

LEADING FROM BELOW

Excerpt from David C. Korten, *The Great Turning: From Empire to Earth Community* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers and Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press, 2006), pp, 316-323.

Leadership for Earth Community emerges through processes of mutual empowerment that encourage every person to recognize and express their capacities for leadership on behalf of the whole. Almost inevitably, this leadership comes from outside the institutions of Empire—from the growing millions of people with the mature consciousness that enables them to envision the possibilities of this human moment and to accept responsibility for bringing those possibilities into being. In Earth Community, leadership roles evolve and rotate in response to the needs of the situation and the skills and circumstances of the participants.

Although the leadership styles of Earth Community may seem chaotic and diffuse to those accustomed to the dominator styles of Empire, they fit the pattern by which all healthy living systems self-organize. This pattern of self-organizing, distributed power gives contemporary social movements their distinctive vitality and makes them nearly impossible to suppress.

The Strategy

Global civil society is appropriately engaged on many fronts—a reflection of its diversity and the complexity of its task. Because its leadership is diffuse and self-organizing, it may seem odd to speak of strategy. Yet each act by each of its many leaders—and the convergent expression of those acts—reveal an implicit strategy, with four essential imperatives:²

1. Accelerate the awakening of Cultural and Spiritual Consciousness. Empire's fabricated culture creates a kind of trance. Awakening from that trance occurs one individual at a time, but each occurrence creates a new role model to inspire others. The greater the number of active role models, the more quickly the awakening spreads and the more easily the culturally liberated are able to find one another to break free from the powerlessness induced by isolation. We facilitate the processes of awakening through our individual engagement and dialogue with others, creating cross-cultural experiences, encouraging deep reflection on meaning and values, exposing the contradictions of Empire, and spreading awareness of unrealized human possibilities by changing the prevailing stories.

2. Resist Empire's assault on children, families, community, and nature. This means resisting the institutions and agendas of Empire, demanding the repeal of unjust and undemocratic rules, and abolishing programs that serve Empire's interests at the expense of community. The resistance can be assertive and may involve principled civil disobedience, but it must always adhere to the principles of nonviolence as practiced by Gandhi in India's independence movement, Martin Luther King Jr. in the U.S. civil rights movement, and other nonviolent resistance movements—even in the face of violent

police and military repression. The discipline of nonviolence underscores Earth Community's moral authority, draws attention to the illegitimacy of Empire, and breaks the cycle of violence.

3. *Form and connect communities of congruence.* The creative potential of the world's hundreds of millions of Cultural and Spiritual Creatives is being expressed through the formation of communities of congruence in which people develop the relationships, institutions, and authentic cultures of living societies. A community of congruence may be as simple as a local study group. It might be a farmers' market, a school to develop inquiring minds, or a course on voluntary simplicity. It might be a socially responsible local business, a church congregation devoted to spiritual inquiry and community service, or a holistic health clinic. No matter how small or isolated such initiatives may originally be, each creates a protected space in which diversity, experimentation, and learning can flourish to create the building blocks of a new mainstream economy, politics, and culture.

As communities of congruence grow and connect, they advance the process of liberation from the cultural trance of Empire and offer visible manifestations of the possibilities of Earth Community. Individually and collectively they become attractors of the life energy that Empire has co-opted—thus weakening Empire and strengthening Earth Community in an emergent process of displacement and eventual succession.

4. *Build a majoritarian political base.* As the base strengthens and the stories of Earth Community are refined, the next task is to build a majoritarian political base. This requires taking the culture of Earth Community mainstream through the many formal and informal communications channels beyond corporate control. As communities of congruence begin to tip the balance of the public culture in favor of Earth Community, the radical democratization of the formal institutions of economy, politics, and culture will follow.

These four strategic undertakings are sequential in that each prepares the way for the next. They are also simultaneous in that each is currently in play, developing at its own pace, and contributing to the birthing process. New initiatives are always in gestation as others are reaching maturity. Each expression flows from authentic values, advances the awakening of Cultural and Spiritual Consciousness, expands communities of congruence, and accelerates the redirection of life energy from Empire to Earth Community to add strength and vitality to the emerging whole and thereby redirect the human future.

Metaphorically, the strategy might be thought of as a process of “walking away from the king,” because it centers not on confronting the authority of the king, but on walking away—withdrawing the legitimacy and the life energy on which the king's power depends. Think of it as a conversation with the king along the following lines:

You have your game. It's called Empire. It may work for you, but it doesn't work for me. So I'm leaving to join with a few million others for whom the game of Empire isn't working either. We are creating a new game with new rules based on the values and principles of Earth Community. You are welcome to join us as a fellow citizen if you are willing to share your power and wealth and to play by the new rules.

This imaginary conversation is acted out through initiatives that turn away from Empire in each of the economic, political, and cultural spheres of public life.

Economic Turning

One of the most visible manifestations of global civil society is the popular resistance against corporate globalization and the institutional instruments by which globalization's supporters are imposing their neoliberal policy agenda on the world. Less visible, but ultimately even more important are the many initiatives aimed at growing corporate-free economies that mimic healthy ecosystems. These initiatives range from "buy local" campaigns and efforts to rebuild local food systems based on independent family farms, to efforts to eliminate corporate subsidies, stop the intrusion of big-box stores, hold corporations accountable for harms committed, and reform corporate chartering. There are groups that encourage humane animal husbandry and sustainable agriculture, seek to abolish factory farms and ban genetically modified seeds, promote green business, introduce sustainable community-based forestry-management practices, and work to roll back the use of toxic chemicals. Other groups are working to strengthen the protection of worker rights, raise the minimum wage, advance worker ownership, increase socially responsible investing, and promote other fiscal and regulatory measures that improve economic justice and encourage environmental responsibility.

In the United States, one national initiative with which I have a close association is the Business Alliance for Local Living Economies (BALLE), an alliance of local groups across the United States and Canada committed to the vision of a planetary system of local living economies free from the pathologies of absentee ownership.³ BALLE chapters support local businesses in growing webs of economic relationships among themselves, raising consumers' awareness of the implications of their shopping choices, and working with local governments to write rules that favor the locally owned businesses essential to prosperous and vibrant community life. Where local production is not practical, BALLE chapters promote trading relationships between local-economy enterprises in different localities and countries.

Innovative graduate business schools, such as the Bainbridge Graduate Institute, are creating curricula geared to preparing managers for a new economy whose defining goals are social and environmental health. Co-op America supports the marketing efforts of independent green businesses. The American Independent Business Alliance and the New Rules Project of the Institute for Local Self-Reliance help communities develop policy frameworks supportive of local independent businesses.⁴ These are only a few of many organizations dedicated to supporting the emergence of locally rooted, life-serving economies in the United States.

Similar initiatives grounded in Earth Community values are taking root most everywhere in the world. As newly liberated economic spaces connect, they may bring forth larger unifying institutional structures, such as cooperative buying and branding groups, but they remain always rooted in and controlled by communities of place. Each such expansion provides people with more choices of where to shop, work, and invest, thereby allowing them to reclaim for their communities more of the life energy that global corporations drain away.

Such efforts might seem futile if not for the fact that community-rooted, human-scale, values-based, independent businesses constitute by far the majority of all businesses, provide most of the jobs, create nearly all new jobs, and serve as the primary source of technological innovation.⁵ They include businesses of all sorts, from bookstores to bakeries, land trusts, manufacturing facilities, software developers, organic farms, farmers' markets, community-supported agriculture initiatives, restaurants specializing in locally grown organic produce, worker co-ops, community banks, suppliers of fair-traded coffee, independent media outlets, and many more.

Political Turning

Other citizen initiatives are democratizing the structures of government, promoting more active citizen participation in political life, opening the political process to a greater diversity of voices and parties, and shifting public priorities in favor of people, families, communities, and the planet. They are lobbying governments on a host of economic, social, and environmental issues ranging from international trade rules to local building codes that need revising to encourage green construction. Many follow a strategy of building momentum from the bottom up, working with local governments on initiatives in support of living wage rules, corporate accountability, and preferential treatment for local independent enterprises. Even advances on global issues like peace and global warming are beginning with local initiatives, including those begun by local governments and politicians.

In the United States, for example, while the Bush II regime in Washington continued to deny the reality of climate change, some three hundred mayors of major U.S. cities met in June 2005, in Chicago, not to debate whether climate change was an important issue, but rather to share ideas on what they should be doing about it. These discussions led to a unanimous endorsement of the U.S. Mayors Climate Protection Agreement, calling on all cities to take climate change seriously and to commit to reducing global-warming emissions to 93 percent of 1990 levels by 2012. It further called for decisive federal action.

Seattle mayor Greg Nickels, who initiated the Climate Protection Agreement, got climate-change religion during the winter of 2003–4, when an absence of the traditional snow pack on the Cascade Mountains resulted in a cancellation of the ski season and created a serious threat of water and power shortages for the city the following summer. Another signatory, New Orleans mayor Ray Nagin, pointed out that another foot of water in the ocean and New Orleans would be gone.⁶ A little more than two months later, on August 29, Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans and flooded 80 percent of the city in one of the worst disasters in U.S. history.

The climate-change initiative is only one example of what some pundits are noting as an important trend in the United States. Frustrated by the failure of national politicians to deal with impending economic, social, and environmental collapse, the elected officials of U.S. cities are stepping in to lead from below. It is in the cities where the realities of homelessness, poverty, violence, decaying schools, droughts, floods, and industries battered by “free” trade agreements are felt most acutely. This creates the impetus for urban politicians to emerge on the cutting edge of a progressive problem-solving politics.⁷ Not only are the imperatives clearer to local political leaders, but they

can also break the grip of big money and media spin more easily than national political leaders can. Urban politicians are learning to work with neighborhood networks to counter the smear campaigns organized by big-money interests against innovative programs in child care, affordable housing, recycling, and open-space preservation.⁸

Some of the most interesting and ambitious projects involve alliances among grassroots citizen groups, local governments, and national office holders to put forward visionary Earth Community initiatives even in the face of seemingly overwhelming resistance from the ruling imperial establishment. Two examples from the United States are the Apollo Alliance, which promotes a sustainable and clean energy economy, and the Peace Alliance, which advocates creating a U.S. cabinet-level Department of Peace devoted to advancing peace both domestically and internationally.⁹

Cultural Turning

There is evidence of an emergent global cultural turning associated with the widespread awakening of the Cultural and Spiritual orders of consciousness. As discussed in part I, the awakening is a consequence of increasing cross-cultural experience, the influence of progressive social movements, and exposure to the realities of global interdependence and the fragility of a finite global ecosystem.

It is this awakening that makes the Great Turning possible. It finds popular expression in the many economic and political initiatives mentioned above. It also finds expression in more distinctively cultural initiatives aimed at rebuilding families and communities through such activities as co-housing and eco-village projects, the creation of safe, vibrant public spaces, the voluntary simplicity movement, and programs in intercultural exchange, media awareness, and educational enrichment.

Most particularly, however, the cultural turning is gaining momentum from a number of global turnings that bring new leadership to the fore and accelerate cultural and spiritual awakening. The following are of particular note:

- Indigenous peoples whom Empire and modernity have ruthlessly decimated and marginalized are reclaiming their traditions and identities and reaching out to share their understanding of the human connections to the sacred Earth. Respectful exchange between indigenous peoples and those peoples whom modernity has alienated from the ways of life may prove to be an especially powerful driver of cultural and spiritual awakening.
- Growth in the percentage of elders in the population due to falling fertility rates and increasing life spans contributes to a rise in the percentage of the population that has achieved the maturity of a Cultural or Spiritual Consciousness. There is growing interest in the potential benefits of elders making their experience and wisdom available to the larger society through their continued active engagement, particularly as teachers and mentors.
- Immigration is shifting the racial mix of the northern nations that have been the centers of white power and global domination. The unwillingness of immigrants to remain confined to the role of a racially defined servant class is a source of increasing social tension, but it provides a much needed challenge to white power hegemony and creates a demand for intercultural exchanges that are driving cultural awakening, particularly among the young.

- Perhaps the most significant single contribution to the cultural turning of the past fifty years has been a spreading rejection by women of Empire's definition of their social roles. Indeed, the re-ascendance of women may be one of the most significant human social developments of the past five thousand years.