

“For people, generally, their story of the universe and the human role in the universe is their primary source of intelligibility and value. The deepest crises experienced by any society are those moments of change when the story becomes inadequate for meeting the survival demands of a present situation.”

THOMAS BERRY, *Dream of the Earth*

“Let ours be a time remembered for the awakening of a new reverence for life...”

*The Earth Charter*

# A New Story for a New Economy

TO FIND OUR HUMAN PLACE IN A LIVING UNIVERSE

*By David Korten*

**E**

CONOMISTS DEBATE WHETHER THE ECONOMY IS RECOVERING from the financial crash of 2008. Scientists debate whether Earth will recover from an economy that is destroying Earth’s capacity to support life. An unconscionable gap between rich and poor—between the profligate and the desperate—grows at an alarming rate. Economists assure us that faster economic growth will provide the technology and financial resources to heal the environment and create jobs to end poverty. Most politicians agree with the economists.

Meanwhile corporations in the business of supplying fossil fuels to grow energy intensive economies resort to technologies increasingly destructive of Earth’s soils and waters. Competition

for food and fresh water intensifies in the face of extreme drought and flooding.

Some among a confused and desperate public respond with denial. Some pray for divine intervention. Some look for ways to profit from the crisis. Some, inspired by an emerging new vision of human possibility, work to heal our human relationships with one another and nature in a bold effort to turn the human course.

We humans pride ourselves on being an intelligent species. Yet we seem incapable as a global society of confronting the reality that we are making bad economic choices that threaten Earth's capacity to support life and relegate billions of people to lives of desperation.

I believe that we are indeed an intelligent species. Among Earth's many intelligent species, we are distinctive in our propensity to organize around stories and our deep need for a sense of the sacred—of what is most important, most worthy of our respect and care. Far more than we may recognize or acknowledge, our human course is shaped by the sacred stories that frame our understanding of the nature and purpose of Creation, our human nature, and our human role in Creation. Herein lies both our possibility and our vulnerability.

If we, as a species, get our sacred story wrong, we can be terminally self-destructive and a threat to the whole of Earth's community of life—the community on which our own existence and well-being depend. We currently have our story terribly wrong.

We are in desperate need of a shared story of the nature and purpose of Creation and our human place in Creation's continued unfolding that is consistent with our current state of knowledge and adequate to the needs of our time.

I believe we each hold the essential elements of the needed story in our heart. Without clear public articulation and affirmation, however, an unarticulated, interior story does not fulfill our societal need. To fill the cultural void left by our lack of an authentic and broadly shared sacred story, we have turned as a global society to a Sacred Money and Markets story that legitimates and frames the structure of an economic system that destroys life to make money for those who already have money far beyond any reasonable need. We experience at every hand the devastating consequences.

This essay is my effort to bring together the elements of a New Story for a New Economy that embodies the entirety of current human knowledge and

understanding, honors our interdependent relationships with one another and nature, recognizes our human agency, gives our lives meaning, and guides our path to a just, sustainable, and deeply democratic human future.



## Idolatry in the Absence of the Sacred

**A**s science, technology, and urbanization set us ever farther apart from nature, we began to think of ourselves as god-like creatures with the right and the power to dominate, control, and replace nature with human created technologies. Economists urged us to turn to money as our ultimate measure of value and look to markets as our moral compass.

Corporate interests picked up these themes and promoted them incessantly through corporate controlled media with the assistance of the PR and advertising experts in their hire until they became

the defining themes of the public culture. With time, we embraced the making of money as our moral obligation and life purpose; the market price of our possessions as the measure of our personal worth.

Money and markets became our objects of sacred veneration. The institutions of finance became temples of worship. Economists became the priests to whom we look for moral instruction. We came to embrace our individual collective violence against life as acts of virtue.

Pope Francis correctly names our collective worship of money “idolatry.” The consequence is truly evil: a deadly toxic relationship with Earth’s sacred community of life.

Although extraordinary advances in science might support a new sacred story, the only serious update of the sacred stories underlying our public discourse since the days of Copernicus, Galileo, and Newton is the story of Sacred Money and Markets. It goes like this:

*Time is money. Money is wealth. Making money creates wealth and is the defining purpose of the individual, business, and the economy. Those who make money are society’s wealth creators. Their affluent lifestyles are their fair and just reward for their special contribution; they merit our appreciation and respect. Material consumption is the path to happiness. We humans are by nature individualistic and competitive. The invisible hand of the free market directs our insatiable competitive drive to serve ends that maximize the wealth of all. Inequality and environmental damage are regrettable, but necessary, collateral damage on the path to prosperity for all. If we hold true to course, economic growth will eventually create sufficient wealth to end poverty and drive the technological advances needed to end human dependence on nature.*

Most readers will readily recognize—or at least suspect—that every assertion of this familiar story is false or badly misleading. Although economics courses in our most prestigious universities teach this story and corporate media constantly repeat it, it is bad ethics, bad science, and bad economics—as is extensively documented elsewhere by many authors, including myself. The ultimate proof is the environmental devastation, economic desperation, and social alienation this story leaves everywhere in its path.

## Three Familiar Creation Stories

# W

hat are the stories to which we humans have for centuries, even millennia, turned for sacred insight? Why have they not provided a bulwark against the idolatry that places our future in doubt?

Let’s look briefly at three familiar and seemingly mutually exclusive stories—the Distant Patriarch, Grand Machine, and Mystical Unity stories. Each has a prominent contemporary following, shapes the values and behaviors of a great many people, and has a supporting institutional infrastructure. The Distant Patriarch story—associated with Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—and the Grand Machine story—associated with Western science—have particularly powerful public presence and strong, well-established institutional support.

Each of the three stories has many variations. I seek only to highlight and explore the implications of the simplest and most familiar—some might say most caricatured—expression of each.



### 1 THE DISTANT PATRIARCH

As recited by the Abrahamic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—the Distant Patriarch story begins with an all-knowing, all powerful God who created all that is in a series of stages over a period of metaphorical days, testing, assessing, and building on what he finds good. (By one account in the Quran, each metaphorical day was 50,000 years; by another it was 1,000 years. The intended point is that it was a very long time. Even scientists have been known to change their estimates by a billion years here or there.)

God continues to rule his Creation from His home

They therefore deserve their privilege and merit our special respect and deference—much in line with the Sacred Money and Markets story’s assurance that the rich and powerful merit special exemptions, tax breaks, and legal protections.

in a separate, sacred dimension called Heaven, from time to time lending a helping hand to the righteous, while observing and judging our obedience to His commandments as handed down to us through sacred texts and interpreted by ordained religious authorities.

Since the beginning of empire, somewhere around 3000 B.C.E., variations of the Distant Patriarch story have inspired and provided moral guidance for billions of people and focused attention on the prime importance of our individual relationship with a distant God of male gender.

For some believers, God is loving; for others he is jealous and vengeful. Either way the emphasis is on an individual personal relationship with a parent figure to whom believers appeal for assistance and guidance and whose rules set the boundaries of their lives. It holds a powerful attraction. It also tends to diminish the importance of our human relationships with and dependence on other people and nature.

Many adherents to this story maintain that God wants us to care for His Creation; others see Earth only as a way station on the path to Paradise. In this latter rendering, God granted man dominion over nature to use as we wish during our brief Earthly layover.

For many fundamentalist believers from a variety of sects the Distant Patriarch story reduces life to a fear-based quest to earn credits to join the saved in Heaven rather than the damned in Hell. Life on Earth is a test of faith—a burden to be endured until our longed-for ascent to reside for eternity with the Creator in Paradise. The resulting uncertainty and fear provide considerable scope for religious authorities to manipulate and exploit believers.

If God is all-knowing and all-powerful, then we may assume that all that exists is by his will and that he has the authority and the means to change what is not to his liking. Christian Calvinists had an explicit belief that, since the rich and powerful are

clearly God’s most favored, they must as well be the most righteous and worthy. They therefore deserve their privilege and merit our special respect and deference—much in line with the Sacred Money and Markets story’s assurance that the rich and powerful merit special exemptions, tax breaks, and legal protections.



## THE GRAND MACHINE

The Grand Machine story is associated with science. The demonstrated contributions of science to human advancement and well-being, knowledge, and technology give this story considerable authority and respect.

In the most classic and familiar telling of the Grand Machine story, the cosmos is much like a mechanical clockwork following its predetermined path as the tension in its spring winds down. Eventually, science added random chance to mechanism as a valid explanation for physical phenomena. Generally, however, scientists hold—at least in public—to the story that only the physically measurable is real and that the formation and function of the cosmos are purely the consequence of a combination of physical mechanism and random chance. Within this frame, life is merely an accidental outcome of material complexity and has no larger meaning or purpose. Consciousness is merely an artifact of physical processes in the brain. Free will and our sense of agency are illusions.

The life sciences, in the interest of scientific rigor, have commonly attempted to describe and explain life and its evolution as a combination of mechanism, chance, and a competition for survival, territory, and reproductive advantage. This story provided a pseudoscientific justification for colonial imperialism, racial domination, rapacious capitalism, and market fundamentalism.

The mathematical models favored by contemporary economists are based on an assumption of the utility-maximizing economic man defined by a single-minded competitive pursuit of individual financial advantage. By the reckoning of the standard Sacred Money and Markets story, a relentless drive for individual financial advantage is not only foundational to our human nature; it is also the primary and essential driver of human progress and prosperity.

We do not lack for examples of the human capacity for individualistic greed, competitive advantage, and disregard for the well-being of others. The story that this capacity defines our human nature, however, fails to note that these are actually defining characteristics of the psychopath or sociopath—the deeply psychologically and morally impaired who present serious threats to society. Caring and sharing are the defining traits of morally and emotionally mature humans. These traits represent our true nature and are essential to the health of human society.

The most compelling challenge to the Grand Machine story actually comes from within science itself. The findings of quantum physics point to a deeper reality that is far from purely mechanistic. Indeed, these findings reveal that what we experience as solid matter is largely an illusion. Even the most seemingly solid objects are comprised mostly of empty space sparsely populated by oddly entangled particles—some of which, depending on the observer, may act like waves.

Such findings are so at odds with our normal human experience of material reality as to have real meaning only to the most advanced scientists and mathematicians with an ability to think in pure abstractions. For most of us, these revelations suggest no readily evident implications—moral or otherwise—for how we engage the world of our daily experience. We therefore enclose them in a separate mental space reserved for curious but largely irrelevant facts.

A common, often unconscious, public takeaway from science continues to be the Grand Machine story of mechanistic reductionism, denial of con-

scious agency, and economic theories grounded in a social Darwinist view of our human nature. Although rarely explicitly articulated or examined in public discourse, these story elements remain foundational to economic theory and have significant influence on many of the disciplines around which we organize human knowledge and formal education. The underlying intellectual frame strips our existence of meaning and purpose, undermines our sense of moral responsibility for one another and nature, and suggests that we either dominate nature and other humans or become victims of their domination.

Individualistic competition, consumerism, and pursuit of material gratification become a natural emotional and intellectual response to and distraction from the terrifying loneliness and despair of an otherwise meaningless existence in a hostile and uncaring cosmos. Propagandists in the employ of Wall Street interests step in with their Sacred Money and Markets story to assure us that shopping and competition for money and financial status can fill our need for meaning, purpose, and relationships. These pursuits, however, do not—and cannot—fulfill these needs. The result is confusion, alienation, and often anger.

The social Darwinist ideas once used explicitly to justify political conservatism, imperialism, and racism and to discourage institutional reform now enjoy little explicit public support. They remain, however, the bedrock of economic theory's definition of our human nature and the benefits of unrestrained "free" market competition.

This frame effectively strips away the possibility of deeply democratic communities that self-organize around mutual caring relationships. This leaves only two options: centralized public authority and/or the market. Both, in our current context, are subject to control by financial interests that value people and nature only for their market price and are subject to debilitating corruption in the absence of individual moral responsibility—a quality that by a fundamental assumption of economic theory is contrary to our human nature.

Although the Grand Machine and Distant Patriarch stories present sharply contrasting perspectives, in subtle and not so subtle ways, elements of both lend support to three self-destructive characteristics of contemporary society: a divisive individualism that creates an illusion of freedom, a utilitarian view of life, and a concentration of institutional power.



### THE MYSTICAL UNITY

The Mystical Unity story has ancient roots in the mystical traditions of most all the world's religions. It is most commonly and explicitly associated with Buddhism. In the classic expression of this story, what we experience as material reality, including our experience of ourselves as material beings, is actually an illusion generated by the human ego—an illusion that separates us from the reality of the eternal One. Teachers in the Mystical Unity tradition generally focus on a first-person experience of awakening through meditation to the infinite love and peace that lie beyond the perceived world of our daily experience.

The Mystical Unity story is consonant with the deepest human spiritual experience. Quantum physics in large measure affirms its assertion that all being is interconnected and that matter is an illusion. The tradition's recognition that all beings are inextricably connected; that the harm we do to others, we do as well to ourselves; and that the veil of illusion is a source of suffering and violence are all profound insights foundational to our common future. Its idea that we are in fact deeply interconnected fulfills our deep need for a sense of belonging.

In contrast to the Distant Patriarch and Grand Machine stories, there is no clearly discernable way in which the Mystical Unity story lends legitimacy to the institutions responsible for extreme systemic violence against people and nature. Its practitioners may become complicit, however, in the failure to confront and address the violence for which dysfunctional institutions are responsible.

Typically, practitioners of Mystical Unity teach that the path to an end to violence in society is through individual meditative practice to suppress and transcend the individual ego. With one notable exception, they are generally silent on the cultural and institutional sources of the violence that define

our current human crisis.

This exception is their inclination to condemn criticism of the institutions that drive our collective human violence against life on the ground that criticism reinforces the perception of separation and constitutes an act of violence against and denial of the essential goodness of the individuals associated with these institutions.

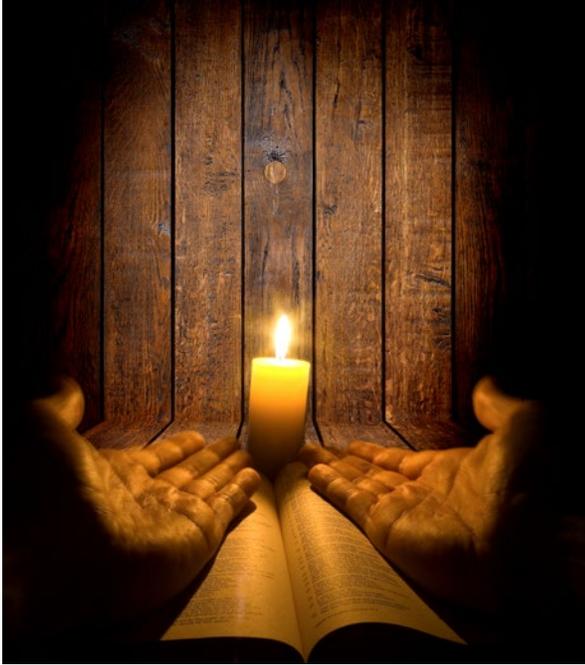
Change is afoot. There are leaders within the Mystical Unity community who point to a different interpretation of the implications of its framing story. As described by Kurt Johnson and David Ord in *The Coming Interspiritual Age* (p. 206), the call of these less-common leaders is not to “wake up and detach.” Rather it is to “wake up and engage” through spiritual activism to create a living world that embodies recognition of the unity of all of Creation. International Buddhist leader and activist Sulak Sivaraksa advocates specific recognition within Buddhist spiritual and social teaching of the ways in which major institutions, most notably transnational corporations, encourage and reward violence against life.

### OUR STORIES MATTER

Most people instantly recognize the three basic stories, though rather few have given serious thought to the implications for how we relate to the world. Some readers protest that the versions of the three stories as I have framed them above are too limiting and ignore their varied interpretations. True enough. None of the three stories, however, regardless of interpretation, provides either a credible explanation for the creative complexity of reality as now revealed by science, or a suitable guide to a viable human future.

In the midst of the cacophony of competing stories in all their many variations, only one story stands out from the rest with sufficient clarity to guide us to our common future. It is the idolatrous Sacred Money and Markets story actively promoted and constantly repeated by corporate sponsored media and most academic economists. The result is our common embrace of an economy that counts the destruction of life to make money as progress.

Change begins with a story of the wonder and beauty of life and the cosmos so compelling as to displace in the public mind the story of Sacred Money and Markets. Think of it as a next installment in the story of our stories series.



## The Story of Our Stories

**P**rophets, sages, and wisdom keepers of all times and traditions have discerned a spiritual order and unity in Creation that defies verbal description. Necessarily, they had to communicate their insights through easily understood stories and familiar images. As these stories and images pass from generation to generation, it is almost inevitable that subsequent generations forget that the original stories and images were metaphorical—not literal.

When the literal interpretation of a metaphorical story serves to affirm existing power relationships, power holders are prone to encourage this forgetfulness and to suppress any variants that point to the possibility of a more equitable distribution of power.

### INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

The earliest peoples were hunter-gatherers who lived solely by harvesting the gifts of nature. It was natural that they worship and study the ways of the sacred Earth Mother they acknowledged as the source of their birth and nurture. Contemporary peoples who identify as indigenous generally continue to live close to nature and to honor Earth Mother as the most sacred of beings. In their experience, Earth is clearly and self-evidently alive, as are all its

components and inhabitants. Their sacred stories express their understanding of reality as they experience it. Many tribes confer special status on the keepers of these stories and on those who possess special abilities to mediate the tribe's relationship with the spirit world.

### RELIGION

With time, human societies took up settled cultivation and formed into larger and more stratified forms of social organization. The metaphors by which these early agricultural societies understood and described the spirit world evolved accordingly. Earthly rulers found it useful to present themselves as representatives, even incarnations, of the deities who ruled the spirit world.

Patriarchal societies favored masculine metaphors and worshiped masculine deities. Matrilineal societies favored feminine metaphors and worshiped feminine deities. More gender-balanced societies worshiped both a Sky Father and an Earth Mother.

The Abrahamic faiths—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—emerged within male-dominated societies in which patriarchs were familiar figures. Quite naturally, they favored the transcendent Sky Father over the immanent Earth Mother and dismissed goddess worship as primitive and pagan. Their priestly classes secured their own authority by declaring certain ancient texts to be the word of God and subject to their exclusive interpretation. The world divided into a multitude of institutionalized religious sects and subjects prone to engage in a deadly competition for followers based on a premise that “My God is the only true God.”

### THE MYSTICS

Each of the Abrahamic faiths had its mystics who discerned Creation as the material manifestation of an undifferentiated spiritual unity rather than the handiwork of an aging patriarch who lives apart from that which he creates. Their cosmologies bore more than passing resemblance to those of the mystics of many religious traditions, including Buddhism and Hinduism. They enjoyed much stronger institutional support in Asian cultures that retained a strong sense of connection between people and nature as co-equal partners in a community of life, than in Western cultures that emphasized a human separation from nature.

## SCIENCE

Newtonian science emerged as a counter to religion's insistence on scripture as the only valid source of knowledge of the nature and workings of Creation. Early scientists recognized that such a narrow religious stance posed a serious barrier to the advancement of human knowledge.

To differentiate themselves from religion and secure their own authority, scientists chose to embrace a narrowly defined scientific method characterized by disciplined observation, quantification, mathematical models, and an insistence that material mechanism holds the only acceptable explanation for observed phenomena. This discipline brought rigor to the search for order in the cosmos and produced advances in knowledge that lifted human understanding and technological possibility to previously unimagined levels.

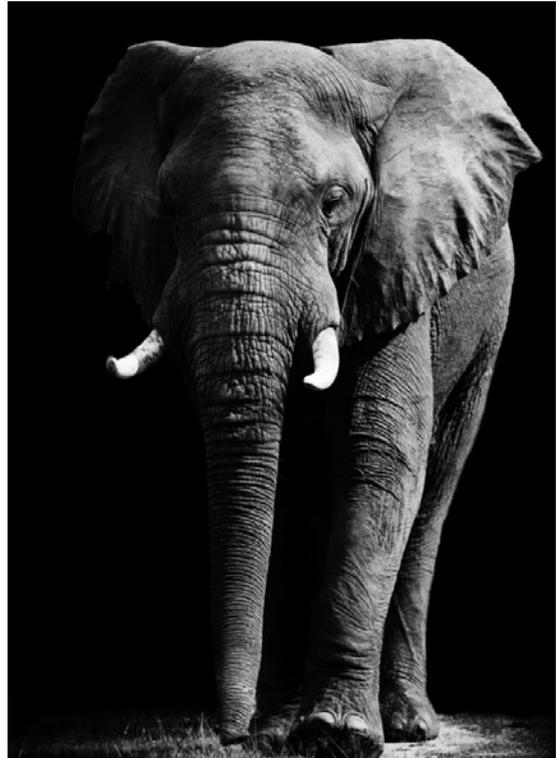
Unfortunately, much as the priestly classes of institutionalized Western religions forgot that the patriarch was a metaphor, the gatekeepers of science eventually forgot that the denial of agency and free will was an intentional methodological choice, not a finding. To this day, despite extraordinary advances in the physical, biological, and brain sciences, most scientists attempt to explain observed data within the frame of a mechanistic, reductionist story that recognizes and affirms only the material dimension of a larger reality.

There are many unintended cultural consequences of the choice to view all of reality through this mental lens. If all of reality is a mechanism playing out a destiny predetermined by some combination of the design and arrangement of its parts and random chance, then human free will (agency) is an illusion. This absolves us of responsibility for our actions and for the consequences of our actions both for other humans and for living Earth. Viewing the world through the lens of mechanism and pure chance, we fail to recognize—even actively deny—life's extraordinary capacity for intelligent self-direction through distributed self-directing local, intelligent agency.

The most advanced observations from quantum physics and the life sciences are very difficult to explain through the confining lens of the Grand Machine story. To the contrary, these observations suggest an extraordinary capacity for forms of self-organization that combine mechanism, chance, and expressions of intelligent self-direction.

This creates a frame for a deeply democratic vision

of radically localized and distributed political and economic power. Combined with recognition of our individual and collective dependence on—and responsibility for sustaining—the health and vitality of Earth as a living community of life, we can recognize and accept our responsibility to replace an economy that works in opposition to Earth's natural forces with an economy that works in co-productive partnership with these forces.



## Six Blind Men and an Elephant

**R**eflecting on the relationship between these three foundational and seemingly mutually exclusive sacred stories brings to mind the parable of the six blind men attempting to discern the nature of an elephant. The first feels its side and proclaims, “An elephant is like a wall.” The second touches its tusk and counters, “No, it is like a spear.” The third feels the trunk and says, “Truly it is like a snake.” The fourth rubs a leg and insists, “An elephant is like a tree.” The fifth feels its ear and pronounces it to be “Like a fan.” The sixth

Biologists have only begun to identify and catalogue the vast variety of these microorganisms, let alone understand their varied functions and the methods of their self-organization, adaptation, and co-evolution.

grasps the tail and says “Nonsense, an elephant is like a rope.”

### **HUMANS DISCERNING THE COSMOS**

Each of the blind men discerns a piece of a larger truth easily misinterpreted when taken out of its larger context. Only by sharing and synthesizing their individual insights do the blind men have any prospect of accurately describing the external qualities of the elephant. It is also telling that their descriptions, framed in terms of mostly physical metaphors, give no hint of recognition of the internal essence of the elephant as an intelligent living being of complex emotions and many talents.

In a way, the blind men are like scientists who try to understand the totality of Creation from within narrowly defined disciplinary boxes and a conceptual frame that excludes conscious intelligent agency.

### **UNRESOLVED MYSTERIES**

The quest to understand a complex, dynamically evolving cosmos so vast and mysterious as to defy human comprehension has challenged our ancestors for millennia. To this day, even with all our scientific advances, the deepest mysteries of the cosmos continue to elude us. Indeed, perhaps the most important recent findings in science are those that reveal how little even our most brilliant scientists yet understand.

For example, science now concludes that the observable cosmos contains hundreds of billions of galaxies, each with hundreds of billions of stars, which in their totality account for only 4.9 percent of the calculated mass of the universe. Beyond vague and untested theories about dark matter and dark energy, scientists have no idea what constitutes the other 95.1 percent—assuming the calculations of mass based on current understanding are correct.

Until recently, science assumed that DNA provides a mechanistic explanation for the physical growth of living organisms from inception to maturity—and dictates much, if not all, of their behavior. Some scientists suggest, to the contrary, that this frame is too mechanistic and that genetic codes cannot alone explain the intricate variations in the design, function, and behavior of living beings. Far from being purely mechanistic, they suggest that the function of DNA may be purposeful and goal oriented.

Until very recently, scientists assumed that 98 percent of human DNA was “junk,” because they could not associate it with specific essential functions. Recent studies suggest that the “junk” DNA may actually have essential functions. A few of the most daring scientists suggest that these functions might possibly include the preservation of ancestral memories.

Biologists have traditionally focused on the classification and study of individual species, with limited attention to the dynamic organization and unfolding resilience and adaptation of the larger communities within which these species evolved.

This is changing. A growing frontier of biology is the in-depth study of life’s organization into complex, self-organizing living communities. Among the most fascinating of these communities are those populated by invisible microbial life essential to human health and well-being.

We know that there are more microorganisms (bacteria, fungi, algae, protozoa, and nematodes) in a teaspoon of healthy living soil than there are people on Earth. Each individual and species is engaged in active, interdependent, self-directing exchange essential to the health and fertility of the soils that grow our food.

Biologists have only begun to identify and catalogue the vast variety of these microorganisms, let alone understand their varied functions and the methods of their self-organization, adaptation, and co-evolution. It is much the same for the microorganisms that live in the human body and are essen-

tial to our health and well-being.

In these many ways and more, science is revealing a cosmos with a wondrous complexity and capacity for creative self-organization far beyond our previous human understanding. This carries profound implications for how we think about our bodies, our relationship to nature, the economy, and our role in Creation.

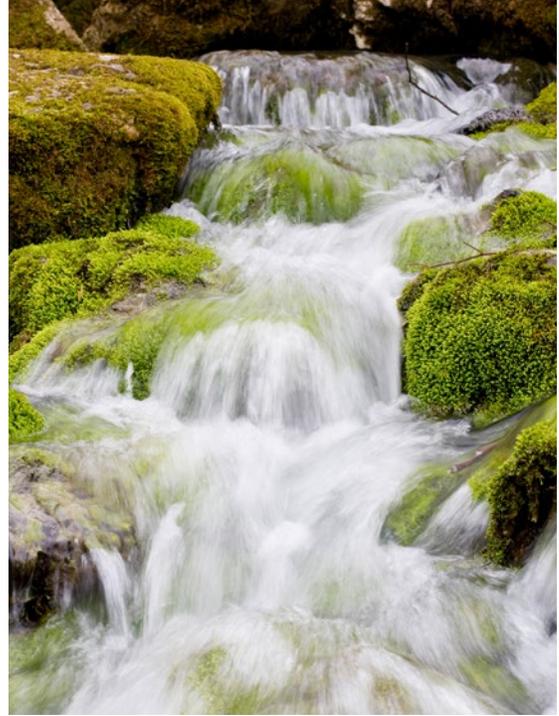
### TIME FOR AN UPDATE

Within little more than the lifespan of my generation, explosive human population growth and breathtaking advances in human knowledge and technology have changed the world almost beyond recognition. We now have the ability to peer far into space and observe the behavior of subatomic particles and the inner processes of individual living cells. We can look back from space to view Earth as a wondrously self-organizing, resilient, adaptive living being.

With the extraordinary tools now available, science discerns and describes in magnificent detail the dynamic processes underlying the unfolding of the cosmos and the evolution of life on Earth toward ever-greater complexity, beauty, awareness, and possibility. By the data of science, the evolution of the cosmos and Earth resemble a seemingly inert seed bursting forth to express itself as a flowering tree far more than it resembles a mechanical clockwork playing out the tension in its spring.

Within physics, the relational models of quantum physics have largely transcended the mechanistic models of Newton. In general, the metaphor of organism seems far more apt than the metaphor of mechanism as the proper lens through which to view reality. Yet science generally holds to the metaphor of mechanism in its public communication.

A growing number of people and groups now recognize the need for a New Story that draws from many sources of human understanding, brings together the insights of both religion and science, and addresses the distinctive needs and realities of our time. Through their individual and collective efforts a New Story is emerging. It has yet to acquire a generally accepted name. For the moment, let's call it the Living Universe story—what I've referred to in previous versions of this essay as the Integral Spirit story.



## The Living Universe

**T**hose of us with sight may find the blind men's conjectures about the elephant amusing. We can comprehend the visual whole of the elephant far better than did the blind men. If we stop at the visual image of the purely physical, however, we still miss the elephant's internal essence.

The observations of science have significantly advanced our understanding of the physical structures and processes of Creation. To grasp the deeper essence of what we experience and observe through our physical senses, however, we must join the observations of science with the insights of the mystics who experience Creation as a manifestation of Spirit and of the religious prophets who discern this manifestation as a product of purposeful agency. The contributions of each are essential to our full understanding of the wonder and genius of Creation.

Put it all together and we begin to discern a story of a Living Universe. The story begins with a unitary spirit without physical form that chose to manifest through a self-organizing process of trial-and-error learning involving elements of order, chaos, and distributed intelligent agency.

As I will demonstrate later in this essay, it is a story that evokes a radical vision of democratic possibility. It as well presents a frontal challenge to

the legitimacy and efficacy of human institutions—public and private—that monopolize and centralize power and decision-making in the hands of the few to assert dominion over the many in a war against nature.

### THE STORY IN MY HEART

We may each have our specific interpretations of the story. As it comes together for me, all of Creation is the manifestation of a spiritual consciousness seeking to know itself through an unfolding creative journey of self-discovery. All things—stars, planets, humans, animals, plants, rocks, and rivers are manifestations of the spirit. Each is both product and agent; each has its place and function in the cosmic journey of the Living Universe as we experience it today.

In his expression of his Jewish faith, Jesus taught, “The Kingdom is within.” Muhammad taught, “Wherever you turn, there is the Face of Allah.”

Within this frame, as I will elaborate below, we humans, and all beings, are at once both physical expressions and agents of the spirit. We humans are distinctive among all Earth’s living species for our extraordinary capacity for self-reflective choice, suggesting that our special role may be to serve as instruments through which the meta-consciousness observes and reflects upon itself and its journey.

The ego and the illusion of separation are not some grand cosmic mistake. They are essential to the creative process. Far from being exclusive to a distant separate being—with the possible exception of humans—intelligent agency is pervasive in its varied forms and is a primary source of the creative power of the whole. Perhaps most important of all, as indigenous peoples teach us, Earth is our Sacred Mother, the source of our birth and nurture. We must love and care for her as she loves and cares for us.

In private conversations, I find the Living Universe story is largely consistent with the private—if rarely spoken—cosmology of many scientists, members of varied faiths, and people who define themselves as spiritual, but not necessarily religious. I have come to suspect that it lives in every human heart—no matter how deeply suppressed it may be.

### DIVINE PURPOSE

The work of framing a Living Universe story is

### Different Stories, Different Worldviews

Four contrasting sacred stories convey very different understandings regarding relationships, agency, and meaning.

**1. Distant Patriarch:** My most important relationship is to a distant God who is Creation’s sole source of agency and meaning.

**2. Grand Machine:** I exist in a mechanistically interconnected cosmos devoid of agency and possessing no purpose or meaning.

**3. Mystical Unity:** Relationships, agency, and meaning are all artifacts of the illusion of separation; I am one with the timeless eternal One.

**4. Living Universe:** I am an intelligent, self-directing participant in a conscious, interconnected self-organizing cosmos on a journey of self-discovery toward ever-greater complexity, beauty, awareness, and possibility.

grounded in the premise that we come to fully know the nature, purpose, and intention of divine reality—and our place within it—through a combination of personal experience, systematic observation of the spirit’s physical manifestation (science), and the inner revelations of religion and contemplative practice (prayer and meditation). No one of these sources of understanding is adequate in itself.

The Living Universe story embraces spirit as both immanent and transcendent, a concept that religious scholars refer to as panentheism. Within this frame, Earth and the material universe of human experience are more than the spirit’s creation. The spirit is in the world and the world is in the spirit. All of Creation is a sacred and ultimately unified expression of an eternal and intimately present divine will.

In a profound sense, the Living Universe story affirms the idea that the complex, pervasive, and localized choice-making processes at work in the

unfolding of Creation occur within the mind of the spirit. Such a formulation, however, can obscure and diminish our appreciation of the true genius and wonder of how and why the spirit might choose to manifest through individual agents.

Within the Living Universe frame, the ego—our experience of our unique identity—is not some form of cosmic error or dysfunction as implied by the most familiar version of the Mystical Unity story. Rather, it is essential to the exercise of our agency as contributors to the spirit’s journey of self-discovery. As Malcolm Hollick observes in *The Science of Oneness*, “[C]onsciousness requires an object of which to be conscious. I, the subject, am only conscious when there is something, an object, of which I am aware.”

There is no me without an “other” and therefore no self-awareness, no self-discovery. I know myself only by awareness of my relationship to the “not me.” Without the separation, there is only the One. For the One to be aware of Itself, it had to create an Other. The resulting differentiation that characterizes the spirit’s conscious and material manifestations does not negate the fact of the underlying Unity; rather it reveals the Unity’s true magnificence.

To become fully functioning as human individuals and societies, we must achieve an awareness that aligns with the wisdom and intention of the spirit that manifests through us. This awareness allows us to recognize and honor both our oneness and our individuality. It helps us achieve spiritual understanding, accept responsibility for the consequences of our personal choices, and create an economy grounded in material reality and sound moral principles.

## ORIGINAL INSTRUCTIONS

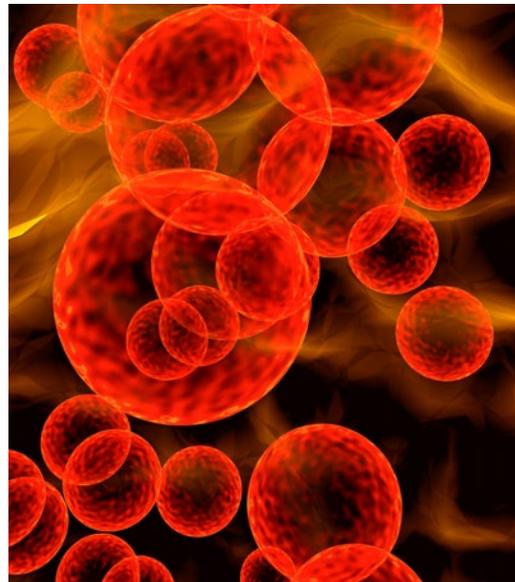
Traditional indigenous wisdom keepers speak of the Creator’s Original Instructions to humans to get along with one another and nature. The Living Universe story’s view of our true human nature embraces this wisdom and connects it with the findings of contemporary brain science that the human brain evolved to reward cooperation, service, and compassion. Science thus affirms that the Original Instructions are integral to our human nature.

Systems biologists find that the healthy function of any living system depends on highly complex and sophisticated forms of collaboration. Most all living organisms exist, thrive, and coevolve only within living communities engaged in continuous synergistic

sharing and exchange that, from a big-picture perspective, is fundamentally cooperative. It seems the Original Instructions apply to and manifest through the whole of life.

It does seem odd that it has taken science so long to discover the evident truth affirmed by our daily experience that caring relationships are an essential foundation of the healthy human families and communities that are in turn essential to our individual health and happiness. Extreme individualism, greed, and violence are pathological; their expression indicates physical, developmental, cultural, and/or institutional system failure.

Creation has given us the gift of an extraordinary capacity for willful agency. We properly use that agency with a sense of creative responsibility to and for the whole—not as a license for individualistic excess.



## Life’s Creative Power

**S**cience tells us that just as the cosmos is comprised of many trillions of stars, each star is in turn comprised of an unimaginably vast number of quantum particles, atoms, and molecules.

All are in constant interaction through processes that are sometimes chaotic, violent, and entropic as in the burning of an individual star. The universe as a whole, however, evolves toward ever-greater complexity, beauty, possibility, and awareness—the

The result is a constantly regenerating physical being with a capacity for extraordinary feats of physical grace and intellectual acuity far beyond the capability—and presumably the imagination—of any individual cell or microorganism.

---

exact opposite of the Grand Machine story of a universe winding down. Organisms and the communities they create in concert with what we perceive to be purely physical processes are even more complex and have an even greater capacity for adaptation, resilience, and creativity—including in response to mass extinction events.

Despite the extraordinary advances in our understanding of these complex dynamics and processes, we still confront the dilemma faced by the mystics who sought to describe a reality that lies beyond the discernment of our physical senses. The Living Universe story comes a good deal closer, however, to capturing the grandeur, complexity, and mystery of Creation than the now woefully inadequate stories around which we currently organize ourselves as contemporary societies. It also provides clues to the nature of the processes underlying Creation's extraordinary capacity for creative innovation.

### **DISTRIBUTED AGENCY**

A well-established finding in the field of group dynamics is that team decision-making is more creative and effective in dealing with complex problems than individual decision-making. The theory of distributed intelligence suggests that multiple interlinked minds have capabilities inherently greater than those of a single mind. For a great many tasks, an interlinked cluster of personal computers can be more efficient and more powerful than a single supercomputer. This same creative potential of interconnected agents acting together as self-directing systems expresses itself throughout nature as foundational to the creative process.

Like you, I am but one of the many trillions of organisms that comprise the biosphere, Earth's exquisitely complex, resilient, and continuously evolving community of life. My body is a complex living community in its own right—my most intimate example of the capacity of distributed intelligence for creative

self-organization.

Each human body is comprised of tens of trillions of individual choice-making cells, each engaged in managing and maintaining its own health and integrity under changing and often stressful circumstances. These cells include the tens of trillions of cells that comprise the body's vital organs and physical structure, plus an even greater number of nonhuman microorganisms that inhabit our skin, genital area, mouth, and intestines and are essential to our health and well-being.

Each cell functions as a member of a self-regulating community that maintains the health and integrity of the body to the best of its ability—even under conditions of extreme stress and deprivation. Together these cells routinely fight off a vast variety of invasive viruses, cancer cells, and pathogenic bacteria that pose potential threats to the health and integrity of the whole. They adapt to changing temperatures and to variations in the body's intake of food and water. They heal damaged tissues, collect and provide essential sensory data to the body's conscious mind, and mobilize instantly to respond to external threats and emergencies, in some instances even before the conscious mind recognizes them.

All the while, these trillions of cells continuously replace themselves, with no loss of the integrity of the body and its function. The cells lining the human stomach replace themselves every five days. The surface of the skin regenerates every 14 days. Red blood cells renew approximately every 120 days.

The result is a constantly regenerating physical being with a capacity for extraordinary feats of physical grace and intellectual acuity far beyond the capability—and presumably the imagination—of any individual cell or microorganism.

Most of this miraculous coordination occurs far below the level of conscious awareness and independent of direct intervention or direction from the brain and central nervous system. So long as I make the proper conscious choices to provide the

# Earth can live without us. We cannot live without Earth.

essentials of nutrition, hydration, rest, and exercise, my cells fulfill their responsibilities to maintain my body's healthy function without specific instructions from any central decision maker of which I am aware or that science has identified.

Cells can and do go rogue, with terrible consequences. Cancer is an example. When cells go rogue and pose a threat to the whole, the healthy cells self-organize to eliminate them. If the community is unable to eliminate the rogue cells, the community of cells that expresses as that particular human dies.

We might take this as a warning. We humans are behaving as rogue cells with the potential to destroy Earth's community of life, the higher-level living body on which our own existence depends. Of course, there may be no need for Earth to mobilize to this end. Through human contributions to climate change and the appearance and rapid spread of deadly new infectious diseases, it appears that we are mobilizing to eliminate ourselves.

Earth can live without us. We cannot live without Earth.

## CONSCIOUS INTELLIGENCE

Does choice-making at the cellular level—or even the level of quantum particles—involve some form of conscious intelligence? The Distant Patriarch story offers no opinion, suggesting only that whatever choices may be involved, they are by the will of God. The Grand Machine story says no, the processes are solely the result of a combination of mechanism and chance. As commonly understood, the Mystical Unity story suggests that the question is largely irrelevant. The Living Universe story does not offer a definitive answer, but suggests that the most credible assumption is that distributed intelligence and individual choice are pervasive throughout Creation.

Certainly, intelligent choice-making is a hallmark of living organisms, including at the cellular level. Perhaps conscious choice exists in some lesser form within matter even down to the level of the individual quantum particle. Of course, if a quantum particle or individual cell has some form of consciousness, it is not likely a form of consciousness in any way familiar to the human mind.

So what is our individual human relationship to the possible meta-consciousness of the whole? Perhaps the relationship between the individual cells of my body and my conscious mind provides some clue.

I know my body's cells exist, so I may consciously care about their good health, because I know that my own health depends on their health. Even if I had the capacity to consciously discern the presence of a single cell in my body, I could not possibly track and care for each of the tens of trillions of cells of which my body is comprised. There is good reason that much of my body's capacity for intelligent choice resides at the cellular level. It frees my body's meta-consciousness—as distinct from an individual cellular and/or individual organ consciousness—to concentrate on managing my relationship to the complex dynamic world beyond my skin.

Scale this logic up to the cosmic level. If we assume some form of cosmic meta-consciousness, it is unlikely it could attend to all the trillions of celestial entities that comprise it—just as I cannot attend to all the cells of my body.

This is not to suggest that the assumed cosmic meta-consciousness is indifferent to our human existence. The meta-consciousness may care with the love that some believe to be the binding force of the universe. In the deepest sense, it likely does possess an awareness and concern for our individual well-being—but not in the way suggested by the traditional Distant Patriarch story.

Here is where things get truly interesting. By the frame of the Living Universe story, we are choice-making manifestations of the spirit. We are thereby instruments of both its awareness and its agency. This suggests that the voice that may reply to my conscious mind in the course of meditation or prayer is both my voice and the voice of the spirit expressing through me. My appeal to God for relief from my suffering is thus in effect an appeal to myself to act with wisdom and self-awareness—ever mindful of my responsibility for myself as well as for the larger evolving community of which I am a part.

Among all the spirit's many agents, it seems we humans possess a capacity to choose and shape our own future with conscious intent beyond that

of any other living species. Because of our dominant presence, our choices affect the well-being of virtually every other member of the community of life on which we in turn depend. Our own future depends on accepting responsibility to use our distinctive capacity wisely to the benefit of all.



## A Living Earth Community

**E**arth's biosphere, comprised of trillions of individual choice-making organisms, is orders of magnitude more extraordinary even than the human body in its demonstration of the creative power of distributed intelligence. Acting in concert, Earth's countless and magnificently varied organisms continuously capture and share energy, water, and nutrients in interaction with Earth's physical systems to regenerate Earth's soils, rivers, aquifers, fisheries, forests, grasslands, and much more. All the while, they maintain a climatic balance and atmosphere distinctively suited to the needs of all the community's individual members.

As indigenous people have long discerned and science has recently affirmed, most living organisms, no matter how small and seemingly inconsequen-

tial, earn their own living by making some beneficial, even essential contribution to maintaining the health, resilience, and creative potential of the whole. How this came to be is an extraordinary story in its own right.

### TO MAKE A HUMAN FROM SCRATCH

To paraphrase Carl Sagan: If you wish to make a human from scratch you must first invent the universe.

By the current estimate of science, some 13.8 billion years ago the cosmos exploded into being. By fortunate coincidence, it had exactly the right physical constants to enable the original particles to form into complex atoms and molecules. These, in turn, formed into trillions of stars, many of which birthed and provided a sustained energy source for the planets that circle them. By further fortunate coincidence, at least one of these trillions of planets possessed exactly the right conditions for the emergence of simple living organisms. Scientists now estimate that there may be as many as 40 billion habitable Earth-size planets in the galaxy. Life has likely emerged on others. We are only certain, however, that it has emerged on one.

Over the 3.8 billion years since life gained a foothold on Earth, the first living organisms and their descendants formed into living communities engaged in a continuing process of experimentation, testing, and learning. Despite the setbacks of catastrophic mass extinction events, the overall trajectory is toward increasing diversity, complexity, and capacity for adaptation, resilience, and creativity. Together they turned Earth into a living jewel in space.

Along the way, acting as a community in concert with Earth's physical structures and forces, they filtered excess carbon and a vast variety of toxins from Earth's air, waters, and soils and sequestered them deep underground. In so doing—whether by fortuitous chance or some deep cosmic intention—they created environmental conditions ideally suited to the needs of a species with a capacity for conscious, creative, self-reflective choice far beyond any other.

### FOR LACK OF AN AUTHENTIC SACRED STORY

Misled by the perceptual distortions of a cultural trance induced by stories that no longer serve, we

“modern” humans forgot the fundamental truth that we are living beings born of and nurtured by our sacred Earth Mother.

We are conditioned by a flawed story to value money more than life. In the interest of a financial gain and in a misguided effort to suppress and bend nature to our will, we devote our best minds and most advanced technologies to accelerating the extraction of carbon and toxins sequestered in the bowels of Earth and releasing them back into Earth’s atmosphere, water, and soil. We limit our concern for other species to the few we find cute or profitable to exploit with no thought of cost to the larger community on which we depend but toward which we feel no responsibility.

At each step, we celebrate our perceived progress toward greater prosperity even as we disrupt and deplete the generative systems of Earth’s living body, reduce the majority of humans to lives of growing desperation, and compromise the future of our children. If this makes economic sense, then economics makes no sense.

The living Earth has an extraordinary capacity to recover from extreme shocks. It will most likely recover from whatever shock we humans impose, short of nuclear annihilation of Earth’s capacity to support life. Full recovery, however, could take millions of years and likely would include elimination of humans.

This is all the more tragic, because it is unnecessary and is largely the consequence of our lack of an authentic shared sacred story to guide our way that is consistent with our existing knowledge and adequate to the needs of our time.

### **STEP TO SPECIES MATURITY**

Our species, *Homo sapiens sapiens*, has been around for only about 200,000 years. In our early years, we honored the Earth Mother who birthed us. As hunter-gatherers, we accepted and adapted to our total dependence on Her for our care and nurture. This began to change with the practice of settled agriculture more than 10,000 years ago.

Over the past 400 years, we have acquired, through the discoveries of modern science, near god-like powers to control and manipulate our world. Much like the experience of adolescence, our species’ ability to reshape our world has raced ahead of our capacity for wisdom and emotional maturity. With a naïve sense of invincibility, we act as

a species to test the limits of our newfound capabilities with reckless abandon. As adolescents so often do, we pose a grave threat both to ourselves and to those around us—in this instance, to the whole of Earth’s biosphere.

The time has arrived to navigate the transition to what Thomas Berry, cosmologist Brian Swimme, and spiritual ecologist Mary Evelyn Tucker call the Ecozoic Era and accept our adult responsibility to and for the whole.

### **THE HUMAN RELATIONSHIP TO A LIVING EARTH**

In *The Universe Story*, Berry and Swimme note that navigating our passage to an Ecozoic Era requires a fundamental shift in the human relationship to Earth grounded in four foundational insights:

1. *“The universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects.”* (p. 243)
2. *“The Earth is so integral in the unity of its functioning that every aspect of the Earth is affected by what happens to any component member of the community. Because of its organic quality, Earth cannot survive in fragments....The integral functioning of the planet must be preserved.”* (p. 243)
3. *“Earth is a one-time endowment....Although the Earth is resilient and has extensive powers of renewal, it also has a finite and nonrenewable aspect.”* (pp. 246-7)
4. *“[O]ur human economy is derivative from the Earth economy. To glory in a rising Gross Domestic Product with an irreversibly declining Earth Product is an economic absurdity.”* (p. 256).

These are essential elements of a New Story for a New Economy grounded in a new understanding of our relationship to the living Earth Community. As Berry elaborates in an earlier lecture:

*“Earth is primary and humans are derivative.... The Earth economy can survive the loss of its human component, but there is no way the human economy can survive and prosper apart from the Earth economy....There is no such thing as a human community in any manner separate from the Earth community. The human community and the natural world will go into the future as a single integral community or we will both experience disaster on the way. However differentiated in its modes of expression, there is only one Earth com-*

*munity—one economic order, one health system, one moral order, one world of the sacred.” [Thomas Berry, “The Ecozoic Era”]*

Any discussion of a New Economy properly begins with the obvious truth: Without nature, there are no people. The Living Universe and Earth Community provide the underlying frame for the New Story for a New Economy.



## A Living Earth Community Economy

**S**cientists debate whether Earth conforms to all the elements of the scientific definition of a living organism. I honor their intellectual rigor and their invaluable contribution to our ever-deepening understanding of how life organizes. I am not inclined, however, to wait for them to come to terms with the need to update their own story.

For those of us engaged in defining and bringing forth a New Economy based on a new human relationship to Earth, there is compelling practical reason to acknowledge Earth as a living superor-

ganism—a self-organizing, self-regulating, continuously adapting, evolving community of life on whose health and well-being our own health and well-being depend—now and forevermore. Indeed, we must look to the structures and processes of Earth’s community of life as a model for the living human economy to which we must now transition. [Note that I use the terms New Economy and Living Earth Community Economy interchangeably.]

### TO DO AS NATURE DOES

Life exists and evolves only as a diverse community. Continuously interacting to optimize the capture, organization, and sharing of Earth’s energy, water, and nutrients, Earth’s countless trillions of organisms create and maintain the conditions essential to the whole of Earth’s community of life on which they each in turn depend.

Although the biosphere self-organizes on a global scale and is subject to Earth’s geologic forces, the locus of decision-making is everywhere local. The dynamic consequences of local choice-making play out through the biosphere’s structure and create global dynamics that in turn shape local choice making. There is, however, no central decision maker or control mechanism.

The most dynamic and vibrantly healthy biosystems are those with a diversity of species functioning as cooperative, self-organizing communities. No species dominates to the exclusion of others, which would threaten the health and well-being of the whole and ultimately, the health and well-being—even survival—of the dominant species.

The introduction of a new and particularly aggressive species not adapted to a bio-community may upset the established balance. Eventually, either the community will mobilize to constrain the errant species or that species will erode the conditions essential to its own survival and expire—but likely at a terrible cost to the rest of the community.

Sometimes an otherwise beneficial species turns rogue even within a biosystem to which it has previously adapted. We humans are a prime example.

Throughout the 5,000 years of recorded human history, there are numerous examples of imperial civilizations that destroyed themselves because, in their quest for dominance, they depleted the natural systems within their territorial domain to the extent that those systems could no longer support the ex-



### **An Extraordinary Capacity to Self-Organize**

Earth's biosphere self-organizes with no apparent equivalent of the institutions of money, markets, corporations, or governments. These institutions are entirely human inventions created to facilitate and shape exchange with one another and nature.

We can design them to exploit life for private financial gain or to serve life for the good of all. We currently have it terribly wrong. In *Agenda for a New Economy: From Phantom Wealth to Real Wealth (2nd edition)* I deal in depth with how they can be restructured to serve life.

isting human population. It is, however, only within the past hundred years that growth in human numbers, per capita material consumption, reliance on sequestered carbon for energy, and industrial agriculture have combined to pose a threat to the

viability of Earth's entire biosphere and therefore to the human species.

Our future depends on learning to organize in co-productive partnership with Earth's biosphere. That means we must restructure our economic institutions to mimic, align with, and integrate with Earth's natural systems as we bring our aggregate numbers and consumption into line with the generative capacity of those systems. We are only beginning to sense the full implications of this imperative.

### **LOCAL SELF-RELIANCE, GLOBAL BALANCE**

Our transition to co-productive participation in a living Earth Community begins with awareness that as living beings our human well-being depends on the continuing vitality of living Earth's generative systems. Contributing to the maintenance and enhancement of the vitality of those systems must therefore be our foremost priority in every human endeavor.

Earth's biosphere self-organizes as an interconnected system of locally self-reliant bioregional communities that scale upward from microorganisms to the global biosphere. The organisms that comprise bioregional subcommunities at each level down to the microorganisms in the soil continuously exchange, share, process, and adapt to the limits of the energy, water, and nutrients locally available to them. All the while, they share and exchange energy, water, and nutrients with their neighbors, together creating and maintaining the generative systems of the higher level community to which each of the subcommunities belongs.

Each community self-organizes to live within its own means. Each species learns to meet its own needs in ways that ultimately contribute to the generative capacities of its local community and thereby to the whole of Earth Community. As each has a responsibility to contribute, so too does each have the right to share in the bounty of the whole.

As we humans learn to organize and live as contributing members of bioregional communities, we will reconnect with the sources of our food, energy, and other essentials of daily life. We will rebuild the place-based communities essential to human health and happiness. We will freely share information, culture, knowledge, and beneficial technology with the peoples of other bioregions. We will engage in the fair and balanced exchange with other bioregions of

our surplus production based on our natural comparative advantage through the kind of mutually beneficial trade that Adam Smith and David Ricardo actually had in mind.

As each bioregional community comes into balance with the natural living generative systems within its borders, the human species will come into global balance with the generative capacity of Earth's biosphere.

Put it all together and the outlines of a Sacred Life and Earth Community story begin to emerge as an ethically grounded, reality-based alternative to the idolatrous story of Sacred Money and Markets. Here are some essential elements of this story:

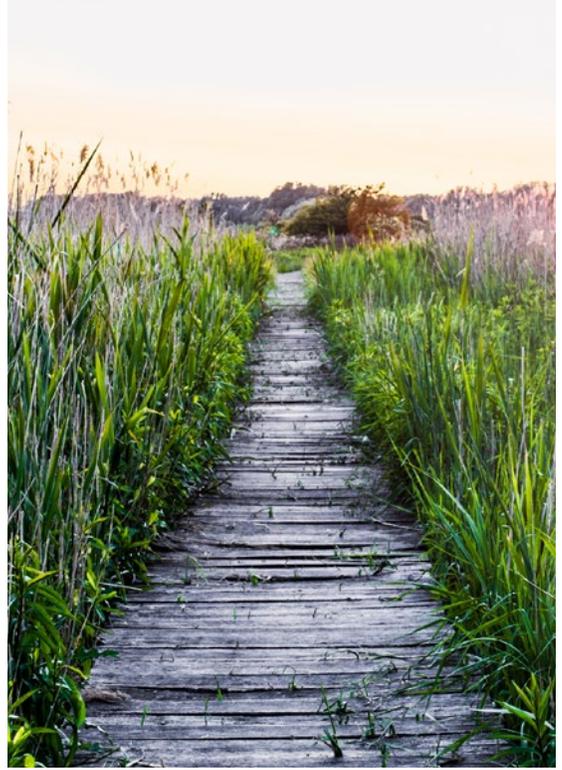
*As living beings, we survive and prosper only as contributing members of a Living Earth Community birthed by a living, self-organizing cosmos evolving toward ever-greater beauty, complexity, awareness, and possibility.*

*Science now affirms that it is our human nature to care and to share. We are rediscovering the ancient truth that participation as creative contributing members of a thriving Earth Community is essential to our well-being and true happiness.*

*We are awakening to the reality that the only legitimate purpose of any human institution—whether business, government, or civil society—is to facilitate this participation. The purpose of the economy these institutions together comprise has an additional function: to support us in creating our essential means of healthful living and well-being in co-productive partnership with the other members of Earth Community. Any indicator of economic performance should be a measure of the economy's fulfillment of this function.*

*Life is sacred. Earth Community is sacred. Time is life. Money is just a number. Money and markets backed by rules and an ethical culture can be useful means to facilitate beneficial forms of exchange; neither is an end in itself.*

Communications technologies have eliminated geographical barriers to human communication. We have thus acquired for the first time in human history the capability to learn and act as a planetary species. We can use this capacity to rethink and choose as a species the stories by which we will live together as a true global community of life in a shrinking and interdependent world. This in turn gives us the means to change our common human course with extraordinary speed as a conscious, collective choice.



## A Dialogue of the Whole

**W**e humans must now navigate a turning to a viable future. This requires a profound shared awakening to our nature as spiritual beings with a responsibility to contribute as participants in Creation's continuing epic journey. This awakening will be partly experiential—a joyful reunion with our true nature. And it will be partly intellectual—a larger and more nuanced understanding of the nature and purpose of Creation and our human role therein.

### A BIG STORY WITH THREE THEMES

In its full development, the Sacred Life and Earth Community story has three interlinking themes.

1. The theme of a **Living Universe Cosmology** that recognizes and celebrates the unity of Creation, connects the domains of science and religion, draws from the breadth and depth of human experience and knowledge, and reveals the wonder and complexity of the creative, self-organizing processes by which Creation unfolds in its epic journey of self-discovery.

If we connect the dots and use the data of science to fill in the gaps, we have a powerful and inspiring new story that reveals the inseparable interconnection of all being, the presence and creative power of distributed intelligent agency, and a profound cosmic purpose.

2. The theme of a **Living Earth Community** that builds on the Living Universe theme to portray Earth as a creative, resilient self-organizing community of life into which humans were born and with which we must now learn to live.

3. The theme of a **Living Earth Community Economy** that frames a vision of and pathway to the culture and institutions of a New Economy that brings humans into a balanced co-productive partnership with Earth's biosphere as responsible members of the Living Earth Community, provides for the livelihood needs of all people, and is radically democratic.

In combination, these three themes call us to assume adult responsibility for our agency as human beings in shaping our own future. They give our lives profound meaning and point the way to a life-centered cultural and institutional transformation that maintains a balance between key polarities, for example:

- Individual and community
- Competition and cooperation
- Material mechanism and conscious agency
- Our momentary individual existence and Creation's eternal unfolding
- Freedom and responsibility
- Unitary and distributed intelligence
- Faith and inquiry

### FINDING OUR STORY

The Distant Patriarch, Grand Machine, and Mystical Unity stories come from earlier times. Each story became the foundation of institutional interests that it serves to this day. Many of the individuals whose status and authority—intellectual or otherwise—derive from the old stories may actually have significant personal doubts and may align more closely with the Living Universe story.

They have significant incentive, however, to keep those doubts to themselves for fear of both professional and public rejection. Their silence inhibits our ability to articulate and organize as a species around a shared story adequate to the defining need of our time and, therefore, our ability to take the step to species maturity.

Religious institutions remain wedded to the Distant Patriarch story, science and academia to the Grand Machine story, and spiritual retreat centers and teachers to the Mystical Unity story. Corporate media and most of academia actively and persistently promote an idolatrous, immoral, and intellectually corrupt Sacred Money and Markets story.

We see signs of a break in the ranks. Respected scientists are writing popular books about consciousness, intelligence, and the need to move beyond reductionism. Leading spiritual thinkers are writing books and articles on sacred activism that connect the insights of spiritual and scientific inquiry. Interfaith conversations are moving beyond seeking mutual tolerance to acknowledging—even honoring—the deeper common insights of diverse traditions and the contributions of science. Thoughtful economists are proposing new indices for assessing economic performance that acknowledge the detrimental impacts of economic growth on living people and nature.

Such conversations are gaining traction and coherence within the institutions of religion, science, and academia, living room salons, public conferences, personal growth centers, think tanks, webinars, media, and more. These conversations, however, remain cautious and fragmented. They rarely address the whole elephant in all its complexity. And they mostly lack the powerful institutional sponsorship that gives the Distant Patriarch, Grand Machine, and Sacred Money and Markets stories authority and public presence.

It remains for those of us engaged in such conversations to connect and collaborate on a national and global scale. We must bring the elements of the emerging New Story out from the shadows and engage an open and respectful public dialogue grounded in a recognition that each of the old stories holds a piece of a larger truth, even as it has exaggerated its truth at the expense of other truths.

The Distant Patriarch story contributes the insight that there is agency and purpose in Creation. The Grand Machine story contributes the insight that there is order in Creation. The Mystical Unity story contributes the insight that matter is an illusion, spirit is the unifying ground of Creation, we are all connected, and ego can be a barrier to enlightenment unless aligned with deep cosmic purpose. Even the Sacred Money and Markets story holds its own kernel of truth, in that money and markets, properly used, can be useful tools for facilitating the responsible and cooperative self-organization of certain types of human exchange.

If we connect the dots and use the data of science to fill in the gaps, we have a powerful and inspiring new story that reveals the inseparable interconnection of all being, the presence and creative power of distributed intelligent agency, and a profound cosmic purpose. This story in turn gives our human lives deep meaning. It invites our active participation in living a positive human future into being.

### **LIVING OUR STORY**

As I said earlier, I believe that the essential values and understanding of the Living Universe story live in the human heart. They are the values expressed by the earliest human societies. Free from the cultural distortions introduced by professional propagandists in service to imperial power going back some 5,000 years, I believe they are the values and understanding that human societies most naturally express. To the extent that this is so, the need is less to convince people, than to affirm the truth that resides in the heart and give form and substance to the implications through the story of a conscious, self-organizing, Living Universe.

Perhaps the most compelling support for this argument comes from the self-directed efforts of the hundreds of millions, perhaps billions, of people around the world who are walking away from the stories and institutions of the old economy to live a

Living Earth Community Economy into being. They are rebuilding their local food systems, creating bicycle-friendly streets, changing building codes to incorporate green building standards, creating local recycling systems, starting businesses that support wind and solar, creating local credit unions and local banks, promoting cooperative ownership, introducing indicator systems that assess local economic performance against the health of their local Earth community and much more. At YES! Magazine [[www.yesmagazine.org](http://www.yesmagazine.org)] we collect and share such stories from all around the world.

Most of those engaged in such initiatives are simply acting on an intuitive sense of what gives their lives direction and meaning. In other words, they are expressing the story in their heart by living it.

Everywhere, people are realizing that society and its primary driver, the economy, are failing both humans and nature. They want to know why. Most can instantly recognize the fallacies of the Sacred Money and Market story. The pronouncements of Pope Francis, who seems to have a deeper understanding of the economy than do most academically trained economists, help to spread the word.

These developments, and more, create an opening for a more productive public discourse on our sacred stories than the familiar debates between doctrinaire Distant Patriarch creationists and doctrinaire Grand Machine evolutionists.

The faster awareness spreads of the devastating and terminal failure of the old economy and the Sacred Money and Markets story, the faster people turn from old economy values and institutions that work in opposition to nature and community to New Economy values and institutions that serve nature and community. Meanwhile, the Sacred Life and Earth Community story emerges in the background to bring deeper meaning and coherence to these efforts.

Those who have the courage and openness of spirit to recognize and express the story in their heart are growing in numbers and influence even in the face of resistance from powerful cultural institutions and old-story true believers. There will always be those who respond to change by clinging ever more resolutely to the accustomed stories of our past. We should expect, however, that their numbers will decline as the conversation spreads and the transition from the old economy to the New Economy demonstrates the appeal and efficacy of a new vision of human possibility.



Any of the three foundational themes can serve as an initial entry point for a conversation leading to a recognition and embrace of the larger story. Persons of a spiritual or intellectual bent might begin with the Living Universe Cosmology. Those with a particular interest in environmental issues might begin by discussing the human role in a Living Earth Community that honors Earth as Sacred Mother. Those working to rebuild local communities and economies might begin with a conversation about the cultural and institutional characteristics of a Living Earth Community Economy.

Regardless of the initial entry point, over time the conversation of any individual group may expand to a larger dialogue connecting all three themes.



**W**hether or not we humans succeed in finding our way to a viable future may turn on our collective answer to a basic question: is the universe more like a dead machine or more like a living organism? The evidence is mounting that we are in crisis because as a species we have lost sight of the basic reality that we are living beings who survive and thrive only as members of a healthy Earth Community in a dynamic, evolving, Living Universe.

We can respond to these fearful times by giving way to desperation. Alternatively, we can embrace the moment as an opportunity to rethink our values and their underlying assumptions. We can rethink and restructure our institutions, beginning with the institutions of the economy by which we structure our relationships with one another and with nature to secure our basic livelihood. Fortunately, a great many people are already engaged in doing so.

Throughout much of human history, we have organized around fragments of a larger story. We must now organize around a story that embodies the entirety of human knowledge, honors our interdependent relationships with one another and nature, recognizes our human agency, gives our lives meaning, and guides our path to a just and sustainable human future.

Our essential current need as a species is to reorganize around a new culture and new institutions grounded in living-system values and design principles that bring us into alignment with nature and Creation's divine purpose. With this quest as foundation, we can proceed to discover and actualize our true human purpose as agents of the spirit from which we manifest.

The fact that we humans seem naturally drawn to unsolved mysteries in an insatiable quest to know is a source of hope for our common future. We may never know where Creation's journey leads, or whether a final destination is even a meaningful concept.

Within the frame of the emerging Living Universe story, the ultimate goal is not a destination. Rather it is the inherent thrill of participating in a grand creative journey of self-discovery. The opportunity and privilege of participation is its own reward.

**March 5, 2014**



**DR. DAVID KORTEN** is the author of *Agenda for a New Economy: From Phantom Wealth to Real Wealth*, *The Great Turning: From Empire to Earth Community*, *The Post-Corporate World: Life after Capitalism*, and the international best seller *When Corporations Rule*

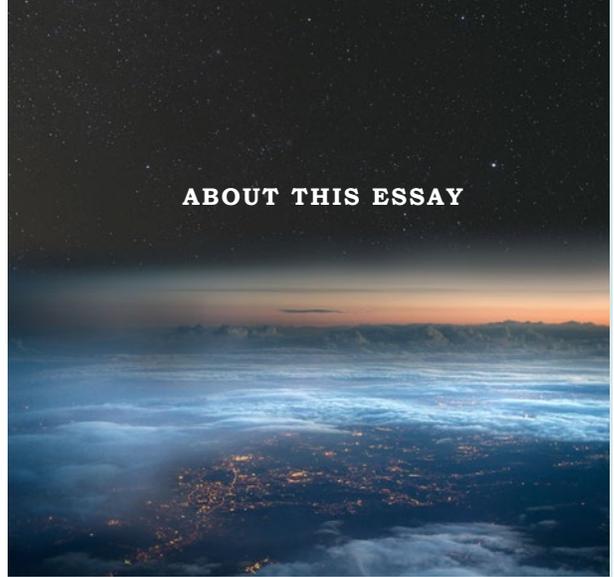
*the World*. He is board chair of YES! Magazine, co-chair of the New Economy Working Group, a founding board member emeritus of the Business Alliance for Local Living Economies, president of the Living Economies Forum, an associate fellow of the Institute for Policy Studies, and a member of the Club of Rome. He earned MBA and PhD degrees from the Stanford University Graduate School of Business and served on the faculty of the Harvard Business School. He blogs for YES! Magazine.

Berrett-Koehler Publishers will release a further revised and expanded version of this essay as a short book in early 2015. An earlier version was published on the YES! Magazine website as “Religion, Science, and Spirit: A Sacred Story for Our Time,” on January 17, 2013.

To the extent that this essay makes a distinctive contribution to the articulation of a guiding story for the human future, it is only by way of connecting insights from the contributions of countless others. These include friends and colleagues who offered specific suggestions and feedback, including Barry Andrews, Tom Atlee, Ed Bacon, Diane Berke, Shannon Biggs, Anna Elza Brady, Ravi Chaudhry, Joan Chittister, David Christopher, Peter Corning, Duane Elgin, Ted Falcon, Matthew Fox, Tim Fox, Marybeth Gardam, Rob Garrity, Matthew Gilbert, Kat Gjovik, Gary Gripp, Christa Hillstrom, Charles Holmes, Garry Jacobs, Kurt Johnson, Frances Korten, Jason McLennan, Bob Massie, Graeme Maxton, Don Mackenzie, Dena Merriam, Winston Negan, Brian McLaren, Martin Palmer, Bill Phipps, Doug Pibel, Jamal Rahman, Steven Rockefeller, Gideon Rosenblatt, Bob Scott, Lucianne Siers, Ralph Singh, Brian Swimme, Michael Townsend, Karma Tshiteem, Lama Tsomo, Mary Evelyn Tucker, Bill Twist, Sarah van Gelder, and Richard Wilson, among others.

Edit by Doug Pibel, design by Tracy Loeffelholz Dunn, and discussion guide by Kat Gjovik.

## ABOUT THIS ESSAY



### A NEW STORY FOR A NEW

**ECONOMY:** The online version of this article can be found at [yesmagazine.org/pdf/kortennewstory.pdf](http://yesmagazine.org/pdf/kortennewstory.pdf) along with related writings:

**DISCUSSION GUIDE:** A guide for personal reflection and conversation about the essay.

**PERSONAL ESSAY:** My reflection on the encounters that drew me to this inquiry, sparked key insights, and led to writing this essay at this time.

Shutterstock photo credits: vovan (candle), Maksud (carrots), cate\_89 (group), My Good Images (water), Richard Cavalleri (Manhattan), Aleksander Bolbot (mushrooms), photo.ua (bull), Donovan van Stadan (elephant), Tadeas (bees), tgergo (walkway), Sebastian Tomus (molecules), Burhan Bunardi Xie (moon), QQ7 (clockworks), MarcelClemens (cover)

## A DISCUSSION GUIDE



### “A New Story for a New Economy: To Find Our Human Place in a Living Universe”

by *David Korten*



After you read the essay, we encourage you to reflect on these questions. Then, extend an invitation to selected friends to read it and join you in your home or community gathering place to share reflections in search of a deeper understanding of your respective beliefs, stories, and possibilities.

**1. The Prevailing Story:** In your experience, how would you summarize the defining prevailing story of our current public culture? What are the implications? Where does this story come from? Who controls it? Whose interests does it serve?

**2. Your Beliefs:** What are your deepest personal beliefs about relationships, agency, and meaning in the universe, and, in particular, your “divine purpose”? How might you share your deepest beliefs with others in the form of a sacred story—your sacred story?

**3. Common Beliefs:** To what extent do you think your family members, friends, community, and the broader society share your story? How would you describe what you think are the similarities and differences?

**4. Why Stories Matter:** How does your story influence how you live, the work you do, and the way you think about important issues? How do similarities or differences between your story and the stories of others influence your relationships with family, friends, the communities to which you belong, and society more generally?

**5. Living Earth Community:** What is your earliest recollection of being in relationship with nature? Has your sense of this relationship changed over time? Do you experience Earth as a living being? As your living Earth Mother? When, in what ways, and with what implications?

**6. A Sacred Life and Living Earth Community Story:** To what extent and in what ways does the Sacred Life and Living Earth Community Story ring true to you—or not? What might be the implications if this were to become the shared story of global society?



# In Search of a Deeper Truth: The Personal Story behind “A New Story for a New Economy”

**By David Korten**

**N**EARLY 20 YEARS AGO, while writing the epilogue to *When Corporations Rule the World*, I struggled with a troubling fact. When I made the case in public presentations that we humans are on a path to potential species extinction, I would often get a response something like, “I agree. It does seem like we are on a suicidal course. But the changes you are talking about are really big and hard to make and, besides, the dismal projections may turn out to be wrong.”

It seemed that even very thoughtful people were saying, “We can’t change. So party while we can. If it ends, it ends. Last one to leave, turn out the lights.” I wondered, does life have so little meaning that people are disinclined to make the effort to change even if our children’s future and the survival of our species is at stake?

While wrestling with this question, I came across Thomas Berry’s *The Dream of the Earth*. I sensed a profound truth in Berry’s argument that our survival as a species depends on discovering a new story that gives us a powerful reason to live—a story that

provides a meaningful answer to the most basic of questions: “Why?”

I’ve since come to realize that our need for a new story has multiple dimensions. The new story must give life meaning and purpose. It must give us a reason to believe that a change of the depth required is possible despite the powerful financial interests aligned in support of the status quo. It must also counter the prevailing story that claims it is our human nature to be individualistic, greedy, and competitive.

The essay “A New Story for a New Economy” is my contribution to our common search for the needed new story. In the following, I discuss other significant waypoints on the personal journey that led me to write it.

## **WAKING TO THE WONDER OF THE WORLD’S RICHLY VARIED CULTURES**

In my youth, I had no concept of cultural diversity and assumed I would spend my life in the monocultural, white, American, middle class, protestant

small town where I was born.

The most exotic person with whom I had any direct personal relationship was my Catholic aunt with red hair. She was very sweet and I loved her, but the Catholic thing and the red hair seemed a bit strange.

Nothing in my life from birth through my first three years of college even hinted at the possibility I might spend 21 years of my adult life living and working in Ethiopia, Nicaragua, the Philippines, and Indonesia deeply immersed in the extraordinary diversity of the world's peoples and cultures. Likewise, it was beyond my comprehension that in the world of my adulthood the barriers of geography would all but disappear as technology connected the world in a seamless web of instantaneous and nearly costless communication.

During the course of my uncommon life experience, I became acutely aware of how the shared culture of a people serves as a lens that shapes the perceptions and behavior of the culture's members in ways both beneficial and destructive. My experience also has led me to an appreciation for the immense range of our human possibilities, the potentially devastating consequences of getting our stories wrong, and the importance of getting our stories right.

### **DEAD WORLD ECONOMICS IN A LIVING WORLD**

People commonly refer to me as an economist because I speak and write about the economy. The label in fact makes me deeply uncomfortable.

I started out as an economics major in college. After three courses, however, I concluded that what my economics professors were teaching had little practical relevance. I switched to psychology. In graduate school, I focused on organizational system design.

I've since come to realize that most academic disciplines, even those that claim to be strictly objective and fact based, in actuality operate within a particular story frame or paradigm—a shared cultural lens. That lens serves to discipline the discipline. As with all cultural lenses, however, it can blind us intellectually. Economics is an important example.

A colleague recently suggested that viewed

through the cultural lens of the economics discipline, Earth looks like a dead rock populated by mindless, money-seeking robots. This perhaps explains my intuition and decision to switch to psychology.

### **FROM HOME TOWN TO GLOBAL COMMUNITY**

During my undergraduate years at Stanford, I was extremely conservative and greatly concerned by the threat that communist revolution posed to our American way of life. This concern led me to sign up for a special colloquium in my senior year on the topic "Modern Revolution." It was there I learned that the revolutions of the 20th century were largely a response to the frustrations of poverty.

I decided to devote my adult life to bringing the lessons of Western business success and the comforts of our consumer culture to the poor of the world's "underdeveloped" countries. I hoped they might become "developed" like us and put an end to the revolution nonsense. That became my story and shaped my life for many years, including the early portion of the 21 years I lived abroad.

Gradually, I came to realize that there was something terribly wrong with the reigning story that economic development as measured by GDP growth was eliminating poverty and bringing forth a world of universal prosperity. The reality I experienced was exactly the opposite. The more GDP grew, the more brutal life became for the majority of people, the faster environmental devastation spread, and the faster once-rich cultures were displaced by Western media-driven cultures of violence and consumer excess.

Eventually I realized to my horror that these same patterns were playing out in my own country—the United States—and all the other countries to which we looked, and still do, as models of development.

As I dug further, I came to see a deeper pattern. Economies were growing financially at the expense of life. In some instances, development did bring individuals more money and more life. More commonly, however, the individual gets a bit more money and a lot less life. The consequences were most visible for people at the bottom, who often

had a bit more money, but less food, less access to clean water, less basic security, and less joy.

On reflection, I came to recognize a direct connection between the story lens of economics and business education and the social and environmental devastation I was witnessing. Public policies shaped by that lens were driving a growing concentration of economic and political power in global corporations and financial markets delinked from moral sensibility and public accountability.

In 1992, I returned home to the United States from the Philippines and began writing *When Corporations Rule the World* to share what I had learned abroad. That transition reawakened the long suspended spiritual search that had begun much earlier in my life.

### **FROM RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION TO SPIRITUAL QUEST**

In my youth, I participated actively in our local nondenominational Protestant Community Church. I was scarcely aware of the variety of the world's religions and had no interest in them.

Then, as an undergraduate at Stanford, I took a course in comparative religion. A remarkable professor opened my mind to the commonalities of the world's religions and also to the parochialism characteristic of competing religious traditions.

After finishing my MBA in 1961, I spent a summer in Indonesia. While traveling by train through Java's spectacular terraced rice fields, I experienced a deep sense of the traditional Asian consciousness that sees time as a circular flow and all life as interconnected. This was the beginning of my awakening to the significance of how deeply our differing cultural lenses shape our perception of and relationships with one another and with Earth.

On my return home, I gave a slideshow presentation on my Indonesian experience to a group of my parents' friends. The gathering included the pastor of a local church, who asked me, "What religion do the Indonesians practice?" I said, "Islam." He responded, "That's too bad." "Why?" I asked. "Because," he said, "Islam is an ethical monotheistic religion, which makes Muslims difficult to convert to Christianity."

I later asked myself, "If ethical monotheism is

supposed to be the highest religious expression and Islam is an ethical monotheistic religion, why should we want to convert Muslims to Christianity? Is it only about market share?" I have never since been inclined to affiliate with a religious denomination. The conversation served, however, to further awaken my spiritual curiosity.

### **THE STEP BEYOND DEAD WORLD SCIENCE**

My deeper engagement with the basic choice between competing cosmologies addressed in "A New Story for a New Economy" began in October 1962 when I was a doctoral student at the Stanford Business School. My wife Fran told me about a university-wide graduate seminar on human consciousness offered by Willis Harman. We decided to take it together.

Harman, at the time a tenured professor in Stanford's Department of Electrical Engineering, was one of several of Stanford's most prestigious scientists who openly acknowledged their belief that the reductionist, mechanistic assumptions and methods of normal science had become self-limiting. He had a particular interest in the relationship between matter and consciousness. Did consciousness manifest from matter? Or did matter manifest from consciousness? As I recall, his working hypothesis was that they are inseparably intertwined.

This encounter with a brilliant mind possessed of impeccable scientific credentials who dared to challenge the prevailing intellectual orthodoxy of science in search of the deepest truths was a life changing, intellectually liberating experience. Harman remained a friend and intellectual mentor until his death in 1996.

### **TWO DEFINING STORIES**

I entered an international development career with a very idealistic view of America's role in the world as a selfless defender of democracy and benefactor of the poor. While serving abroad I had the opportunity to observe the global expansion of corporate power from the perspective of those who experienced the resulting cultural, economic, and political disruption and the money- and consumption-centered Western culture that came with it.

That led to my direct and intimate involvement in the global people-power resistance that emerged to counter the intrusion and the related concentration of unaccountable economic and political power. It informed *When Corporations Rule the World*, which in turn led to my further and deeper involvement in the people-power resistance.

I now see a world gripped in a values struggle between money and life. Global corporate power aligns with the interests of money. An expanding global people-power movement aligns with the interests of life. Corporate power mobilizes around a well-defined Sacred Money and Markets story with a pervasive public presence in corporate media and a corporate dominated educational system. The people-power movement is far less visible and mobilizes around a wide variety of peace, justice, and sustainability initiatives that lack a recognized and accepted framing story.

“A New Story for a New Economy” outlines what I call a Sacred Life and Earth Community story. It is a story I have come to believe lives in the human heart and provides the implicit frame for the hundreds of millions, if not billions, of people who are spontaneously acting to bring a life-honoring human future into being.

Based on the lessons of my life experience I have no doubt that the choice between the well-established Sacred Money and Markets story and some version of the Sacred Life and Earth Community story will determine the human fate. If the Sacred Life and Earth Community story is to prevail, it must gain clear articulation and public presence.

### **TELL ME YOUR IMAGE OF GOD AND I WILL TELL YOU YOUR POLITICS**

In the fall of 1999, I spoke at a conference on “Global Economic Justice” organized by the Washington State Association of Churches and the Church Council of Greater Seattle. It was a lead-up to the historic 1999 Seattle WTO confrontation. I shared the podium with Marcus Borg, a respected academic theologian and Jesus scholar. The defining statement of Borg’s presentation reached deep into my consciousness: “Tell me your image of God and I will tell you your politics.”

Borg explained that the image of God as distant

patriarch supports a politics of authority, competition, and domination. The image of God as a universal spirit manifest in all creation supports a politics of cooperation, compassion, and sharing. He noted that both images find strong support in the Christian Bible.

It was a reminder that the stories by which we understand the nature of reality have serious implications for the societies we choose to create. I recognized for the first time how the image of God as distant patriarch may serve to support and legitimate a concentration of power in imperial corporations and governments that is deeply at odds with the teachings of Jesus and other great religious teachers.

### **SACRED EARTH MOTHER**

In March 2012, I was an invited guest at a small gathering of indigenous environmental leaders convened to discuss the then upcoming debates of the Rio+20 UN Conference on Sustainable Development. These leaders observed that, in preparatory meetings, Wall Street interests proposed that to save nature we must value her and to value her we must price her. This pointed to a by-then familiar pattern. First price, then privatize, then commodify, and finally securitize. Within the frame of the global market game, the Wall Street proposal would give those with the most money a license to monopolize and exploit at will, for their own private gain, the gifts of nature essential to human life.

I found myself strongly aligned with the indigenous story that Earth is our Sacred Mother. Her care is a sacred responsibility of all humanity. She is priceless. She is not for sale. The significance of the indigenous perspective reached deep into my mind and my soul. I did not feel it as something sentimental. I felt it as an essential and pragmatic foundation of a viable human future.

### **THROUGH A LARGER LENS**

In June 2012, I joined a planning meeting convened by the Club of Rome in Bristol, England to plan a global initiative to raise public consciousness of how our values shape our common future. At that gathering, I shared simple versions of what

I called the Distant Patriarch, Grand Machine, and Integral Spirit cosmologies and noted some of the implications of the different ways in which they each characterize reality.

Martin Palmer, who hosted the gathering, asked me whether these cosmologies are mutually exclusive. My instant response was, “Yes, of course.” As I later reflected on his question, I came to doubt my response. Might there be a deeper answer? Eventually, I recalled the Hindu story of six blind men describing an elephant and considered the possibility that each of the three cosmologies I had outlined described an element of a larger and more complex reality.

I pulled my thoughts together in a short essay and circulated it to participants in the Bristol meeting and a few other friends and colleagues. Their enthusiastic and insightful responses motivated me to develop the essay further. One relatively early version became the central focus of a small conference in Washington, D.C., organized by the Contemplative Alliance in November 2012.

A later revision provided a focal frame for a June 2013 conference in New York City, also organized by the Contemplative Alliance. Insights from the New York conference prompted me to restructure the essay to bring in the Mystical Unity cosmology and further develop the link between our choice of sacred stories and our economic culture and institutions.

I shared a draft of the revised essay with Steve Piersanti, president and publisher of Berrett-Koehler Publishers. Steve has been my guide and publisher on all my major books. We worked out a plan to expand the essay into a short book to launch in early 2015.

Steve suggested that there might be a stronger, more evocative title for the cosmology I was calling Integral Spirit. In exploring possibilities, I recalled a book Berrett-Koehler had published earlier by my friend and colleague Duane Elgin called *The Living Universe*.

I realized that Duane’s frame in that book aligned almost perfectly with what I was calling Integral Spirit. That wasn’t particularly surprising given the contributions that Duane has made to my understanding over the past twenty years. Steve and I agreed that the Living Universe might be the better

term for the new cosmology story.

I have no doubt that we humans will continue to probe the mysteries of the universe for so long as we remain a viable species. The story by which we live may never get beyond an approximation of the reality of a universe so complex, vast, and wondrous. The Living Universe story as related in “A New Story for a New Economy” is only one such approximation. I am encouraged by the number of people I have encountered—including spiritual leaders and respected scientists—who share my belief that this story is at least a rather closer approximation of “reality” than the stories around which human societies currently organize—and a more serviceable guide to a viable human future.

**March 5, 2014**



**DR. DAVID KORTEN** is the author of *Agenda for a New Economy: From Phantom Wealth to Real Wealth*, *The Great Turning: From Empire to Earth Community*, *The Post-Corporate World: Life after Capitalism*, and the international best seller *When Corporations Rule the World*. He is board chair of *YES! Magazine*, co-chair of the New Economy Working Group, a founding board member emeritus of the Business Alliance for Local Living Economies, president of the Living Economies Forum, an associate fellow of the Institute for Policy Studies, and a member of the Club of Rome. He earned MBA and PhD degrees from the Stanford University Graduate School of Business and served on the faculty of the Harvard Business School.