

# Ecological Civilization and the New Enlightenment

BY DAVID KORTEN

**D**URING THE PAST CENTURY, we humans have become a truly global species with both the ability and the imperative to choose our common future by conscious collective choice. Growth in our numbers and the destructive power of our economic and military weapons of mass destruction creates the necessity; advances in communication technology that link us into a seamless web of global communications and in biological and ecological sciences that deepen our understanding of what life is and how it organizes give us the means.

## A Species in Terminal Crisis

The unfolding collapse of three critical systems puts our common future at serious risk.

1. **Environmental Systems.** Lead indicators include climate change, loss of fertile soil, diminishing supplies of clean freshwater, disappearing forests, and collapsing fisheries. All are a result of an increasing human burden that human numbers and consumption place on a finite planet. Per the Global Footprint Network, we humans are consuming globally at a rate 1.6 times what Earth can sustain. Everything above 1.0 comes at the cost of diminishing Earth's ability to sustain life and in turn drives a violent competition for what remains and a growing flow of desperate refugees.
2. **Social Systems.** In 2010, the combined wealth of the world's richest 388 billionaires equaled the combined wealth of the poorest half of humanity — 3.5 billion people. Now, just 7 years later, it takes the combined wealth of only the 8 richest billionaires to equal the combined wealth of the world's



poorest 3.6 billion people. The combination of extreme inequality and environmental displacement undermines human well-being, institutional legitimacy, and the social fabric of families and communities. The violence driving massive numbers of refugees from the Middle East is a direct consequence.

3. **Governance Systems.** The legitimacy of political and economic institutions that demonstrate their inability to address the above environmental and social crises is disintegrating. This gives rise to political demagogues who exploit the resulting fear and uncertainty.

These three system failures are interlinked, self-imposed, and threaten our species viability. All are a direct consequence of a takeover of our access to the essential means of living by global corporations that value life only for its market price, promote the idolatry of money, and sponsor those politicians who equate the corporate interest with the human interest. Awareness that something is going very wrong is sweeping global society, but with limited understanding of the nature of and reasons for the cultural and institutional system failure now playing out. Lacking such understanding, we look for solutions that tinker at the margins of a failed system grounded in false assumptions and values in the hope of making it slightly less destructive.

Our hope for a viable human future depends on a deep system transformation supportive of an Ecological Civilization that brings people and planet into balance, nurtures innovation and creative expression, and provides all people an opportunity for material sufficiency and spiritual abundance.

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Already underway, that transformation is grounded in three foundational truths of our being:

1. We humans are living beings.
2. Earth is our mother — the source of our birth and nurture, and
3. Life exists — can exist — only in communities of place that self-organize to create and maintain the conditions essential to their own existence.

## The Emerging New Enlightenment

The Enlightenment of the 18th Century was grounded in the Newtonian image of a mechanistic universe. This image greatly expanded and deepened our human recognition and understanding of the order inherent in creation. In so doing, it set the stage for extraordinary advances in technology and social organization through which we came to dominate Earth and one another — leading to the great environmental and social unraveling now unfolding. At the same time, it undermined faith in an authoritarian Church and the divine right of kings and unleashed the forces of democracy and self-organizing social movements essential to successful cultural and institutional transformation. Together, these dynamics create the imperative and capacity to navigate a great human turning to the Ecological Civilization of our future.

A now unfolding 21st century Enlightenment draws from the ancient wisdom of indigenous peoples, the great religious prophets, and the findings of contemporary science to greatly expand and deepen our human understanding of ourselves and our place in creation. Metaphysically it acknowledges the intelligence and consciousness the 18th century Enlightenment denied. Politically, it recognizes that we have only begun the journey to a truly democratic sharing of power.

## The Price of Idolatry

Why do we tolerate a system that strips away the relationships that define our humanity and reduces us to servitude to money? It traces to a fundamental aspect of our human nature: with the gift of language, we humans organize as societies around shared cultural narratives. Political demagogues have long recognized that those who control the framing narratives of a society's culture, control its people.

During the 20th century, corporate public relations and advertising specialists mastered the arts of cultural manipulation to create an individualistic culture of greed and profligate material consumption that serves well the short-term interests of a financial oligarchy. Once immersed in this culture, society lost sight of that on which our true health and happiness depends.

Of our many influential cultural narratives, the most important are those that define what we hold to be sacred [entitled to reverence or respect]. When we get the sacred wrong,

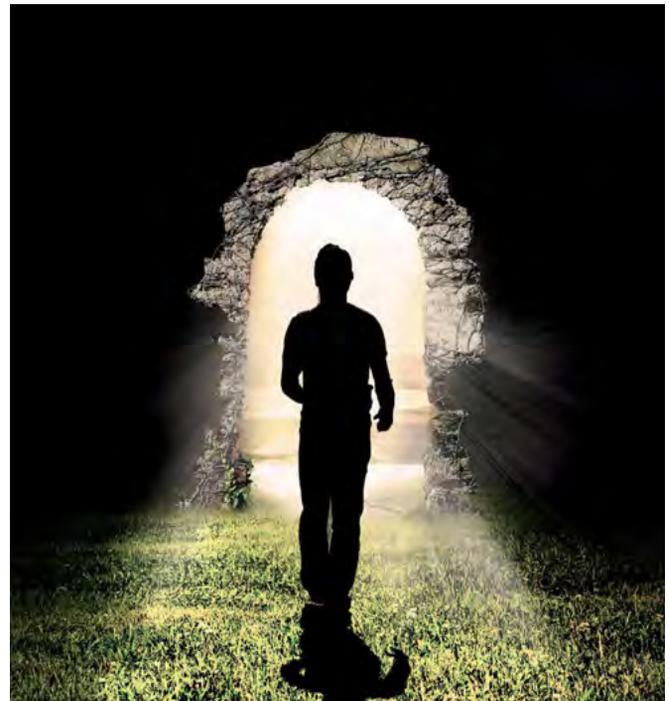
we easily become entangled in a web of self-destructive, even suicidal, deceptions.

Separated from nature and one another, we of modern society have lost our sense of what is truly sacred. Losing sight of the truly sacred, we fill the breach with a familiar narrative constantly affirmed in the public mind by pundits and economists schooled in what Nobel Laureate economist Joseph Stiglitz has called a faith-based religion. I call it our Sacred Money and Markets narrative.

*Time is money. Money is wealth. Those who make money are society's wealth creators. Poverty is a sign of laziness and personal failure. Consumption is the path to happiness. Individualistic greed and competition are human virtues that the invisible hand of the free market directs to ends that create opportunity and prosperity for all.*

*Those who would deprive society's wealth creators of the fruits of their labor engage in envy—a mortal sin. Maximizing financial gain is a moral and legal duty of business—indeed of every individual. Earth is here for our use and pleasure and is best used in whatever ways maximize financial gain.*

Every element of this narrative is false or misleading. Yet over the past few decades this has become the narrative by which we define the purpose, meaning, and direction of society — and of our individual lives and relationships. In its thrall, we embrace money as a sacred object of veneration and the measure of our human worth and accomplishment, banks as our temples worship, consumption as our solace, economists as our moral authorities, and free [unregulated]



<http://maxpixel.freepress.com/in-The-Dark-Light-Hope-Tunnel-Christian-Faith-1872961>



“As our sacred Earth mother loves and cares for us, we must love and care for her.”

markets as a superhuman controlling power that meets our needs and rewards the worthy.

The Sacred Money and Markets *narrative* frames the moral and intellectual foundation of the Sacred Money and Markets *economics* taught as an objective values free science to business and economics students in the world’s leading colleges and universities.

False on every point, the narrative perverts our sense of values and legitimates the concentration of decision-making power in the hands of a financial oligarchy. It is neither a true science nor a true religion. It is an immoral, anti-democratic political ideology at odds both with the moral teachings of the world’s great religions and the findings of contemporary science. Its immoral and intellectually false premises set us up to measure economic performance by financial metrics like GDP and stock price indices like the Dow Jones Average.

GDP is in substantial measure an indicator of the rate at which we are monetizing relationships previously based on mutual caring. This process destroys the natural bonds of family and community, while increasing our dependence for our essential means of living on money created and allocated by global financial institutions lacking concern or accountability for our well-being.

With a similar bias favoring financial interests over life interests, stock price indices are primarily an indicator of the rate at which the inflation of financial assets is increasing the financial power of those who own them relative to the power of those who do not.

## Sacred Life and Living Earth

Contrast the fabrications of the Sacred Money and Markets narrative with truths of the following reality based Sacred Life and Living Earth narrative. Imagine how different our world would be if this were the foundational narrative by which we structure and manage the economy.

*Time is life. Life is the most precious of the many forms of wealth. Money is just a number useful as a medium of exchange in well-regulated markets. We humans are living beings born of and nurtured by a living Earth itself born of a living universe evolving toward ever-greater complexity, beauty, awareness, and possibility.*

*Life exists only in community. We humans survive and prosper only as contributing members of a living Earth community. It is our human nature to care and to share. Making time for life — to experience and serve — is the path to happiness and well-being. Equality, community, and connection to nature are essential foundations of human health and happiness.*

*As our sacred Earth mother loves and cares for us, we must love and care for her. The only legitimate purpose of institutions of business, government, and civil society is to serve as vehicles through which we humans cultivate and express our true nature and create our means of living in ways that serve both ourselves and the Earth Community to which we all belong.*

The Christian biblical verse Matthew 6:24 says it well: “No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and



We take part in the creation of the Earth and its future.

love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.

If we visualize God as the spirit of life, this verse frames the defining choice we now face as a global species. Will we organize as a global society in the service of life? Or of money?

## The Human Quest for Meaning

Now let's take a deeper dive into our narrative problem. Three contrasting creation narratives have currency in Western culture: The Distant Patriarch, the Grand Machine, and the Mystical Unity. Each conveys a very different understanding of relationships, agency, and meaning.

1. The **Distant Patriarch** narrative is most commonly associated with the institutions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. By the reckoning of this narrative, our most important relationship is to a distant God who is the source of all agency and meaning. All that is, is by his will. Our defining task is to obey His commandments to win his favor and thereby a favored place by his side in the afterlife. We know who are God's most favored, as he has granted them the wealth and power to rule over us. *It is not our place to challenge or change what he has willed.*
2. The **Grand Machine** narrative comes to us as the standard narrative of Newtonian physics and classical evolutionary biology. By its reckoning, the universe is best understood as a giant clock works winding down to a heat death as

the energy of the tension in its spring is exhausted. Life is merely an accidental and meaningless outcome of material complexity. Only the material is real. Consciousness and free will, or agency, are illusions. We are alone and powerless in a mechanistic cosmos devoid of agency and possessed of no meaning or purpose. *Wow, this is depressing. Let's go shopping to lift our spirits.*

3. The **Mystical Unity** narrative, most commonly associated with Buddhism, comes to us from the world's spiritual traditions. In its classic expression, the only reality is spirit. What we experience as material reality is an illusion generated by the ego, which is the cause of our suffering. We find peace only by shedding the ego through meditation and meld with the timeless eternal One. *Please don't disturb our peace with your distracting tales of social conflict and environmental disasters.*

Each of these narratives is dated, partial, and tends to absolve us of responsibility to care for one another and Earth. Yet each contributes a truth essential to our understanding of our true nature and the meaning, purpose, and responsibility of our place in creation.

The Distant Patriarch narrative recognizes intentional purpose. The Grand Machine narrative recognizes order. The Mystical Unity narrative recognizes that the ground of all being is a unifying spiritual consciousness.

## Creation's Epic Journey

Each narrative contributes to an emerging Living Universe narrative that draws from all the sources of human knowledge and understanding — our inner awareness and daily experience, indigenous wisdom, the teachings of the mystics, and the findings of science. Together, they tell the story of creation's epic journey in search of self-knowing — a story to inspire and guide our way to an Ecological Civilization.

The essence of the Living Universe narrative has long been known to indigenous cultures, suggesting it lives in the human heart. To bring it to the fore of public consciousness as our shared narrative, we need only affirm what most people already intuitively know — and what science is gradually coming to acknowledge as its findings increasingly defy explanations based solely on mechanism and chance.

As science tells the story of creation, the universe was born some 13.8 billion years ago, when a giant energy cloud burst forth in a blinding flash of quantum energy particles. With time, these particles formed into complex atoms that formed into complex molecules that joined to form stars and galaxies that gave birth to planets — one of which gave birth to carbon based life.

Evolutionary biologists pick up from this story to tell us that some 3.6 billion years ago, the first living organisms appeared on Earth. As their numbers, diversity, and complexity increased, they organized themselves into a planetary-scale living system comprised of trillions of trillions of individual choice-making living organisms; they worked together with Earth's geological processes to filter excess carbon and a vast variety of toxins from Earth's air, waters, and soils and sequester them deep underground. In so doing, this grand alliance of seemingly primitive species, created the environmental conditions suited to the emergence of ever more highly-advanced species.

To this day, with no discernible source of central direction, the countless organisms of Earth's living community work with Earth's geological structures to continuously renew Earth's soils rivers, aquifers, fisheries, forests, and grasslands while maintaining global climatic balance and the composition of Earth's atmosphere to meet the diverse requirements of all Earth's widely varied life forms. Constantly experimenting, testing, and learning this living superorganism has been on its own journey of self-discovery toward ever-greater complexity, beauty, awareness and creative potential.

## A Daring Experiment

We, the human species, are a product of that journey. We represent creation's most daring experiment in the creative evolutionary potentials of a living organism with a self-aware reflective consciousness. We are aware that we are aware, an essential piece of what makes us distinctively human.

All species, even microbes, contribute to shaping the life of

the place where they live. Only we humans can moderate and shape our impacts as a conscious collective choice. As Earth's dominant species, we now shape the destiny of Earth and all who call it home. Yet we act as irresponsible adolescents, unmindful of the responsibilities that go with the choices we have the ability and the freedom to make.

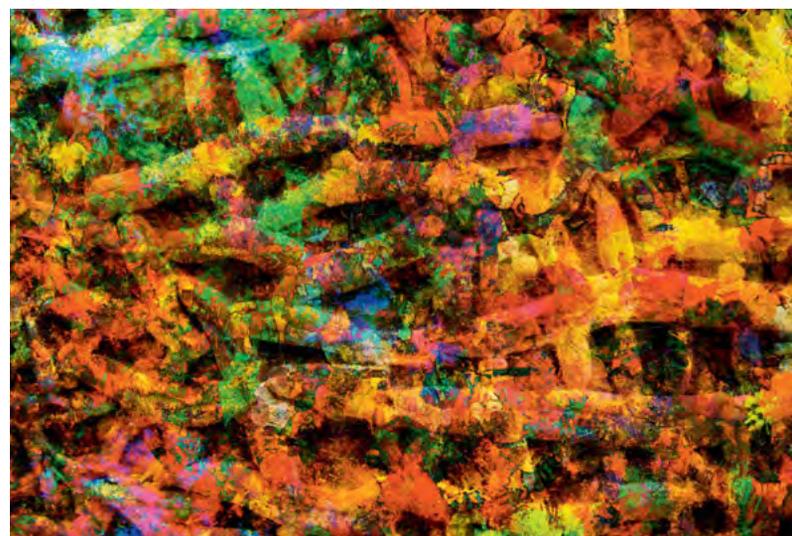
Think of our present choice point as an initiation rite — a test of our worthiness and potential to contribute to creation's journey of self-discovery through actualizing its creative possibilities. If we prove worthy, we may endure as contributing members of Earth's still evolving community of life. If we fail, we join the growing list of extinct species — a small footnote to creation's grand journey.

Our current life destructive, climate disruptive, but financially profitable expansion of tar sands oil extraction, deep-sea oil drilling, hydraulic fracture natural gas extraction, and mountaintop coal removal are only particularly visible current examples of our reckless disregard for Earth mother that birthed and nurtures us.

We do not strengthen our case by dedicating our best minds and most advanced technologies to accelerating the extraction and release of sequestered carbons and toxins back into Earth's atmosphere, waters, and soils in a foolhardy effort to dominate, suppress, and control the natural processes of a living Earth that makes our own lives possible.

## United We Flourish, Divided We Perish

For an even deeper looks at life's wondrous capacity for intelligent, cooperative self-organization, we can turn to the human body — the living host to our individual human consciousness and the instrument of its agency. Each of us is



Even the smallest microbes shape our lives as part of the living environment.



a composite of more than 30 trillion individual living cells, each engaged in a continuous and ever adapting exchange of energy, water, nutrients, and information in response to ever changing conditions of temperature, diet, location, schedule, physical and mental stress, cell damage, and invasive pathogens — all below the level of our conscious awareness.

Equally essential to our health and wellbeing are an even greater number of microorganisms, such as the bacteria and yeasts of our gut that manufacture essential vitamins and help metabolize our food. Each cell and microorganism is an individual, self-directing living being joined together in a self-organizing, continuously self-renewing alliance that functions as, and by all outward appearances is, a single being.

Throughout our life span, the body continually renews its physical structures through cell death and replacement. In each human body, approximately three billion cells die each minute — each reliably replaced by a living cell of like kind.

Each of these cells is constantly making choices that balance its needs and those of the whole on which its own existence depends. It is as if each cell lives by a nuanced moral code reflective of creation's intention grounded in a recognition that the well-being meta-organism, without which the single cell cannot exist, must always be primary.

The wonder of these infinitely complex and purposefully adaptive processes confirms the existence of mechanism and order in creation. Yet the idea that this miracle is solely the outcome of a combination of purposeless mechanics and chance — to this day the public premise of science — defies logic, common sense, and the foundational principles of Newtonian mechanics.

Quantum physicists now suggest that solid appearing matter is defined more by relationships rather than particles. Similarly, the observations of the life sciences suggest that life, as well, is defined primarily by the symbiotic relationships by which communities of organisms sustain themselves through dynamic adaptive exchanges that defy purely mechanistic explanation.

If we assume that conscious intelligence is synonymous with spirit, the premise that all being is a manifestation of spirit aligns with the premise that the spirit is both immanent and transcendent. It also aligns with a living universe cosmology that recognizes intelligent consciousness as the ground or origin of the energy field that following the Big Bang gave birth to matter — and to all that now is.

Hope for our human future lies in our now accelerating human awakening to the consequence of our recklessness and its source in flawed assumptions and dysfunctional institutions. We have touched briefly on the intellectual and cultural sources of the self-destructive system failure. Let us now turn to the institutional sources — starting with the choice between the household and the firm as the primary unit around which we organize to secure our means of living.

## Healthy Communities, Healthy Households

I once asked an economist friend and colleague for whom I have special regard, “Why do economists so often come up with the wrong answer?” His reply, “Because they take the firm rather than the household as the primary unit of analysis.” The household organizes around living. The firm organizes around money.

The word “economy” is derived from the Greek word *oikos*, meaning household management. This suggests that the Greeks thought of the economy in terms of people, households, and communities organizing to make their living from what nature provides them. Think, perhaps, of a family farm on which family members grow and prepare their food, and harvest wood for fire and wild game for meat from a local forest.

The household in most traditional societies organized around gifting. Communities of traditional households organized around gifting and barter. Money entered in only as a supplement — primarily to facilitate exchange among strangers. Earth's complex systems of self-organizing exchange involve no equivalent of money. To this day, the primary relationships of healthy households and communities are primarily gifting or barter relationships based on mutual trust and caring. The same is true of a healthy modern society, supported by strong and efficient public services — including free public infrastructure, education, and health care.

A society organized primarily around monetary exchange, markets, privatized infrastructure, privatized services, and

an ethic of buyer beware is a deeply troubled society. The actions required to transition from our current circumstance to the life serving living Earth economy of a healthy society, go far, far beyond increasing worker pay and implementing additional rules to curb abuses of corporate power. Such actions — essential as they are — leaves in place an inherently destructive system driven to use every means available to free itself of the restraints.

Our goal is a system that greatly reduces this conflict between the power of the few and the common good of the many by equalizing financial power and rooting it in caring communities of place with strong commitment to public services that secure the health and well-being of all who call that place home. This in turn significantly reduces the need for intrusive government regulation and oversight.

The health of a living community depends on constant creative micro-adaptation to local conditions. Decision making is necessarily local and cannot be centralized.

Earth's biosphere localizes decision making by segmenting itself into self-reliant, self-regenerative bioregional communities, each engaged in the constant locally self-reliant capture, sharing, reuse, and regeneration of locally available nutrients, energy and water to maintain the health and vitality of all its resident organisms. Each community member contributes; each in turn benefits.

As we humans achieve local balance between our needs and our local biosystems, we simultaneously move toward global balance. Appropriate indicators of economic performance will assess our progress toward the goals of material sufficiency for all in balanced relationship with Earth's biosphere.

Our biggest challenge will be achieving the structural changes required to shift power from money-serving corporations to life-serving communities.

## Our Self-Inflicted Institutional Threat to Human Viability

In a recent conversation, a colleague observed that we are heading to a future in which robots will no longer work for people. People will work for robots. I at once affirmed the prediction, but corrected him on the timing. We already do.

We call them corporations. They are soulless legal entities with no physical body, consciousness or moral sensibility. They have no need for air, food, or water. They do not love, reproduce sexually, or have a natural life span. Essentially legally protected pools of money programmed by law and financial markets to grow themselves, they value life only for its market price and have no fear of death or imprisonment.

The corporation is animated solely by those it employs. Some employees may be lavishly rewarded. Yet with the possible exception of those who may also be major owners, employees — including the CEO — work for the corporation at its pleasure and can be terminated without notice or recourse.

Linked together by legal contracts, interlocking ownership, and computerized financial markets, private-interest, for-profit corporations bear an eerie resemblance to the Borg of Star Trek science fiction. Part organic, part artificial intelligence, the Borg strips living beings of their capacity for independent agency and reduces them to drones in service to itself.

These robotic self-directing dehumanizing creatures increasingly control our human access to food, water, information, shelter, education, healthcare, energy, transportation, and recreation. Caring nothing for our relationships to family, community, and nature, they turn us against life and strip us of what makes us most truly human. They make a mockery of democracy, and threaten our species viability.

It is a wholly anomalous development. Corporations are human creations and in fact — like money — they have no existence beyond the human mind. By the actions of a corporatist US Supreme Court, a money saturated political system, and international agreements crafted by and for corporate interests, we now live under a system that assigns corporations more rights than people, and our Earth mother no rights at all. This subversion of democracy has been carried out in the name of democracy through processes never subjected to any test of the consent of the people stripped thereby of their liberty.

The legal instrument of incorporation is a useful — even essential — tool to facilitate the necessary and beneficial self-organization of complex modern societies. It only works to the benefit rather than the detriment of society, however, for so long as the corporation's power is subordinate and accountable to the power of a democratic state.

Democratic governments are constituted by people to serve their essential needs for services and infrastructure



beyond their individual means. A corporation is in turn created by the government that issues its charter — presumably to fulfill a public need that government is accountable to its electorate to fulfill. A corporation, thereby, is properly considered a transparent and accountable public entity and is governed accordingly. Such corporation has no inherent right to operate beyond the territorial jurisdiction of the government that issued its charter.

Legitimate multinational corporate bodies, as for example the United Nations, are created by intergovernmental agreements and accountable to intergovernmental governing bodies. Transnational or multinational private interest corporate entities that operate beyond national identity and are accountable only to private self-perpetuating and publicly unaccountable governance boards are inherently illegitimate institutions that increasingly threaten not only human viability, but as well the viability of Earth as a living superorganism.

We must rethink and transform the institution of the corporation to subordinate corporate power to people power. It's called democracy. It requires breaking up transnational and multinational concentrations of economic power into independent entities, each operating within and accountable to the jurisdiction of the government that issued its charter. Ownership of such entities is then properly transferred from short-term absentee owners to long-term stakeholder owners under cooperative ownership structures.

We need a parallel effort to reclaim and reconstitute finance as a *service* sector. Financial institutions produce nothing of real value. Their only function is to ration access to money. They should be cooperatively owned and managed as public utilities. Financial speculation is properly prohibited. Gambling is properly limited to well-regulated casinos.

## A Defining Moment

This is a defining moment in the 200-thousand-year evolutionary history of *homo sapiens* — an endgame struggle between money and life, between corporate power and people power, between the right to exploit life for private gain and

the right to live. Corporations, the champions of money, command the most visible and powerful position. Less visible, but growing rapidly, are the emerging forces of a deep civilizational shift — a dramatic turning of the human course.

These forces include the awakening already underway within science, religion, and the public to the living universe narrative of the 21st century Enlightenment. There is a tandem disintegration in the credibility of the institutions of corporate rule evident in the highly dangerous political chaos playing out around the world. This disintegration is a counterpoint to the growing movement of people who are turning their backs on the institutions of global corporate rule and directing their life energy to the task of rebuilding the relationships of community and a living Earth economy.

They are advancing sustainable community agriculture, renewable energy and energy efficiency, local zero-waste circular manufacturing, Independent retail, green building, local financial services, local and/or fair trade clothing, holistic education, independent media and communications, local business development and professional services, public transportation, holistic health and wellness, creative participatory arts and culture. The greater their success, the greater our opportunities to engage and meet our needs through the emerging living Earth economy.

We need a multitude of voices and actors clearly and explicitly connecting these potentially mutually reinforcing and amplifying trends.

There is no solution to the unfolding environmental, social, and governance system collapse within an institutional system based on demonstrably false values and flawed assumptions. We humans are engaged in a monumental work of reinventing ourselves, our culture, and our institutions. This presents a strong challenge and opportunity, especially for the institutions of religion and education that are essential to the success of the New Enlightenment on which the transition to an Ecological Civilization ultimately depends.

It is the most exciting intellectual challenge and creative opportunity the human species has faced since our ancient ancestors first walked the Earth. ■