Brown: Yes by that time I was starting to write my first book about Big History. I think we called it Colloquium Whole Earth History.

Stelmach: Whole Earth History and so did that prompt you to write your first book on Big History, that colloquium, or had you already had a thought about what you wanted to do in Big History before that?

Brown: Well, you know, I heard I heard the term Big History first in 1991 when I read an article by David Christian in which he used that term and I immediately knew I wanted to do that. My first course that I taught at Dominican that I sort of made into a Big History was in 1994. I taught World History and Geography and then I just expanded it back but there was no textbook to use so eventually I realized maybe I have to write one and I even proposed it for a sabbatical somewhere in the late 90s. I'm sure you've heard this story. Some committee has to approve your sabbatical project so when I proposed writing a history beginning with the Big Bang to the present most of the committee just burst into laughter, reasonably so, but then I realized I wouldn’t get a sabbatical on that project so I quickly made up a new one and waited until I retired. So that was in 2001.


Brown: That’s when I really started seriously writing although I had a first draft that I wrote in one of my mountain trekking trips -- I still have it somewhere. So, and I had a big collection of how I wanted the table of contents to be. A folder this fat with possible ways to organize it. So obviously I was thinking…

Stelmach: You were thinking about it for quite a while.

Brown: But you know I realized I needed to be teaching it in order to be writing a book. So as soon as I retired I got busy creating that colloquium.

Stelmach: That colloquium. So did Phil come to you first or did you go to Phil and Jim Cunningham?

Brown: I think probably I went to them cuz I went to Sister Patricia... you know I thought I might teach it in the history department but she wanted the colloquium that’s what keeps the history department going is having colloquials.

Stelmach: Right, right.
Brown: So then probably I went to them.
Stelmach: And how many years did you teach that colloquium?
Brown: Well, three or four.
Stelmach: Yeah, what I recall it had been a staple for quite a while because the change in the GE happened in 2007 maybe something like that? So how long has Big History been at the university now? When did it start?
Brown: 2010 I believe.
Stelmach: 2010. So you kept the colloquium going after 2007 when I got involved. So, one of the interesting things for me is those early days cuz I was on the GE committee. Phil and I were on the GE Committee in 2009 when we changed the whole GE, changed some distribution of GE Committee, and then brought in Big History as this first-year experience and it evolved in terms of its conceptualization from little pieces here and there. So one of the pieces was my own experience with first year at Whittier College where it was a common experience over two semesters and I really wanted the common experience so was pushing for the common experience very hard. Mojgan was there as the interpreter and almost the marketer of this. I mean this would have not been without Mojgan because Phil and I were spinning off these ideas and then finally you brought in a conceptualization if I recall.
Brown: Well I heard about this committee to change the freshman requirement and I think I called Phil or emailed him and said who is on this committee Phil and by that time he had decided to push something like Big History and then he all of a sudden said well you are so he named me to the committee on the spot.
Stelmach: So I think Mojgan if she wasn’t chairing it, she eventually chaired it cuz the other woman in school of education, I can’t remember her name, but she did a very good job. The whole point of the change in the GE was that many people wanted to get rid of the religion requirement so that was one of the reasons why I wanted to be on the committee. I wasn’t against reducing but I wanted to make sure any changes were appropriate to what I thought the heritage of the university was and then the Big History project really struck me, one because we construct it as a common experience but also integrative knowledge. Remember we talked so much about this idea… it wasn’t really interdisciplinary it was how you take all these fields and have a coherent story of who we are as human beings. So I pushed the integrative knowledge piece, the common experience Phil pushed the Big History with you, and then Mojgan wasn’t convinced early on. I don’t know maybe she thought Phil and I were just pushing things down people’s throats and she is attentive to all the little nuances and psychology in the room but once she agreed to it then she took it to the Board of Trustees, subcommittee on the academic curriculum and then to the Faculty and she had a brilliant presentation. You’ve probably heard something about what she did.
Brown: Well I did and there were repeated lunch-in meetings where she would listen to the faculty, that was what impressed me so. She would have me sit at the back of the room so when questions came up I could answer them from my experience teaching it but mainly she was
listening to the problems and objections that faculty had and figuring ways to solve them and you know that’s pretty rare for an administrator to do so that’s what convinced me.

Stelmach: Well a lot was at stake because the Board of Trustees demanded a change so we were under the thumb so I was…

Brown: Why were they demanding change?

Stelmach: They wanted something unique, they wanted something that wasn’t just a run-of-the-mill distribution requirement and Luis Calingo was there at the time right? Was he the Vice President or assumed to be? So eventually when he was… So he played a role in swaying the Trustees without Luis, so Luis played a really big role in all of this. The reason why I’m telling this story is because when I think back on my idea of what we ended up with and then what the future can be for Big History. There is this origin story itself and I think Phil wrote an origin for that, teaching Big History, right or a book or at least taught it? So I can’t remember all the things he told obviously you were the most important in terms of the conceptualization. So when you think about Big History and in terms of the future, what are the lines that you think should be sustained so it lives up to your vision of what Big History is? I mean I’ve mentioned a sort of integrative knowledge and I know you’re interested in the science component. What are the various pieces that you think have to be there for it to be the Big History project you envisioned?

Brown: Well, I think the Board of IBHA defines what Big History is mainly that it’s based on empirical evidence and it’s a you know an integrative study of all academic disciplines integrating them into one origin story. So for me, the fact that it has to stay within empirical evidence is the whole definition of what it is. So for instance I have a lot of trouble with Ted Peters who keeps on going beyond that empirical evidence and still calling it Big History. I think that’s just not correct. I think that the Board of IBHA has the right to define what it is and that’s the definition certainly that I go on. So one of the tasks of Big historians is to keep the story based on the evidence and keep it up to date because so much new findings are coming in all the time that even when we were writing the textbook we could hardly get through a chapter because so many things would change before we finished.

Stelmach: And teaching it is the same thing. People bring in new articles and oh I didn’t see this and yeah.

Brown: But that’s of course part of the pleasure of studying it is that now that you have a framework for understanding this and this stuff as it comes in but anyways that’s certainly…

Stelmach: So say more about how you understand empirical evidence or empirical knowledge, how does that get established?

Brown: Well, it's basically what's called the scientific method. It's very complicated as we both know its not simple. We’re human beings and we’re fallible, and I think we can never understand all reality, we are fishing in the dark. So, in terms of empirical evidence, we're just trying to look at evidence that we can see and observe and replicate and that more than one person can verify so that we can correct our mistakes over time. I don’t know. I wrote a little chapter in my new book about the scientific method but you know scientists tend not to discuss the things they don’t
know and the difficulties they have in finding out and they tend to make it seem as though they
are very confident about their findings and so I think that’s a little misleading scientist should
always be talking about the difficulties but its the only process that I can see that moves us closer
to… near reality.
Stelmach: So, you and I have had conversations about this before so I’m inclined to be a little…
not so much loose in terms of what Big History is but how Big Historians have conversations
with people that are not Big Historians. So you can educate them and they… if there’s something
else that emerges that could be incorporated in terms of some sort of evidence into Big History.
So, I know you’ve written your article on morality and religion and this is a project that ended up
with what you now have which is a stunning piece of what I think Big Historians can do to really
be helpful in terms of integrative knowledge in various fields because there are other fields like
ethics and morality that you can’t empirically verify. These are values that people hold, right? So
how you engage in terms of the values that inform people that don’t necessarily just come out of
the scientific method but are important to who we are as human beings, you know, our traditions,
our faith traditions in particular? I think that article is a model for Big Historians: How they can
engage with something other than just the scientific method. When you were writing it did you
get a sense that you were doing something different as a Big Historian?
Brown: Well no. I felt I was applying empirical thinking of the way, say an anthropologist do. I
mean there are certainly ways to study what the values of people hold and what the faiths they
hold and the other model, of course, is Fred Spiers’ brilliant study of religion in the Andes. So I
think there are scientific empirical ways to study these things.
Stelmach: So as an anthropologist this is how you understood that. There were points though
along the way in the article where you said this isn’t necessarily all a reality but I can’t address
that because that is not part of what can be… I don’t know if you said empirical.
Brown: You know what people bring up to me is what they call; subjective experience, the
individual subjective experience of God or you know just experience and that’s what's not very
empirical cuz that’s an internal, personal experience that you can say lots of different individuals
have a similar experience but you can’t verify it really.
Stelmach: You can verify they have the experience…
Brown: That they say they have it.
Stelmach: That they say they have it, you can’t verify that is relative to a larger reality. So some
neuroscientists you know are studying scientifically mysticism and what the brain does when
people are under a mystical trance. Is that part of the Big History?
Brown: I think that will be. I think that… I mean consciousness in all is a subjective experience
is a big frontier of knowledge right now and a great… a lot of new understanding is going to be
coming through and it will be part of Big History once it's done in a scientific way which is what
is what’s happening.
Stelmach: Yeah, it's starting to happen. Are there many Big Historians that are now going that
direction or are you in dialogue with others doing it in their separate fields?
Brown: Well and that gets to the big question of what is research in Big History or is it that the research gets done in the specialized disciplines and the Big Historians then synthesize it into the story but they’re not actually doing the research themselves?

Stelmach: Well, what’s the answer to that?

Brown: Well, I think it tends to be the latter. That’s why of course we need the specialists in their disciplines and then the Big Historian’s job is to synthesize it and make it a part of the story.

Stelmach: Is that a consensus position about the role of a Big Historian that the research within Big History is in dialogue with individual disciplines advancing knowledge there that gets sent… is that kind of stated in any place?

Brown: No, I guess I’m not aware of it. You know the problem is…

Stelmach: It’s an interesting point, isn’t it?

Brown: I guess the problem is that we want to be training… you want people to be getting PHDs in Big History so that they can be teaching Big History but if you get a Ph.D. in Big History what kind of research do you do? So far we’ve had so few that there’s no answer to that yet I think.

Stelmach: So few people doing it doctoral work or…

Brown: In Big History. We have Ester now doing hers in Amsterdam and she’s doing a little Big History so that’s a possibility. What’s his name got his Ph.D. with David at Macquarie and you know I’m not even sure what he did. Some kind of analysis of astronomical stuff I think but still, it was more synthetic than original research.

Stelmach: So the Big History story is taking separate fields of knowledge and putting it into a larger story of the trajectory of the cosmos and the human community. So what’s your ideal view of the… I’ll back up: So, if you were to say these are the fields that Big History should be engaged in because it seems like this is where knowledge is advancing, what are those fields that you think are the priority fields?

Brown: The big gap fields.

Stelmach: Yeah.

Brown: Certainly, consciousness I think would be number one. How life began, we still don’t understand that fully or even partially, and then of course how the Big Bang began but that one’s much trickier to find out. Now we’re just speculating all kinds of stuff but we don’t have any empirical way to answer that. So I think those are the main ones that I can think of right now but the other main one is how to construct the story itself and you know we’re still in the early stages of that and some of us are using thresholds and some of us are not. Most of us are using an underlying theme of increasing complexity with increasing energy flow but we’re still not really measuring that at an empirical level very well so that’s an area that needs a lot more research that may be nobody is doing except Big Historians because that’s thematic for the whole story so how to tell the story and…

Stelmach: How to put it together. How you take the synthesis and have a coherent thread or something.

Brown: Exactly. That’s real and not just speculative.
Stelmach: So the various contending constructions are the complexity, the thresholds, and energy flows? Is there another possibility?
Brown: Well, let me think… you’re challenging… I’m not quick on my feet with this stuff that’s why I write. I think the other contending one probably is Swimme and Tucker with their universe story construction which seems to have a kind of theological thematic base to it.
Stelmach: So by theology, there is a purpose, there is an end, there is a moving value-wise.
Brown: Value-wise, morality seems to be moving towards some higher morality or something like that.
Stelmach: That’s interesting you say that because I wondered where Brian’s work fit in for you because it seemed like it was interesting for you but it isn’t what you do.
Brown: That’s right, I love it but it goes beyond Big History because it goes beyond… you know once you get into theology you’re not in empirical reality anymore.
Stelmach: But he’s serious in terms of where he says he’s doing his empirical work and then he crosses the line. So he has integrity around that is what I sense that you sense about him.
Brown: Well, I just love his passion and his… not everybody does. He's very kind of preacher-like and you know some people are turned off by the way he tells his story.
Stelmach: He does it in such a humble way.
Brown: Yeah, exactly.
Stelmach: It's disarming isn’t it, yeah. I think it’s great. I agree, I find it fascinating in his movie when I first started because I wasn’t conversant with the various strands and then when he showed that movie he said what did people take away from this and the immediate thing that I got was that he was telling the story of hubris.
Brown: Human hubris?
Stelmach: Human hubris that was really what he was reminding us of and that was going to be a problem. So that then takes us to your ideas about the future. What do you think… now you’ve integrated all of this knowledge and it tells us something and the story is being told in various fashions it got now this more value [unclear].
Brown: What is the real meaning of the story?
Stelmach: What’s the meaning of the story, yeah?
Brown: Okay, well, there are many levels of meaning to it I think and you know basically… one basic meaning is that it's integrating knowledge into a framework that is very helpful for students and teachers so…
Stelmach: And they can garner their own meaning out of it because it's there. It's what we have now take a look at it, we’ve organized it best objectively or whatever as we can now it's up to the students and teachers to do something with that.
Brown: Right and then you add whatever levels of meaning however you want but just as an educational tool it seems very helpful for me particularly in this age and day where we have so much knowledge that’s very difficult to organize and we feel just flooded by all of the stuff we have to learn. And we know in every culture that people learn from an origin story and we don’t have one anymore so this is a common origin story that organizes knowledge in a helpful way.
So that’s probably my basic meaning from the story but then there’s a much larger meaning and that is that the story tells us that humans are in an extremely difficult predicament at this moment in time like nothing we’ve ever confronted before and the story helps us understand how we got in this predicament but it also shows us that to deal with this predicament is gonna require an extraordinary level of cooperation, globally that has never before existed. So, to me, it’s a call to arms in a very urgent way, and this of course kind of contradicts its academic mission. I mean you know academics aren’t supposed to be leading a charge and activism, right. It's hard to maintain your objectivity if you’re out there on the political barricades. So far Big Historians have not engaged in political activities.

Stelmach: Even though the implications for what you should do are very strong.

Brown: Exactly and the implications for students and everybody are very strong so this is where we need to make some decisions I think and of course, I haven’t seen what the solutions will be. David Christian more than anyone I think understands the need for action and of course he’s our best spokesperson and he speaks for what we need to do at places like [unclear] so he’s been the one that has stepped forward the most in those arenas. I think IBA itself is formed as a non-profit organization for educational purposes so I don’t think it can take political action itself but I think as Big Historians we can write academic articles more of them of the predicament we’re in and the need for international cooperation.

Stelmach: So there’s Big History as the discipline or as the…

Brown: Trans-discipline.

Stelmach: Yeah, the trans-discipline but then there’s the Big Historian as the person and what’s the person’s responsibility with the knowledge and that’s where David takes it a little farther. Well, but in your own life you’ve written about civil rights, you’ve advocated for certain amounts of things so where’s Cynthia, and where’s Big History? How do you put the two together or how have you? Obviously, you speak with authority about trans-discipline but you also speak as a human being who has had a committed life.

Brown: Well, it's true I just have values and I speak up for them. You know I grew up in the segregated South and that was really intolerable so I couldn’t really remain quiet the rest of my life about that.

Stelmach: Yeah.

Brown: So it's interesting, isn’t it? As you know I’m totally un-Catholic and not religious as an adult at all and yet my values fit very closely with the heritage at Dominican College.

Stelmach: So thinking of the future, what kind of advice… so I had students weigh in on those three scenarios you know the transitional, the conventional, and the… barbarism?

Brown: I’ve even forgotten what I’ve laid out...

Stelmach: Yeah, one of them is conventional where the market system would be the future but it would be overwhelmed because it can’t really do its job so that’s got a negative future. Then barbarism where everything would fall apart, you know violence and whatever, and then the transitional is Raskin, was it Raskin?

Brown: Into some kind of planetary civilization.
Stelmach: Planetary which is what I assume is closer to what you were saying you need this cooperation otherwise… Of the 15 students that filled this out I think six of them were in barbarism, five of them were in the market system but it’s not going to work, and the others were in the transitional but had no hope for it. That’s what they wanted and they began to think maybe I should play a role in this so what advice do you give the students who are in the university right now are mainly getting stories of dystopias, dystopias, and there’s not this for good or ill the utopia of the 60s or 70s… they’re not hopeful. What’s the role of academics in it?

Brown: Well, that’s very disturbing to me. I think we have to challenge them: How do you want to live your life? Even if you think there’s a very small chance of succeeding at a planetary civilization… cooperative civilization do you really just want to give up before you try and spend the rest of your life living in despair and pessimism about what’s going to happen?

Stelmach: Well, academics as you say don’t do a good job on this, we don’t help them. I intentionally do it in my ethics and in my religions classes bring the value question into the: we’ve got this knowledge, we’ve got this understanding that comes from great thinkers that give us some understanding of the world but we still have to do something and the academic community doesn't necessarily go there. Under the guys being objective all the time, we have subverted our role to challenge students I think. Do you think this is a problem?

Brown: I do think this is a problem and I agree with you and you know the journal of Big History wants to do some kind of issue and memory of me and so they asked me what I think should be in there and that was the first thing I suggested was teaching about the future and raise the question with students of how they want to live their lives and how they can be hopeful about the future even if it doesn’t look as hopeful at the moment. So I think it's a big problem and I agree with you that we need to step over our objective bounds and engage with it. If for no other reason because our predicament now is much more severe than it has ever been.

Stelmach: Because some of the solutions, I’ll suggest what I see as a problem to see if you agree, science is providing opportunities for different kinds of things that can happen because science can produce it. And so there’s a sense that if science can do it we do it rather than should we do it so the judgment… the having the conversation about the judgment of whether to do it or not seems like the academic is also advocating its responsibility at that level.

Brown: I agree completely and it's ridiculous some of the things that technology now is doing that they shouldn't be doing it’s just ridiculous but it's not clear how it can be stopped…

Stelmach: Bill Sullivan who’s actually one of the co-authors of Robert Bellah does a lot of professional education consulting with Carnegie Foundation and now with somebody else has been doing a lot abroad in Scandinavia and he’s in the salon that I’ve created and he’s raised the issue in terms of professional education… In the past, the professions were developed by virtuous sitting at the feet of someone understanding the crafts whether its medicine and incredibly there’s a technological solution to gaining the skills to do these things but you don’t have the mentoring you don’t have the other capacity to think now that I have the skills how do I use them and he said this is the problem with liberal education we’re not giving people the capacity to do this judgment, discernment so it’s forced me to think - I’m supposed to be writing
a book on liberal education -- it’s forced me to think how do I bring that into the picture? And I think this discussion around Big History also... I’m thinking I ought to do a chapter around the teaching of Big History around these issues for liberal education.

Brown: Good.

Stelmach: And Lindsey Dean is actually... I’m on her committee GTU and Judith Berling wants her to think about Big History and its role within liberal education more clearly. And I think if we were to frame, I don’t know if Mojgan has talked to you about the survey on general education where some of the students who aren’t sure how it applies, what’s its relevance to their life. Well, I think we’ve now framed the rationale for Big History at Dominican well enough, they think they’re only gaining all of this information but it’s more to than that...

Brown: Well, I’m very glad to hear that. I guess one more thing I would like to say about the future of Big History is that I’ve come to understand that it’s not going to spread at the university except sporadically until we can set up the same kind of support system we’ve had at Dominican on an international level. I think it’s very difficult for an individual person to teach Big History and there are a few that do it but when they stop then it goes away but most people can’t do it by themselves they need to be working with a group of faculty, they need to have summer institutes where they can continuously renew and revise their courses, they need to have support groups either lunches or online support the same way the Big History project does it to high school teachers and that’s why it's spreading faster at the high school level because it has all of that built-in support. We’ve had it at Dominican lucky circumstance but no place else does and if IBHA really wants this to spread IBHA has got to find a way to set up these support systems.

Stelmach: So we’re having Luis bring his Philipino colleagues in, I wasn’t planning to go this summer but I am, his Vice President for Academic Affairs Alma Esperanza she was here, I brought her here on a Fullbright from the Philippines so we had a connection and she’s now his VP for Academic Affairs. Very strong Catholic, I mean the whole Catholic institution. So we’re going to do one on religion and Big History and how you teach it in that context of that Catholic university which has some very specific requirements on what they can and can’t do. Fortunately, the Catholic church is more enlightened around evolution around other Protestant churches which is also a way for me to help educate our colleagues on that point so I’m looking forward to doing that with her and I’m pretty certain we’re solid in convincing Luis that it’s not going to work there unless they have this kind of support network from the institute. Yeah, now I think... I don’t want to take credit for it but I’m certainly one of the supporters for the idea that this was such a change of how academics function that we needed almost behavioral modification through these lunches and through this institute. It’s akin in my mind to the Great Books program at St. John’s or St. Mary’s now has it where academics aren’t pontificating so you have to go to training. You can’t even teach unless you get some kind of behavioral modification where it really is share inquiry. So students learn this cooperative sharing of information, reading together, and it’s a collective intelligence that you’re constantly bringing up. So, other thoughts about the future of Big History, what you want to have on record, and then we can end.
Brown: Well, I’m very grateful for this conversation and to understand how much we agree about these things we haven't really had a chance to talk together before. I don’t think I have any final thoughts.

Stelmach: Well, I guess the final thought is to thank you for what you have given to Dominican but more than that given to the world in a sort of sense.

Brown: Well, thank you I feel very fulfilled. You know I’ve played my own little part and have had a wonderful time doing it.

Stelmach: So, is other people still coming for an interview?

Brown: I don’t think so, I think this is the last one. I think this is the sixth one.

Stelmach: So there are a lot more than I thought there were going to be.

Brown: Yeah, they got a very impressive coverage of my story both professional and personal.

Stelmach: So then nothing has been left out, all stones turned?

Brown: Well, there are a few very personal things that I’ll have to add mainly my love story with Jack I’ve referred to it obliquely but I haven’t turned over the… I’ve written a little chapter link about it just for myself really trying to understand it better and nail it down so I wouldn't forget it and I’ve shared that now with a couple of family members and I’m not ready to turn it over yet to Dominican but eventually I will.

Stelmach: Eventually it’ll be part of the Archives. No, I think everyone has responded immediately to every suggestion that Mojgan and I and others have made about what makes sense with your library and your personal papers and this whole project.

Brown: I’m just thrilled that you've had really put in the time, intention, and resources to make a real project out of it, I’m very grateful.

Stelmach: I think we’re at the moment in Big History where we still need more work to be done internally as the importance of Big History for Dominican. It’s still a job to be done and I see this as a way to remind ourselves and educate others of what we have I mean this is pretty special.

Conclusion (Stuart Horne): This concludes this episode of the Cynthia Stokes Brown Oral History Project, presented by the Big History Program at Dominican University of California.