

# THE WORLD WE WANT

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For decades, many of us have anticipated that the day of reckoning for our reckless human ways was near at hand. That day is now. Peak oil, climate chaos, financial collapse, and spreading social disintegration are all consequences of deep cultural and institutional dysfunction. The imperative to address them presents us with an epic test of our human intelligence and creativity.

## The Big Picture

When I was a student in business school my professors always told us. Look at the Big Picture. Don't just treat the symptoms of the problem. Look up stream to find and deal with the cause. The big picture of the human confrontation with the limits of our Mother Earth becomes crystal clear once we step back and take a look upstream.

The big picture now facing the human species has three critical elements.

The first element is **environmental collapse** driven by our relentless growth in consumption and population. From the perspective of our Earth Mother our human excesses have for millennia been little more than the normal nuisance one expects from young children.

Somewhere around 1980 we passed a threshold. Our human consumption became more than a nuisance, it began to exceed what our Mother could bear and began to threaten her very life. We see the results in climate chaos, depletion of fresh water and fertile soils, the collapse of fisheries, the erosion of denuded forest lands and melting ice caps. We are building up toxics in the water, soil, and air. We are killing our mother and thereby ourselves. As a species, we must grow up fast and accept our adult responsibilities. The implications are pretty straight forward.

Any Star Trek fans here? Remember those scenes in *Star Trek. Scotty to Captain Kirk. Life support is failing. Kirk to Scotty. Shut down all nonessential systems and redirect all available resources to life support.* There it is — the order for our time. No resources for war or extravagance. Focus all attention on the health of the crew and the life support system.

No more throwaway stuff. No more economic growth for the rich. Our priority must be to grow our well-being rather than our consumption. Invest in peace, education, and health care rather than war. Invest in compact communities rather than suburban sprawl. Invest in local economies and environmental

rejuvenation rather than in shipping toys around the world and speculating in the global financial casino. Invest in sidewalks, bicycles, bicycle paths, and public transportation rather than cars and highways. Invest in education for living rather than advertising designed to get us to consume more.

Here is the kicker. We must eliminate exactly those forms of non-essential production and consumption that our economic and political systems are designed to promote.

How many of you have watched Annie Leonard's video "The Story of Stuff?" I must have watched it a dozen times. It's a brilliant exposition of the consequences of an economic system designed to make money for rich capitalists without regard for human or natural consequences. I'll return to this in a minute.

The second element of the big picture is the **unraveling social fabric of civilization**—a consequence of extreme and growing inequality. A world divided between the profligate and the desperate cannot long endure. It intensifies competition for Earth's resources, undermines the legitimacy of our institutions, and drives an unraveling of the social fabric of mutual trust and caring essential to healthy social function.

In 2005 *Forbes Magazine* counted 691 billionaires in the world. This year, 2008, only three years later, it counted 1,250, nearly double, and estimated their combined wealth at \$4.4 trillion. These are the people who get the big tax breaks. According to a United Nations study, the richest 2% of world's people now own 51% of all the world's assets. The poorest 50% own only 1% assets. That is why we call them poor, because they don't own any assets. When the rich own everything there is nothing left for the poor to own.

A poor family wants a small plot of land to grow some food. A billionaire wants that land for a 20,000 square foot vacation home he may reside in for no more than a few days a year. Can you guess who gets the land? They tell us economic growth is essential lift the poor to prosperity. All too often

economic growth lifts the yachts and swamps the naked swimmers.

Most growth in consumption in recent years has not been at the bottom where it is needed. Its been at the very top among the already super wealthy. Our real resources are shrinking, but whatever resources are left, the rich can easily buy them. Speaking of billionaires and their yachts, I love the quote from a billionaire commenting on the rising price of oil. “Last year it cost me \$30,000 for a tank of diesel for my yacht. Now it costs me \$60,000. Its no big deal.”

For the super rich, if we run out of oil, there is always ethanol. Meanwhile desperate mothers watch helplessly as their babies die for lack of food.

We cannot grow our way out of poverty. The only way to end poverty and heal our social divisions on an already over stressed planet is through a redistribution of resources from rich to poor and from nonessential to essential uses. Oops. Can't you just hear the right wing wind bags? Hey, that Korten guy, he's talking about equity. He must be a communist.

Actually I'm a proud American patriot. I grew up with the patriotic story that the United States is a middle class democracy without the extremes of class division that characterize other societies. That story once made us proud and the envy of the world. Of course it was never quite accurate, but it expressed a beautiful widely shared human ideal that we must now reclaim. Equity is an essential foundation of true democracy and of our national ideal and self-image. Equity can even be defended on the grounds of rightful inheritance and property rights. Think about it.

Natural wealth was created by our Earth mother and is therefore a common heritage of all her children, including all non-human species. None of us has a right to abuse that wealth or to monopolize it to the exclusion of our sisters and brothers.

**This brings us to the third element of the big picture:** the governing institutions to which we give the power to set our priorities and our collective course. We might wonder how such injustice could happen in a world governed by democratically elected governments. The answer is simple and alarming. Our world is not governed by democratically elected governments. It is ruled by global financial institutions in the service of financial speculators who exchange trillions of dollars daily in search of instant unearned profits to increase the fortunes — and the power— of the richest people on the planet. They bring down governments that displease them, and buy and sell

the largest corporations like commodities. By design and law the defining priority and obligation of these governing institutions is to generate financial profits to make rich people richer, in short to increase inequality in a world in desperate need of greater equity. To this end, the corporations that rise or fall at the pleasure of the speculators, assault our eyes and ears with advertising messages intended to get those of us who are already have more stuff that we need — to buy more stuff.

That is the big picture. So what does it tell us about what we need to do and about how much hardship we will be involved in giving up our American way of consumption?

We need to grow strong caring communities in which we get more of our human satisfaction from caring relationships and less from material goods. We will need to end war as a means of settling international disputes and dismantle our military establishment. We need to reclaim the American ideal of being a democratic middle class nation without extremes of wealth and poverty. And we need to encourage and support the rest of the world in doing the same. To do all this we will need to create democratically accountable governing institutions devoted to the well-being of people and nature.

And there can be no trade offs between justice, sustainability, happiness, and democracy. They are all inseparably linked.

We are told that a serious effort to save the environment would impose serious hardship, particularly on the poor. Does any of this agenda sound like unbearable hardship? And exactly how is a more just distribution of resources going to hurt the poor? The story that saving Earth and ourselves will impose unbearable hardship is one example of a great many fabricated cultural stories that obscure our ability to see the possibilities before us.

### **What If We All Wanted the Same Thing?**

Think about this. Wouldn't it be nice if it turned out the choices we must make to survive together are the same as the choices we must make to create the very world most all of us want? If that were case, then we should be able to just get together and make it happen. Wouldn't that be cool? Maybe we should start a conversation to find out to find out what people truly want.

Actually that conversation started quite some time ago. One of the most profound experiences of my life was participating in the civil society portion of the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in

1992. I was part of a gathering of some 15,000 people representing the vast variety of humanity's races, religions, nationalities, and languages. Our discussions centered on defining the world we wanted to create together.

These discussions were chaotic and sometimes contentious. But at one point it hit me like a bolt of lightning. For all our differences, we all wanted the same thing: healthy children, families, and communities with healthy natural environments living in peace and cooperation—and not just for ourselves. We wanted it for everyone. Out of our conversations grew our shared dream of a world in which people and nature live in dynamic, creative and ultimately cooperative and balanced relationship. The Earth Charter, which is the product of a continuation of this discussion, refers to this world as an Earth Community,

I've lived in a lot of exotic places: Ethiopia, Nicaragua, Indonesia, the Philippines, California, Florida, and that place in outer space called Washington, DC. I've experienced a lot of different kinds of people. As I reflect back on that experience I realize that for all our differences, with the exception of a relatively few people who suffer from some debilitating psychological dysfunction, we are a lot more alike than we generally realize. Most of us want to breathe clean air and drink clean water. We want tasty nutritious food uncontaminated with toxins. We want healthy, happy children, loving families, and a caring community with a beautiful healthy natural environment. We want meaningful work, a living wage, and security in our old age. We want a say in the decisions our government makes. We want world peace. This doesn't seem excessive.

But, you say, what about here in the United States? What about our division between red states and blue states?

It turns out that for all the talk of **red states and blue states**, polling data indicate that even here we have substantial agreement on many key issues. We are more purple than we realize. For example, eighty-three percent of us believe that as a society the United States is focused on the wrong priorities. Supermajorities of more than 80 percent want to give higher priority to the needs of children, family, community, and the natural environment. Seventy-two percent of us agree that big companies have too much power. Put it together and we find out that Americans want a world that puts people ahead of profits, spiritual values ahead of financial values, and international cooperation ahead of international domination.

Note that none of these are distinctively conservative or liberal values. They are widely shared **human values**. What if all of us who live in this country were to wake up one morning and recognize that we are one nation yearning for healthy children, families, communities, and natural environments?

So where do those of us here stand? Let me see some hands. Do you believe that as a society we are focused on the wrong priorities? Do you yearn to see greater priority given to the needs of children, family, community, and nature? Do you think big business has too much power? Look at that. A room full of psychologically healthy people who want a healthy world that works for all. And I bet that some of you came in here believing that you are part of a fringe minority. In fact, we are the leading edge of a national and global supermajority and it is appropriate for us to speak and act accordingly.

I want to note something else here that I find significant. The idea that beneath the surface of our wondrous cultural diversity most humans want the same thing is consistent with recent scientific findings that our human brains are wired for compassion, caring, altruism, and cooperation. Engaging in helpful loving acts of cooperation and generosity stimulates the release of our bliss hormone, the same hormone released when we're having good sex. Isn't that stunning? Think of the possibilities.

### The Barriers

So what's our problem? Why are we in such a mess? Why didn't we long ago just get together to create the world we really want.

What are the real barriers to creating the world in which we measure our progress against a national happiness index rather than by an index of how fast we are turning stuff into garbage? Corrupt politicians and greedy corporate executives come to mind.

These folks certainly demonstrate that there are some seriously morally and psychologically challenged people in the world. Part of our problem is that they are the ones who most often capture the headlines, because they are the one's most inclined to engage in the ruthless competitive struggle required to claim positions of great power.

And then there are also those dysfunctional institutions we mentioned devoted to the concentration of wealth and power. These institutions tend to recruit to the highest levels of power the ethically challenged whose personal

values are consistent with the institution's values and priorities.

### **The Bad Story in Our Heads**

Our biggest problem, however, is neither bad people nor bad institutions. The problem way up there at the source of the stream is a bad story that keeps running on an endless loop in our heads telling us to get real, because the world of our dreams is nothing more than a naïve fantasy forever beyond our reach. You know the story. Its probably been running in your head all the time I've been speaking.

It is our human nature to be fearful, violent, greedy, and individualistic. Our wellbeing in this life depends on strong leaders with the will to use their police and military power to protect us from the criminals, terrorists, and rogue dictators who threaten our way of life. We depend on the competitive forces of a free unregulated market to channel our individual greed to constructive ends. There is no alternative. It's in our nature. Our only hope for salvation is the promise that if we obey those whom God has appointed to rule in this life, God will reward us with paradise in the afterlife in a place where people live in peace, harmony, and eternal bliss.

Now isn't that interesting. Peace, harmony, and eternal bliss in the afterlife. But don't even think about creating such a world here in this life. The story goes on.

The discipline and competition necessary to achieve order in this life may bring pain and hardship to some, but it is all for the good, because the brutal competition of war and the unrelenting pursuit of individual profit builds character, drives innovation, and leads to greatness. This competition, violent and destructive as it may sometimes be, has been the key to human success since the beginning of time and ultimately works to the benefit of everyone.

Have you ever heard this story? How often do elements of this story run in your head telling you that the world you long for really isn't possible?

This debilitating story is self-affirming, because our media bombard us with stories of the violent, the greedy, and the individualistic — including many politicians and corporate CEOs celebrated for their

political and financial success. We easily conclude that such people are representative of the best of our human nature, rather than pathological exceptions to the healthier human norm.

I call this story the Empire story, because it is the foundation of 5,000 years of organizing ourselves into hierarchies of domination and abuse. It legitimates the oppression of Empire and denies the higher order potential of our human nature—the potential, which if cultivated, that makes it possible for us to do things differently. The elements of this narrative are embedded in the stories most commonly heard from a great many economists, scientists, preachers, politicians, and historians—among others. We heard them in school. We hear them in church. We hear them on the media. Their constant repetition creates a kind of cultural trance from which we are now just beginning to awaken.

The trance isn't new. It has held us captive to the most reptilian aspects of our nature for the past 5,000 years. It drives the endless imperial cycle in which one Empire vanquishes another and obliterates its accomplishments. The success of those who achieve imperial dominion over their neighbors gives rise to monumental hubris and material self-indulgence until the reigning empire is so weakened by its own excesses that the more disciplined warriors of another tribe or nation easily vanquish it.

Does anything here sound familiar? Where exactly is the United States in this cycle.

### **Fall of the American Empire**

The fall of the American empire seems destined to come not from any military invasion across our borders but rather from our growing foreign debt and the purchase of our assets by the foreign sovereign wealth funds that hold that debt. It will be a rude awakening indeed when we one day wake up to realize that we, the democratic Christian capitalist rulers of the world have been reduced by our own hand to an economic colony of the Chinese Communist Party and a group of Islamic dictatorships in the Middle East.

No one in power even seems to notice, perhaps because their attention is focused on promoting wars in the Middle East and bailing out the high rollers who might otherwise have to sell one of their oversized yachts to cover their gambling losses on sub-prime mortgages.

## Why Now?

Change begins with a new story that celebrates the best rather than the worst of what we are and can be. Its pretty straight forward. If we convince ourselves that we are innately brutal, greedy beings and that this is all for the good, then we set ourselves a goal of perfecting our capacity for greed and violence, thus perpetuating the world of our nightmares.

It is time to start filling our heads instead with the story that it is our nature to be caring and giving and that this is all for the good, and therefore we properly set our sights on perfecting our capacity for love and caring and create the world of our dreams. It isn't a particularly new story. A young fellow named Jesus built quite a following by preaching it to large crowds of adoring fans some 2,000 years ago. Some of our most revered heroes, for example Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. preached the same message and built powerful social movements.

OK. I know the question you are about to ask. Hey, you look at me and say "Didn't this guy Korten just say its been this way for 5,000 years. They crucified Jesus and they assassinated Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. Why should we expect things to change now? Its over. The ice caps are melting. We're cooked."

Here is the key to why now. For the first time since the first empires were formed in the lands we now call Iraq and Egypt we have both the means and the imperative to liberate our selves from the story in our heads, break the cycle of domination, and live Earth Community into being. It is the Great Work of our time. Some of us call it the Great Turning.

The communications capabilities of the Internet provide the means to hold the global conversation needed to awaken ourselves from our cultural trance and create global alliances for change that bring together people from all levels of society. It starts with local conversations that grow and merge through the Internet into global conversations.

The global scale collapse of social and environmental systems provides the shared imperative to have that conversation, a conversation now already well underway. For the first time since our earliest human like ancestors walked the earth millions of years ago, we humans have the means and the imperative to engage this conversation on a global scale.

We weren't born with the Empire story in our heads. Its not in our genes. It got there because it is a constantly reoccurring theme of the cultural stories we turn to for answers to our most basic questions about ourselves and our possibilities. These stories

are continuously propagated by the same economic, political, and religious institutions of Empire that reward those who serve the dominator system by showering them with financial success and promoting them to positions of unaccountable power.

## The Power of Authentic Stories

Profound social change takes place when an important cultural story changes. The impetus to change stories that affirm imperial rule is unlikely to come from within the institutions of Empire.

Democracy took hold when citizens organized to replace the story of the divine right of kings with the story that the powers of government derive from the will of the people.

People of color and women won recognition of their full human rights only as the civil rights and women's movements successfully exposed the fallacy of the story that people of color and women are less than fully human. Recognizing the full humanity of all peoples opens us to a deeper understanding of what it truly means to be human in all the rich potentials that our human nature embodies.

The environmental movement is replacing the story that nature is a dark and evil threat to be subdued, vanquished, and used for whatever purposes please us with the story of Earth as a living being, the mother of life, a living spaceship.

We are still working on many of these new stories, but those of my generation have experienced the enormous societal shifts that these changes in our cultural stories have wrought. In each instance a new story has contributed to the yet larger process of the Great Turning of the human course from the dominator path of Empire to the partnership path of Earth Community.

The propagandists of Empire who propagate Empire stories work at an inherent disadvantage, because their success depends on suppressing our natural desires for community, justice, and liberty. That is why Empire has to pay them handsomely for their service. The results they seek do not come naturally.

The power of **authentic** stories is the source of civil society's ultimate power advantage. The stories of Earth community acknowledge and express our genuine desire to love and be loved and to live in creative caring communities with peace and justice for all beings.

Corporations command economic power. Governments command the coercive power of the

police and military. The power of authentic stories, however, ultimately trumps all the other forms of power, because these other forms of power depend for their legitimacy on the stories that frame the culture. Unlike the fabricated stories of Empire, the authentic stories of Earth Community resonate with what we know deep in our being to be true. Once we are clear that there is an alternative to the violent domination of Empire and the alternative is the world of our dreams, we can together reclaim the power we have yielded to Empire and redirect it to the work of growing Earth Community.

Without our willing acquiescence, the dominator structures of Empire simply collapse, as the Marcos Regime in the Philippines collapsed, as the Soviet Union and the apartheid regime in South Africa collapsed without a shot fired. Progressive Talk show host Thom Hartmann calls this process walking away from the king.

### Conversation

How does it happen? It begins with a conversation. A while back Cecile Andrews, our local Seattle author of *The Circle of Simplicity* explained to me how the women's movement changed the story on gender, and unleashed the long suppressed power of the feminine. It started with discussion circles in which women came together to share personal stories. As each woman spoke her truth, a larger truth was revealed for all to see. The prevailing story that the key to a woman's happiness is to find the right man, marry him, and devote her life to his service is not true.

Absent the discussions that encouraged the sharing of their true stories, women whose experience failed to conform to the prevailing cultural story held themselves responsible for the failure. They assumed they were simply different, and thus in some way deficient. By breaking the silence to share their stories they ended their isolation and rose above self-doubt as they came to realize that they were in the very good company of a great many other wonderful women. Many then lent their voices to a growing chorus of women engaged in changing the cultural stories by which society had long defined women and their roles.

Cecile noted to me that the same process is involved in the voluntary simplicity movement. Through sharing stories about what makes us truly happy, we come to see the fallacy of the advertising story that material consumption is our source of

happiness. Once this fallacy is seen for what it is, we can enthusiastically share our stories of how we are improving the quality of our lives by reducing the quantity of our consumption and gaining control of our time to do more of the things that make us feel fully alive.

The power of authentic stories told and retold by millions and ultimately billions of people can trump the power of Empire. It begins with a conversation.

There are now hundreds of thousands of organizations involved in advancing the conversation that is challenging and changing the economic story that serves the predatory institutions of Empire. The economic story we are working to change rests on false representations about our human nature, the public interest, economic growth and money. These false representations promote false priorities and distract our attention from the possibility of creating the world we truly want and that we must now create to save our Earth Mother—and ourselves. In everything you do, share the story of our human possibility and of our right and responsibility to create for ourselves and for future generations, the world of our shared dream.

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Our distinctive human capacity for reflection and intentional choice carries a corresponding **moral responsibility** to care for our Mother Earth and for one another. We must now test the limits of the individual and collective creative potential of our species as we strive to become the change we seek.

In these turbulent and frightening times, it is important to remind ourselves that we are privileged to live at the most exciting moment of **creative opportunity** in the whole of the human experience. The future is in our hands. Now is the hour. We have the power to turn this world around.

*We are the ones we have been waiting for.*

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Based on a presentation to the Seattle Green Festival, April 13, 2008. Dr. David C. Korten, author of *The Great Turning: From Empire to Earth Community*, and *When Corporations Rule the World*, co-founder and board chair of *YES!* magazine, president of the People-Centered Development Forum, and a board member of the Business Alliance for Local Living Economies.