Preface

This is now the third account of big history that I have written. Unlike the first one, when I was working alone in my downstairs office trying to convert piles of notes into a story, now I am connected to people teaching, writing, and learning big history around the world.


In the almost ten years since my first book of big history appeared in 2007, big history has become a global mini-movement in teaching and research. The formation of the International Big History Association in 2010 anchored these activities. (See www.ibhanet.org.)

At the elementary level Jennifer Morgan has spearheaded professional training for teachers. (See www.deeptimejourney.org.) This is used especially in Montessori schools, based on Maria Montessori’s ideas in the late 1940s for cosmic education.

At the high school level Bill Gates galvanized action by funding the development of free on-line curricula—one for anyone to take on their own and one for teachers to use in high school classrooms. (See www.bighistoryproject.com.) At present about 1500 schools have big history classes managed by the Big History Project, while some 50,000 teachers worldwide are using part of the curriculum.
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Undergraduate courses are being taught throughout the world, especially in Korea, Australia, the U.S., and the Netherlands. At Dominican University of California, all freshmen are required to take two semesters of big history courses. The faculty used their experience to write *Teaching Big History*. Ed. by Richard Simon, Mojgan Behmand, and Thomas Burke. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015. (See also www.dominican.edu/academics/big-history.)

At the graduate level courses are currently being developed. A few intrepid students are in Ph.D. programs in Amsterdam and Sydney. Ten graduate scholarships are being offered at Macquarie University’s Big History Institute. (See www.bighistory.mq.edu.au.)

In the midst of all this big history activity, I wanted to write another account of big history. I wanted to re-think the story once more, after becoming familiar with the various versions of it and the issues involved in how it is structured and presented.

Primarily, however, I wanted to write as simply and clearly as I possibly could, using my tenth grade teaching voice. (I taught tenth grade world history for two years at Eastern High School in Baltimore, MD, from September 1961 to June 1963.) I also wanted to give more space to science than I did in my earlier versions—in order to have more room to be clear and to put humans in their proper context.

My hope is that this version of big history will be accessible to many people—to students, teachers and the general public. I hope
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that teachers will find it useful as a supplement to the on-line materials from the Big History Project. I hope that students can keep it in their backpacks and on their bookshelves. I hope that it will be easy to translate so that people everywhere can learn our global story.

This book is organized into twelve chapters, which can fit easily into one semester of instruction, if desired, with about a chapter a week. In the first chapter I discuss what the scientific method and big history are. In the last chapter I discuss a variety of ways that people interpret big history and find meaning in it. The other ten chapters are based on eight major turning points, or thresholds, in the cosmic story. One threshold, the emergence of life, deserves two chapters, while a discussion of the future fills chapter 11.

This book is not formatted as a traditional textbook, although it can easily be used as one. It has a glossary to alert students and teachers to keywords. Each chapter has questions on the frontier of knowledge, as well as suggestions of how the content applies directly to the reader, to answer the perennial question: “Why do I have to learn this?” In addition, the book contains thirteen profiles of interesting people currently involved in science and the humanities.

Knowing that traditional textbooks tend to be boring, I hope this one is not. I trust that you enjoy it and keep turning those pages. After all, this is the most amazing story ever told—the story of how hydrogen gas eventually turned into us. (Thanks, Brian Swimme.)
I began writing big history soon after returning from my mother’s memorial service. She laid the foundation for me to be able to think on large scales, and she modeled how to be an inspiring teacher. I am forever grateful to her.

As my thinking has developed, I am deeply grateful to David Christian and Craig Benjamin for the opportunity to write together the first university textbook of big history. We began as friends and ended as better friends, not always the way that writing a textbook together works.

I want to thank the kind and generous founding members of the International Big History Association (IBHA), from whom I have learned much. In addition to Christian and Benjamin, they are Walter Alvarez, Lowell Gustafson, Barry Rodrigue, and Fred Spier. I am also grateful to Esther Quaedackers, Sun Yue, Joe Voros, Jonathan Markley, and Andrey Korotaev, current additions to the IBHA board.

My gratitude to faculty, students, and administrators at Dominican University of California knows no bounds. In early 2010 Dominican’s faculty voted to require two big history course of each incoming freshman. The creative faculty who chose to participate have constructed courses that reach positively an overwhelming portion of students. I am especially grateful to those who have most influenced my thinking: Mojgan Behmand, Dan May, Phil Novak, Harlan Stelmach, and Jim Cunningham.

I also want to thank those who implemented the Big History Project. That seems to me a huge achievement in curriculum
construction. David Christian provided the overall direction. I had the pleasure of writing small essays for it, working with terrific people like Michael Dix, Greg Amrofell, Andy Cook, and Bob Bain.

I want to thank especially the people who have read my text, or parts of it, during its many revisions. Fred Spier gave the entire text a close reading and response. Lucy Laffitte also helped with the whole thing. The following friends and experts gave excellent suggestion on various parts of it: Walter Alvarez, Martin Anderson, Anne Beaufort, Craig Benjamin, Fran Berry, Eric Chaisson, David Christian, Jim Cunningham, Todd Duncan, Dennis Flynn, Russ Genet, Kyle Herman, Jim MacAllister, Bill McNeill, Dan May, Lauren Mezey, Esther Quaedackers, Brian Swimme, Mary Evelyn Tucker, and Sun Yue. I didn’t always follow their advice, and the mistakes are mine alone.

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A new private school opened in San Francisco in September 2015. Called Proof School, it is especially for students gifted in math. Its leaders chose big history as the core of its humanities program and piloted my manuscript with their first ninth grade class. I want to thank Zachary Sifuentes and Austin Shapiro for their courage and creativity. I also want to thank Damian Pawlowski, a teacher at Los Gatos High School, in Los Gatos, CA, who used the Big History Project curriculum. He assigned parts of my text to 75 students doing research on chosen topics and carefully compiled their responses.

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