

# KOSMOS

Global Transformation in Harmony with All Life



## AWAKENING TO LIFE

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## We the People of Living Earth: An Authentic Story for Our Time

By David Korten

*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*

We humans live by stories that express the shared values and beliefs that allow us to organize as coherent communities and societies. Our most important stories are those that express what we hold to be most sacred, most essential to our wellbeing. These in turn reflect and are grounded in our deepest beliefs about our origin, nature, and purpose.

When we get our story wrong, we get our future wrong. We now have our story badly wrong.

### When Time is Money

Call it our Sacred Money and Markets story. The corporate media constantly repeats it. Economics courses in our most prestigious institutions teach it as settled science. It is the foundation of university business and public policy curricula.

*Time is money. Money is wealth. Making money creates wealth. Making money is the defining purpose of workers, business, and the economy. The rich are society's wealth creators. Affluent lifestyles are their fair and just reward. Material consumption drives prosperity and is the path to happiness. Poverty is a consequence of laziness. The Earth belongs to us.*

*It is our human nature to be individualistic, competitive, and acquisitive. Guided by the invisible hand of the free market, these beneficial traits unleash the creative potential of humanity to grow the economy to create the wealth to end poverty and drive the technological innovation required to eliminate our dependence on nature. The community interest is simply an aggregation of the individual private interests of its individual members.*

*Corporations, groups of people working in common cause, are engines of wealth creation. They are entitled to the same rights as any person.*

As we live out this story, GDP and the financial assets and consumption of a favored few increase. Economists assure us society grows richer. Caring relationships are monetized. The many struggle in growing desperation. Earth dies. Focused on becoming ever more proficient at making money disconnected from the creation of real value, we have forgotten how to live.

It takes no more than a few minutes of reflection to recognize that the familiar Sacred Money and Markets story is false or misleading on every point. It misdefines our nature, celebrates the psychopath as hero, and promotes an addiction to material consumption we might otherwise recognize as the sign of an empty life.

For so long as the Sacred Money and Markets story defines what we value, who we honor, and how we define the purpose of society's most powerful institutions, we will grow the financial assets of the few, strip the many of their means of living, and erode Earth's capacity to sustain life.

How could we get it so wrong? Our stories hold the key.

### Insights from Two Encounters

In the fall of 1999, I encountered Marcus Borg, a respected New Testament scholar, at a conference organized by the Washington State Association of Churches and the Church Council of Greater Seattle. It was the lead-up to the historic Seattle WTO confrontation.

Borg's defining statement struck a deep chord. "Tell me your image of God and I will tell you your politics."

Borg explained that the image of God, as an all-knowing, all-powerful patriarch who rules from afar, translates into belief in a hierarchy of righteousness that supports a politics of authority, domination, and competition for power. The image of God as a universal spirit manifest in all creation supports a politics of co-operation, compassion, and sharing. He noted that both images find expression in the Christian Bible. Western cultures strongly favor the patriarch image.

Much later, in March 2012, I was a 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 noted that by the reckoning of the dominant culture story, Earth and its bounty are property and best preserved by raising their market price.

In the indigenous story, Earth is our Sacred Mother, a living being and the source of our birth and nurture. Her care is a sacred responsibility and cannot be compromised no matter how much money may be at stake. The significance of the indigenous perspective hit me full force when Karma Tshiteem, secretary of Bhutan's Gross National Happiness Commission, summed up his presentation on Bhutan's development philosophy with three words: "Time is life." I was raised to believe that "Time is money."



Springtime at St. James's Park, London

There it was: two contrasting worldviews summed up in three words. One supports an economy in which money is the purpose and life is the means. The other supports an economy in which life is the purpose and money is a means. The insights from these two encounters highlight the significance of our framing stories, especially our deepest beliefs about the nature of reality.

### Three Partial Truths

There are three cosmologies (creation stories) familiar to Western culture: the Distant Patriarch cosmology of the Abrahamic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—mentioned above, the Grand Machine cosmology of Newtonian physics, and the Mystical Unity story of the mystic tradition. Each in its most familiar form is partial, dated, and in conflict with the fullness of current knowledge. These are the most familiar and widely recognized variations of each of the three.

**The Distant Patriarch:** The Distant Patriarch cosmology centers on an all-knowing, all-powerful god who, over a period of metaphorical days, created all that is. As he is the sole source of agency (willful action), all that exists is by his will. My most important relationship is to him. My purpose is to obey his rules as defined by his anointed Earthly representatives, whom he makes known to me by the power and privilege he grants them. *God, I'm trying to play by the rules, but things are not going well. Please save me.*

**The Grand Machine:** In the Grand Machine cosmology, the universe is much like a mechanical clock playing out its predetermined destiny as the tension in its spring winds down. Only the material is real. Free will and agency are illusions. All is explained by mechanism and chance. Life is merely an accidental outcome of material complexity. Consciousness is an artifact of physical processes in the brain. Therefore, I exist only as an accidental and meaningless entity in a mechanistic cosmos devoid of agency and possessing no purpose or meaning. *This is depressing. I think I'll go shopping.*

**The Mystical Unity:** The Mystical Unity cosmology has ancient roots in the world's mystical traditions. It is most commonly and explicitly associated with Buddhism. In the classic expression of this cosmology, what we experience as material reality—including our experience of ourselves as material beings—is an illusion generated by the human ego, which is the cause of suffering. We find peace through meditation to transcend the ego and meld our individual consciousness with the love and peace of the unitary consciousness that is the only true reality. *Please don't distract me. I'm meditating to find peace and heal the world.*

Each of the three encourages a kind of individualistic passivity, withdrawal, and acceptance of the existing structures of power that set us against one another and Earth. Set in opposition to one another, the three competing cosmologies sustain a destructive divide between the spiritual and material that leaves us vulnerable to seduction by the fabricated Sacred Money and Markets story.

The way forward to a viable, just, and prosperous human future begins with a synthesis cosmology grounded in the ancient wisdom of indigenous people supplemented by all the many sources of human insight and understanding—including the three familiar cosmologies.

### A Living Universe Cosmology

As contemporary science observes the behavior of subatomic particles, the inner life of living cells, the self-regulation of complex ecosystems, and the scale of the universe, we witness a grand, complex, and wondrous reality far beyond the imagination of previous human generations. The more science reveals of these mysteries, the more evident the yawning gaps in our understanding become.

When we look beyond the details we see a universe unfolding on a clear and persistent underlying trajectory toward ever greater complexity, beauty, awareness, and possibility. Creation's expression bears far greater resemblance to a living seed bursting forth



to grow into a magnificent flowering tree than a giant mechanical clock playing out the tension in its spring.

The most advanced observations of physical systems by quantum physics and of living systems by the life sciences reveal extraordinary capacities for self-organization, even in seemingly solid matter. It is as if the universe unfolds through a self-directing, cosmic scale trial-and-error learning process in which agency and conscious intelligence (spirit) are pervasive and integral to everything. To know God as spirit, we need only observe how s/he expresses with an apparent drive to know and to express her/his possibilities through learning and becoming—the same drive that manifests on a micro-scale as integral to our human nature.

Put it all together and we can discern an emerging Living Universe cosmology that evokes a radical vision of deep intentionality and purpose. For humans, it evokes a profound sense of meaning, the deep possibilities of radical democracy, and a story frame to guide the transformation of our relationship to living Earth as our source of birth and nurture.

### Children of a Living Earth

Scientists estimate that there may be as many as 40 billion habitable Earth-size planets in the galaxy. Carbon-based life likely exists on others. We are only certain, however, that it exists on one. By our current reckoning, life appeared on Earth some 3.5 billion years ago. Over the first 2 billion years it consisted solely of prokaryotes, single-cell organisms with no nucleus. They formed a tightly networked community in which they constantly exchanged information and learning to invent all of life's essential miniaturized chemical systems. In addition, acting in concert with Earth's physical structures and forces, they filtered excess carbon and a vast variety of toxins from Earth's surface and sequestered them deep underground. In so doing, they created conditions on Earth's surface necessary for the birth of yet more complex organisms of ever more wondrous abilities.

Continuously capturing, sharing, and exchanging energy, water, nutrients, and information, Earth's countless and ever more complex and varied organisms interacted with Earth's physical systems to create and continuously regenerate Earth's soils, rivers, aquifers, fisheries, forests, grasslands, and much more. With few exceptions, each living member of Earth's community of life, no matter how small and seemingly unimportant, earns its living contributing in some way to the health, resilience, and creative potential of the whole. Together, each living member helps to maintain conditions of climate, soil fertility, and the chemical balance of Earth's atmosphere and seas suited to the needs of each of the community's individual members.

Earth birthed humans some two hundred thousand years ago. For many thousands of years, we lived as one with Earth and found our place of service within her ever-renewing, ever-evolving living community. Our sense of separation began around 3000 BCE with the rise of imperial civilizations. The technological

advances of the most recent four hundred years have given us godlike powers to manipulate, suppress, and exploit our Earth mother. Acting as prodigal adolescents with a naive sense of invincibility, we recklessly tested the limits of our newfound abilities, unmindful that special abilities bring special responsibilities.

Now in a collective fit of collective insanity induced by the idolatrous Sacred Money and Markets story, we humans devote our best minds and technologies to reversing the course of Earth's evolution. We have submitted to rule by money-seeking corporate robots on a frantic mission to extract the carbon and toxins long ago sequestered by Earth's earliest life forms to release them back into Earth's atmosphere, waters, and soils to suppress the living processes that sustain us to make as much money as possible before we humans wake up and stop them.

### Life is Sacred | Money is Just a Number

As we reawaken to our true nature, the corruption of the Sacred Money and Markets story becomes self-evident. A new story, a Sacred Life and Living Earth story, is emerging to replace it. Time is life. Real wealth is living wealth. Money is just a number useful as a medium of exchange in well-regulated markets. We humans are living beings born of and nurtured by Living Earth, itself born of a living universe. Life exists only in community. We are a part of nature, not apart from nature. Earth does not belong to us. We belong to Earth. Our health and prosperity depend on Earth's health and prosperity.

Our human nature calls us to care and share for the benefit of all. Serving the living community that sustains us is essential to community health and the source of our greatest happiness. Individualistic greed, ruthless competition, and violence against life are indicators of serious psychological and societal dysfunctions. Poverty is most often the consequence of a lack of opportunity. The purpose of any human institution—whether business, government, or civil society—is to support people as productive, contributing, sharing members of a vibrant and prosperous living Earth community. Corporations that seek to monopolize resources and decision-making power in the pursuit of purely financial ends have no place in a healthy society.

This is an authentic story grounded in ancient self-evident truths that live in the human heart. It frames the principles of a new economy that holds the key to a viable and prosperous human future. It changes everything. Live it, speak it, and share it. Ours is a moment of human reawakening to our true nature and possibility. We are the ones we've been waiting for.



David Korten is the co-founder and board chair of YES! Magazine, co-chair of the New Economy Working Group, president of the Living Economies Forum, an associate fellow of the Institute for Policy Studies, and a member of the Club of Rome. This article is based on his most recent book, *Change the Story, Change the Future: A Living Economy for a Living Earth*.