

## **Imperatives for Institutional Transformation**

**A conversation with John B. Cobb, Jr. and David Korten**

**Session III of IV in the Ecological Civilization Series**

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**Description:** The imperative to transition to an ecological civilization of justice, peace, and environmental health has profound implications for the institutions to which we look for spiritual and intellectual guidance—the institutions of religion and education. Future human viability requires that these foundational institutions adjust their intellectual frameworks to reflect an expanded new enlightenment understanding of life's interconnections and capacity for intelligent self-organization. The implications for economic theory and practice are particularly dramatic as we transition from maximizing financial profits to prioritizing the health and well-being of life.

**David Korten:** [00:00:04]... Matt [Fox, in Session II] kind of introduced us to this idea that we sometimes get into longing for death.

**David Korten:** [00:00:15] And even if you're familiar with the evangelicals who are into the "rapture," they kind of look forward to that. I think, at least my view is, that we're probably here in this existence whatever the implications are for a good reason; that this is a time for both learning and for contributing. So this discussion about an ecological civilization perhaps gets us on the right course. As we were planning these sessions, when I was studying the background of the Parliament of the World Religions, I was very struck in reading the mission statement and their declaration in 1993, and then their Declaration on Climate Change, the extent to which it is clear the purpose of the parliament is to engage the institutions of religion in addressing the fundamental issues of our time, toward creating a world of peace, justice and sustainability.

And in the most recent declaration on climate change they actually referred to that very explicitly as an ecological civilization. So we call it by many names, but that's a name that very much appeals to me, because the "ecological" makes clear that it's a coming together of essentially everything - that all people and all of nature - to maintain the health and vitality of the whole. The term civilization: I often think of Gandhi's response when he was asked what do you think of Western civilization, he said, "I thought it'd be a good idea." I think it'd be a good idea... And that's kind of how I approach this. It seems to me that most of our, what we call "civilizations" have been imperial structures in which the few have exploited the many and nature, to live in some kind of special extravagance and power. That seems to actually be very much the nature of what we have currently. I'm a little bit handicapped because my printer was not working.

**David Korten:** [00:02:52] Now, this is one part of a four part series. We had two parts yesterday in which we were mainly exploring stories or narratives and the idea that one of the things that makes us human, that is distinctive about us as a human species, is our reliance on narrative: that we can actually, we actually create realities of the mind, through our narratives, and we tend to live those out. We're each born into our particular narrative of our culture or our tribe, and we tend to grow up within that without questioning it.

**David Korten:** [00:03:31] Part of what is distinctive about this moment in time is that we are

becoming aware of the power of our narratives and the extent to which the differences in our narratives define many different possibilities for humanity. I think you know Fran, my wife here and I are probably not alone in this group of having lived in numerous different cultures, in some depth, and realizing how distinctive and diverse they are.

**David Korten:** [00:04:05] And this relates to the different stories within which they grow up and that begins to give us a sense of the variety of our human choices.

**David Korten:** [00:04:20] The session this morning centers on John Cobb, my esteemed teacher. All of these sessions I pulled together with individuals from whom I have benefited so greatly in the deepening of my thinking. And as you may have noticed all of us are people who are kind of into challenging convention...challenging conventional ideas of which of course is the real challenge before us right at this time.

**David Korten:** [00:05:01] The session this morning we're going to focus on, more on the applied side. Yesterday was more exploring the narrative...

**John Cobb:** [00:05:22] Just because you haven't had your lunch, doesn't mean it's still morning!

**David Korten:** [00:05:27] See I told you - always challenging! I don't dare say anything out of line or one of my colleagues will jump on me!

**David Korten:** [00:05:43] My wife is also a colleague.

**David Korten:** [00:05:57] We're going to explore - I'll talk mainly about the institutions of the economy. John is expert on just about every institution imaginable, and has become established as a leading thinker and challenger of just about every field of human knowledge and understanding.

**David Korten:** [00:06:19] And I'm particularly indebted to John because he's eighty-three years old..*ninety*-three years old, and is my inspiration for as long as you're able, contributing to creating a human future that will actually work for all.

**David Korten:** [00:06:43] Now, as I think about the relationships involved, I was recently reminded through roughly 99 percent of the experience, since the modern human species emerged, we lived as tribes. And you think about relationships within the tribe and this is the way we evolved: we're in constant contact with other humans, the humans that we live with, and that our life depends on as a community and with nature, and that our children grow up within that community - in constant contact with that community and with nature, pretty much every minute of every day. Then you contrast that, you begin to think about how contemporary society organizes, and how virtually every one of our current institutions tends to separate us from one another and nature.

**David Korten:** [00:07:46] One of the least visible but most important of those is money. So more and more of our relationships are defined by financial transactions. But it's the same thing in terms of our housing, the way it organizes us into very often single-person households. It leaves us dependent on cars moving from one neighborhood to another. The corporations control the money and they control basically our lives. Now one of the things that Fran and I became aware of - Fran

will be leading the next session, where we'll all be having a discussion together, in this room. I guess I should also mention that we're sending around a sign up sheet if any of you want to sign up for us for my e-mail newsletter or for YES magazine newsletter. If you look at our economic institutions, well, when Fran and I were working in development - and we were essentially advancing the models of economic growth and we were not really conscious of the extent to which we were doing that - we began to realize over time that the countries where we were working, in Africa, Asia and Latin America, at that point in time particularly, most people lived in villages, lived off the land, they lived without money.

**David Korten:** [00:09:20] Economists call them absolutely poor and yet they often had healthy diets. They lived off the land. They had decent homes. They often have wonderful cultures and values and strong communities. What development was doing - it became very clear, over time that the whole thrust of what we call economic development and the advancement of economic growth is driving people off of the land, and into requirements for an income which then is controlled by the people who control access to money, either through lending or through providing jobs.

**David Korten:** [00:10:14] Once that hits you say, "Wow." Much of what we call economic growth and which we're driving in terms of economic growth and our economic policies - we've got to grow the economy, because that's how we grow jobs, etcetera etcetera - is really about getting people more and more dependent on the financial system, and on the banks and corporations that control that money and its flow. Now we also begin to realize that some of the most defining developments of our time are what are called trade agreements: that they're actually international economic agreements that are written by and for corporations, in their essence, and to shift power from communities - that are supposedly, or from governments, that are supposedly democratically accountable to their people - to transnational corporations that owe no allegiance to any place, people or country except their very richest owners. So you begin to see this frame, and that the whole thing is an economy essentially designed to produce and enrich billionaires. And that explains a great deal about why we're in so much trouble. Because that drives the destruction of nature. It drives the increasing injustice and inequality. And of course the military contractors that benefit from war, it's to their benefit. But it is absolutely against everything that the Parliament stands for in terms of peace justice and a sustainable relationship with nature. And the whole process of economic growth and economic development that we've taken to the third world is very much an effort in the post-colonial era. Remember after World War II, India became independent, and all the different colonies became gradually independent. But we then substituted economic development, which was reintroducing this kind of corporate colonialism. Now I'm sure John will talk a little bit more about this, but some of the implications are - well, you know the concentration of wealth currently is beyond imagination. Last year the count was the eight richest people owned as much wealth as the first half of humanity. Then this year it was six individuals. And yesterday I learned that the latest count is five individuals. And of course we're moving toward Jeff Bezos. He can't keep track from day to day how many billions he has, which is a fair amount. And the underlying pattern is toward one corporation - we might not even know its name, but that in effect controls every aspect of the economy globally, if we continue on this current path.

**David Korten:** [00:13:22] Now what this means is that we know many of you I know are working on development of local economies and that is essential to begin to develop the frames of an alternative economic infrastructure. But at the same time we have to be standing against and

transforming these global institutions.

**David Korten:** [00:13:46] And this requires fundamentally changing our whole relationship to corporations, recognizing that a corporation exists only because of government issues a charter. If there's no charter, it doesn't exist. Now why in the world would there be any legitimate reason for a legitimate government to issue a corporate charter except to serve the public good? Now keep that in mind. And then we realize, okay, we actually have to break up these trans-national global corporations and restructure them so that they are actually accountable to the communities in which they do business. It's a huge agenda! I mean this this becomes just absolutely daunting when you begin to recognize the depth of the changes. But we absolutely cannot develop local economies that are controlled by local people, if we allow this continued concentration and control of our local resources and assets. We need to fundamentally restructure the financial system, so that we eliminate financial speculation. Gambling should be done in well-regulated casinos, not in our global financial system.

**David Korten:** [00:15:16] So this means that we need to return to a system of local banks; the initiatives that we now see toward governments. Every government ought to have its own its own bank, which means it can control its own savings and use those to create financial funding as needed, to serve the local interests.

**David Korten:** [00:15:44] It means we've got to reduce total human consumption but do it in a way that actually meets the material needs of all people. So just two examples... One very nice contribution to doing that would be to eliminate war and the instruments of war. Think how much how much of the burden on the environment we could eliminate, simply by that act. Another is to essentially eliminate dependence on cars except by perhaps people who are truly living in rural areas.

**David Korten:** [00:16:17] But the potential to the extent that we organize around neighborhoods where we can get around by bicycle and foot and are connected by fast mass transit and so forth... Actually Fran and I had the experience of living in downtown Manhattan, in New York City and it's wonderful. You don't need a car. You don't want a car; it's ridiculous to have a car there. Most everything that we needed was in walking distance of our apartment. Fran took the subway into work. You begin to get much closer to the people that you live with.

**David Korten:** [00:16:53] So we're exploring so many different ways in which our fundamental institutions need to change. Now I want to turn here to John. This is primarily his session and to my knowledge John Cobb is probably more than any other individual led the global discussions on an ecological civilization. He's got extraordinary ties in China, which is kind of the world leader in the sense that they have built commitments to an ecological civilization actually into their national constitution. John's a very interesting guy because he's been on the intellectual frontlines of just about every field of human knowledge. He was born in Kobe, Japan in 1925 to Methodist missionaries. He grew up in Kobe and Hiroshima. You may have heard of Hiroshima... After World War II, he actually served in the occupation, the US occupation force in China...

**John Cobb:** [00:18:06] Japan.

**David Korten:** [00:18:10] Japan. Sorry. Thank you.

**David Korten:** [00:18:23] He's one of the leaders in in challenging religious convention and philosophical convention. He's a leading student and proponent of Whiteheadian scholarship philosophy. It's called Process Theory, which is a philosopher's version of creation spirituality that Matt talked about yesterday. And as I was looking at his resume I was struck that in nineteen seventy one - this was actually a year before the Club of Rome Limits to Growth studies that attracted so much attention - John wrote a book called, *Is It Too Late - The Theology of Ecology*, which was essentially putting forward the same premise before the Club of Rome study. According to Wikipedia John's written more than 50 books, and where I really became a devotee of John was with his 1989 book that he co-authored with Herman Daly on *For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy Toward a Community Environment and a Sustainable Future*, which to me is basically the biblical text of true ecological economics. And my understanding of the story is that the theologian working with the economist ended up making the economist discover the real foundations of real economics. So these are all to John's credit. Anyhow, with that I want to turn it over to you, John to fill it in with your insights into the vision for an ecological civilization.

**John Cobb:** [00:20:27] Well thank you so much. And I'm always happy to be flattered. I've had a wonderful time at these meetings. The people who have been speaking to us are saints. Really many of them really have given their lives, and even endangered their lives, and especially I've appreciated hearing from indigenous people. I've been around a lot of people who have talked about the indigenous people as having wisdom, and I've certainly accepted that and so forth. But I have not personally had the privilege of hearing so many expressing that wisdom before. And it's very real. So I'm going to criticize - I usually do. But I hope you understand this may be the best there is, but it ain't good enough. It's that kind of criticism.

**John Cobb:** [00:21:30] I think that even if everybody who spoke to us, and most of the rest of us achieved what we were concretely working on, that the world still might not survive, as a habitable place for human beings. I hope we can direct attention in a different, and more sustained and systematic way, to what is necessary if we are to get through these next decades without really fouling the nest to such an extent, that our children don't have a place to live. So that's why having a term like ecological civilization, like integral ecology - you may come up with something you like better, but that's minor. Except I hope that we can agree that we're all working for it. If we could become a unified force, instead of appear to the political leaders as being a bunch of special interests, which are readily dismissed, I think there would be a chance of really making a huge difference in the next decade. I have been I've been worrying about this for 50 years and I've seen lots of wonderful things being done. But I have not seen anything being done that had a chance to redirect our basic energies, so I don't consider the matter of developing an ecological civilization one cause, alongside other causes. I think it is *the* cause which all of us are in fact working for. I have not heard a single speech or expression of sentiment from the platform or from people sitting in the audience that I did not think expressed an aim at ecological civilization. But I didn't hear anybody talking about how we could put this together in a way that might actually change something. So that's what I'm concerned about. And this event has given me hope, but I've had hope before and it's always been dashed. So my hopes don't mean that I'm confident. But If we could agree that in a hundred different ways... this is not a desire to put an end to the efforts to do any of the things that I've heard about, but if we could organize in such a way that as we did them, we

understood we were moving to the end that the other 99 people, people in the other 99 directions were going. I'll start with the ecological economics. This is an example of something that is absolutely imperative, unless we change our teaching about what the goal of economics is. You understand that the religion of economics, as taught in all of our colleges and universities - I hope there are exceptions, I haven't found them yet - the goal is growth. Now you know what growth means? It means using up the resources of the earth faster. If that's the only economic thinking we have... Now that economic thinking is beneficial to corporations, but it's destructive to everybody else. And corporations are not human beings - they'll probably survive when they're no human beings left.

**David Korten:** [00:25:49] The charters will still be there...

**John Cobb:** [00:25:54] But none of us want to devote our lives to the eternality of corporations. Why do we allow all of our higher education to be committed to a goal that is purely destructive? But that's what we do. Now there is a society of ecological economics. But in a meeting like this of people who really want the world to survive, I haven't heard it mentioned. That troubles me, but it's a typical example of what I'm talking about. These folks are doing a lot - wonderful job, but other people who are doing a wonderful job don't even know about it! Now let's suppose that everybody who really cared about an ecological civilization, under whatever labels, was giving strong moral support to those who are working on what kind of economy we need, if the world is to survive and who developed a lot.

**John Cobb:** [00:27:02] I'm very proud of the book that he mentioned. It did help to get the movement started, but there are lots of people who know lots more about economics than I, who have been working on spelling this out. So it's done. The theory is there, but it doesn't get any support from the people who think they're working for it. You see what I mean? But the same thing is true... I've just come from a series of very powerful speeches in the plenary this morning. I was personally... and so many things were said that I like. I always hate to make these statements; it sounds like it's putting something else down. It's not. It's an expression of the fact that I realize I have not been really aware of all the powerful things that are being done to put an end to nuclear armaments. I was very encouraged, very heartened. But that's just another example. If all of us, who really would like a world without nuclear weapons, whether we're doing economics or education or whatever, really gave support to those people, they'd be able to do twice, three times as much. They've accomplished a lot but they haven't accomplished getting any nuclear power to sign on to a statement that it is prepared to give up its nuclear power. And that's where the rubber really hits the road. And that of course is very closely connected to the economy as long as the economy is run for the sake of corporations and a few key individuals who are working with them.

**John Cobb:** [00:29:01] Those who control that part of the world's economy are not going to give up their weapons. There is still a segment of the planet that is not under their control and those cultures, those nations that are not under their control, are systematically demonized in all of our press.

**John Cobb:** [00:29:28] If all of us would realize that when you read the paper - I don't care which newspaper it is - you're reading propaganda, and it's propaganda basically for the status quo or for making the status quo a little bit more status quo than it already is. We might be able to put an end

to the need. When we talk about war, who is the great villain? Russia.

**John Cobb:** [00:30:01] Who are the people who are most promoting hostility toward Russia? ...the leaders of the great progressive Democratic Party. We do not have a voice in government. Both political parties are controlled, by essentially the same people. I tell people my ancestors were southern patricians. Now there were only a few hundred of these folks, but they controlled all the politics of the southern, southeastern states. We did. I'll say "we." I want you to understand: I'm not talking against other people. We did it by playing off the "niggers" and the "poor white trash." They hated each other so much that we were kind of above the fray. And they both let us pull all the strings. Well we are being treated exactly the same way by the deep state today. It's very hard to say exactly who and what that is, but it's very much involved with the financial system. Even the industrial corporations are pretty much instruments of the financiers. Karl Marx was right. The longer we have this capitalist system the more concentrated wealth becomes. And his followers were not patient. They couldn't wait until all the wealth got concentrated in the hands of a couple of hundred people. Marx was not one who wanted the revolutions at the time that he was writing. He wanted... When all the wealth is in the hands of a couple of hundred people, then yes, you revolt: it doesn't matter much what happens to those 200 people if they get killed. What's that in relationship to the horrors they've been inflicting on the rest of us? So, I'm not saying he was the tender-hearted person, with great compassion and so forth. I'm just saying when the number who run the world - the 1 percent of 1 percent of 1 percent - you can "off 'em" one way or another: put them on one of the islands where they have bought up the whole island and turned it into a supposed paradise where, they are all miserable together.

**John Cobb:** [00:32:46] The rest of us then could take over and have a sensible world. Whether we would, I don't know. We're perfectly capable of being just as stupid then as we are now.

**John Cobb:** [00:32:57] But there is also a real chance. I think the conditions are getting to the point, and the awareness of the crisis is getting to the point, that if we were to organize ourselves to support each other - instead of working on all of the thousands of fragments that need to be worked out, within the next ten years we might be able to redirect actions so that there will be a, well, "habitable" world. It's much too late to avoid catastrophes, disasters. It is not too late to save a livable planet, but it's getting too late. The climate scientists say maybe, maybe 20 years we have before climate just goes so crazy, there's no telling whether we have a liveable planet. The most immediate threat is still nuclear war. And if you allow yourself to believe all the bad things that are said about Russia, so you get so angry with Putin that you don't think it'd be bad at least to kill him and a few million other Russians... That's the propaganda we're getting! Try to find out what's really happening in Russia. They are not a threat to the world. One country is really the threat to the world - and almost everywhere in the world people know that. Except here, of course. We are the threat - because our leaders are in the service, not of the American people, not in the service of democracy not in the service of human rights... That's all propaganda.

**John Cobb:** [00:34:57] If you just look at the governments we set up, the governments we oppose... you'll find the ones we oppose have a lot more civil rights and humanitarian activity than the ones we ally ourselves with. Be sure you understand that we are owned: all of our political expressions are controlled, the major media are controlled by the group that is getting richer and richer and by people who do not care what happens to the bottom 50 percent. I think that what we

need to do and just... If I were the boss - and I don't mean the boss of the government, I mean the boss of any really significant but potentially powerful group - I'd say the first thing we need to do is to say, to understand in order to have an ecological civilization you've got to have lots of things. You've got to have ecological agriculture. You've got to have ecological cities. You've got to have ecological economics. You've got to have ecological education. You've got to have ecological systems of communication and transportation. You've got to have ecological industry.

**John Cobb:** [00:36:30] I'm not trying to be exhaustive. I think you could get a group of people who could come out with a very useful list of what needs to be done. Then, look at that list, you say. Now some of these things we already know what they would be. I'm not saying we know, I mean somebody knows. It's in print. You can find out. I think, for example, that what we need to know in order to have an ecological health system is known. I'm not saying we have an ecological health system. I think we've been moving in that direction. Western medicine with its emphasis on chemistry and operations - physical operations - certainly has much to contribute, but we've learned that oriental medicine, indigenous medicine... We've learned that psychology, what I would call also parapsychology, has a more enormous potential of helping us to be healthier people. I think we've learned that spirituality is a very important contribution, and that some people have really pulled that together. So what we need there is not to invent the wheel (but) is to take the wheel and start putting it on our vehicles. And that's happening. So that's not... That's one of those areas.. I'm not saying check it off! But the people who are working in that area have already gone a long way.

[00:38:11] I think the same thing is true with food production which is very important. Now there we are... There are millions of people who are already working on healthy agricultural processes. And I think we know that the healthy agricultural process is one in which we produce the food as close to the consumer as possible - or that we consume food that is produced - however you want to put it. I think we know a good deal about what constitutes food that is not contaminated by chemicals, and so forth and so on. So I don't think they are the primary...The primary issue is learning what to do, and there are lots of people who are already interested in it and are making wonderful progress in that area. I want to celebrate these things and I want everybody who is interested in saving the world from catastrophe to celebrate these things and claim 'em. And when issues relevant to them are being voted on, I want all these people to think: yes this is our issue! We're going to support it, and we're going to let our representatives know that we want ecological health care. We want ecological food, and that we are willing to eat an ecological diet. Now that of course is getting very personal. But if I just wander around the booths down there, clearly there are people who are advocating an ecological diet. OK. So these are areas we don't have to invent. I think the same thing is true with economics, but whereas ecological agriculture food production has a certain popularity, you find people all over who know about it. The same thing with ecological health.

**John Cobb:** [00:40:14] Economics is something people don't want to have to think about. Better think about it! It's destroying the planet! It's important to you! Find out about ecological economics and support it! If you are an expert, then you can tinker with it and show improvement - that's wonderful! But we know that - by "we" I now mean a few people - ignored by, of course you're not going to learn any of this from the press. You're not gonna learn it from the educational - I prefer to call it schooling - institutions, since I don't think they educate, but there are schools. They have an enormous impact upon the way people think. They have blocked this out. You might learn a little



bit in some schools about an ecological way of producing food and consuming it. Though you would be much more likely to learn about industrialization of agriculture in our schooling system, still.

**John Cobb:** [00:41:25] But one thing I promise you you will not even learn the existence of this ecological economics.

**John Cobb:** [00:41:33] But that's all the more reason to recognize that you need to know about it. You are being kept ignorant, by people who profit from the ignorance. And they are not the people we want to follow. I think I've said a couple of things about education. When I was growing up higher education was liberal arts colleges and professional schools. I finished university of Chicago, before it succumbed to the national, and international, but national wave of moving to the academic disciplines. Now an academic discipline is not a liberal art. An academic discipline... Very explicitly, the academic disciplines were created in order to increase the amount of knowledge that can be gained about very specialized topics. When I talk about Harvard University and use it as my example of what's wrong, I hope you'll understand it's because of its excellence in doing what it claims to do and what is regarded as the norm for higher education institutions - not because I think they don't do a good job. I think the economy is doing a wonderful job for what it set up to do, but that's just the reason to say: we've got to have a different economy. Harvard University describes itself as a value-free research university. Is that what we want? Okay. Obviously if you're doing research that is value-free, you won't do research on how to solve a social problem. That's value laden. Value-free research is just anything that will increase our information about a very narrowly defined topic. I'm not saying it's bad, but I would think maybe if five percent of our higher education was devoted to that kind of research, that would be proportionately about right. The problem with Harvard doing it... I mean, that would be fine. All the other universities want to be like Harvard; being value-free has become the norm of good schooling. There's a book written by a leading educator. Again I'm using that language and I always, I don't feel comfortable, but nevertheless we need to say it. Okay, if I just say "school man" it won't make it. He wrote a book addressed to the university professors. It is entitled *Save the World on Your Own Time!* That is not what you were hired to do. You were hired to do research and to teach the next generation how to do research and in a value-free way. Well that's wonderful to be value-free, except that - I mean, it might be wonderful. I don't think it's wonderful at all. But of course there is one value. It's the default value, alright... that's what I call it... When you don't pay any attention to values of compassion or concern for the future or any of those things, one value stands out: money! Money has become the basis of deciding what to do research on. You can't do research unless you can raise the money for it. Well there is research being done on how to keep people alive longer. And that's, although I don't think they're really researching the most important features of that... Nevermind. We all benefit from advances in chemistry that are relevant to the well-being of a human, but I don't want to dismiss all the research that is being done. But the vast majority of research is being done by who can pay for it, and the military establishment has got lots and lots and lots of money, and it's never audited. It's so very convenient to have one huge block of money that is not audited. Just leave it up to the military folks to decide how to waste it. So there is an enormous amount of research that's done, in order to become more secure, which means really more in danger. But next, of course corporations have a lot of money. So we do lots and lots of research. But is that education? I can't really understand it that way. I would love for universities to be places where people who want to save the world would go and then they'd talk to you: what angle do you want to

take on this? We'd recommend this and this and this. And then people would say: well I think I'm mostly interested in being able to feed people in the future, when fresh water is awfully scarce. How do we develop food systems that don't depend on water? How do we develop a system that will shut me up when the time comes...

**David Korten:** [00:47:45] Right there. We're going to... You know we're handicapped, by having only one mic. But our program now calls for John and I to have a bit of a conversation.

**David Korten:** [00:48:06] That was a remarkable presentation and I don't think I ever listened to a presentation where I agree with everything. I have to comment on your comments about Harvard. And that's because Fran and I were in fact on the Harvard faculty for a while. And I think it is worth elaborating: I often refer to our decision to leave Harvard - which was mutual with Harvard - that it was really the most intellectually freeing experience of my life. And it was very useful being there. And actually the my mentor that got me there in the first place said Harvard is a great place to be from. He went on to be the president of the University. The more prestigious the university, the narrower the definition of the professional specialties. And all of it is all geared to make - It's almost like it was intended - to keep people from seeing connections. And of course all the important things are in the connections.

**David Korten:** [00:49:27] And I'm also struck, you know when you criticize our breaking into progressive causes. This is a fascinating thing about the difference between, in a sense, the left and the right. As I got, at one point in my life, very deeply into the conversations with people who identified as extreme conservative, I realized you've got the social conservatives, you've got the neo-liberals, who are people that never saw a war they didn't like... But you also have the libertarians, who never saw a war that they did like, unless the opposing army was coming across the borders. In many ways, the three kind of fundamental elements of the far right are people that you can't imagine how they could ever even talk together. And yet they somehow come out with a coherent and integrated political agenda.

**John Cobb:** [00:50:30] They all love money.

**David Korten:** [00:50:36] Too but it's also I think it's just very important to stress - I think you all got this - that John is not criticizing any of the efforts among the progressive groups and the individual causes. It's just that we have to recognize that they are all inseparably linked, and that we all have to support each other.

**David Korten:** [00:51:00] Now I want to run you in a little different direction John. John just got back. I mean, again you know we used to not talk about people's age; that was kind of embarrassing, and we pretended they were younger and so forth. I think there is such a role for us elders that we've got to celebrate the age. And John is such an example to celebrate that at eighty-three years old he just got back...

**audience member:** [00:51:29] Ninety-three!

**David Korten:** [00:51:29] I can't believe you're so old!

**David Korten:** [00:51:37] John just got back from a month trip in China and South Korea. In both places where he is celebrated, it's almost like a god; it's amazing the prestige he has there. I had the privilege of being with him in South Korea, so I saw that. But spending a week in South Korea was as much as I could tolerate at eighty-one, and John was going on back and forth to China. But there are amazing things going on in those two countries, and in terms of ecological civilization the conversations that are emerging are quite extraordinary - and particularly in contrast to the United States.

**David Korten:** [00:52:32] And I'd just love to hear you say more about that experience of what you see it contributing to the world.

**John Cobb:** [00:52:40] Yeah, well my only real hope for the world lies in China. That's because China is on its way to becoming a leading, if not THE leading center of global life.

**John Cobb:** [00:52:59] And in China, the government is not under the thumbs of the banks. That's true also in Russia. But in the great majority of the European countries and the United States and much of the Third World, banks control the governments. When Herman Daly and I wrote our book - I'm not exactly sure how the dates fit - but we were very much positively impressed by the European community, because this was a wonderful illustration of how countries that have been fighting each other for hundreds of years had decided they weren't going to fight each other any longer. They were going to become a "we" instead of an "us and them". But we were disappointed when they went to a common currency - the currency is controlled by banks. Being controlled by banks, the Greeks under the recent example, you remember the Greek people have been suffering greatly. And if Greece had its own currency, it could resolve basically - at least get started, on resolving its own problems. But because it doesn't, it had to turn to the European banks, and the banks told them they could not do what they thought they needed to do. I haven't kept up with Greece, but I'm not optimistic that they made much progress in solving their problems. So I think we need to understand the great importance when you see that China has built thousands of miles of railway, on which you can travel at 200 miles an hour and not realize you are moving. The contrast between the US, which has not yet been able to connect any two cities with this kind of rail connection. The reason: the banks don't think it's profitable to them to do it. I think that financial control by a government - yeah you may say: oh but China has a dictatorial government... So it's a complicated matter. People do do a lot of electing of people, but the Communist Party can say no at any point. If any city or province or other national parliament proposes to do something that the Communist Party doesn't want done, it can block it. So I'm not trying to say it's democratic, but I believe that the Communist Party cares more about how people feel and what people want than the US Congress.

**John Cobb:** [00:56:16] The people of the United States want single payer by 75 percent - I mean the percentage is high; it's not just a slight majority. Neither political party is willing to even consider it. In China I don't believe that could happen. The Communist Party is very eager to be popular, to be liked. And if there is a strong sense that the people want something, they'll get it. So that's just to say to set aside all these horrible things that we keep being told about dictatorship and so forth. So shall I go on to say how this works out?

**David Korten:** [00:56:59] Oh, okay. We've got to open it up to the audience.

**John Cobb:** [00:57:03] Yes. Oh yes. Okay, well then one more step. When the government was very much under pressure from the people fifteen years ago because the people hated the pollution of the air and the water and the soil the reaction was to promise the people that the government was really committed to an ecological civilization. They didn't know what they meant by that. Just today we still have that to figure out and we didn't - I didn't mean to say we know all about it. There's a lot that just needs to be thought almost from scratch about what that means.

**John Cobb:** [00:57:46] But once they had said that, it changed the nature of the conversation. Now at the time they said that they were heading fully, unquestioningly toward industrializing their agriculture. But because they said that, it was possible to build up a large opposition to the destruction of rural China. It was only copying the US and the Chinese government became committed to developing the rural China with its tiny farms rather than to destroy it. That's a significant historical change. Several hundred million people's lives are directly affected.

**David Korten:** [00:58:43] We want to get into conversation - we have to move quickly but the economics piece is so fundamental.

**John Cobb:** [00:58:56] Yes.

**David Korten:** [00:58:56] ...And you have had such a role in that. Now as you spoke of ecological economics - at least as I heard it - you said it as though you assumed everybody here knows what ecological economics is and how it's different from standard economics. Is there anybody here that doesn't feel they totally understand what ecological economics means? I thought... I suspect there are more. Could you? It's actually a two-fold question. OK. Kind of quickly... What is distinctive about ecological economics?

**David Korten:** [00:59:30] But the second part is you've made very clear that the dominance of neo-liberal economics in our educational system, media and so forth - a terrible impact. What are we going to do about the neo-liberal economists, and how do we move forward on ecological economics?

**John Cobb:** [01:00:00] When I talk about what we need to do... I know I'm verging on the fanciful, but I think we have to use our imagination. Because if we just go along practical lines, the things that can easily be done, we're going to destroy ourselves. And when you get near enough to the final crisis, practicalities ceases to be, I think, the dominant mode. Herman Daly and I wrote a book together and the title in our mind was "Economics for Community." And by community we meant not only human community, but the community of human beings with the natural world. So we didn't use the word ecological but I think ecological economics - that is exactly what we were talking about.

**John Cobb:** [01:00:59] You see that the only economics that is allowed in universities, or in any governmental context, is one based upon radical individualism. You learn that in Economics 101 - I mean I'm not imposing something. Just pick up an introductory economics text, and you will learn that "homo economicus," the human being about whom the economic theory is developed, is an isolated individual interested in his working as little as possible and earning as much as possible.

And that the basic way of getting more income, for less labor is the market. When goods are exchanged on the market both people profit, otherwise they wouldn't exchange. This is very very fundamental and not irrelevant to the reality. I mean if it was totally irrelevant to the reality it wouldn't have survived for the length of time it has. But there are many many things, which are just totally omitted from this. But we want to begin by saying human beings are relational beings and we benefit when the communities of which we are a part benefit. It's much more meaningful to human beings actually to be part of a healthy community that is becoming healthier, than to gain half the income of the whole community, to put in one's own pocket. But that's the opposite of the teaching now.

**David Korten:** [01:02:52] So, the foundation of ecological economics is very simply that we are living beings. And our health and happiness actually depend on the health of the living Earth and the health of the human community. Money is just a number can be a useful tool but to organize everything around money is insane. So ecological economics is about: if we started with the health of living systems as the foundation - and this would probably mean using as our indicators of performance something like the Bhutan happiness indicators - it would lead to a totally different set of institutions and decision making processes. Now do you have any... I don't even know that either of us has any thoughts about what we do with conventional neo-liberal economists. My sense is that the teaching of conventional economics in any legitimate educational institution ought to be forbidden. It's a course that should only be taught as part of a study of deceptive human intellectual frames. But I don't know... Do you have any thoughts on that?

**John Cobb:** [01:04:18] Well again, let's just imagine that out of our conversations today, and in this whole meeting or somewhere else, the idea that there is an alternative economics, or way of thinking of economics, that has a very different kind of practical consequence, that is adequately worked out theoretically so that its practice was not impossible. If 20 million people in the United States understood that - and it shouldn't be impossible to communicate to them - I believe there would be an enormous demand that universities offer courses. I think that part of the way to go is not to get rid of what we've got. My guess is, if every university had in addition to what we might call a Department of Traditional Economics, a new Department of Ecological Economics, and you were required to take a course in one of them. I believe that we'd have to feel very sorry for the people who were teaching that traditional one. I'm willing to feel sorry for them.

**David Korten:** [01:05:40] There is a case also that we need to take a course in conventional economics to understand how it works and how destructive and how totally illogical it actually is. Now we're actually running a little behind schedule... I'll open this up for your comments and questions. And since I have a very hard time keeping track of that while also keeping track of the ideas I'm inviting Fran Korten, my wife who's an excellent facilitator, to come up and lead the lead the discussion. Fran was also Executive Director of Yes! Magazine for 20 years.

**Fran Korten:** [01:06:39] OK so here's what I want to organize this... I just want to say it's just such an honor to be part of this. John, you are an inspiration! He is so clear! My breath is taken away... So here's what I want to do with this. I want to take three questions in a row and then our speakers can respond, however they want to that mix of inquiry. So let's see. I'm going to start with you because I think you had your hand up first, my dear. Yes. And then I'm going to go to you and then I'm going to go to the back of the room. Yes. Yes. That was you in this in the dark coat. OK. So

that's my three. And I think you're going to have to come up to the front because of our short cord, and the fact that we are recording this for whatever purpose - we have no idea, like the rest of the parliament. So here you go. Say your name.

**audience member:** [01:07:53] Hi I'm Joy Kennedy and I'm here with the World Council of Churches and I want to say I'm sorry that you haven't heard the voice around alternative economics yet because we actually had a session with various folks over in the huge 107 with only a handful of people. But it was on, "Making Peace with the Earth an Economy of Life for All." And in that, we've been working away in the World Council of Churches program around alternative concepts and worked hard at ecological debt. I mean debt's a big deal in the traditional economics stuff right? What about our ecological debt? We also have produced work around a "greed line"... I mean everybody talks about the poverty line. What's a greed line? You know an economy of enough - that kind of thing, trying to get people to think about things in a different way. So when you're talking about imagining alternatives, what kind of hooks or alternatives would you propose?

**Fran Korten:** [01:08:55] Thank you.

**audience member:** [01:09:01] You said the banks are running everything I believe cryptocurrency, Bitcoin etc. is being developed to counter the banks. Do you think that will succeed, or where is that going to go? It seems like a whole alternate way of handling money.

**Fran Korten:** [01:09:25] Thank you. And if you would say your name...

**audience member:** [01:09:28] Certainly. Marvin Lehrer. I wondered what your reactions are to E.O. Wilson and his proposal - does he not deal enough with the economic aspects? His book *Conciliance* emphasized how the specialty of the sciences and so forth, rather than working all together and holistically, and then more recently he proposed *Half Earth*: that half of the earth be turned back to nature so that we could enjoy and use the other half. E.O. Wilson - generally what's your reaction to him?

**Fran Korten:** [01:10:13] All Right so those are some really good challenges for you.

**David Korten:** [01:10:17] I'll go first?

**David Korten:** [01:10:21] You know it's very interesting on discussions of debt: debt is always something somebody owes to somebody else. All our calculations and discussions are based on who owes the debt. There's never any discussion of who holds the debt. And that of course would expose this concentration of wealth and it becomes very different. So I mean owing money is only a power issue. But as you noted ecological debt that's un-repayable; that is huge. So the issues there - phenomenal. I don't know if you've got any better answers on that...

**David Korten:** [01:11:09] Now, to me the cryptocurrencies - the effort by individuals to use fancy algorithms to create money out of nothing - it's a great way for you to get very rich, if you can figure out how to con people into accepting it as currency. But I think the whole damn thing is a huge scam. It's just like any other private banks creating money out of nothing. The creation of money should be a public function that is transparent and it is publicly accountable. And as you've

outlined, each community should be able to develop its own currency. Now you don't want it all very very small, but in terms of a reasonably sized nation, with a bio-regional economy, they ought to be in control of their own currency. When we talk about the U.S. banking system we don't actually - well, it might be a good idea to break up the United States, but we can along with one currency, but the banks in the process of creating it should be local and should be in response to community needs.

**David Korten:** [01:12:20] The E.O. Wilson idea: I haven't seen his treatment of that, but the idea that we take half of the world and return it to nature and then we destroy the other half doesn't seem to me a very sound idea. My view: we've actually got to learn to work with a living Earth, as a whole that's part of the living Earth community. Because if we simply go ahead and destroy our half of the world we will have to move to the other half and destroy it, if we're going to survive.

**John Cobb:** [01:12:59] Well let's see, I'll start with death also. I unfortunately belong to a denomination that does not use the accurate words when we say the Lord's Prayer. Jesus wanted the debt system to be destroyed. And of course he was harking back to Leviticus.

**David Korten:** [01:13:22] He had some ideas about the money changers, too.

**John Cobb:** [01:13:25] Yes, yes... So, you know as late as the medieval period Christians were not allowed to loan money to other Christians. But unfortunately laws like that can have, what shall I say, unanticipated consequences. And what it meant was that the money... people still want to borrow money, so we have to find out some other way of handling the whole context. But because people wanted to borrow money and they couldn't borrow it from fellow Christians, Jews became the money lenders. And of course the money lenders are popular when they are lending. But when they are trying to get it back with interest, they become very unpopular. And that has been one of the things that has fed into antisemitism. So, if you look at the whole history, we haven't had a good solution. But I think that debt would play a much smaller role. One of the needs of our present economy is to be constantly increasing the size of the economy. Because all the money that is borrowed has to be paid back with interest, there has to be more money in the system, in order to pay it back. So our present economic system is based on the ever-increasing debt, and this inevitably has negative consequences. And I think that can be avoided in an ecological economics.

**David Korten:** [01:14:57] Well, let me just comment one more thing on the debt that we never talk about. If you have a system in which the debt is two local banks and you put your savings in the bank and you get a little interest, and then you buy a home and you need to take a loan from the bank and so forth - the money, the debt and the interest is basically continuing recycling among the same people. But when you get an economy where one group of people control all the money and the others are desperately borrowing to live from day to day, then the flow of interest is only one way. There is no recycling, and it's a trip to Never Never Land.

**John Cobb:** [01:15:41] I think my answer to the E. O. Wilson thing would be the same. I think we should have large areas of wilderness and of course our areas of wilderness are shrinking. And so I'm happy to move in that direction. I can't quite picture that 50/50 sort of model. But it's good to have ideas like that tossed out so that there's a discussion about it, you see. Most of the time we don't even think about the value of wilderness as such. That's what he is appealing for.

**audience member:** [01:16:16] What do you think of cryptocurrency?

**John Cobb:** [01:16:20] Oh, well he knows more about it, that's why I wanted him to answer first. Well, the possibility that I think we should take seriously, although it sounds utterly ludicrous is the trillion-dollar coin. Have you heard about the trillion-dollar coin?

[01:16:40] That's totally different. Yeah.

[01:16:42] No, it's a totally different approach. But our Constitution forbids our government from creating money. We're stuck with the private. But we are, the government is allowed to produce coins...

**David Korten:** [01:16:57] Well, but that, yeah... The Constitution is amendable. I mean anything that's interpreted, meaning that the creation of money, the means of exchange, is appropriately a private function to the benefit of a few individuals is absolutely absurd and if... I don't think that's in the Constitution, but if it is, we ought to damn well get rid of it.

**John Cobb:** [01:17:20] But changing the Constitution is harder than producing a trillion-dollar coin.

**David Korten:** [01:17:27] Yes, agreed.

**Fran Korten:** [01:17:31] John says he's not practical, but he is! All right, so I want to take three more questions and I promised you and I'd like to do you and also you. OK. So come on up. I think you're first. Be sure to state your name.

**audience member:** [01:17:53] Thank you. Good afternoon. I'm Ananta Anantakumargiri from Madras Institute of Development Studies, India. Good afternoon to you all. Thank you so much for your bid for the journey with ecological civilization. But it also invites us to think further about the legacy of civilization in history, and the varieties of manifestations of civilization. For example in India we started with the forest-based civilization, and in Greece, it was a city-based civilization with the differing consequences. Both the civilizations... Walter Benjamin said that the story of civilization is also a story of barbarity. So how do we accept the challenge of barbarity and civilization and plans for an ecological civilization. Secondly you mentioned about Karl Marx very interesting. So how does the project of ecological economics embrace the challenge of critical political economy and in the process how do we move towards economics in ecological civilization and an integral conversation across political economic, ecological economics - but I would also like to add modern economy and modern sociology.

**audience member:** [01:19:33] Hi, my name is Ruth Hall. Thank you both for this fascinating discussion. I'm wondering what you think about the ideas of rights. We've lost 60 percent - I think World Wildlife Fund said we've lost 60 percent of the world's animals largely due to habitat loss. And the population of humans, of course, has doubled since 1970 as the animal population is reduced by 60 percent. What do you think of movements - I think New Zealand has started this, and maybe some other places - of actually giving animals, rivers, forests legal rights?



**Fran Korten:** [01:20:07] Thank you. OK, third question.

**audience member:** [01:20:10] Martin Murdell... I come in support of Ruth Bryode Sharone's interfaith musical, as a licensed architect in Los Angeles. And I know John. I wanted to just contextualize my question if I may. It's ironic that we're having an election in America today and I'd like you to consider an alternative career at ninety-three, to be to be a commentator on CBS or one of the major networks, so we can get the real news out. He's a mentor of mine as well, David. So my question has to do with - you gentlemen are scholars - it has to do with is there an example of a utopia, or another successful culture that has succeeded economically. I also - one of the context was I couldn't help but saying my father's adage was: he who has the gold rules. That's the golden rule and it is.

**David Korten:** [01:21:27] Mine too.

**audience member:** [01:21:29] It is funny, but it leaves us with the real challenges. So I mean I just wonder is there an example in you in utopian literature or anywhere. Because, we're all human. That's where we're challenged by our humanity, ironically. I appreciate the conversation very much.

**Fran Korten:** [01:21:47] So who's gonna go first?

**John Cobb:** [01:21:55] I think in response to two of the questions, I should say a little bit more about what I mean by an ecological civilization. Basically it's a new richer and more extensive term for what back in the 70s we just called a sustainable society. And a sustainable society, I don't think that should be called Utopia: there will be sinful people in a sustainable society. There will be sinful people in an ecological civilization. If we don't have an ecological civilization, there won't be any people to have. I'd rather have a lot of sinners than no sinners at all. So I don't think of what we're calling... I think we need to have an image of the best kind of society we can imagine, which includes both virtue and sin, okay. So, when I call for an ecological economy that is focused upon communities, communities and nature and in humanity, that does not - I don't think that's assuming that they will all work perfectly at all. But I'd rather continue the human project even though it hasn't ever produced anything perfect, and I think never will.

**John Cobb:** [01:23:33] You see, when I use the word civilization in a very neutral way, not that it's good or bad... When the human population reached a certain amount, it was inevitable that there'd be some cities emerging and cities have developed methods of increasing food production. And maybe the increase of food production came first - I'm not trying to decide that. But with cities came wars, really organized wars, much greater amounts of slavery. Patriarchy became worse. So, I don't think civilization is some an inherently good thing, it's just as ambiguous as everything else.

**John Cobb:** [01:24:23] But right now it's the human species that's endangered, along with all the animal species that we're talking about. So rather than say: well wouldn't it be better not to have civilization... If I could think of some other way human beings could live without cities, okay. But, I don't think that. I think when we are facing total anhi... - destruction beyond imagination that - let's just say that. I think that the advantages of being more rural rather than most urbanized are not the topic to spend a lot of time on. So I think we need to be defending cities, as well as countryside. But

I'm very proud of having participated in persuading China not to move another 300 million people into cities. So I'm not an enthusiast for cities.

**David Korten:** [01:25:32] Yeah, the discussion of civilization and the term which - it's a word John I have some differences on. To me, a civilization should be civil, by definition and that should be a civil relationship among people and nature. And at least as I have looked at the question of civilization, I've noticed that most of what we have called civilizations were essentially empires. And they were societies of which a few people controlled the many and exploited nature to maintain their kind of opulence. So that's why I say well civilization would be a good idea, and I would be inclined to say these societies were not civilizations. And what we want now is a real civilization, but that's a word game.

**John Cobb:** [01:26:34] It's a terminological issue between us. .

**David Korten:** [01:26:35] Yeah. Exactly.

**David Korten:** [01:26:38] Now, the point about the legal rights of nature. This is a really foundational point. In a sense, our whole Western legal system is built around the rights of private property, which is really the rights of private individuals to acquire property in any amount that they are able and to use it in any way that is profitable or beneficial to them. Within a living Earth frame, that obviously does not work. And part of what we must realize is that most of the real wealth in the world which would be water, and fertile land and all things that are essential to our well-being, are things that no human created; these are commons on which we all depend. And this points to the need for a fundamental transformation of our whole legal system, and the foundations of western law, to recognize that and fundamentally rethink how we think about property and the responsibilities, as well as any rights that go with property ownership.

**John Cobb:** [01:27:52] Let me just say one thing. When we were in Korea, one of the groups that were hosting us was a group of lawyers, who were working seriously on this issue.

**David Korten:** [01:28:05] Ah, yes. Now the other question about: are there any examples in the world... You know the current system has been extremely effective in wiping out any examples of the kind of society that would seem to be what we're working toward. Now, this is, well you know we've talked about the difficulty of achieving the things that we're talking about. I think about it in terms of the two Is: where we need to go is impossible, and where we need to go is imperative. So it's imperative that we do the impossible. I don't know where that leaves you but that's... That is a reality. And ultimately since what we need to do, we need to do as a global society. Because we are... that is just the nature of our current interconnection. It means we absolutely have to go where no human has gone before. So it's a kind of Star Trek adventure, but we got to create it.

**Fran Korten:** [01:29:20] I want to thank John and David and recognize that it's time to come to a close. Thank you all for being here. There is a follow on session that starts in a half an hour at 2:15. That is the wrap up of the four-session series that we have been embarked on and that will include Matt Fox and Jeremy Lent as well as John and David. So I urge you to come back for that, if you can. And thank you for your good questions and your good attention to this remarkable conversation.

