



IN APPRECIATION

YES! Magazine co-founder David Korten

Evolving Into an Ecologically Civilized State of Mind

It was my pleasure to converse with YES! co-founder David Korten in our weeks-long preparation for an interview that spans his 83 years on the planet and all the experiences and ideas that led him to co-found *YES! Magazine* 25 years ago. David evolved from a self-described “conservative young Republican” who traveled the world hoping to “save” other cultures from communism, to a collaborative thought leader who calls out the outsized influence of corporations and passionately advocates for global societies to move toward an ecological civilization. On that subject, he is the author of many books, including *When Corporations Rule the World*. The way in which David has opened himself over the past several decades to unfolding, emerging, and relearning offers a model for us all.

—Zenobia Jeffries Warfield

Zenobia Jeffries Warfield: A lot of folks have referred to 2020 as an unprecedented time. But we can look to recent history, even, and see that there’s much precedent for what’s going on right now. Though there is this convergence where all the things are happening at once. How would you describe it?

David Korten: One of the things we need to get clear on is that for a long time, we have been going in a direction as a species that no sane person should want to be going. But we hide it under a lot of statistics, and basically a lot of media distortion coming from the system that is driving us actually in the direction of human self-extinction, but which doesn’t want anybody to see that because the system is working for a very few people who control most of our media and education and our conversations.

We have these findings from science—massive consensus of the world’s brightest scientists calling attention particularly to the climate issue, as you know, essentially terminally

serious for the species. It’s very hard for the scientists to get everybody’s attention. But that little bug that we call the coronavirus, man, that’s got our attention. And it has exposed, certainly like nothing else in my 83 years, the failings of our system, of just how out of touch it is with our fundamental nature as living beings born of and nurtured by a living Earth.

The fact [is], we’re all interconnected and all interdependent, and the division of the world into identities of race and gender, etc., is a fabricated creation. Well, the gender’s definitely not fabricated, but the way it’s played out is totally fabricated, and it is fabricated to support a system in which a very few people benefit from the tremendous destruction that’s being played out.

Warfield: You didn’t always think this way, though. You worked with international development institutions for 30 years.

Korten: What I realized was that most everything we were doing in the name of economic development was essentially going into communities where people lived as communities, they were connected to the land, they lived from their land, and in many instances, essentially controlled their own assets. And this had been disrupted for a long time by the colonial dynamics.

Most people living on their land had at least some kind of claim to rights to its use. But what we were doing in the name of development was pushing them off of that land, separating them from controlling their own means of living and putting them into service ... essentially forcing them into lives as itinerant agriculture workers or sweatshop workers in some factory, so that, by the definitions of our contemporary economics, they were serving the economy. And suddenly it began to hit me that what we call serving the economy is essentially a kind of servitude in service to the rich people who control the real assets, but they do that by controlling our access to a means of living.

That was when I really broke with the establishment and began the work in civil society.

Warfield: Right. What was that like, coming back home, finding the folks to connect with who were thinking along those same lines?

Korten: Most of the people who were focused on concentrating economic power as such—what you might call confirmed racists—that was just a kind of an incidental part of it, which is different than what [was experienced] in the South where it was intentional suppression of anyone with dark skin.

All these dynamics in some ways are so complex and yet they integrate together in some ways a very simple frame, either what my colleague Riane Eisler calls the dominator society—with a few people on top and everybody on the bottom—or a partnership society in which we basically recognize we’re all human beings dependent on the health and vitality of living Earth. We all do better when we all do better.

Warfield: Which is the theory or framework of ecological

civilization, right?

Korten: As I understand it. You've probably seen, there are different versions of ecological civilization. China has it built into its constitution, but its real theory is really what we'd call sustainable development. They end up calling it the "two mountain theory": we're going to continue growing GDP and be the world leader in growing GDP. And we're also going to be the world leader in protecting the environment, which is a fundamental contradiction. A friend often comments, "You can't climb two mountains at the same time, you simply got to make a choice."

Warfield: Exactly. And some of what I'm seeing, too, with ecological civilization, is it's a framework that can be applied to Indigenous ways of being that have existed across the planet for eons.

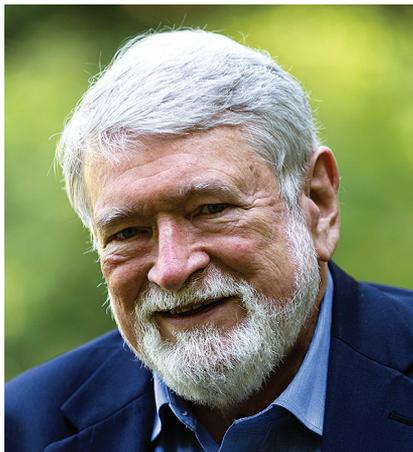
Korten: As we now come to rediscover what Indigenous people always knew, that their well-being was dependent on the well-being of their place. That is now true on a global scale. We are now a global species. And we have to find ways to manage our numbers and our ways of living in ways that are in balance with the living Earth and its needs. Because if the needs of all of us living beings are essentially not being met, the Earth loses its capacity to sustain life. Herein is a fundamental lesson of all of this: That life, as we have now come to understand it, can only exist in communities that self-organize, to create and maintain the conditions of their own existence.

Warfield: I do want to get back to YES! You said before that the intention wasn't for YES! to be this great media outlet. It was a platform to have thinkers come together to discuss issues, and get out those thoughts about solutions, alternatives.

Korten: Resistance alone is a losing strategy. You have to have a positive alternative, something that we move toward instead of away from.

When we were founding YES!, it was a time when Margaret Thatcher's idea that there is no alternative was very prominent. And the thing very strong in my own mind was, we absolutely have to keep alive the recognition that there is an alternative. So in a sense, we never give up.

Now, once we got into that, then it became more [about exploring] what does that alternative look like? That became increasingly our frame of telling the stories that exemplify the alternatives. And as this keeps playing out in YES!, it's also playing out in my own understanding and thinking ...



**THANK YOU,
DAVID KORTEN,
FOR YOUR PASSION,
GUIDANCE, AND DEVOTION
TO OUR ORGANIZATION
AND ESPECIALLY FOR
SHARING YOUR VISION OF
A BETTER WORLD.
LOVE,
YOUR YES! FAMILY**

*If you'd like to send your own
thank-you note to David, email
thanksdavid@yesmagazine.org*

pushing us deeper ... and bigger, in a way. ...

The way I see it, it's a continuous unfolding toward ever-greater complexity, beauty, awareness, and possibility.

Warfield: So where do you see us going now? Humans (all over) working together with the Earth, we're so far away from that. You say often how we're moving toward extinction. At the risk of sounding superficial, how do you give people hope?

Korten: If you think about human culture and institutions, they are both products of the human mind. And again, like money, they exist only in the human mind. There is nothing out there that prevents us from changing what's in here (*points to head*). And that can happen very rapidly.

How? I don't know, but it has happened in the human past. And that's partly why it's so important that we begin trying to envision, what would this ecological civilization look like? This gets you into things like ownership and how we think about how we use money. ... [And] the nature of the family, and all the changes in how we think about family, and so forth, but still recognizing that family—however we define it—is essential, just as community is essential. And the core has to reside with living families in living communities, not with transnational corporations and banks that are totally delinked from life.

Warfield: We're all learning and relearning at these different stages in our lives.

But I often think about "how do we get a consensus to make transformative change?" A friend once said to me you don't need everybody, you just need a critical mass. What are your thoughts around the kind of work that needs to happen to get just that?

Korten: You need millions of conversations around exactly the questions we're asking. One possibility: start a communications organization, maybe you call it YES! [*laughs*]. Maybe you put out a magazine that has an issue called ecological civilization that does a beautiful job of beginning to lay out some of the questions.

Warfield: We've learned a lot from each other over our series of conversations. I appreciate the learning exchange.

Korten: What I appreciate about it, is that we clearly share in common our passion to learn.

Warfield: Absolutely. It's always great talking with you, David. Thank you so much. ♥

*This is an excerpt of a longer conversation. Go to
yesmagazine.org/thanksdavid to read more and hear the full audio.*