

Religion, Science, and Spirit: A Sacred Story for Our Time

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Wow! It is such a privilege to be part of this amazing gathering. As co-founder and board chair of YES! Magazine, you can imagine that I'm constantly looking for signs of hope and possibility. There are few more hopeful signs than this gathering of America's most creative and effective storytellers. We are all here because we realize that we humans are in deep crisis and the cause traces back to the beliefs and values communicated through the false stories by which we live—and we are committed to being part of the solution by our contributions to changing those stories.

We each have our own story of how we came to this work. Here is mine.

I first became aware of the consequences of failed stories during twenty-one years living and working in Africa, Latin America, and Asia on a mission to end world poverty. I originally assumed that the work of international development was to support the people of impoverished countries in learning to use their talents and natural wealth more efficiently and effectively to better meet their needs and achieve healthier happier lives. Over time, I realized that what was really happening was very different.

Yes, I witnessed growth in GDP, expansion of the middle class, and the accumulation of huge fortunes by a fortunate few.

Debt, dependence, and deprivation for the many.

I also, however, observed that life for the majority became less secure and more desperate. Slums spread. Families and communities disintegrated. Once beautiful cultures survived mainly as tourist attractions. Rivers died. Once vibrant coastal corals and verdant hillsides became barren wastelands.

Outsized profits for the few.

Eventually, a story emerged very different than the one that drew me to this work. In the name of helping the poor, rich countries were loaning poor countries foreign currency to invest in growing their economies. Because foreign currency is only good for buying things from abroad, this created dependence on foreign goods and technology—and built up debts that could be repaid only by selling their national labor and assets to foreigners.

When repayment time came, the International Monetary Fund and World Bank stepped in like mafia debt collectors with baseball bats ready to break legs. They told indebted countries they must restructure their economies, not to better meet the needs of their own people, but rather to repay the debt. Reduce your spending on health and education, they said. Sell your land and natural resources to private foreign corporations. Set up duty free zones with cheap nonunionized labor with no rights or benefits to produce goods for export to foreign consumers.

Debt, dependence, and deprivation for the many. Outsized profits for the few.

You may recognize this as a familiar pattern that now plays out here in the United States, in Europe, and all around the world.

Why do we tolerate it? Because of a story, constantly repeated and rarely challenged in public conversation.

Time is money. Money is wealth. Those who make money are society's wealth creators. Envy is a sin. Consumption is the path to happiness. Humans are by nature individualistic, greedy, and competitive, which are in fact beneficial qualities that the invisible hand of the free market channels in ways that create prosperity for all. Maximizing financial gain is a moral and legal duty of business. Earth is a rock in space useful as a stock of free resources and a convenient waste dump.

This is the standard economic story propagated by the few whose interests it serves—and it is false on every point.

Contrast it with this very different and more truthful story.

Time is life. Life is the most precious of the many forms of wealth. Making time for life is the path to happiness. Equality, community, and connection to nature are essential foundations of human health and happiness. It is our human nature to care and to share. The purpose of business is to serve the community. Earth is our sacred mother. As she loves and nurtures us, we must love and care for her. This is the story around which we must create a New Economy.

There is a yet bigger story, however, that holds the key to our future.

In 1992, my wife Fran and I returned to the United States from Asia and I began to write *When Corporations Rule the World*, which became an international best seller. Fran by the way, is publisher of YES! Magazine, which we founded to tell the stories of human possibility and the people who are making it happen.

To care about our common future, we need a story that gives us a reason to care.

While writing the book I frequently gave talks on the imperative for change based on a new economic story.

When I made the case in public presentations that we humans are on a path of our own creation to potential species extinction unless

we change our ways, I often heard people respond:

“Yes, it may be true we are on a suicidal course, but changing our ways would be expensive and inconvenient. And if the doomsayers turn out to be wrong, we will have ended the party for nothing.”

I was stunned and dismayed. Then I chanced upon Thomas Berry’s book *Dream of the Earth* in which he observes:

“For people generally, their story of the universe and the human role in the universe is their primary source of intelligibility and value. The deepest crises experienced by any society are those moments of change when the story becomes inadequate for meeting the survival demands of a present situation.”

Bingo: To care about our common future, we need a story that gives us a reason to care.

We humans live by stories. Lacking a sacred story that gives our lives meaning and purpose, we have come to worship money and the free market as our reason for being and our guide to moral conduct. It is no wonder we are in deep trouble.

Earth is sacred. Life is sacred. Money is only an accounting entry--a number on a piece of paper or in a computer hard drive. The free market that self-organizes to create prosperity for all with no rules is a fantasy with no more reality than the belief that alchemists had the power to turn lead into gold.

Our common future depends on a cultural and institutional transformation that begins with a story of the origin, nature, and purpose of creation—a cosmology—that reflects the fullness of our current human knowledge, gives us a reason to live, and serves as our guide to forming healthy, mature relationships with one another and a living Earth.

I can quickly illustrate the point with three creation stories: The Distant Patriarch. The Grand Machine. And the Integral Spirit. The first two are instantly familiar. Only the third serves our need.

The **Distant Patriarch** story comes to us from the Abrahamic religions. It speaks of an all knowing, all powerful **Patriarch** who created the cosmos, rules it from a place called heaven, and observes and judges our obedience to His commandments. By the reckoning of this story, my only truly important relationship is with Him. My life purpose is to figure what He wants and gain His favor and get a good spot in the afterlife. By the perverse interpretation of the Rapturists, the growing devastation of society and Earth is a hopeful sign that the time of ascent of the believers to Heaven is near. Check it out. Google the “Rapture Index.”

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The **Grand Machine** story comes to us from science. It speaks of the cosmos as a giant clock, life as an accidental outcome of material complexity, and consciousness and free will as illusions. It reckons that evolution progresses through chance genetic mutation and a competitive struggle by which the fitter survive and flourish and the weaker perish. It tells me, I am alone in a vast universe without meaning or purpose. My most rational response is to distract myself from the terrible loneliness through the pursuit of material consumption and hedonistic pleasures—until the lights go out.

The **Integral Spirit** story has ancient roots and a significant modern following, but virtually no institutional support or public visibility. By its reckoning, all of creation is the expression of an integral spiritual intelligence engaged in a sacred journey to discover and actualize its possibilities through a process of becoming.

Our common future depends on igniting the public imagination with a compelling sense of awe at the wondrous beauty and mystery of Creation.

All beings—stars, planets, humans, animals, plants, rocks, rivers, grains of sand—are all expressions of this divine force—each with its place and function in the journey of the whole. Creation, at our deepest level of understanding, is a fundamentally cooperative, creative enterprise. Extreme individualism, greed, and violence are pathological—signs of developmental

physical, cultural, and institutional failure.

This story is confirmed by our inner awareness, indigenous wisdom, the teachings of the prophets, the findings of science, and our daily experience. Although rarely spoken, it is the story of nearly everyone I know and likely resides in the heart of every person—even if not yet discovered. It is a story to inspire and guide us to a human future of true prosperity and happiness for all.

Many who already acknowledge it in private need only a public affirmation that they are not alone to step forward and join in actualizing its possibilities.

Such breakthroughs in consciousness take hold only at rare moments of public readiness. I have observed over the past nine months indications from a multitude of colleagues and institutions of a readiness to engage a public conversation exploring our nature as spiritual beings and the nature of our responsibility for the care of our Sacred Earth mother.

As expressions of the spirit, we humans are agents of the divine with an intimate relationship to all Creation. This carries a responsibility to contribute the distinctive capacities of our reflective consciousness to Creation's continued creative unfolding.

Our common future depends on igniting the public imagination with a compelling sense of awe at the wondrous beauty and mystery of Creation. We need stories that inspire us to bring forth new cultures and institutions. Stories that help us know we are members of a sacred Earth Community and encourage our active and knowing participation in Creation's epic journey.

You, the entertainment industry's master storytellers, have the creative imaginations, advanced technologies and worldwide influence to bring this story to the fore of the human consciousness. I implore you to use these gifts, to tell this story for the sake of ourselves, our children, Sacred Earth, and all of Creation.....Thank you.

[Dr. David Korten](#) is the author of *[Agenda for a New Economy: From Phantom Wealth to Real Wealth](#)*, *[The Great Turning: From Empire to Earth Community](#)*, *[The Post-Corporate World: Life after Capitalism](#)*, and the international best seller *[When Corporations Rule the World](#)*. He is board chair of [YES! Magazine](#), co-chair of the [New Economy Working Group](#), a founding board member emeritus of the [Business Alliance for Local Living Economies](#), president of the [Living Economies Forum](#), an associate fellow of the [Institute for Policy Studies](#), and a member of the [Club of Rome](#). He earned MBA and PhD degrees from the Stanford University Graduate School of Business and served on the faculty of the Harvard Business School. [He blogs for YES! Magazine](#). This presentation to the [Global Alliance for Transformational Media](#) - GATE 3 conference evening program "Celebrating Meaningful Messages for an Awakening Humanity" is based on his essay "[Religion, Science, and Spirit: A Sacred Story for Our Time](#)." This [presentation is also available online](#) on David Korten's Living Economies Forum website.