

Change the Story, Change the Future: A Living Economy for a Living Earth

Economics of Sustainability: Emerging Models for a Healthy Planet

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It is lovely to be back here in the Bay Area with so many dear friends and colleagues from the forefront of the New Economy movement. And so many fans of YES! Magazine.

Georgia, in her framing invitation to this conference, spoke of the cultural resistance to the deep changes we as a species must now navigate. She called us to frame a cultural intervention grounded in a new story and vision of possibility. Many of you have echoed this theme in your presentations, questions, and comments. In his closing comments this morning, Andy Kimbrell specifically echoed that need.

Tonight I'm going to share my reflections on a simple self-evident but largely forgotten truth. We humans are living beings born of a Living Earth who live by our share stories. And that is why we are in big trouble. We've got our story terribly wrong. If we are to have a future, we must get it right—and that will change everything. The story I believe we need has new elements, but deep indigenous roots.

In March 2012, I was a guest at a small gathering of indigenous environmental leaders at the Pocantico Retreat Center, the former Rockefeller family estate in New York, to discuss the then upcoming Rio+20 UN Conference on Sustainable development in Rio.

These leaders observed that in preparatory meetings, Wall Street interests had argued that to save nature we must value her by pricing her. It seems a sensible argument—but the indigenous leaders pointed out a familiar pattern: First price, then privatize, then commodify, then securitize, and then profit from a new round of speculative financial games.

The indigenous position was clear and uncompromising: Earth is our Sacred Mother—the source of our birth and nurture. Her care is a sacred responsibility of all humanity. She is beyond price and not for sale. Her rights must come before all other rights.

Midway through our deliberations, Karma Tshiteem, secretary of the Bhutan Gross National Happiness Commission, ended a brief presentation with three words, “Time is life.”

As I was growing up, my dad instructed me that “Time is Money.” As an undergraduate in college I took a whole course on calculating the time value of money. In business school we were constantly making such calculations.

Time is Life. Or time is Money. Two profoundly contrasting world views brilliantly summed up in just six words.

The wisdom of the indigenous leaders reached deep into my mind and heart. Far from mushy sentimentalism, they articulated an essential and pragmatic foundation of a viable human future.

The Pocantico encounter drew me back to Thomas Berry and to the Pachamama Alliance and Lynn and Bill Twist and their work extending the voice of the indigenous peoples of Ecuador and Peru into an inquiry into our human story. The result is my forthcoming book *Change the Story, Change the Future: A Living Economy for a Living Earth* that will launch next February. In this book I make the case that our common future depends on framing and popularizing a Sacred Life and Living Earth story to displace the Sacred Money and Markets story by which we currently live.

You are surely all familiar with the Sacred Money and Markets story. Here are its essential elements.

Time is money. Money is wealth. Making money creates wealth and is a defining purpose of individuals, business, and the economy. Those who make money are society's wealth creators. Affluent lifestyles are their fair and just reward for their effort and contribution.

Material consumption is the path to happiness. Poverty is a consequence of laziness.

We humans are by nature individualistic competitors. This is a blessing, because the invisible hand of the free market channels our individual and corporate competitive drive for financial gain to choices that maximize economic growth and thereby the wealth and well-being of all.

Corporations aggregate the talents and interests of people working together to provide the essential jobs, goods, and services that create a better life for all. A corporation's profits are the measure of its social contribution.

As corporations create wealth, governments consume it. The functions of government should be limited to assuring the common defense, securing property rights, and enforcing contracts.

Economic inequality and environmental damage are a regrettable but necessary and unavoidable cost of the economic growth that is essential to eliminate poverty and to drive technological innovation needed to free us from our dependence on nature.

Is there anyone here who has never heard this story? Have you noticed that its every assertion is false? Though it is taught in economics courses in our most prestigious universities as objective science, it is bad ethics, bad science, and bad economics.

It is a story fabricated by corporate funded think tanks, PR professionals and economists to put a pretty face on capitalism and gain and maintain our acceptance of a capitalist suicide economy—that is quite literally killing us. What is capitalism? Literally it means rule by the owners of capital. More specifically it refers to an economic system in which the few monopolize control of society's productive resources to extract

unearned monopoly profits at the expense of the many. The favored institutional instrument to achieve this control is the publically traded, limited liability corporation.

The Sacred Money and Markets story is constantly repeated by corporate media. It frames every news report and political debate. And it legitimates a legal system that gives corporations more rights than people and gives nature no rights at all.

In one of his many insightful homilies, Pope Francis observed that money is not in itself evil. It is the idolatry of money that is evil—the worship of money as a false god.

Seduced by the Sacred Money and Markets story, we have become a global society of money worshipers. The making of money has become our life's purpose, shopping a civic duty, financial markets our moral compass, the institutions of finance our temples, and economists the priests who provide us absolution for our personal and collective sins against life.

Choosing money over life, we acquiesce to rule by global financial markets gamed by high-speed computers. We give ourselves in indentured servitude to money-seeking corporate robots that reduce people and nature to commodities for sale and operate as autonomous entities beyond human control. The CEOs and billionaire financiers who appear to be in charge are merely well compensated servants of a system that favors them with lavish rewards, but which they are individually powerless to redirect to the service of life.

Even though we may sense the story is bogus, it carries the day in political debates and defines our common future because it is the only story we hear in the public discourse. Unlike the corporate interests that organize around a well-defined story, we who struggle in cause of life, justice, sustainability, peace, and democracy campaign and organize around individual issues—often defined by identity politics. In so doing, we concede the framing story and play into the divide-and-conquer strategy of elite politics.

To the extent we argue our case within a larger story frame, we generally do so within the established Sacred Money and Markets story frame. For example, rather than argue that greater equality creates healthier societies, we argue that it is better for economic growth. We thus reinforce the story we must discredit and replace. We may win a temporary victory for life, but we lose the future to money.

A new story, a Sacred Life and Living Earth story, is emerging as people mobilize to rebuild their lives and their communities around values of caring and sharing for one another and nature. I It goes something like this:

We humans are living beings born of and nurtured by a Living Earth. Real wealth is living wealth. Time is life. Money is just a number useful as a medium of exchange in well-regulated markets.

Life exists only in community. We humans are creatures of conscience who survive and prosper only as members of a Living Earth community. The prime task of any living community is to maintain the conditions essential to the life of its members. We all do best when we all do well in a world that works for all.

A connection to nature and community is essential to our physical and mental health and well-being. It is our nature to care and share for the benefit of all. Individualistic greed, ruthless competition, and violence against life are indicators of serious individual and social dysfunction. The economy's assault against Earth's capacity to support life and its drive to grow the gap between rich and poor indicates terminal system failure.

The purpose of human institutions—whether business, government, or civil society—is to provide all people with the opportunity to make a healthy, meaningful living in a balanced co-productive relationship with Earth's community of life.

Corporations that seek to monopolize resources and decision-making power in the pursuit of purely financial ends unburdened by the exercise of human conscience have no place in a healthy society.

Human institutions are human creations. That which humans create, humans can change.

Environmental sustainability, economic justice, and a living democracy are inseparable. We have all of them, or we have none of them.

This Sacred Life and Living Earth story provides a framing vision for a Living Economy that is rooted in community, works with nature, meets the needs of all, and gives every person a voice in the decisions on which their well-being and that of the whole depend.

Generally, the shared sacred story of a people aligns with their underlying cosmology or creation story—their deepest shared beliefs about the origin and nature of the universe. That we lack such a shared and currently credible cosmology goes a long way toward explaining why we have been so easily seduced by the Sacred Money and Markets story.

At their core, the issues are deeply spiritual—a theme seldom discussed within our circles. They have roots in our answers to the most basic of questions. From where have we come and why? What is the nature of the universe that gave birth to Earth that in turn gave birth to us? For what purpose were we born?

Each of our three most familiar cosmologies—the Distant Patriarch, the Grand Machine, and the Mystical Unity—suggest quite different answers.

According to the conventional teaching of the Abrahamic religions, we are the creations of a Distant Patriarch, an all-powerful, all knowing God who lives in a far place called heaven and rewards our obedience with a place of eternal bliss by his side in the afterlife. Whatever exists is by his will. By a currently popular distortion, he wants us to be rich and rewards his favored with wealth and power. So get with the program. Go for the money.

By the conventional teaching of a science that remains stuck in the frame of an old and outdated cosmology, we are the product of a Grand Machine universe akin to a big clock playing out its destiny as its mighty spring winds down. By this story, life is merely an accidental outcome of material complexity and has no purpose or meaning. Consciousness is an artifact of physical processes in the brain. Free will is an illusion.

Wow. That's depressing. I think I'll go shopping.

In the classic expression of the Mystical Unity story, what we experience as material reality, including our experience of ourselves as material beings, is actually an illusion generated by the human ego—an illusion that separates us from the reality of the eternal One. This cosmology is a source of profound insights. We are all interconnected. The harm we do to others we do as well to ourselves. The illusion of separation is a source of suffering and violence.

Typically, practitioners of Mystical Unity teach that the path to ending violence is through individual meditative practice to suppress and transcend the individual ego. They neither mention nor offer us guidance, however, in dealing with the violence of rogue institutions that operate beyond human control.

The Sacred Life and Living Earth story that frames a new economics for a healthy Living Earth builds on the foundation of a less familiar cosmology—an emerging Living Universe cosmology. The Living Universe cosmology embraces the findings of science, but observes that as described by science, the unfolding universe bears no resemblance whatever to a mechanical clock winding down. Rather it resembles a living seed bursting forth to grow into a magnificent flowering tree.

Drawing from the insights of indigenous peoples, religion, and the mystics, the Living Universe cosmology embraces the view that all of creation is the manifestation of a conscious spiritual intelligence seeking to know itself through a creative journey of self-discovery as it unfolds toward ever-greater complexity, beauty, awareness, and possibility.

By this reckoning, all beings—stars, energy particles, star systems, planets, humans, animals, plants, rocks, and rivers—are both expression and agent of the spirit; each with its place and purpose in a process that reveals an extraordinary capacity for intelligent, purposeful self-organization at all system levels. The human ego is not the result of some cosmic blunder. It is essential to our participation in this greatest of all epic journeys of self-knowing.

According to science, some 13.8 billion years ago, a giant energy cloud burst forth in a blinding flash. By fortunate coincidence, it had exactly the right physical constants to form into quantum particles, that formed into complex atoms, that formed into complex molecules.

With the passing of time, these molecules formed into trillions of burning stars, each comprising an unimaginably vast number of quantum particles, atoms, and molecules in constant, often violent, and chaotic interaction. These stars produced and threw off substances we experience as stable solid matter, yet which quantum science tells us is mostly empty space occupied by constantly moving, appearing, and disappearing waves and particles.

Many of the trillions of stars birthed and provided a sustained energy source for the planets that circle them. At least one of these trillions of planets possessed exactly the

right conditions for the emergence of simple organisms with an ability to co-evolve into ever more complex organisms.

In the earliest stages of Earth's evolutionary journey these microscopic, single cell organisms worked with the forces of Earth's geological processes to transform every aspect of Earth's crust, waters, and atmosphere to create and maintain conditions distinctive to planet Earth and essential to the emergence of more complex life forms—like humans. They transformed and stabilized the chemical composition of the planet's atmosphere, lowered the planet's temperature, and concentrated and sequestered a vast variety of chemical compounds (including toxins and excess carbon) deep underground. They created weather systems that provide the planet's land mass with continuously renewing supplies of freshwater and oxygen-rich air.

This extraordinary self-organizing system now continuously regenerates Earth's soils, rivers, aquifers, fisheries, forests, grasslands, and much more to sustain the life of the whole. All the while, this wondrous self-organizing community maintains a climatic balance, temperature, and chemical composition of Earth's oceans, landmass, and atmosphere wholly unlike conditions on any of Earth's planetary neighbors. Decision making within this system is everywhere local—the outcome of countless trillions of individual choice making living organisms.

The idea that this miracle is solely the outcome of a combination of mechanics and purposeless chance defies logic, common sense, and the foundational principles of Newtonian mechanics. It is not what machines do.

For all our scientific advances, we still have pitifully little understanding of how it all works because the nonindigenous cosmologies of modern society condition us to think of Earth as more like a machine than like an intelligent living organism maintaining the conditions essential to life. So we give very little attention to studying Earth as a living system.

In our ignorance, we have created and serve an economy that aggressively extracts and releases sequestered carbons and toxins back into Earth's atmosphere, waters, and soils to suppress the natural processes by which Living Earth maintains the conditions essential to our existence. And to what purpose? To make money, that exists only as numbers on a computer hard drive, for people who already have more money than they can possibly use.

Meanwhile economists and technophiles living in a science fiction dream world suggest that with enough money and technology we have no need of nature. We can create vast desalination plants to meet our need for fresh water, meet our energy needs with fracking and nuclear reactors, and replace living trees with carbon sequestering mechanical trees.

It is perhaps the most fundamental fact of our existence that without a healthy living Earth, there will be no humans. Without humans, there will be no money and no corporations. The right and responsibility of humans to secure the rights and well-being of nature is the most fundamental of all human rights and responsibilities.

The work of our time is to learn to live, with appropriate humility, in alignment with the structures and processes of Living Earth. This requires that we replace a money centered suicide economy with a life centered living economy that restores and sustains the health of our Living Earth mother, equitably meets the needs of all people, and supports radical democracy.

Values and power are the two critical variables. First we must decide what we value more—life? Or Money? We must then design our institutions to allocate power accordingly.

For the Suicide Economy, money is the defining value. Its institutions are structured to answer to computer managed global financial markets blind to the needs of life.

Our goal is a Living Economy for which life is the defining value, money is solely a means, and the power to make resource allocation decisions resides with people who make their living as co-productive members of place-based communities in which people and nature work together to meet the needs of all. This requires that our dominant institutions:

1. Support broadly participatory, cooperative local ownership and democratic self-governance.
2. Foster local diversity and self-reliance in securing a means of living for all the community's members using local energy, nutrients, water, and material resources.
3. Cultivate and reward civic engagement, responsibility, the sharing of work and resources (including a free exchange of ideas, knowledge, and information), and honest dealing in the interest of the well-being of all.
4. Encourage everyone to contribute according to their ability, and recognize the right of each to meet their reasonable needs with due consideration for the needs of others.
5. Maintain permeable managed boundaries to maintain the integrity of the community, support fair and balanced exchange with neighbors, and secure the community's resources against theft by invasive predators—such as global corporations.

Such measures root economic power in living households, businesses, and communities. They focus the attention of both households and firms on the creation and continuing regeneration of real living wealth.

It is a daunting, seemingly impossible challenge. The institutional structures of corporate oligarchy have never seemed stronger. Yet in many ways, they have never been more vulnerable. The foundation of their power is rapidly eroding as the seductive promises of the Sacred Money and Markets story lose credibility and people everywhere are relearning the arts of living in co-productive community with one another and nature.

They establish family farms and farmers' markets and promote urban agriculture to rebuild local food systems. They revive rites of passage that reconnect generations to one another and to forces of life seen and unseen. They establish and patronize locally owned human-scale businesses that rebuild local ownership, self-reliance, and self-determination. They work with local governments to create bicycle-friendly streets, incorporate living-building standards into building codes, create zero-waste local recycling systems, install wind- and solar-energy generation, create and move their money to local banks and credit unions. They promote cooperative ownership and introduce indicator systems by which people can assess local economic performance against indicators of the health of people, community, and nature.

Architects, builders, and urban planners create living buildings, neighborhoods, communities, and cities. Young and old come together to create eco-villages that bear resemblance to traditional extended family households and organize to produce a portion of their own sustenance to reduce their dependence on money and markets. Social entrepreneurs organize car and bicycle sharing.

Communities organize to manage nearby forest ecosystems to restore and maintain forest health and provide livelihood opportunities for local people. Young people return to the land and learn to live from farming and ranching using methods that support the regeneration of soils and aquifers.

People share lessons, experience, and inspiration freely via the Internet. They build communities of place that reduce dependence on money, increase local control and self-determination, and advance democracy as a way of life.

We have shared many such stories at this conference. You can find thousands more on the YES! Magazine website.

Close up, these individual efforts seem scattered, marginal, even naive in the face of the corporate power they dare to challenge.

Step back, however, and we discern the outlines of an emerging interracial, intercultural global-scale social movement—an inclusive inter-sectoral movement of movements—converging on a trajectory toward a Living Earth future. Lacking a name and a unifying story, this movement of movements remains invisible to the broad public, the money seeking corporate robots, and even to itself.

Yet at every hand, this movement challenges the power and legitimacy of the failed system and its idolatrous story as it surrounds the money seeking robots and occasionally infiltrates them to recruit allies from the ranks of the mercenaries and indentured servants in their employ. It is building popular support for political action to replace economic policies that serve the interests of money seeking corporate robots with policies that support we the people in healing ourselves, our communities, and Living Earth.

Imperial rulers, whether kings or corporate robots, depend on the obedience of the ruled. Their seemingly invincible power is an illusion. They hold only the power that we the

people yield to them. When we walk away from our corporate masters to rebuild our lives and communities, we reclaim for communities and ourselves the fruits of our labor, ingenuity, resources, and vision.

The time is ripe for a compelling and unifying story to meld the seemingly disparate and largely unseen efforts of hundreds of millions of people into an unstoppable social force. Those of us here in this room are positioned to make a defining contribution to crafting and popularizing such a story.

- As you live the Sacred Life and Living Earth story, speak it. We are living beings born of a nurtured by a living Earth mother.
- Insist that opponents and detractors ground their arguments in the values and assumptions of the Sacred Life and Living Earth story.
- Ask of every policy proposal: Does it serve life or money? Does it increase or decrease corporate monopoly control of the means of living? Does it favor the concentration or equitable distribution of ownership? Does it restore and enhance or further undermine the function of Earth's living systems? Does it strengthen relationships of caring and sharing or further monetize them?
- When you encounter news reports, policy studies, and academic curricula framed by the Sacred Money and Markets story, call out the fallacies and reframe the arguments..

Share the story in your heart and spread its joyful message of possibility. Let us each find our favorite rendering among the story's rich variations. Invite others to join. Let our voices rise together as a mighty gospel choir, each voice with its place within the shifting harmonies and rhythms of the whole.

We will know we are on a path to a viable future when the corporate political flacks find themselves compelled to argue within our frame that their proposals will best serve life and heal our Living Earth mother.

The story holds an essential key.

Our future is ours to choose. Change the story. Change the future. We are the ones we've been waiting for.

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David has MBA and Ph.D. degrees from the Stanford Business School. His earlier included service as a captain in the US Air Force, a Harvard Business School professor, a Ford Foundation project specialist, and Asia regional adviser on development management to the U.S. Agency for International Development. He lived and worked for 21 years as a development professional in Ethiopia, Nicaragua, Philippines, and Indonesia.

His previous books include [*Agenda for a New Economy: From Phantom Wealth to Real Wealth*](#), [*The Great Turning: From Empire to Earth Community*](#), and the international best seller [*When Corporations Rule the World*](#).