who are swimming in uncertainty both the skeptic free thinker, humanist, the science oriented side where there has not been a lot of emphasis on values,

inspiration and heart, and also those on the dogma side who are given all the answers and yet some deep part of their soul knows that something is missing and all these things that are said to be bad, especially as it's related to science and our understanding of inner reality or outer reality, or social reality and our interpretive reality, there is a lot of really important stuff there.

Any further writing that you do, you can count on me both to support that but also to work with you as we've done in the past because I'd love to make sure that you can be as bold and prophetic as possible without being over that edge where your own life is endangered.

Amir: I appreciate that very much. On that note, I am working on two new books now. One is non-fiction and it has more to do with business, branding and it's a different thing.

The third one is going to be my first novel and it's very much actually about these subjects. It really tackles the theme of what is truth, what is reality, what is knowledge and it is going to be very much so about epistemology but I believe that in terms of writing it through a format of a novel, I think I can bring these questions to a wider audience and make these themes accessible.

Michael: That's great. I just created something myself that I don't think even I've told you about. I don't think I've mentioned it. This *God and Big History*, five-part video series was really an attempt to articulate a set of core values, priorities and commitments that unite tens of millions of secular and religious people around the world.

It's not about having the same beliefs, it's about having the same commitments and values, and I've articulated my creed in six core points. Reality is my god. Evidence is my scripture. Big history is my creation story. Ecology is my theology. Integrity is my salvation and ensuring a just and healthy future is my mission.

Now of course those can be said in secular terms, reality is my ultimate commitment, my ultimate concern. Evidence is the main way reality reveals itself and so on, and conservative religious people sometimes feel more comfortable with language like, "My god includes reality. My scripture includes evidence. My theology includes ecology," and so on but I would encourage you to take a look at those.

I think that you might find some, in fact I am sure you will find some of the material videos useful in this fiction because what I am excited about it is the form of fiction is often more effective in communicating ideas than non-fiction and so I really want to engage with you and get some dialog about my ideas and whether you think that I am onto something or whether you think any of that would be useful in your own writing.

Amir, this conversation series is really centered around this notion, this mythic idea that the past is rooting for that when you have an evolutionary understanding you have a relationship to time that is far deeper than without an evolutionary understanding.

The sense that time goes back millions and billions of years and we now know evidentially that god/reality is revealed through evidence and that countless generations have contributed and struggled and in some cases sacrificed in a major way and our very existence is dependent upon that.

We wouldn't even be alive had they not sacrificed, so the sense of past is rooting for us today engage in ways that allow for a flourishing future generation, so the future is calling us to greatness. So anything that you might be led to say on this theme that the past is rooting for us and the future is calling us to greatness?

Amir: Michael, I appreciate the question you are bringing up because it really puts things in perspective for me. This has been part of the challenge that I've had to articulate some of these ideas in my context. So I will speak in my context and compare it to the global context.

In the Middle East for instance or in that region in general, environmental concerns aren't at the top of the list because if for instance you look at the conflict between radicalized Sunnis and radicalized Shi'as, it's very much a matter of doctrinal debate and just very contentious. These are my beliefs, these are my doctrines. Yours are wrong. You are going to hell. I am going to fight you and kill you.

When you have a situation where that causes so much turmoil, environmental concerns really drop at the bottom of the list. Having said that, if we actually for instance look at Syria, when you go way back when the protests started and they were peaceful, non-violent and people had a commitment to non-violence, these are regular people, not people who are radicalized or nothing and they just wanted a better chance at life and dignity.

Part of the reason they mobilized was because of drought.

Michael: Huge part.

Amir: Yes, huge part. There was drought. The government didn't care. They didn't have access to water. Their harvests weren't basically as much as expected. Now, if you go to them and you start talking about an evolutionary worldview, the challenge is it is so inaccessible. They have different concerns and if we talk about spiral dynamics and I am hoping that the viewers are familiar with that, and I am guessing they would be but just the stages of worldview development, even if we don't want to call it stages of worldview development, just different kinds of worldviews, it's been accessible.

So part of the concern has been why do you even begin to articulate in that connects, when you have all of these on. Having said that also, if we look at people in general, Muslim traditionalists or Christian who are living in the West, who are living in more urbanized cities like Dubai or like Istanbul in Turkey, now we can begin to conversation that becomes a lot more relevant.

Where I feel it is really relevant is to show people listen, these doctrines that you believe in, they are not fixed in time. They are not frozen and when you look at history, not just from this biblical or Koranic perspective that goes back supposedly five or six thousand years, we are way beyond that and people are educated and who are urbanized and who have access to knowledge that they understand that [inaudible 21:00] and because of that understanding, I feel there is a way to begin to introduce the conversation.

That's really where I feel things are at, which is why I haven't even really step fully into the conversation yet.

Michael: Yes. We've titled this particular conversation, It's Time for Integral Islam. What does that look like, sound like and feel like to you? How do you see the emerging of integral Islam? What does that mean?

Amir: Great question, thank you because actually that's exactly what I feel where the tension is at. What I mean by that is basically this. [Inaudible 21:45] Muslim world in general a lot of heated debates either recently at the time of recording this interview in America, Bill Maher with Ben Affleck on and Sam Harris, Islam is really at the center of a very heated contentious debates.

The key thing when you look at the Muslim world in general is that there is a crisis of modernity. For centuries and centuries, you've had a civilization that was very much premised on a traditionalist worldview and had codified doctrines at the core of that worldview.

Now with modernity, I mean for the first time in the history of the Muslim world, you have education and institutions, universities where women graduate in larger numbers than men in some cases. The economic circumstances have changes, where we can now go out and get jobs. People have access to satellite television, they have access to the internet, they've got access to mobile devices which are going to get cheaper and broadband access is going to get faster and cheaper as well.

You have now innovations in online education and massive open online courses (MOOCs), I believe that's what the acronym is for, so there is so much disruption going on and in the midst of that disruption, because Islam for centuries has been at the center of people's lives, now they are going, "If I let go of Islam, I am betraying my identity, I am betraying my community. There are things about it that feel true, that feel right, experiences of transcendence,"

but at the same time, something is definitely not working here. Something smells a little fishy and even rotten.

There is this debate about like what is Islam, can you reform Islam? What aspects can you reform? I feel that when you bring on board and into the discussion an integral framework which also very much includes an evolutionary perspective, people now can begin to step back and say, “Secularizing doesn’t mean that we become like Western Europe where churches are empty and people are experiencing a crisis of meaning.”

Even North America, to an extent, and that is something very prevalent. Some of the courses out there, some of the books out there would teach you things like how to have more meaning and purpose in life which in the region of Middle East, that’s not even a conversation that people really are experiencing because there is already so much purpose and meaning in life, just tragic purpose and tragic meaning, so it’s not even on their radar.

What an integral perspective does is it says number one, you don’t have to discard your religion altogether. You can look at traditions as exactly that, tradition. What does that mean? Just so we can unpack it further. Let’s use the analogy of a birthday cake.

It is your birthday. Here is your birthday cake, here is the candle. Make a wish. For the most part, I would say all of us or the vast majority of us know that when you blow a birthday cake and you make a wish, that’s kind of like a superstitious fun thing that you do. You don’t take it seriously like I am going to make a wish and it is going to come true or like Santa Claus is real, or whatever, but these are just traditions that we live, that we go through, and they are beautiful traditions.

You gather around the birthday cake, people join you and you blow the candles and like, did you make a wish? Yes, I made a wish. What was your wish? I am not telling anymore, I am keeping it to myself, but we don’t take those things seriously as belief.

When it comes to the Islamic tradition there are many things in it that are beautiful that provide meaning, that provide a sense of purpose, ritual and bring communities together and so with an integral perspective you don’t have to discard that but what it also says is that we have to be intellectually honest, we have to be empirical and we really need to look at the beliefs behind these rituals and actually assess them.

Are they warranted? Are they valid? Heck, are they even useful to begin with?

Michael: Yes, exactly. One of the things that I watched – I don’t know if you watched any of Neil De Grasse Tyson reboot of Karl Sagan’s *Cosmos* series but --

Amir: It has been one of my favorite things to watch.

Michael: Yeah.

Amir: I love it. It is fantastic. He is really well animated and just all lit up and energized.

Michael: In terms of the sacred side of science, he just does it really well and one of the things he does repeatedly is he shows how religion, if it gets dogmatized, if it gets basically what I call the triple idolatries – I'll say more about that in a minute – but making an idol of either the scriptures or what I call idolatry of the written word that is where you think god's best guidance or best map of reality is frozen in time, so you are not present to current evidential revelation, so idolatry of the written word.

Idolatry of the otherworldly which is where you think where god resides is outside time and nature, not incarnate, revealed or expressed or personified in reality, and idolatry of beliefs is when you think anyone's belief system is the only one right way to right relationship to reality and I love that fact that Neil De Grasse Tyson in that series, I forget which program, where he really showed how Islam at one time was really on the cutting edge of evidential revelation and it was only when it locked into fundamentalism that it really lost that and I think it's a tragic loss and hopefully can be regained.

Amir: Yeah, absolutely because back then there was a much wider diversity of view, so many different schools of thought. Now granted yes, they are very much based on the notion of this is the holy text but even then you had a school for instance that I talk about in my book, they are called The Rationalists, we can call them and for them, it was this dominant debate which basically on one side, you had the Ashadi, the traditionalists saying, reason is subservient to revelation.

This is revelation, this is reason. The rationalists on the other hand were like, that doesn't make sense because you use reason and rationality to engage with the scriptures. If you didn't have reason and rationality, you wouldn't be able to engage with the scriptures and make meaning of them to begin with, therefore revelation is subservient to reason.

Now, when it comes revelation, again with an integral worldview and an integral approach, you can look at revelation and you can say what exactly do we mean by revelation? Is revelation even warranted?

So the experience of sitting down and meditating and experiencing heightened states of consciousness, feelings of transcendence, those experiences are real, they are valid and they are powerful. Now what they imply, that's a whole other matter. That's when you get into faith and non-evidential aspects of things, so is it about just chemicals in your brain? Is it about consciousness? Is consciousness an actual thing that exists outside of us?

That is something to be discussed and debated but that I think is more in the realm of faith, it is not really in the realm of science and empiricism. Nevertheless, if people feel that I was sitting down and praying or experiencing a sense of transcendence, and I had this revelation or this epiphany, I think that's pretty warranted and that's a beautiful thing but to say, this is my book and it is revelation and it is the one true book, it's troublesome even if reason is here and revelation is here.

That is something to keep in mind but you had that in the past, revelation is subservient to reason. That got overturned centuries ago and that was one of the main reasons among others, which were very crucial, for the decline of the Islamic civilization and here we are now, stuck with this mess which on top of it we are dealing with tyrants and dictators and so on and so forth.

Michael: Exactly. Amir, here we are living now in the 21st century, 2014, we are recording this and we are waking up to the fact that there are some large scale challenges that face humanity, such as peak oil, such as climate change, such as the growing gap between the rich and the poor, species extinction, overpopulation, there are some big challenges.

I know that you are aware of these challenges and have as I have occasionally grieved and gotten angry. How do you stay as a general rule inspired to be in action? What wakes you up on a daily or weekly basis that allows you to do this supportive work that you are doing from a place of hope and inspiration rather than fear and overwhelm? What do you find helpful, what tools do you use?

Amir: There are really two things and very simply, very briefly in a nutshell. One, to be the proof for expanding identities. I think there is a lot of evidence around that shows that our sense of identity is expanding. It is no longer around race, religion, very narrow definitions of culture. More and more, we are really beginning to see ourselves as members of one big family, of one big species.

That's a trend that inspires me and there is a lot of evidence for it, and yes, there is a lot of creative tension – if we can call it that – with [indiscernible 32:01] and things like, but bottom line, our sense of identity is expanding. That is number one.

Number two, there is a lot of technological innovation in exponential technologies specifically that are going to be available to us in the next coming years, in the two decades and the fact is when you look at the rate of innovation in these exponential technologies in various aspects, what happened in the next last 100 years, we are going to experience that same level of innovation in the next 10 to 20.

The next 10 to 20 years are going to bring so much innovation and in fact, in some cases more than what happened in the last 100 years. Here are some specific examples.

Solar power by all measures of various experts, if nothing catastrophic happens, if there are no serious economic problems, solar power is destined to become a dominant source of power.

When you look at an entrepreneur who is based in the United States like Elon Musk, he has helped start the company Solar City. He is the founder and the CEO of Tesla Motors which is fully electric car. We are just at the beginning of this and for anyone who reads and who follows that news very closely like I do, it's a very exciting future.

So long as we don't have serious economic problems or some nuclear catastrophe or whatever, that's the trajectory we are headed in and I think if we get there fast enough we can avert environmental catastrophe and with our sense of expanding identity, I do believe that more and more we are going to find cooperation happening among ourselves, again, as long as we don't engage in some crazy wars in the next 10 to 20 years.

So that's what keeps me hopeful, that's what keeps me inspired.

Michael: That's great. You are mentioning the expansion of identity or even what I sometimes even think Joanna Macy and others have spoken of the greening of the self. There is the whole sense of myself is my skin encapsulated ego or just my people, my family, my tribe and we have found as humans of finding greater spheres of cooperation, complexity, compassion, generosity and that sense of identity.

Who I am in my essence, for example I don't see myself as just an American or just a human or just a male. I am the universe becoming conscious of itself. I am an expression of this 13.8 billion year process of creativity now becoming aware of itself.

In a very real sense, myself doesn't even stop with the planet or the Milky Way but it is really the entire universe and whatever that great mystery is in which we live, move and have our being and all the different names for that, whether you call it god, reality or whatever, so I too find it and that allows me to look at my mortality.

As you know, I went through a very serious bout of cancer few years ago when I was looking at the possibility that I could die pretty quickly and that sense of peace that comes with the sense of expanded identity, knowing that I am doing the best that I can where my joy and the world's needs intersect to find those places where I can contribute that my legacy is my lord, that is my legacy is my ultimate commitment or ultimate concern has truly given me an incredible peace but it's also helped me reprioritize my life.

I don't take my life for granted anymore. This brush with death, Connie and I have this little ritual at the end of each season, we thank the season for being a blessing to us. We personify the season and say something like, "Thank you autumn for being such an amazing

season, if we never see you again. We just cherish what a gift you've been," and then we are silent.

Often, one or both of us will tear up but there is something about having that mortality and death and that expanded sense of self that prioritizes and so I was glad you mentioned that because that hasn't come up in too many of my other conversations.

Amir: It's huge. It is crucial and to be honest, if it were up to me, I would make big history a compulsory part of all education system, starting at kindergarten.

Michael: Amen, brother. You've got my attention. That's exactly what Connie and I feel.

Amir: Starting at kindergarten and yes, you can walk out of the kindergarten and sing your country's national anthem and stand before the flag and pledge allegiance, that's all fine but big history has to have higher precedence than that.

Michael: Amen. I remember back when I first met Thomas Barry in 1988, just a couple of years after you were born. I met him and he gave me a copy of Maria Montessori's book, a 1948 manuscript called *To Educate the Human Potential*.

Maria Montessori in 1948 she was saying that if the story of the universe was now called big history but if the story of the universe is the foundation of education, then kids know who they are, where they are in time and space and how everything fits into a coherent whole, and it gives them a priority and a sense that they have a cosmic task that there is some great role that they can play.

I remember, here she was saying that in 1948 and now we are rediscovering that with this whole movement of big history and the epic of evolution, so I am encouraged.

Amir: Yes, and when you put it that way you really begin to feel that the universe has your back.

Michael: I like that, yes.

Amir: In quite a literal sense, like in terms of momentum. I am not talking about this New Age conception of the universe and let's manifest our desires, that's another discussion but in a sense of momentum, like billions of years of momentum.

The universe has my back and if I am aligned, if I am in integrity and if I have right relationship to reality to use your languaging, my desire to want to contribute and give back and infuse this world with more meaning and betterness, that I feel is going to unfold a lot more

naturally and smoothly rather than this world is static and it's going to shit – sorry, can I say that word on your show? Okay.

It's a different worldview altogether, and so I am very much in favor of including big history as part of the education system and teaching it to children starting at a very young age. I feel very strongly about that.

Michael: Amen. For anybody watching this or listening to this, if you are inspired by this piece, Connie's and my main website is TheGreatStory.org and just click on Kid's Curricula, it's right there in the middle of the page and you will see a lot of stuff that's been created for home schooling families, for parents, for religious educators and anybody really wanting to teach the fun, playful aspects of big history to kids, starting really young.

This is fabulous. I've got a question though as we are just beginning to wind down. I've got a question that Connie has asked me to ask everybody and I think I've only forgotten once or twice and that is that if you had the opportunity to have dinner with any three people in human history or like in a dinner party where it's all four of you together, or if you had the opportunity on a one on one over a hike or a cup of coffee, tea or whatever, who would those three people be and why would you pick them?

Amir: That's an awesome question. You know, I know for a fact two of them would be two of them would be people who are alive today and I think in principle I would prefer to have conversations with people who are alive today than people who existed sometime in history, for the simple reason that the people who are alive today are more in tune with today's challenges and I want to ask questions about how to overcome today's challenges.

I don't think I would want to go back in time, I am not so sure about that, but the two people who are alive today who I definitely want to meet and learn from, number one, I've mentioned him already, Elon Musk. For an entrepreneur to start three different companies at the same time and grow them to over a billion dollars in valuation and not just companies that are selling you junk food or more of the same but that are really pushing forward in terms of innovation.

You have Tesla Motors, electric car company and beautiful electric cars. In fact, the whole premise was how can we create a car that's so damn cool that people want to buy it that just happens to be electric? That was the thinking and then Space X, the guy is a crazy lunatic in the best sense possible. He wants Space X to become so good at developing rockets and spaceships, he wants to go to Mars.

He believes that we need to become an interplanetary species. Name me one person who is thinking at that level who is alive today? It's insane, and then he is involved in

Solar City, which is right now the biggest provider of solar panels in the United States and soon, maybe even beyond.

He also launched along something called the Giga Factory for batteries, because he believes that the big problem is actually storage of energy. It's not solar generation of energy, it's how you store that energy.

Batteries are going to be very important for making this happen and for realizing this project, and getting us off of fossil fuels. So I would want to meet Elon Musk for all these reasons and I am like what can I do to think at a bigger level.

The other person I would want to meet, his name is Moe Ibrahim. He is a Sudanese born billionaire who is based in the United Kingdom. He is a British-Sudanese billionaire, self-made. He went into East Africa back when there were no mobile telecommunication networks and after selling his company for about \$200 or 300 million, he wanted to start a company there.

He went to get loans and people said to him, "We don't loan entrepreneurs or companies that want to start companies in Africa because there is so much corruption there," and he is like, "So is the continent doomed to fail?" He said, "I am going to take all that I attained and earned from the sale of my previous company and I am going to get my own investors on board and I am going to start this company."

"Here is the cool part. I am going to do it without paying a single bribe and I am going to find a way to make that happen and I am going to establish those companies." He came up with a brilliant method. He basically enacted a rule that any check – I believe it was for 5,000 or 10,000, any check more than that needs to be signed by the board of directors and they will need to investigate why it's being paid out.

That board has people from the United Nations, from the World Bank and I think even from Interpol or something. He got some crazy big names involved. Every time a conversation would happen in those countries about a potential bribe arising, he would be like, "You are going to have to explain it because this is the process and these are the procedures, and these are the people who are involved." So immediately this person gets discouraged and is like, "I guess this is not one of those companies where I can do that."

Eventually, he sold his company for over \$3 billion and established East Africa's first mobile network, and because of that now you have innovation, now farmers can communicate together. Now you have mobile payment systems all created and all innovations have happened because he built the infrastructure, the backbone.

I love him. He is a hero of mine and I think he is doing some tangible stuff, and it is amazing.

The third person, frankly, I don't know. I think the third person, I would want to meet someone not necessarily entrepreneurial and innovation driven but somebody who is wise, somebody with a profound understanding of human nature and how to expand our sense of identity.

I don't know who that would be but it would be somebody in the vein of I guess Martin Luther King or maybe the Buddha himself, Rumi, maybe. I don't know.

Michael: Cool. That's great. Last question that I want to ask is if you are speaking to a young person, somebody in their late teens or 20s who is just really struggling, they are overwhelmed and fearful, what kind of encouraging word would you give them?

I guess a separate different question is speaking to somebody over 60 who is wanting to leave a positive legacy, what would you offer them? At those two ends of life, what coaching or counseling, or suggestions would you offer?

Amir: This might seem unconventional or untypical but it's really as simple as just taking some time off, going out into the world, enjoying some solitude so we can get in touch with our own wounds and our own pain, and rather than trying to escape from it and get on our mobile devices or go light up a cigarette, just go out into the world, reflect, commune with nature and sit with the pain, sit with the wounds, and just breathe in and smile, and really process those feelings so that we are a lot more in tune with who we are at our very core because I think once we can get in touch with that core, renew that connection regularly it's a beautiful place to be and it brings a lot of clarity.

Even though for a while you have to sit through the crappy, icky feelings, after you do that you enjoy feelings of inner peace, joy, tranquility and I think in essence, if we can learn to do that regularly and more frequently, and then live life from that place as often as we humanly can that is really the best way to live, and then to share that with everybody.

Michael: Wonderful. That is fabulous. That would really go for both ends of the spectrum, as far as I am concerned.

Amir: Yes.

Michael: Amir, this is great. If people want to go more fully into your work, obviously your book, *My Islam: How Fundamentalism Stole My Mind and Doubt Freed My Soul*, where else would you suggest that they go?

Amir: You are going to have my name there, Amir Ahmad Nasr, which is my full name. If they actually just took my whole name and put dot com, they can go to my personal website and if they can click on Contact, and I actually would like to hear from the viewers and the listeners, and I welcome emails, I read all my emails. I don't respond very quickly and I do my best to do that but I read all my emails and I love getting listener feedback and viewers' feedback. That would be really it.

On the website, they will find information about the book and I also invite them to get a copy. It's not really just a story about Islam, it is really a human story of how to overcome self-limitations and oppression, and find freedom and joy even in the worst of circumstances.

Michael: Amen. Having read it, I highly recommend it, as you know.

Amir: I appreciate that.

Michael: Amir, thank you so much. Blessings and I look forward to having another conversation soon.

Amir: Thank you so much. Thank you for having me. I appreciate it.