

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *WHEN CORPORATIONS RULE THE WORLD* AND *THE GREAT TURNING*

DAVID C.
KORTEN

CHANGE THE STORY,
CHANGE THE
FUTURE

A LIVING ECONOMY
FOR A LIVING EARTH

DAVID C.
KORTEN
NEW ECONOMY WORKING GROUP

**CHANGE THE STORY,
CHANGE THE
FUTURE**

A LIVING ECONOMY
FOR A LIVING EARTH

A Report to the Club of Rome



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CHANGE THE STORY, CHANGE THE FUTURE

Choice-making beings of many possibilities, we humans live by shared cultural stories. They are the lens through which we view reality. They shape what we most value as a society and the institutions by which we structure power.

When we get our story wrong, we get our future wrong.

We are in terminal crisis because we have our defining story badly wrong. Seduced by a fabricated Sacred Money and Markets story, we live in indentured service to money-seeking corporate robots and relate to Earth as if it were a dead rock for sale.

Communications technologies now give us the capacity as a species to choose our common story with conscious intention. This is a moment of unprecedented opportunity to create a future consistent with our true nature and possibility as living beings born of a Living Earth born of a Living Universe.

An authentic Sacred Life and Living Earth story is emerging. It has ancient roots in indigenous wisdom. If embraced, it changes everything.

Change the story, change the future.

1 OUR STORY PROBLEM

Economists debate how to accelerate economic growth. Scientists debate how long the human species can withstand an economy that is destroying Earth's capacity to support life. Social activists debate how to reduce an intolerable and growing gap between the profligate and the desperate.

Meanwhile, corporations compete for monopoly control of the information commons and what remains of Earth's freshwater, fertile soils, minerals, and fossil fuel. The growing demand of energy-intensive economies for fossil fuel drives environmentally destructive extraction methods like fracking, deep-sea drilling, and mountaintop removal. Competition for food and freshwater increases in the face of population growth; extreme drought and flooding; the conversion, destruction, and depletion of farmland; and the contamination of freshwater sources.

Politicians dependent on big money to fund their campaigns advance policies that favor the interests of money over the interests of life. Economists ease the conscience of those politicians with assurances that such policies accelerate growth in the gross domestic product, which in turn will

end poverty and fund technologies to eliminate our human dependence on nature.

Money prospers. Life withers. We cannot eat, drink, or breathe money. No matter how fat our bank accounts or advanced our technologies, we depend on Earth's health for food, freshwater, clean air, and a stable climate.

Some among a confused and desperate public respond to the contradictions with denial. Some look for ways to profit financially from the devastation. Some pray for divine intervention.

Our hope lies with the growing millions who work to heal our human relationships with one another and nature in a bold effort to turn the human course. Through thought and deed, they are authoring a new story of meaning and possibility. It is a story with ancient roots and profound implications for our economic relationships.

THE ESSENTIAL ROLE OF A SACRED STORY

Many indigenous people use the term *sacred* to refer to what is most important, most essential to the well-being of the community and its members, and therefore most worthy of special respect and care. It is in that sense that I speak here of sacred stories.

We humans live by stories. A shared story is the basis of the ability of any people to live together as an organized society. A society's ability to organize as a secure and prosperous community depends on the authenticity (validity) of its story. Authentic stories are generally the product of the

shared experience of a people and take form through largely unconscious processes extending over generations.

There are also inauthentic sacred stories fabricated to serve the interests of a ruling class at the expense of the rest. We currently organize as a global society by such a story, and we bear the tragic consequences.

SACRED MONEY AND MARKETS

While preparing dinner each day, I listen to the evening edition of NPR's *Marketplace*. Its focus is money. Two questions dominate: Is the GDP growing, how fast is it growing, and why? Did major stock indexes rise or fall, and why?

Every day on every consequential news outlet, similar programs focus our attention on how the financial economy is doing. Any mention of how people and nature are doing is usually in the context of assessing the implications for the GDP and stock prices—financial indicators that speak to how money and the moneyed are doing. To listen to the discussion, you would infer that the purpose of people and nature is to serve money.

These reports have a consistent familiar frame. I call it our Sacred Money and Markets story. It goes like this:

Time is money. Money is wealth. Material consumption is the path to happiness. Making money creates wealth, drives consumption to increase happiness, and is the 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 contribution. Poverty is a consequence of laziness.

Humans are by nature individualistic competitors. That is a blessing, because freed from distorting regulation, the invisible hand of the free market channels the individual and corporate drive for profit to choices that maximize economic growth and thereby the wealth and well-being of all.

Just as a person's income is a measure of their worth and contribution to society, so too the profit of the corporation is the measure of its worth and contribution. As a legal entity that aggregates talents and interests to increase the economic efficiency of the individuals within it, the corporation is properly considered to be a person in its own right and entitled to the same rights as any other person.

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 growing the GDP. GDP growth in turn eliminates poverty, drives technological innovation to free us from our dependence on nature, and brings universal and perpetual prosperity for all. There is no viable alternative to a profit-driven free market economy.

Economics courses in our most prestigious institutions teach this story as settled science. The corporate media constantly repeat it. Over time, money has become con-

temporary society's object of worship. Making money has become life's purpose, shopping a civic duty, markets our moral compass, institutions of finance our temples, and economists the priests who provide absolution for our personal and collective sins against life. Pope Francis correctly named it idolatry—idol worship.

Thoughtful readers will readily recognize—or at least suspect—that every assertion of this Sacred Money and Markets story is false or grossly misleading. The story is based on bad ethics, bad science, and bad economics. We now see the environmental devastation, economic desperation, social alienation, and moral and political corruption this fatally flawed story leaves everywhere in its path.

Profit itself is not the problem. A modest profit is essential to the health and survival of any private enterprise. Managing the economy to maximize profit for the benefit of a financial oligarchy is, however, a recipe for economic, social, and environmental disaster—as America's experiment with unrestrained greed dramatically demonstrates.

WHEN MONEY-SEEKING ROBOTS RULE THE WORLD

A favorite science fiction plot portrays robots that turn rogue and become a threat to their human masters. Unfortunately, that plot isn't a fictional future; it is a current reality.

In the 2012 US presidential election, Republican candidate Mitt Romney famously declared that corporations are people. Apparently, he hadn't noticed the distinction between the corporation as a self-governing legal entity and

the living people in its employ. The demonstrated inability of US Supreme Court justices to recognize the distinction gives new meaning to the phrase “Justice is blind.”

People are living beings. We have bodies. We eat, breathe, love, and reproduce. We live in community and exercise moral conscience and sensibility in our relationship with our living neighbors. We bear legal responsibility for our crimes and our harms against others. We die.

A corporation has no physical body, conscience, or moral sensibility. It has no need for air, food, or water. It does not love, reproduce sexually, or have a natural life span. It has no fear of imprisonment or execution for its crimes.

The only consequential thing that a corporation has in common with a living human person is the legal doctrine that grants it some of the same rights enjoyed by natural persons—but without the corresponding responsibilities.

Publicly traded corporations are legally protected pools of money-seeking financial assets. They take no notice of collateral damage to life. The living people in their employ, including CEOs, are paid employees required to leave their personal values at the door and subject to dismissal without recourse at the corporation’s pleasure.

The corporation’s primary accountability is to global financial markets driven by human traders and high-speed supercomputers engaged in gaming market prices for quick profits with no concern for long-term value. The financial institutions (corporations) for which these traders and computers work are the ultimate money-seeking corporate robots. They have well-documented histories of deception and

criminality in the pursuit of unearned profits. They favor financial speculation over real investment, encourage and reward fraud, drive continuing cycles of economic boom and bust, mire people and governments in debt they cannot pay, and hold national governments hostage to the interests of global financiers.

If these corporations were just the people they employ, then most of the world's global bankers would be in prison.

Titular human owners—such as the beneficiaries of a retirement fund—rarely have any direct involvement or say in the affairs of the corporations they “own.” Whatever their involvement, they are as owners explicitly exempt from civil or criminal penalty for the corporation's crimes.

Under this system, the Money Economy prospers. Its corporate robots use their profits to buy up the rights to ever more of Earth's living wealth. A privileged few among those who serve the robots enjoy lavish rewards. Those not in the inner circle of privilege struggle to survive job losses, declining real compensation, growing debt, and increasing competition for what remains of the living wealth on which their lives depend.

Economists point to growth in GDP and financial assets and assure us that society is getting richer. They take no note that Earth's living wealth, the real wealth on which life depends, is in accelerating decline.

In recent decades, the corporate robots and their extravagantly compensated minions have expanded their control of the institutions of media, education, and politics to construct a shared public story. Lulled into a trance by the

constant assurances that money and shopping are the keys to our health and happiness, we submitted to corporate rule.

For so long as we leave it to money-seeking robots to shape our shared story and economic priorities, they determine our shared future.¹

GLOBAL AWAKENING

The gap between the Money Economy story and the Living Economy reality of people and nature is growing so extreme and obvious that the Sacred Money and Markets story is losing its grip on the public mind. People are reawakening to our nature as living beings born of a Living Earth born of a Living Universe. As we reawaken to our true nature, we see more easily that the Money Economy is a numbers game driven by self-directing corporate robots for which life is nothing more than a tradable commodity. That game would be irrelevant except for the resulting increase in unearned financial assets—and thereby the economic and political power of the winning robots.

We are eroding Earth's capacity to support human life. Growth in human population and individual consumption intensifies competition for what remains of Earth's declining real wealth. The corporations with excess financial assets buy up the remaining capacity in order to extract monopoly profits from the humans whose lives depend on access to that capacity. The greater the financial returns to the corporate robots and the few they favor, the greater their ability to expand their monopoly control to extract more

profits and further increase their relative share of economic and political power. Earth dies. Human suffering spreads. Public and private institutions lose their credibility, the social fabric frays, and the global system becomes increasingly unstable.

To many of us, these consequences come as no surprise. The spiraling system collapse is playing out much as forecast by the computer models described in *The Limits to Growth*, the highly controversial study by the MIT Systems Dynamics Lab published in 1972 as a report to the Club of Rome.² The future is here.

Guided by a Sacred Money and Markets story, we have created a global suicide economy designed to make money with no concern for the consequences for life. If our goal is short-term growth of the financial assets of a tiny financial oligarchy, then the system is a brilliant success.

Most efforts to avoid further collapse focus on treating the symptoms of a system failure with marginal adjustments: a new regulation, a tax on bad behavior, a subsidy incentive for good behavior. Such adjustments might be appropriate if we were dealing with a broken system. When dealing with a self-destructive system supported by a false story, the only solution is a different system grounded in a different story.

Fortunately, the elements of a new story are emerging. These elements are the cultural equivalents of the imaginal discs that guide the caterpillar's transformation from larva to butterfly. The more quickly and clearly we give expression to the new story, the more rapidly we may find our way to a just and sustainable human future.

SACRED LIFE AND LIVING EARTH

Here are some defining elements of the emerging story. I call it the Sacred Life and Living Earth story.

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 violence, greed, and ruthless competition are indicators of individual and social dysfunction. Environmental damage and extreme inequality are indicators of serious 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. Institutions designed to concentrate their decision-making power in the pursuit of purely financial ends unburdened by the exercise of human conscience—as is the case for most publicly traded limited-liability corporations—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.

As elaborated in the pages ahead, this story draws from the breadth of human knowledge, honors our interdependence with one another and with nature, recognizes the responsibilities that go with our human agency (the exercise of willful choice), gives our lives meaning, and guides our path to a just, sustainable, and democratic human future. It provides a framing vision for a Living Economy that:

- maintains a co-productive balance between humans and nature;
- provides a healthy, meaningful livelihood for all based on a just and equitable sharing of real wealth; and
- gives every person a voice in decisions on which their well-being and that of the whole depend.

I believe that the critical elements of this Sacred Life and Living Earth story live in the human heart. Largely unspoken, however, it has little public presence. To guide our path to a viable and prosperous human future, it must become our shared public story. This is our opportunity to make it so.

A MOMENT OF HOPE AND OPPORTUNITY

The institutional structures of corporate oligarchy have never seemed stronger. Yet in many ways, they have never

been more vulnerable.³ The foundation of their power is rapidly eroding as the seductive promises of the Sacred Money and Markets story lose their credibility and allure.

Although it is barely noticeable amid the daily news reports of spreading violence, environmental disaster, and political gridlock, and it is given no mention by corporate media, a new story is emerging in the words and deeds of millions of people engaged in rebuilding community and reconnecting with nature.

Voluntary simplicity, small houses, backyard and community gardens, and urban agriculture are all growing in popularity. The Living Building Challenge, which is driving the leading edge of the green building movement, shifts the building-industry frame from walling us off from one another and nature to increasing our connections with one another and nature. The New Economy movement, devoted to rebuilding local economies grounded in living-system principles and committed to creating an economy that works for all people and nature, is attracting rapidly expanding support—including support from local governments.

Scientists are acknowledging that animals are conscious and experience feeling states.⁴ Campaigns against the factory farming of animals are gaining momentum. Local initiatives are removing pavement to restore turf and native plants.

Despite massive resistance from powerful corporate robots, environmental regulation is well established, and there is broad public support for government action to protect natural systems. Serious campaigns to strip corporations of

their assumed rights of personhood and to establish in law the rights of nature are gaining strength.

The US Congress established the US Bureau of Reclamation in 1902 to build great dams to bend nature to our human will and use. The bureau's very name absurdly suggests its job is to reclaim from nature that which nature has taken from us. Now the US Bureau of Reclamation is removing dams to reclaim rivers for nature.

For a time in the decades following World War II, a privileged white middle class that felt well served by corporate rule provided corporations with a supportive political base. The institutions of the Money Economy that now systematically erode the white middle class erode as well their customer and political base and create an opening for social movements that unify the excluded.

For five thousand years, ruling classes have maintained their power by keeping the excluded divided along lines of race, gender, religion, language, ethnicity, and more. These lines are blurring. Universal education is increasing literacy and sophistication among the excluded. Communications technologies are facilitating links among grassroots movements. And intercultural exchange is building appreciation for the rich variety of our cultural traditions as a priceless asset.

Given the long history of racial and gender discrimination, the change in attitudes and laws relating to race and gender over the past sixty years is particularly dramatic. Despite strong undertones of prejudice in the venom of some politicians, an African American whom the law would have

confined to the back of the bus in southern US states in the years of my youth became US president. Mainstream society now turns to indigenous people, once scorned as savages, as a source of wisdom and insight into how we all should live.

Demeaning racial and gender stereotypes widely accepted as immutable truth sixty years ago still exist, but their public expression now risks contempt and social sanction.

We are in the midst of a deep shift in human consciousness. The elements of its framing story are emerging. They have yet to find coherent, unifying expression.

CHANGE THE STORY, CHANGE THE FUTURE

We cannot act coherently as a society without a shared framing story. It defines our shared values and priorities, the questions we ask, and the options we consider. It shapes political debates, our institutions, and our interpretation of current events. For this reason, no matter how discredited an established story may be, we cling to it in our public discourse until it is replaced by a more compelling story.

Corporate interests repeat and reaffirm the Sacred Money and Markets story at every opportunity. They use it as the frame for every news report and political debate. They make it the basis of their legal arguments. They teach it in our schools and universities. So long as it carries the day, it defines our future.

Those of us committed to advancing justice, sustainability, peace, and democratic governance campaign and or-

ganize 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.

Moreover, to the extent that we do argue our case within a larger story frame, it is most always the frame of the Sacred Money and Markets story. Thus, we do more than concede the story that legitimates the institutions responsible for the economic, social, environmental, and governance failures we seek to remedy. We reinforce it. We win occasional temporary victories for life on a particular issue, but we lose the future to money.

To win the future for life, we who would live in service to life must organize around the articulation and sharing of a compelling, unifying counterstory. We must make the articulation of a Sacred Life and Living Earth story a focal point of discussions in our living rooms, schools, churches, and civic centers. We must make our story the frame of our social media exchanges, community initiatives, and political advocacy. We must introduce it into academic curricula. We must use it in selecting the indicators by which we assess the performance of the economy.

We must discipline ourselves to recognize and challenge the fabricated Sacred Money and Markets story wherever we encounter it—in business news, in education, in political debates and advocacy, and in conversations with colleagues. Compel the champions of money to make their case within a Sacred Life and Living Earth frame.

In the pages ahead, we will explore the many dimensions

of the challenge of turning from a world organized around a Sacred Money and Markets story to a world organized around a Sacred Life and Living Earth story. We begin with the cosmologies that define our deepest beliefs about the nature of reality and our human origin, nature, and purpose.

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Author of *When Corporations Rule the World* and *Agenda for a New Economy*

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By David C. Korten

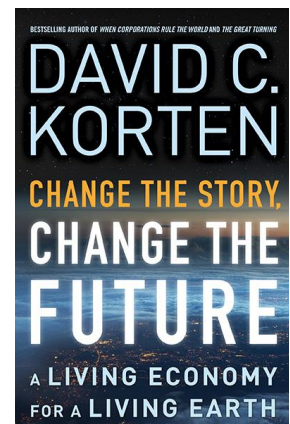
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Change the Story, Change the Future dares to speak a forbidden but self-evident truth. Seduced by a fabricated Sacred Money and Markets story, we humans live in indentured service to money-seeking corporate robots that relate to Earth as if it were a dead rock.

Hope lies with the truth of a Sacred Life and Living Earth story that has ancient roots in indigenous wisdom and lives in the human heart.

"Change the Story, Change the Future will transform your view of reality and human purpose. One of the most important books of our time, from one of the most brilliant thinkers of our era, it hands us the keys to a world in which all people live in creative, peaceful, and coproductive partnership with one another and with nature. Read it, ponder its message, and spread the word!"

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