

DAVID KORTEN is co-founder and board chair of the Positive Futures Network. This article draws from his newly released book, *The Great Turning: From Empire to Earth Community*. Go to [www.yesmagazine.org/greeturning](http://www.yesmagazine.org/greeturning) for book excerpts, related articles, David's talks, and resources for action.



# The Great Turning

## From Empire to Earth Community

### David Korten

By what name will future generations know our time? Will they speak in anger and frustration of the time of the Great Unraveling, when profligate consumption exceeded Earth's capacity to sustain and led to an accelerating wave of collapsing environmental systems, violent competition for what remained of the planet's resources, and a dramatic dieback of the human population? Or will they look back in joyful celebration on the time of the Great Turning, when their forebears embraced the higher-order potential of their human nature, turned crisis into opportunity, and learned to live in creative partnership with one another and Earth?

#### A defining choice

We face a defining choice between two contrasting models for organizing human affairs. Give them the generic names Empire and Earth Community. Absent an understanding of the history and implications of this choice, we may squander valuable time and resources on efforts to preserve or mend cultures and institutions that cannot be fixed and must be replaced.

Empire organizes by domination at all levels, from relations among nations to relations among family members. Empire brings fortune to the few, condemns the majority to misery and servitude, suppresses the creative potential of all, and appropriates much of the wealth of human societies to maintain the institutions of domination.

Earth Community, by contrast, organizes by partnership, unleashes the human potential for creative cooperation, and shares resources and surpluses for the

good of all. Supporting evidence for the possibilities of Earth Community comes from the findings of quantum physics, evolutionary biology, developmental psychology, anthropology, archaeology, and religious mysticism. It was the human way before Empire; we must make a choice to re-learn how to live by its principles.

Developments distinctive to our time are telling us that Empire has reached the limits of the exploitation that people and Earth will sustain. A mounting perfect economic storm born of a convergence of peak oil, climate change, and an imbalanced U.S. economy dependent on debts it can never repay is poised to bring a dramatic restructuring of every aspect of modern life. We have the power to choose, however, whether the consequences play out as a terminal crisis or an epic opportunity. The Great Turning is not a prophecy. It is a possibility.



Photo by Ben van der Zee

### **SILENCED BY EMPIRES**

Delphi was inhabited since 1400 B.C. by people who worshipped the Mother Earth deity. Beginning in the 8th century B.C., Delphi became known for the powers of the oracle Pythia, who foretold the future in a trance induced by inhaling light hydrocarbon gases that escaped from a chasm in the earth. Early goddess worship at Delphi gave way to the Greek worship of Apollo. In 191 B.C. the sanctuary fell to the Roman Empire, which stripped it of its treasures to finance wars.

### **CLASH OF EMPIRES**

The Empire of the Sun came to a devastating end. This is Nagasaki, in the early afternoon of August 10, 1945. Photographer Yosuke Yamahata wrote: "I had been directed to photograph the situation in Nagasaki so as to be as useful as possible for military propaganda. At the same time I was concerned to discover the means for one's survival in the midst of this tragedy."



Photo by Yosuke Yamahata  
Copyright Shogo Yamahata / Courtesy of IDG Films

Illustration by Tracy Loeffelholz Dunn for YES! Magazine

## A turn from life

According to cultural historian Riane Eisler, early humans evolved within a cultural and institutional frame of Earth Community. They organized to meet their needs by cooperating with life rather than by dominating it. Then some 5,000 years ago, beginning in Mesopotamia, our ancestors made a tragic turn from Earth Community to Empire. They turned away from a reverence for the generative power of life—represented by female gods or nature spirits—to a reverence for hierarchy and the power of the sword—represented by distant, usually male, gods. The wisdom of the elder and the priestess gave way to the arbitrary rule of the powerful, often ruthless, king.

## Paying the price

The peoples of the dominant human societies lost their sense of attachment to the living earth, and societies became divided between the rulers and the ruled, exploiters and exploited. The brutal competition for power created a relentless play-or-die, rule-or-be-ruled dynamic of violence and oppression and served to elevate the most ruthless to the highest positions of power. Since the fateful turn, the major portion of the resources available to human societies has been diverted from meeting the needs of life to supporting the military forces, prisons, palaces, temples, and patronage for retainers and propagandists on which the system of domination in turn depends. Great civilizations built by ambitious rulers fell to successive waves of corruption and conquest.

The primary institutional form of Empire has

morphed from the city-state to the nation-state to the global corporation, but the underlying pattern of domination remains. It is axiomatic: for a few to be on top, many must be on the bottom. The powerful control and institutionalize the processes by which it will be decided who enjoys the privilege and who pays the price, a choice that commonly results in arbitrarily excluding from power whole groups of persons based on race and gender.

## Troubling truths

Herein lies a crucial insight. If we look for the source of the social pathologies increasingly evident in our culture, we find they have a common origin in the dominator relations of Empire that have survived largely intact in spite of the democratic reforms of the past two centuries. The sexism, racism, economic injustice, violence, and environmental destruction that have plagued human societies for 5,000 years, and have now brought us to the brink of a potential terminal crisis, all flow from this common source. Freeing ourselves from these pathologies depends on a common solution—replacing the underlying dominator cultures and institutions of Empire with the partnership cultures and institutions of Earth Community. Unfortunately, we cannot look to imperial powerholders to lead the way.

## Beyond denial

History shows that as empires crumble the ruling elites become ever more corrupt and ruthless in their drive to secure their own power—a dynamic now playing out

## Earth Community Dialogues

Leadership toward Earth Community must come from people working together from the bottom up to reclaim and rebuild family and community life and restore environmental health. We cannot count on those in power to lead us away from the status quo.

People across the country are taking the initiative to begin broadly inclusive dialogues to address the

imperative and opportunity of this moment of great change. Call these Earth Community Dialogues.

The initial impetus may come from a small group or even a single individual. It may start with a faith community; it may simply be a group of concerned friends. The defining quality is a commitment to engaging in an expanding conversation cutting across racial, religious, and class lines, and devoted to exposing the myths of

Empire, affirming the deeper values most humans share, and acting one community at a time to create a world that works for all.

As the circle of engagement grows, the dialogue will extend into ever-larger community forums and engage the full range of print and electronic media. As these dialogues take root in a growing number of localities, they create a growing potential to merge into ever-larger dialogues of the whole.

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All societies are patterned on either a dominator model—in which human hierarchies are ultimately backed up by force or the threat of force—or a partnership model, with variations in between. **RIANE EISLER**



#### **CARCASSES OF AN OIL EMPIRE**

An oil collection facility lies in ruins at the giant Burgan oil field in Central Kuwait. The oil field is the largest in the world and was targeted by Iraqi troops retreating from the U.S. invasion in 1991 in a scorched-earth campaign ordered by Iraqi President Saddam Hussein. As oil production peaks, global resource wars become more likely, according to Richard Heinberg (p. 34) and other futurists.

*Photo by Scott Nelson for Getty Images  
Illustration by Tracy Loeffelholz Dunn for YES! Magazine*

in the United States. We Americans base our identity in large measure on the myth that our nation has always embodied the highest principles of democracy, and is devoted to spreading peace and justice to the world.

But there has always been tension between America's high ideals and its reality as a modern version of Empire. The freedom promised by the Bill of Rights contrasts starkly with the enshrinement of slavery elsewhere in the original articles of the Constitution. The protection of property, an idea central to the American dream, stands in contradiction to the fact that our nation was built on land taken by force from Native Americans. Although we consider the vote to be the hallmark of our democracy, it took nearly 200 years before that right was extended to all citizens.

Americans acculturated to the ideals of America find it difficult to comprehend what our rulers are doing, most of which is at odds with notions of egalitarianism, justice, and democracy. Within the frame of historical reality, it is perfectly clear: they are playing out the endgame of Empire, seeking to consolidate power through increasingly authoritarian and anti-democratic policies.

Wise choices necessarily rest on a foundation of truth. The Great Turning depends on awakening to deep truths long denied.

### **Global awakening**

Empire's true believers maintain that the inherent flaws in our human nature lead to a natural propensity to greed, violence, and lust for power. Social order and material progress depend, therefore, on imposing elite rule and market discipline to channel these dark tendencies to positive ends. Psychologists who study the developmental pathways of the individual consciousness observe a more complex reality. Just as we grow up in our physical capacities and potential given proper physical nourishment and exercise, we also grow up in the capacities and potential of our consciousness, given proper social and emotional nourishment and exercise.

Over a lifetime, those who enjoy the requisite emotional support traverse a pathway from the narcissistic, undifferentiated magical consciousness of the newborn to the fully mature, inclusive, and multidimensional spiritual consciousness of the wise elder. The lower, more narcissistic, orders of consciousness are perfectly normal for young children, but become sociopathic in adults and are easily encouraged and manipulated by advertisers and demagogues. The higher orders of consciousness are a necessary foundation of mature democracy. Perhaps Empire's greatest tragedy is that its cultures and institutions systematically suppress our progress to the

## Three Turnings

The Great Turning requires more than adjustments at the margin of Empire. It requires turning from dominator to partnership relations in each of the three major spheres of human activity.

### Cultural Turning

The Great Turning begins with a cultural and spiritual awakening—a turning in cultural values from money and material excess to life and spiritual fulfillment, from a belief in our limitations to a belief in our possibilities, and from fearing our differences to rejoicing in our diversity. It requires reframing the cultural stories by which we define our human nature, purpose, and possibilities.

### Economic Turning

The values shift of the cultural turning leads us to redefine wealth—to measure it by the health of our families, communities, and natural environment. It leads us from policies that raise those at the top to policies that raise those at the bottom, from hoarding to sharing, from concentrated to distributed ownership, and from the rights of ownership to the responsibilities of stewardship.

### Political Turning

The economic turning creates the necessary conditions for a turn from a one-dollar, one-vote democracy to a one-person, one-vote democracy, from passive to active citizenship, from competition for individual advantage to cooperation for mutual advantage, from retributive justice to restorative justice, and from social order by coercion to social order by mutual responsibility and accountability.

higher orders of consciousness.

Given that Empire has prevailed for 5,000 years, a turn from Empire to Earth Community might seem a hopeless fantasy if not for the evidence from values surveys that a global awakening to the higher levels of human consciousness is already underway. This awakening is driven in part by a communications revolution that defies elite censorship and is breaking down the geographical barriers to intercultural exchange.

The consequences of the awakening are manifest in the civil rights, women's, environmental, peace, and other social movements. These movements in turn gain energy from the growing leadership of women, communities of color, and indigenous peoples, and from a shift in the demographic balance in favor of older age groups more likely to have achieved the higher-order consciousness of the wise elder.

It is fortuitous that we humans have achieved the means to make a collective choice as a species to free ourselves from Empire's seemingly inexorable compete-or-die logic at the precise moment we face the imperative to do so. The speed at which institutional and technological advances have created possibilities wholly new to the human experience is stunning.

**JUST OVER 60 YEARS AGO**, we created the United Nations, which, for all its imperfections, made it possible for the first time for representatives of all the world's nations and people to meet in a neutral space to resolve differences through dialogue rather than force of arms.

**LESS THAN 50 YEARS AGO**, our species ventured into space to look back and see ourselves as one people sharing a common destiny on a living space ship.

**IN LITTLE MORE THAN 10 YEARS** our communications technologies have given us the ability, should we choose to use it, to link every human on the planet into a seamless web of nearly costless communication and cooperation.

Already our new technological capability has made possible the interconnection of the millions of people who are learning to work as a dynamic, self-directing social organism that transcends boundaries of race, class, religion, and nationality and functions as a shared conscience of the species. We call this social organism global civil society. On February 15, 2003, it brought more than 10 million people to the streets of the world's cities, towns, and villages to call for peace in the face of the buildup to the U.S. invasion of Iraq. They accomplished this monumental collective action without a central organization, budget, or charismatic leader through social processes never before possible on such a scale. This was but a foretaste of the possibilities for radically new forms of partnership organization now within our reach.

### **Break the silence, end the isolation, change the story**

We humans live by stories. The key to making a choice for Earth Community is recognizing that the foundation of Empire's power does not lie in its instruments of physical violence. It lies in Empire's ability to control the stories by which we define ourselves and our possibilities in order to perpetuate the myths on which the legitimacy of the dominator relations of Empire depend. To change the human future, we must change our defining stories.

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NASA

**GLOBAL COMMUNITY**

"Blue Marble: Next Generation." A mosaic of data taken from NASA satellites, this is the most detailed image of the Earth's surface ever produced, emphasizing Earth's reality as a living spaceship.



Evan Schneider for U.N. Photo

**GLOBAL CONSCIENCE**

The United Nations brings together representatives of all nations to provide peaceful conflict resolution and promote cooperative aid. In Garhi Habibullah, a U.N. medical officer treats victims of the Pakistan earthquake. Information on all U.N. missions is at [www.un.org](http://www.un.org).



OLPC

**GLOBAL COMMUNICATION**

One Laptop Per Child is a nonprofit group developing a \$100 laptop for free distribution to the world's children. The laptops have wireless broadband and even in remote villages make a network of their own, peer-to-peer, extending the reach of global communication and cooperation.

**Story power**

For 5,000 years, the ruling class has cultivated, rewarded, and amplified the voices of those storytellers whose stories affirm the righteousness of Empire and deny the higher-order potentials of our nature that would allow us to live with one another in peace and cooperation. There have always been those among us who sense the possibilities of Earth Community, but their stories have been marginalized or silenced by Empire's instruments of intimidation. The stories endlessly repeated by the scribes of Empire become the stories most believed. Stories of more hopeful possibilities go unheard or unheeded and those who discern the truth are unable to identify and support one another in the common cause of truth telling. Fortunately, the new communications technologies are breaking this pattern. As truth-tellers reach a wider audience, the myths of Empire become harder to maintain.

The struggle to define the prevailing cultural stories largely defines contemporary cultural politics in the United States. A far-right alliance of elitist corporate plutocrats and religious theocrats has gained control of the political discourse in the United States not by force of their numbers, which are relatively small, but by controlling the stories by which the prevailing culture defines the pathway to prosperity, security, and meaning. In each instance, the far right's favored versions of these stories affirm the dominator relations of Empire.

**THE IMPERIAL PROSPERITY STORY** says that an eternally growing economy benefits everyone. To grow the economy, we need wealthy people who can invest in enterprises that create jobs. Thus, we must support the wealthy by cutting their taxes and eliminating regulations that create barriers to accumulating wealth. We must also eliminate welfare programs in order to teach the poor the value of working hard at whatever wages the market offers.

**THE IMPERIAL SECURITY STORY** tells of a dangerous world, filled with criminals, terrorists, and enemies. The only way to insure our safety is through major expenditures on the military and the police to maintain order by physical force.

**THE IMPERIAL MEANING STORY** reinforces the other two, featuring a God who rewards righteousness with wealth and power and mandates that they rule over the poor who justly suffer divine punishment for their sins.

These stories all serve to alienate us from the community of life and deny the positive potentials of our nature, while affirming the legitimacy of economic inequality, the use of physical force to maintain imperial order, and the special righteousness of those in power.

It is not enough, as many in the United States are doing, to debate the details of tax and education

# Portrait of a Perfect Economic Storm

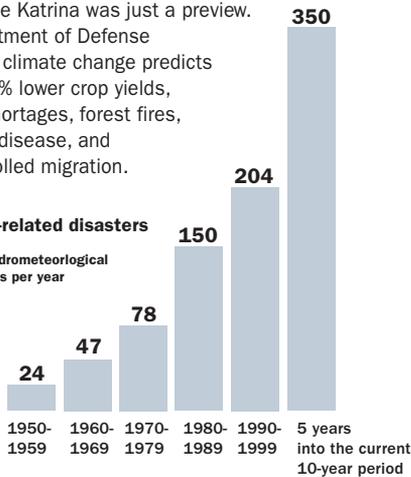
Climate change, financial meltdown, and peak oil will devastate those segments of the economy dependent on oil subsidies and stable global supply lines. These are no longer future issues. A dramatic restructuring of the way we live, including a return to local food and energy self-reliance, has become an imperative.

## Climate Change

Hurricane Katrina was just a preview. A Department of Defense study of climate change predicts 10%–25% lower crop yields, water shortages, forest fires, famine, disease, and uncontrolled migration.

### Weather-related disasters

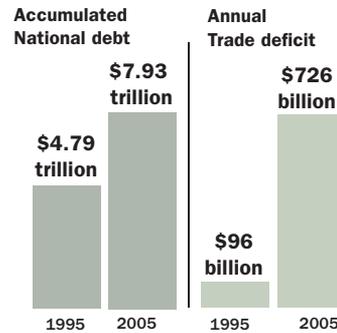
Average hydrometeorological occurrences per year



Source: International Strategy for Disaster Reduction

## U.S. Financial Meltdown

Growing trade deficits generate foreign debt at a rate of \$2 billion a day. When the rest of the world tires of feeding our profligacy, financial meltdown will ensue.



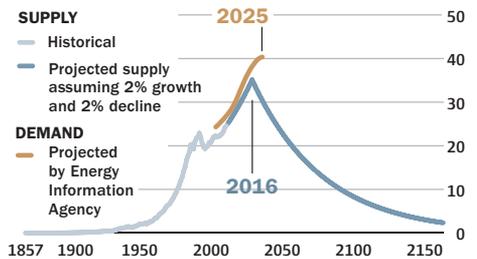
Sources: globalpolicy.org; publicdebt.gov

## Peak Oil

Global oil production cannot keep pace with growing demand. Rising oil prices spell the end of economies built on cheap oil, industrial agriculture, car-dependent sprawl, and the global projection of mechanized military force.

### Supply and demand of oil 1857-2150

In billions of barrels per year



Supply curve based on EIA projection deemed most likely by Hirsch, et al., [http://www.netl.doe.gov/publications/others/pdf/Oil\\_Peaking\\_NETL.pdf](http://www.netl.doe.gov/publications/others/pdf/Oil_Peaking_NETL.pdf). Demand projections based on average annual percent change of 1.9.

Source: Department of Energy, Energy Information Association

YES! Magazine graphic, copyright 2006. Text by David Korten

policies, budgets, war, and trade agreements in search of a positive political agenda. Nor is it enough to craft slogans with broad mass appeal aimed at winning the next election or policy debate. We must infuse the mainstream culture with stories of Earth Community. As the stories of Empire nurture a culture of domination, the stories of Earth Community nurture a culture of partnership. They affirm the positive potentials of our human nature and show that realizing true prosperity, security, and meaning depends on creating vibrant, caring, interlinked communities that support all persons in realizing their full humanity. Sharing the joyful news of our human possibilities through word and action is perhaps the most important aspect of the Great Work of our time.

Changing the prevailing stories in the United States may be easier to accomplish than we might think. The apparent political divisions notwithstanding, U.S. polling data reveal a startling degree of consensus on key issues. Eighty-three percent

of Americans believe that as a society the United States is focused on the wrong priorities. Supermajorities want to see greater priority given to children, family, community, and a healthy environment. Americans also want a world that puts people ahead of profits, spiritual values ahead of financial values,

and international cooperation ahead of international domination. These Earth Community values are in fact widely shared by both conservatives and liberals.

Our nation is on the wrong course not because Americans have the wrong values. It is on the wrong course because of remnant imperial institutions that give unaccountable power to a small alliance of right-wing extremists who call themselves conservative and claim to support family and community values, but whose preferred economic and social policies constitute a ruthless war against children, families, communities, and the environment.

The distinctive human capacity for reflection and intentional choice carries a corresponding moral responsibility to care for one another and the planet. Indeed, our deepest desire is to live in loving relationships with one another. The hunger for loving families and communities is a powerful, but latent, unifying force and the potential foundation of a winning political coalition dedicated to creating societies that support every person in actualizing his or her highest potential.

In these turbulent and often frightening times, it is important to remind ourselves that we are privileged to live at the most exciting moment in the whole of the human experience. We have the opportunity to turn away from Empire and to embrace Earth Community as a conscious collective choice. *We* are the ones we have been waiting for.

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