



*“Let ours be a time remembered for the awakening
of a new reverence for life ...”*

THE EARTH CHARTER

Religion, Science, *and* Spirit

A SACRED STORY FOR OUR TIME

By David Korten

FOR PEOPLE, GENERALLY, THEIR STORY OF THE UNIVERSE and the human role in the universe is their primary source of intelligibility and value,” Thomas Berry wrote in *The Dream of the Earth*. “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.”

We live at such a moment. Humanity’s current behavior threatens Earth’s capacity to support life and relegates more than a billion people to lives of destitution. This self-destructive behavior and our seeming inability to change have deep roots in the stories by which we understand the nature and meaning of our existence. The challenge before us is to create a new civilization based on a cosmology—a story of the origin, nature, and purpose of creation—that reflects the fullness of our current human knowledge; a story to guide us to mature relationships with one another and a living Earth.

Three Cosmologies

Three distinct cosmologies have each had their influence in shaping the Western worldview. Two are familiar. The third—and most relevant to the task at hand—has ancient roots, and may in one form or another be the most widely held. It has virtually no public presence.



The cosmos is created and ruled by a Distant Patriarch.

This is the cosmology most commonly associated with the institutions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. It views creation as the work of an all-knowing, all-powerful God. From his home in a separate, sacred dimension called Heaven, He observes and judges our obedience to His commandments handed down to us through sacred texts and interpreted by His anointed religious authorities.

This cosmology focuses attention on our individual relationship with a personal but distant God, as expressed in Michelangelo's famous rendering of a God portrayed in the image of man. By implication, our human relationships with one another and with nature are secondary to this primary relationship. Although some adherents believe that we have an obligation to care for God's creation in this life and to show compassion to our fellow human beings, in many interpretations of the Distant Patriarch story, life on Earth is but a way station on the path to paradise. Nature exists for our temporary human use and comfort. Those who demonstrate their closeness to God by their pious religious observance and special knowledge of His intention properly exercise authority over the rest of us.



The cosmos is a Grand Machine.

This is the cosmology commonly associated with science. It is the standard story of Newtonian physics, evolutionary biology, and the institutions of secular academia. In this cosmology only the material is real. The formation and function of the cosmos and the evolution of life are consequences of a combination of physical mechanism and random chance. Life is an accidental outcome of material complexity and has no larger meaning or purpose. Consciousness and free will are illusions.

By this reckoning, the cosmos is much like a mechanical clock-works gradually running down as its spring unwinds. Building on the mechanistic determinism of classical physics, classical biology holds that life evolves through a combination of chance genetic mutation and a competitive struggle by which the fitter survive and flourish as the weaker perish.

According to the Grand Machine cosmology, a brutal competition for survival, territory, and reproductive advantage is the basic law of nature, and these same instincts define our human nature. Indeed, as economists of a social Darwinist perspective assure us, our competitive instinct is the primary and essential driver of human prosperity and progress. The defining debate turns on the question of whether this instinct best serves society when free from government interference or when guided by public regulation and incentives.



The cosmos is a manifestation of Integral Spirit.

This cosmology has ancient roots and a significant modern following, but lacks institutional support and 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 an ongoing process of becoming. Our world and the material universe of our experience are more than God's creation—they are God made flesh. God is in the world and the world is in God, yet they are not identical. Although the spirit is imminent, it is also transcendent, a concept religious scholars refer to as panentheism.

We come to know the nature, purpose, and intention of this divine force through both our inner experience and our observation of its physical manifestation. All beings, stars, planets, humans, animals, plants, rocks, and rivers are expressions of this divine force—each with its place and function in the journey of the whole.

Contrary to prevailing theories of social Darwinism, the Integral Spirit cosmology recognizes that life is a fundamentally cooperative enterprise.

Indigenous wisdom keepers speak of the creator's original instructions to humans to get along with one another and nature. Brain scientists tell us the human brain evolved to reward cooperation, service, and compassion—suggesting that the creative processes of evolution have programmed these original instructions into our brains and DNA.

Extreme individualism, greed, and violence are pathological and signs of physical, developmental, cultural, and/or institutional system failure. Caring relationships are the foundation of healthy families and communities. The Golden Rule common to all major

faiths is a better guide to appropriate moral behavior than mechanistic rules are.

The Integral Spirit cosmology postulates that we humans participate in and contribute to the divine journey. We can apply our distinctive capacities for reflective consciousness and choice either to advance creation's evolutionary thrust toward ever more creative possibility, or to disrupt it. Together, our individual choices determine our collective fate and shape the course of the journey far beyond our time.

We find threads of this story in the traditional wisdom teachings of indigenous peoples and the mystical traditions of all faiths, including the Abrahamic faiths. In his expression of his Jewish faith, Jesus taught, "The Kingdom is within." Muhammad taught, "Wherever you turn, there is the Face of Allah."

The Integral Spirit cosmology is consistent with the findings of quantum physics, which reveals that the apparent solidity of matter is an illusion and at the deepest level of understanding only relationships are real. I find that Integral Spirit is the underlying cosmology of a reassuring number of religious leaders and devout members of many faiths, including a great many Catholic nuns, as well as most people who define themselves as spiritual, but not necessarily religious.

Why Creation Stories Matter

Our creation stories have powerful implications for our understanding of our place in the cosmos and thereby shape our most foundational values, our politics, and the distribution of power in society.

The Distant Patriarch story characterizes our earthly existence as a separation from the divine goodness and grace of heaven. Our experience in this life becomes a test of faith, a burden to be endured and ultimately left behind in an eventual ascent of the righteous to reside with the creator in paradise. This cosmology reduces the purpose of life in the present to a fear-based quest to earn credits toward a divine judgment that will determine whether our fate after death will be to join the saved or the damned. It is a perfect setup for the manipulation and exploitation of believers by demagogues.

Different Worldviews

The three stories convey very different understandings regarding relationships, agency, and meaning.

Distant Patriarch: Our most important relationship is to a distant God who is the sole source of agency and meaning.

Grand Machine: We are alone in a mechanistic cosmos devoid of agency and possessing no purpose or meaning.

Integral Spirit: We are intelligent, self-directing agents integrally connected to all of creation with a distinctive role and responsibility to advance the continued creative unfolding of life's possibilities.



The Grand Machine story strips our existence of meaning and purpose. In so doing, it supports consumerism and an ethic of individual material gratification as a distraction from the terrifying loneliness and despair of an otherwise meaningless existence. By characterizing life as inherently competitive, it provides a pseudo-scientific justification for social Darwinism, colonial imperialism, racial domination, and the unrestrained competition of market fundamentalism. It neglects the far greater role of cooperation and synergy on which all living systems—and human society, civilization, and culture—depend.

Though sharply at odds regarding the presence or absence of a spiritual intelligence, both the Distant Patriarch and Grand Machine cosmologies affirm the self-destructive individualism and separation that lead us to behave in ways that threaten Earth's biosphere and our future as a species.

The Integral Spirit story, by contrast, infuses all we behold in this life and beyond with profound meaning. All of creation is a sacred and ultimately unified expression of an eternal and intimately present divine

will. All beings are interconnected and our fates are inextricably intertwined. As participants in and contributors to the ongoing process of creation, we each bear a sacred responsibility. Our lives take on profound meaning and purpose in relationship and service to the sacred whole.

This cosmology has the elements of the needed story for our time. It remains, however, largely a private story without the institutional sponsors that give the Distant Patriarch and Grand Machine cosmologies authority and public presence. The absence of institutional sponsorship helps to secure its authenticity, but the absence of public visibility limits its influence as a guide to rethinking and restructuring our human relationships with one another and nature.

Largely invisible in the public forum, it is not included in public opinion polls, leaving us with little idea of how widespread its acceptance actually is. Consequently, those of us who align with its foundational insights have no way to assess whether we are just cultural outliers or members of what may quite possibly be a cultural majority. Intimidated by our isolation, we



may be reluctant to share the truth in our hearts, thus limiting our ability to share and deepen our insights and to join with others to fulfill the responsibilities to which the insights of this story call us.

Six Blind Men Describe an Elephant

Reflecting on the relationship between these three seemingly mutually exclusive cosmologies brings to mind the story of the six blind men describing an elephant. The first feels its side and proclaims, “An elephant is like a wall.” The second gropes its tusk and counters, “No, it is like a spear.” The third feels the trunk and says, “Truly it is like a snake.” The fourth feels a leg and insists, “An elephant is like a tree.” The fifth feels its ear and pronounces it to be “Like a fan.” The sixth grasps the tail and says “Nonsense, an elephant is like a rope.”

We understand and relate to our world largely through our basic senses. The spiritual dimension, however, lies beyond our limited direct sensory experience. When we seek to describe it, like the blind men groping the elephant, we turn to familiar imagery. This story is a warning that any interpretation of the infinite is likely to capture only a part of a much larger reality.

The Politics of Story Power

The mystics among the prophets, sages, and wisdom keepers of all times and traditions have discerned a spiritual order and unity in creation they could make intelligible to their followers only through metaphor. Consequently, they sought to communicate their mystical insights through easily understood stories and familiar images. Not surprisingly, the intended messages have been subject to omission and distortion as they pass from generation to generation.

Generally, for early indigenous peoples the deeper truth of creation as the expression of an integral spiritual consciousness translated into stories of an enchanted world inhabited by spirits of diverse motives and magical abilities. Matrilineal societies tended toward feminine imagery and worshiped images of the Goddess. More gender-balanced societies worshiped both a Sky Father and an Earth Mother.

With time, human societies developed large-scale institutional structures that supported powerful political and religious rulers with a considerable interest in shaping stories of divine power to serve their political interests. Stories and images of gods and goddesses as larger-than-life versions of their earthly rulers served them better than stories and images of

an enchanted world of spirit beings.

The Abrahamic faiths—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—were each built on the foundation of a deep and profound sense of the integral spiritual unity and order of creation. Each emerged within male-dominated societies in which patriarchs were familiar figures and symbols. They naturally looked to the patriarch as their symbol for an all-knowing, all-powerful spiritual consciousness.

It was also natural that these societies placed their religious institutions in the care of men—who in turn found that it best served their political interests to favor the distant Sky Father over the imminent Earth Mother and to dismiss goddess worship as primitive and pagan. The priestly class further strengthened its power and authority by affirming sacred ancient texts interpreted by religious scholars as the sole authority on the will of God.

Eventually, the keepers of the faith conveniently forgot that the image of the Distant Patriarch was only a metaphor for the unity and order of the Integral Spirit from which all being manifests.

Separation of the material and spiritual worlds, rejection of the feminine, and a reliance on ancient texts as the primary (if not sole) source of human knowledge and moral authority, in denial of the data of the senses, became a serious barrier to the advancement of human knowledge and understanding. As the world divided into a multitude of institutionalized religious sects and subsects, the underlying stories of the spiritual unity of creation gave way to often violent competition for market share based on “My God is the real God” product differentiation.

Newtonian science emerged as a counter to religion’s rejection of the experience of the senses in favor of explanations of events based on stories of the magical powers of mythic figures, and to the barrier this rejection posed to human advancement. To secure its integrity and authority, science embraced disciplined observation of how matter interacts with matter as its primary—even exclusive—source of knowledge and learning. This brought a new rigor to the search for order in the cosmos and lifted human understanding and technological possibility to previously unimagined levels.

Much as the priestly classes of institutionalized Western religions conveniently forgot that the patriarch was a metaphor, however, the gatekeepers of science eventually forgot that the denial of agency and free will that imposed a useful and beneficial discipline on scientific inquiry within the context of 17th-century belief systems was a choice—not a scientific finding.

A scientific culture that ignored or denied spiritual consciousness brought with it an implicit denial of life’s capacity for conscious self-direction. This in turn limited our ability to comprehend and embrace the richness, potential, and responsibilities of our nature as conscious, intelligent, self-directing participants in Earth’s interconnected, ever-evolving, ever-learning web of life.

That the reductionist story underlying most scientific inquiry to this day describes only one element of a larger reality does not invalidate the truth or utility of its contributions. It is essential, however, that we recognize how the myopia of classical scientific reductionism suppresses our sense of wonder, agency, responsibility to and for one another and living Earth, and our ability to actualize a democratic vision of the authentic popular sovereignty of self-governing peoples and an equitable distribution of power.

Integral Spirit as a Liberating Synthesis

Our future as a species depends on bringing to the fore of human consciousness a story that invites us to consider the whole of the elephant, and to relate to it in ways appropriate to both its nature and ours. The Integral Spirit story provides a core narrative.

In its contemporary expression, the cosmology of the Integral Spirit draws from the many ways of human knowing. It embraces and melds insights from the frontiers of scientific observation, the world’s major religions, and the experience of indigenous peoples and mystics extending back to ancient times. In acknowledging both intelligent agency and material mechanism, it recognizes that agency plays out in an ordered living cosmos within a framework of rules, and it clearly distinguishes between free will and license. It affirms our human nature as spiritual beings with an epic calling to advance a sacred purpose, and it frames a vision of possibility to guide us to a viable future consistent with the divine will as revealed in

our most comprehensive understanding of the cosmic unfolding.

Contemporary Western culture presses us to choose between the institutions of religion and science as our primary source for understanding our human nature, purpose, and possibilities. In their current institutionalized forms, Western religion and science are both relics of an imperial past. Both define themselves by stories that support the prevailing systems of human domination of one another, other species, and Earth. Each resolutely defends its claim to being society's ultimate and final intellectual and moral authority and clings to its own self-limiting cosmology as the only valid story.

Despite their imperial legacy, the Distant Patriarch and Grand Machine cosmologies are both the product of efforts to discern and describe critical elements of the larger story of the Integral Spirit. That larger story has been with us in various forms since the beginning of human consciousness.

It is readily evident why the Integral Spirit cosmology has lacked sponsorship and support from the imperial institutions that have defined the dominant human societies for the past 5,000 years. It evokes a radical vision of democratic possibility and presents a fundamental challenge to their legitimacy.

It is for this very reason that it is the story and the vision we now need to guide our way to a future in which we humans learn to live in balanced and mutual prosperous relationship with one another and nature.

Distributed Intelligence and Life's Capacity to Self-Organize

We now know a great deal more than we have in the past about the creative capacity of the processes through which Integral Spirit manifests. We still have much to learn from and contribute to these processes, but to do so we must acknowledge and celebrate them. We know, for example, that at every level, the cosmos has an amazing capacity to self-organize toward greater complexity and potential.

The theory of distributed cognition or intelligence suggests that multiple minds have capabilities inherently greater than does a single mind. Many interlinked per-

sonal computers have more power than a single super computer. It seems that creation learned early on to apply this principle on a grand scale in the design of the endless fractal structures of its self-organizing systems long before the arrival of humans. It is a key to the creativity and resilience of the cosmos.

Earth's biosphere, the exquisitely complex, resilient, and continuously evolving layer of Earth life, demonstrates on a grand scale the creative potentials of the distributed intelligence of many trillions of individual choice-making living organisms, self-organizing to optimize the capture, organization, and sharing of Earth's energy, water, and nutrients to bring Earth to life. Acting in concert, they continuously regenerate Earth's soils, rivers, aquifers, fisheries, forests, and grasslands while maintaining Earth's climatic balance and the composition of Earth's atmosphere to serve the needs of Earth's widely varied life forms.

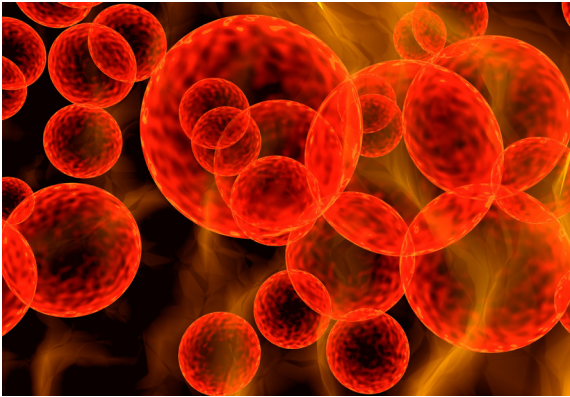
When we see all being as a manifestation of spirit, we might think of all of the biosphere's complex choice-making processes as occurring within the mind of God. In the ultimate sense, perhaps it does. Such a formulation, however, can obscure and diminish our appreciation of the true wonder and structure of the biosphere as a self-organizing living system.

The human body is an even more intimate example of the creative power of distributed intelligence. My body, which hosts my personal consciousness, is but one of the many trillions of organisms that together form Earth's biosphere. It is in turn comprised of tens of trillions of individual living cells, each a decision-making entity in its own right with the ability to manage and maintain its own health and integrity under changing and often stressful circumstances.

Simultaneously, each cell faithfully discharges its responsibility to serve the demanding needs of my entire body on which its own health and integrity (and mine) depend. Together, these cells maintain the body's health and integrity even under conditions of extreme stress and deprivation to create a capacity for extraordinary feats of physical grace and intellectual acuity far beyond the capability of the individual cell. Resources are shared based on need, not greed.

*I believe in Spinoza's God who reveals himself in the orderly harmony of what exists,
not a God who concerns himself with the fates and actions of human beings.*

ALBERT EINSTEIN



We are also learning that trillions of non-human micro-organisms inhabit our skin, genital areas, mouth, and intestines with essential roles in supporting and regulating our bodily functions as members of a high-functioning living community.

The body's individual decision-making resource-sharing cells and microbes are more than interdependent. Each is integral to a larger whole of which no part or sub-system can exist on its own. Together they fight off a vast variety of viruses, cancer cells, and harmful bacteria and create regulatory mechanisms internal to the whole that work to assure that no part asserts dominance over the others or monopolizes the body's stores of energy, nutrients, and water for its exclusive use. All the while, they adapt to changing temperatures and energy needs and variations in the body's food and water intake, heal damaged tissues, and col-

lect and provide the sensory data to our conscious mind essential to our conscious choice making. Another of the many impressive expressions of the body's capacity to self-organize is the process by which its cells continuously renew with no loss of body integrity. The cells lining the human stomach have a turnover of only five days. Red blood cells are replaced every 120 days or so. The surface of the skin recycles every two weeks.

Most of this cellular and molecular activity occurs far below the level of our personal awareness. So long as we provide the essentials of nutrition, hydration, rest, and exercise, our bodies' cells fulfill their responsibilities to maintain our healthy function without specific instruction from our conscious mind.

Cells can and do go rogue, with terrible consequenc-



es. Cancer, Alzheimer's, and leukemia are examples. Within limits, the body has mechanisms to eliminate such threats. If those mechanisms fail, the body dies and the rogue cells die with it.

So how do our cells decide, individually and collectively, what to do? Is there some form of conscious intelligence involved at the cellular level? The Grand Machine story says no; the processes are mechanical. The Distant Patriarch story does not address the question beyond the fatalistic suggestion that whatever happens is God's will. The Integral Spirit story says yes—the capacity for conscious choice is a defining quality of life and indeed of all being.

Is the consciousness underlying the choices of an individual cell a form of consciousness that would be in any way familiar to the human mind? Probably not, but we may never know, because with the exception of mystics who have developed a capacity to bridge the barrier between themselves and the meta-consciousness, we have no recognized means to experience a consciousness other than our own, and least of all the consciousness of a single cell. What seems evident is that intelligent choice-making is a hallmark of living organisms at all levels.

One critical insight from recent findings in biology is that most of the body's self-organization occurs at the cellular level through intercellular communication and choice-making independent of direct intervention or direction from the brain and central nervous system.

Similarly, although the biosphere self-organizes on a global scale and is subject to external influences from other celestial bodies, the locus of agency is everywhere local. The dynamic consequences of local choice-making play out through the biosphere's fractal structure and create global dynamics that in turn shape local choice-making with no evident central authority.

The separation or differentiation of consciousness is essential to creation's incredible capacity for creative innovation, yet we see in our human experience how the illusion of separation can lead us to relate to one another and nature in deeply destructive ways. Buddhism teaches that this illusion of separation is the cause of humanity's self-inflicted suffering. To become fully functioning as individuals and societies, we must achieve a maturity of self-awareness that allows us to hold in mind the reality of oneness and at the same time honor the illusion of separation by accepting responsibility for our individual actions.

Conscious Choices

Exactly how it all works may forever remain a mystery beyond our human understanding. Based on what we do know, however, our bodies, the biosphere, and the cosmos all express as fractal structures that self-organize from the bottom up rather than from the top down—exactly the opposite of what the Distant Patriarch story suggests. And contrary to the foundational assumption of the Grand Machine story, the evidence of our daily experience, reports of mystics, and some interpretations of quantum physics suggest that intelligence—and presumably some form of consciousness—is the organizing principle of our bodies, Earth’s biosphere, and the cosmos.

When we see all of creation as a manifestation of God, of spirit made flesh, we may recognize ourselves as physical expressions of God, but not in the sense of Michelangelo’s famous painting. We may also recognize that within the scale of the cosmos, we are far from being creation’s only expression of conscious intelligence. To the contrary, we are only a tiny element of an expression so grand as to be beyond our perception and comprehension.

So what is our individual human relationship to the grand expression of Integral Spirit? This is pure conjecture on my part, but I believe there may be clues in the relationship between the individual cells of our body and our conscious mind. I know my body’s individual cells exist, but only because science tells me so. I may care deeply about their good health, yet I cannot discern the condition or function of any individual cell—let alone consciously intervene to save an errant cell from the consequences of its bad choices.

Given that my body’s cells number in the trillions, the possibility that I might have such ability defies imagination. Imagine the distraction if our minds attempted to track details of the life of each individual cell in our bodies. It is for good reason our minds are highly selective in the information to which they attune.

It seems similarly unimaginable that the living Earth is conscious of my individual existence or behavior as a human cell in its larger body. If we scale this logic to the cosmic level, it would suggest that the living cosmos is unlikely to be conscious even of the Living

The Integral Spirit and a New Economy

Both the Distant Patriarch and Grand Machine cosmologies contribute to a sense of detachment from life that leads to a devaluation of nature. They also lend legitimacy to an undemocratic centralization of institutional power and authority. Further, the social Darwinism of the Grand Machine cosmology lends moral authority to flawed economic theories that instruct us to value money more than life and actively celebrate the behavior and ethics of the psychopath as a cultural ideal.

Whether or not the stories themselves are the cause of the deep, self-inflicted social and psychological pathology expressed in our self-destructive relationships with one another and Earth, their broad cultural acceptance poses a serious barrier to healing.

The pathology finds its clearest expression in a greed-driven economy grounded in a financial logic that assures us we are getting richer even as we destroy the real wealth of cooperative, caring human communities and Earth’s natural living systems.

In our confusion, we forget that the only true wealth is living wealth, pay more attention to financial deficits than social and environmental deficits, and assume that the economy and business exist to make money rather than to serve life.

The living systems perspective of the Integral Spirit cosmology provides a framing story to guide our path to a planetary system of local bioregional living economies aligned with the needs and realities of the Ecozoic Era

Earth as one of the countless celestial entities that comprise it.

There is no necessary contradiction here with the reports down through the ages from spiritual mystics who experience the melding of their human consciousness with an undifferentiated consciousness that transcends all of material reality. If all creation is a manifestation of undifferentiated Integral Spirit, then the system of distributed intelligence discernible in a living, evolving cosmos is derivative of the undifferentiated meta-consciousness.

Perhaps the individual human consciousness, with proper training and discipline, has the capacity to penetrate the illusion of separation to experience a temporary reunification with the undifferentiated spirit. Perhaps we all have the ability through meditation and prayer to tap into the wisdom of the higher levels of consciousness from which we manifest, and thereby tap into and experience the beauty of its creative wisdom in a very personal way.

It does not, however, follow that the undifferentiated meta-consciousness has the intention, desire, or capacity to attune to us individually, to intervene in our individual or collective human lives, or to change the operant rules of the self-organizing processes of the differentiated consciousness that shape the unfolding of the cosmos or its individual elements. This is not to suggest that the cosmos is indifferent to our existence. It may care deeply with the love that some believe to be the binding force of the universe.

Consider also that as manifestations of the Integral Spirit, we are instruments of its agency. We might therefore think of the voice that replies in the course of meditation or prayer to those who succeed in penetrating the ego's illusion of separation as at once the voice of our authentic self and the voice of God. Similarly, when we pray for divine intervention to save us from the consequences of our individual and collective choices, we in effect appeal to ourselves as agents of the Integral Spirit.

Step to Adult Responsibility

The important point is that, right or wrong, our choice of creation stories has real world consequences. If we choose to believe our fate lies with purely mechanistic forces beyond our control in denial of our own agency and responsibility, we then resign ourselves to the outcome of forces beyond our control. If we assume that a parental overseer—whether it be God, the market, a new technology, or compassionate space aliens—will save us from our foolish behavior, we likewise absolve ourselves of responsibility for our actions as we await divine intervention.

If we accept, however, that we are conscious, intelligent agents in a conscious, intelligent, self-organizing cosmos, it becomes evident that our future is in our hands and the well-being of all of Earth's children depends on our acceptance of adult responsibility for our individual and collective choices and their consequences.

Recall the Buddhist teaching that the illusion of separation is the source of human suffering. As manifestations of the spirit, we humans are instruments by which the spirit (God) expresses its agency in the material world. Thus, our appeals to God for salvation from our suffering are in effect appeals to ourselves.

The earlier assertion that evolution has hard-wired cooperation, service, and compassion into the healthy human brain does not negate our capacity for free will. Free will and the illusion of separation are both essential to our human potential to contribute to the creativity, adaptability, and resilience of a living Earth and thereby to the whole of creation. If we lose sight, however, of the interdependence behind the illusion, the sense of separation can become so terrifying as to overwhelm our predisposition for cooperation and lead to us to use our free will in deeply self-destructive ways. Free will conveys creative responsibility, not individualistic license.

Whether specific details of our chosen story are right or wrong is less important than whether its overarching narrative awakens us spiritually; inspires cooperative, mutually beneficial relationships; supports a way of living that recognizes the wonder, beauty, goodness, ultimate meaning and value of life; and puts us on a path to a viable future. Most important

A Big Story Connecting Three Narratives

The emerging story of creation's epic unfolding features three narratives, each flowing from one to the next.

1. THE **INTEGRAL SPIRIT COSMOLOGY** NARRATIVE recognizes the unity of creation and the contributions of our varied religious traditions, bridges the domains of science and religion, and draws from the breadth and depth of human experience and knowledge to reveal a self-organizing process that combines order, chance, learning, and the agency of a distributed integral intelligence.

2. THE **SACRED LIVING EARTH** NARRATIVE builds on the understanding of the Integral Spirit narrative to present Earth as an intelligent living organism with an extraordinary resilience and capacity to learn, adapt, and innovate as it creates the conditions necessary to the emergence of ever more complex, capable, intelligent, self-aware, and cooperative life forms.

3. THE **LIVING EARTH ECONOMIES** NARRATIVE builds



on the Living Earth narrative to frame a vision of and pathway to the culture and institutions of a New Economy that brings us into balanced partnership with Earth's biosphere, meets the needs of all people, and is radically democratic.

As we follow the flow of the narratives from Integral Spirit to Sacred Living Earth to Living Earth Economies we move from the transcendent to the imminent, from the abstract to the practical, and begin to discern a pathway to a viable human future ripe with meaning and possibility.

at this moment in the human experience is that our chosen story calls us to accept adult responsibility for the consequences of our choices for ourselves, one another, and a living Earth.

Consequently, on purely pragmatic grounds, the Integral Spirit story in its many variations is the obvious choice. If wrong, we lose nothing. A clockwork cosmos could care less. A loving parent God will be pleased with our progress toward mature adulthood. If right, we avoid self-extinction, our lives take on profound meaning, and we unleash yet unrealized capacities for creative expression.

Transition to an Ecozoic Era

The foundational insights of the Integral Spirit cosmology

hold the conceptual key to our collective passage to what cosmologist Brian Swimme and eco-theologian Thomas Berry call the Ecozoic Era, the fourth in the succession of life eras identified as the Paleozoic, the Mesozoic, and the Cenozoic. In *The Universe Story*, they note that our passage to this new era depends on a fundamental shift in the human relationship to Earth grounded in four foundational insights:

1. "The universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects." (p. 243)

2. "The Earth is so integral in the unity of its functioning that every aspect of the Earth is affected by what happens to any component member of the community. Because of its organic quality, Earth cannot survive in fragments....The integral functioning of the

planet must be preserved.” (p. 243)

3. “Earth is a one-time endowment....Although the Earth is resilient and has extensive powers of renewal, it also has a finite and nonrenewable aspect...Once a species is extinguished we know of no power in heaven or on Earth that can bring about a revival.” (pp. 246-7)

4. “[O]ur human economy is derivative from the Earth economy. To glory in a rising Gross Domestic Product with an irreversibly declining Earth Product is an economic absurdity.” (p. 256). [See inset: “The Integral Spirit and a New Economy”]

As Berry elaborates in an earlier lecture:

“Earth is primary and humans are derivative....The Earth economy can survive the loss of its human component, but there is no way the human economy can survive and prosper apart from the Earth economy....There is no such thing as a human community in any manner separate from the Earth community. The human community and the natural world will go into the future as a single integral community or we will both experience disaster on the way. However differentiated in its modes of expression, there is only one Earth community—one economic order, one health system, one moral order, one world of the sacred.” [Thomas Berry, “The Ecozoic Era”]

Failing to recognize the fundamental truth of our dependence on the generative systems of Earth’s biosphere, we humans act as a reckless, predatory invasive species, the equivalent of cancer cells systematically destroying Earth’s living body. In an act of collective insanity, we have created a global civilization that depends on a non-sustainable fossil fuel subsidy to work in direct defiance and opposition to the natural structure and forces of the biosphere. This leads to the systematic disruption and depletion of the biosphere’s generative systems and thereby Earth’s capacity to support life.

If there is to be a human future, we must fundamentally reshape our cultures and institutions to work in creative partnership with the structure and dynamics of the biosphere. Is it consistent with our nature to do so? It depends on the story.

The Distant Patriarch story is ambiguous, with many contrasting versions from which to choose. The Great Machine story says no; it is our inherent nature to be individualist, competitive, greedy, and violent. The Integral Spirit story and the narrative emerging from a deeper and more contemporary understanding of evolution articulated by evolutionary biologist David Sloan Wilson and others say yes; humans evolved to cooperate, share, and serve.

A Story for Our Time

The turning we humans must navigate to a viable future depends on a profound awakening to our nature as spiritual beings and our responsibility as participants in creation’s epic journey of self-discovery. This awakening will be partly experiential—a joyful reunion with our true nature. It will be partly intellectual—a larger and more nuanced understanding of the nature and purpose of creation and our human role in its continued unfolding.

To accelerate this awakening and actualize its possibilities we need an open and self-critical public conversation about the foundational stories by which we understand our human nature and purpose. That conversation must go far beyond an unproductive debate between doctrinaire Distant Patriarch creationists and doctrinaire Grand Machine social Darwinist evolutionists. Fortunately, the conversation is already underway in a rapidly growing number of forums sponsored by influential organizations including Contemplative Alliance, Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale University, Pachamama Alliance, Temple of Understanding, Wall Street Trinity Institute, and others,

These conversations call us to reflect on what we truly believe and to examine contrasting cosmologies from the perspective of historical experience, the insights of history’s greatest teachers, the frontiers of science, and implications for the path ahead. The process is best served by a sense of humility and recognition that for all our scientific advances, we remain far from a full understanding of the deep mysteries of the cosmos.

The Integral Spirit cosmology appears to offer many of the elements of the story we seek. Yet even with

its ancient roots and its affirmation and enrichment by recent breakthroughs in science, it too remains a partially developed story and we are limited to speculating on many of its elements.

That we humans seem naturally drawn to unsolved mysteries may be a key to discovering and fulfilling our place of service to the whole.

We know not where the journey leads, nor whether a final destination is even a meaningful concept. The attraction is the inherent thrill of participating in a grand creative endeavor for which participation is its own reward.

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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.



RELIGION, SCIENCE, AND SPIRIT: A SACRED STORY FOR OUR TIME: The online version of this article can be found at yesmagazine.org/sacredstory along with related writings:

DISCUSSION GUIDE: *A guide for personal reflection and conversation about the essay.*

PERSONAL ESSAY: *My reflection on the encounters that drew me to this inquiry, sparked key insights, and led to writing this essay at this time.*

SUPPLEMENTAL COMMENTARY: *My thanks to Fran Korten and to the many friends and colleagues who provided critical comments, encouragement, and important insights to this essay as it developed over several months from June to December 2012. They include Barry Andrews, Shannon Biggs, Ravi Chaudhry, Joan Chittister, Ted Falcon, Matthew Fox, Marybeth Gardam, Rob Garrity, Kat Gjovik, Christa Hillstrom, Garry Jacobs, Kurt Johnson, Graeme Maxton, Don MacKenzie, Winston Negan, Brian McLaren, Martin Palmer, Bill Phipps, Jamal Rahman, Steven Rockefeller, Bob Scott, Lucianne Siers, Ralph Singh, Brian Swimme, Karma Tshiteem, Lama Tsomo, Mary Evelyn Tucker, Richard Wilson, and others. Those interested in delving deeper can review selected excerpts from these exchanges. Misinterpretations, errors, and omissions are mine alone.*

A GUIDE FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION AND CONVERSATION

This discussion guide is intended to accompany David Korten's essay, "Religion, Science, Spirit: A Sacred Story for Our Time."



We encourage you to reflect on the themes of the essay and their implications and to then invite a few friends into the conversation by sharing the essay and hosting a conversation in your home. Here are some suggested questions to consider:

- 1. Your Beliefs:** With which cosmology do your deepest beliefs about relationships, agency, and meaning align? What are the implications for what you believe about human possibility and in particular your responsibilities to and for others and nature?
- 2. The Beliefs of Others:** Based on your experience, what percentage of people in your circle would you estimate embrace some version of the Integral Spirit story as their story?
- 3. Sacred Earth:** What would be the implications for society if we were to acknowledge as a species that Earth is our mother and that it is our sacred duty to care for her as she cares for us?
- 4. Living Economies:** What might be defining characteristics of an economy that works in partnership with nature rather than in opposition to it?
- 5. Public Conversation:** If you agree that the absence of the Integral Spirit Story from the public conversation is a problem, how might you contribute to changing that?