

## From the Love of Money to the Love of Life

*by David C. Korten*

**W**e come together at this time of national sorrow and unity to pledge our commitment to the values and principles set forth in the Earth Charter, a document that begins with these words:

*We stand at a critical moment in Earth's history, a time when humanity must choose its future.*

The terrible and unconscionable tragedy of September 11 gives a meaning and urgency to the prophetic words of the Earth Charter Preamble that could not have been imagined by any of us three weeks ago.

Two universally shared images are now deeply embedded in the collective consciousness of our species. One is the image of the living Earth—a vibrant gem as seen from the darkness of space—that has become the icon of humanity's emerging planetary consciousness—a symbol of peace and of the wonder and oneness of life. The other is the image of two gigantic World Trade Center towers collapsing into a pile of rubble and ending the lives of human beings trapped inside—a symbol of the fear, hatred, and violence that divide us in a deeply troubled world—a terrifying symbol of the ease with which those so alienated from life that they find meaning only in death, can transform the technological instruments of our power *over* the world into instruments of our vulnerability *to* the world.

The juxtaposition of these two images—one, the living jewel of life, the other, the collapsing towers of death—provides a defining reference point for humanity. Hold both of these images in mind as you listen further to the Earth Charter Preamble:

*We stand at a critical moment in Earth's history when humanity must choose its future.*

*The future at once holds great peril and great promise.*



*We must recognize that we are one human family, and one Earth community with a common destiny.*

*We must bring forth a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace.*

*It is imperative that we declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations.*

So much truth in so few words. The terrible tragedy of September 11 has focused world attention, altered our collective consciousness, and demonstrated the need to reorder human priorities. It is a moment that compels choice, but leaves it to us to determine what that choice will be. Much rests on how our nation, America, responds.

Succumbing to the dark forces of fear and vengeance, we can choose to respond in kind to this horrific and unconscionable act. We can unleash our vast military might against an invisible and widely dispersed network of a few thousand violent extremists, thereby risking the loss of tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands—even millions—of innocent lives—in an endlessly spiraling escalation of violence. Or we can choose a path of patient and compassionate justice that respects life, the rights of the innocent and the rule of law in a cooperative international effort to *bring the guilty to justice*, as we simultaneously work to *bring justice to the world* by creating a world that works for all—free of the injustice that leads to violence.

The September 11 attack on America was unthinkable, sudden, and brutal. It appeared without warning, seemingly from nowhere. And yet placed in the context of the historical forces that gave rise to this vicious act, it begins to seem almost inevitable—only the details of time and place—when and where—could not have been foreseen.

It was a wake up call too visible, too dramatic, too evil to ignore. It shocks us out of our trance of complacency about the fate of the world beyond America's shores and compels us to ask, "Why?" From where does such hatred of America spring? In our search for answers we confront the unbearable desperation and fear born of exclusion and powerlessness that are the daily experience of billions of our fellow human beings in a world of

increasing inequality, deprivation, and violence. We also confront the reality that in the eyes of many of the world's dispossessed, the hands of America are not clean.

The meaning of the Earth Charter in this time of crisis is found not only in its words, but also in the extraordinary process by which it was crafted. It is the product of an open, broadly participatory process that involved thousands of people from all walks of life and every part of the world. It gives voice to the deep values and profound vision of hope of ordinary people everywhere for what the world can be. It is a manifestation of an awakening planetary consciousness of the oneness of life that transcends race, gender, religious affiliation, nationality, and language—and it flows not from the deliberations of intellectual élites, but from the heart and soul of humanity.

More than simply an awakening to values too long neglected, humanity is experiencing an evolutionary step toward an awareness of culture itself — to a realization that cultural beliefs and values are human constructs, subject to conscious critical examination and choice. We are in a collective trance of blind acquiescence to a culture of violence, injustice, materialism, and domination so destructive of life that it threatens our very survival. As we free ourselves from this trance, we are able to direct our life energy toward the task of consciously, intentionally living into being a new culture of peace, justice, compassion and partnership grounded in the principles set forth in the Earth Charter.

We each come to this awakening in our own way. For many of us in America, it started with the civil rights movement when we first became aware that relations between blacks and whites had long been defined by cultural codes that had nothing to do with reality. Once we learned to recognize the difference between reality and the unexamined, unjust, and self-limiting belief system that governed race relations, it became easier to see similar distortions of reality in the cultural codes that define the relations between men and women, between people and nature, between straights and gays, and most recently between the institutions of money (including global corporations, the World Bank, the IMF, and the WTO) and the needs of life.




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Awakening to the reality of our cultural conditioning is a critical step toward the realization of a new level of human freedom. Racism, sexism, homophobia, exploitation, and materialism are more easily seen for what they are, and our minds are opened to potentials within ourselves, otherwise denied. Increasingly immune to the distorted cultural conditioning of our minds by corporate media, advertising, and political demagogues, we are able to see that in our obsessive pursuit of power, money, and materialism we have forgotten how to live.

We awaken to the reality that we have given over our lives to the culture and institutions of a suicide economy that so devalues life that it actually rewards us for destroying life—the lives of persons, the life of community, and the life of nature—and to what end?—to make money for those who already have more money than they need.

It is a profound distortion of values. Money is purely an abstraction without substance or intrinsic worth. Life is the sacred essence of our being, the breath of God, the greatest of creation's miracles. Yet our cultural trance has so disabled us that we have come to accept, without question, the use of money as a measure of life's value. We have acquiesced to the rule of predatory global corporations, which are bound by law and structure to maximize financial return to faceless absentee owners without regard to the social and environmental consequences for life.

The task ahead, what theologian Thomas Berry calls “the Great Work,” is both simple and profound. We must transform societies dedicated to the love of money, into societies dedicated to the love of life. We must free ourselves from the pathological culture and institutions of the global suicide economy, withdrawing from them our life energy—the source of their sustenance—as we live into being the life-serving cultures and institutions of a planetary system of living economies\* comprised of human-scale, locally rooted, equitably owned enterprises that mimic the ways of healthy, mature ecosystems.

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\* *Editor's note:* For Dr. Korten's presentation on “A Planetary System of Living Economies,” see [www.pcdf.org/Living-Economies](http://www.pcdf.org/Living-Economies).

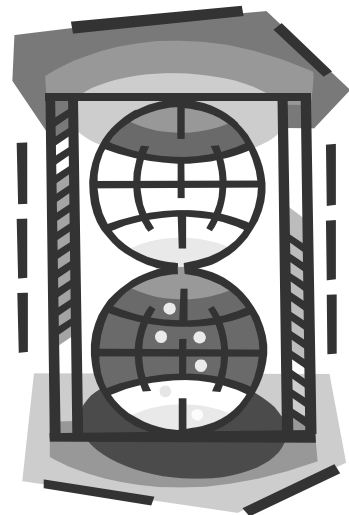
The Great Work begins in part by getting our story right. The cultural trance that alienates contemporary societies from life and spirit has been maintained in part by an old story that traces back to the early days of the scientific revolution.

As this limited and now badly out-dated story tells it, matter is the only reality, life is an accidental outcome of material complexity, consciousness is an illusion, and the cosmos is but a clockworks, defined by purely mechanical relationships, created and set in motion by the hand of a God who then abandoned his creation leaving the great clockworks to exhaust itself as its spring winds down. Elaborating on the story line of the mechanical universe, biologists added a sub-text that reduced the miracle of evolution to a series of chance genetic mutations combined with a competitive struggle in which those more fit survive and flourish, as the weaker and less worthy perish. It is an old story based on premises now largely discredited by science itself.

Yet a collective cultural trance continues to hold modern societies captive to this story's self-limiting view of reality and human possibility—stripping life of meaning, mocking compassion as naive, and dismissing concern for the well-being of one another and the Earth as irrational. The old story leaves us with no moral purpose beyond the compulsive pursuit of material gratification in an ultimately futile effort to distract ourselves from the terrible loneliness of conscious beings abandoned by their God in a dead and uncaring universe.

The awakening of our cultural consciousness allows us to see this story for what it is—simply a story—a creation of the human mind—a story in fact sharply at odds with the evidence of our daily experience and the findings of more contemporary science.

A new story is emerging from a convergence of modern scientific knowledge and ancient spiritual wisdom—a story that awakens us to the sacred wonder of a living cosmos embarked on an epic journey of self-discovery. It is the story theme for the Great Work ahead.





The new story begins some 15 billion years ago when all the energy and mass of our known universe burst forth from a point smaller than the head of a pin and spread as dispersed energy particles, the stuff of creation, into the vastness of space. With the passing of time these particles self-organized into atoms, swirled into great clouds that eventually formed into galaxies, then coalesced into stars that grew, died, and were reborn as new stars, star systems, and planets. The cataclysmic energies unleashed by the births and deaths of billions of suns converted simple atoms into ever more complex atoms and molecules—at each step opening new possibilities for the growth and evolution of the whole.

More than 11 billion years later, at least one among the countless planets of the cosmos gave birth to a living organism—the simplest of bacteria, only a single cell. Yet these enterprising creatures launched the planet's first great age of invention. They discovered the processes of fermentation, photosynthesis and respiration, which provided the building blocks for what was to follow. They learned to share their discoveries with one another through the exchange of genetic material and, in so doing, created the planet's first global communication system. With time they discovered how to join in cooperative unions to create complex, multi-celled organisms with capacities far beyond those of the individual cells of which they were comprised. Continuously experimenting, creating, building, life transformed the planet's substance into a living web of astonishing variety, beauty, awareness and capacity for intelligent and cooperative choice.

Then, a mere 2.6 million years ago, quite near the end of our 15 billion-year story, there came the creation of a being with capacities far beyond those of any creature that preceded it to reflect on its own consciousness; to experience with awe the beauty and mystery of creation; to articulate, communicate and share learning; to reshape the material world to its own ends; and to anticipate and intentionally choose its own future. Each of these extraordinary creatures was comprised of some 30 to 70 trillion individual living, self-regulating, self-reproducing cells joined in an exquisitely balanced cooperative union. They called themselves—humans.

The new story calls on us to re-examine our most basic assumptions about reality and about human possibilities. Its cosmic metaphor is not the machine, but the organism. Its irreducible building block is not a particle, but a thought. Rather than banishing to some distant place beyond our experience

the spiritual intelligence and energy we know as God, it acknowledges the essential and ever present spiritual unity that is the ground of all being. It reveals the wonder of life's extraordinary capacity for creative self-organization, infuses our lives with meaning and possibility, and evokes a love and reverence for the whole of life, the miracle of our living planet, and the creative potentials of each person. It suggests that far from being the end products of creation, we humans were born to find our place of service in life's quest to know itself through the continuing, unfolding discovery of new possibilities.

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The new story allows us to recognize evil as that which is destructive of life and the actualization of life's potential. Equally, it allows us to recognize our own capacity for goodness, compassion, and creative engagement in the unfolding drama of creation. And in revealing life's ability to self-organize with a mindfulness of both self and whole, it affirms our potential to create truly democratic, self-organizing human societies that acknowledge and nurture our individual capacity to balance freedom with responsibility.

As we humans must now consciously choose our future, so too must we choose the story that will guide us to that future. The principles embodied in the new story are the same principles articulated by the world's people in the Earth Charter. This is a time of passage to a new human era grounded in a new human consciousness. It is more than a historic moment. It is an evolutionary moment.

We are being called by the deep intelligence of creation to take a step toward species maturity — to accept responsibility for the consequences of our presence on this planet — a responsibility not only for the well-being of one another, but as well for the whole of life. The Earth Charter articulates the vision, values, and principles that we now embrace as we respond to that call.

