

# **The Great Turning: The End of Empire and the Rise of Earth Community**

Sermon delivered by David Korten  
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It is always a special pleasure to come to Port Townsend. You have such a special sense of community and love of place that has become tragically uncommon in this country. This UU Fellowship is also very special in being a strong community devoted to active and open spiritual inquiry. The kind of community building in which many of you are engaged is a key to finding a pathway to a viable human future. It is the Great Work of our time.

Surely, you have noticed that we humans are in serious trouble. Our environmental, social, and economic systems are collapsing around us. My message this morning centers on why we are in this mess and how we can turn crisis into opportunity through a spiritual awakening.

This is a defining moment for the human species. We have a brief window of opportunity to navigate the passage from a self-destructive Era of Empire, characterized by 5,000 years of violent domination, to an Era of Earth Community characterized by peaceful partnership. This passage to a new level of species maturity promises a more secure and fulfilling life for everyone. Its successful navigation requires a deep rethinking of what it means to be human and our relationship to the Cosmos that gave birth to Earth as a living planet and subsequently to us.

A threefold crisis creates the imperative. The communications revolution creates the possibility.

- **The first element of the crisis is Excess Consumption:** A combination of population growth and growth in consumption per capita is depleting the natural life support system of the planet, disrupting natural water cycles and climate systems, and threatening human survival.
- **The second element is Inequality:** Unconscionable and growing concentration of financial power in a world of ever more intense competition for a declining base of material wealth is eroding the social fabric to the point of widespread social breakdown.
- **The third element is Institutional Pathology:** The most powerful institutions on the planet, global financial markets and the transnational corporations that serve them, are institutions of Empire dedicated to growing consumption and inequality. They convert real capital into financial capital to increase the relative economic power of those who live by

money, while depressing the wages of those who produce real value through their labor. These institutions respond to environmental and social crises with palliatives that side step the need to reduce overall consumption and reallocate resources from rich to poor, because to do so would be contrary to their legal and financial imperatives. We cannot expect the institutions that got us into the crisis to get us out of it.

We face the imperative to:

1. Reduce aggregate consumption, which means renouncing economic growth and consumerism as our defining economic priorities in favor of meeting real human needs, including needs for dignity, community and meaningful work.
2. Eliminate extremes of inequality, which means renouncing domination as our defining mode of organization in favor of equity and deep democracy.
3. Bring forth new institutions and cultures designed to support a reduction in consumption and a reallocation of resources to eliminate inequality.

Properly understood, the imperative creates an unprecedented opportunity to unleash our long suppressed human potential for creative cooperation to bring forth a world that provides a better life for everyone. Mostly what we give up are forms of consumption that are wasteful or actively destructive to free up resources for constructive uses. The possibilities are breathtaking. We can reallocate from:

- Instruments of war to health care and environmental rejuvenation.
- Automobiles to public transportation.
- Suburban sprawl to compact communities and the reclamation of forest and agricultural land.
- Advertising to education.
- Financial speculation to local entrepreneurship.

It will require serious adjustments, particularly for those whose livelihoods depend on serving the institutions of Empire. They too stand to receive compensating gains, however, in the form of more fulfilling jobs and a better future for their children.

This is the opportunity that the three-fold crisis places before us. Here is the key to the Great Turning we must now navigate.

We humans live by stories. The stories we share create a culture of shared values, understanding, and expectations that is an essential foundation of any coherent human community. Changing the human course begins with changing the stories by which we live.

Our religious institutions have an essential role in this work because our cultural belief systems rest on a foundation of the Creation stories that frame our deepest beliefs about the nature of reality, our human nature, our relationship to creation, and the purpose of our existence. If we are to move ahead as a species, our religious institutions must become true centers of spiritual inquiry dedicated to drawing from the whole of human knowledge and experience to deepen our understanding of ourselves and of Creation.

Perhaps the best way to explain why I think this is so important is to share a bit of the story of my own spiritual awakening. It is typical of the experience of many Unitarians.

I grew up a bit south of here in Longview, Washington. As was characteristic of much of our part of the country at that time it was quite monocultural. I attended a rather nondescript Protestant church because that was just what we did. I rarely saw a person of a race different than mine. I never met a Buddhist, Muslim, or Hindu. The most exotic people in our town were Catholics. There were rumors there might also be some Democrats. I saw nothing unusual about this and assumed this was the place I would live out my life.

Then in college, I took a course in Comparative Religion and learned that there are many approaches to basic spiritual beliefs. That was the beginning of my journey away from a conventional and largely unexamined belief system.

Later in my graduate school days, for reasons you can read about in the Prologue of *The Great Turning*, I spent the summer of 1961 in Indonesia. In the rural areas of Indonesia, I experienced a people who lived in deep connection to community and to the natural cycles of their place. It shattered my conventional worldview.

When I returned home, my parents arranged an evening for me to share my stories and photos with some of their friends, including the minister of one of our local churches who asked me what religion the Indonesian's practice. I said, "They are Muslims." He replied, "That's too bad." "Why?" I asked. He said, "Because Islam is an ethical monotheistic religion and it is difficult to convert Muslims to Christianity." I was stunned by his answer. Is institutional religion about nothing more than brand identification and market share? As I recall, that was the point at which I became religiously unaffiliated.

My serious inquiry into the spiritual nature of reality began much later in 1994 when I was writing the epilogue to *When Corporations Rule the World*. I was struggling to understand what seemed to me an odd experience. When I made the case in my public presentations that we humans are heading on a path of our own creation to potential species extinction, I would often get a response something along these lines. “Yes, it is true that we seem to be on a suicidal course, but it would be terribly expensive and inconvenient to change and the dismal projections may be wrong anyway, which means we would be giving up a great party for nothing.” Basically people seemed to say, “Let’s party while we can and the last one out turn out the lights.”

It was as if many people placed no particular importance on the survival of the species, not even for the sake of their children. It raised a perplexing question. Does human survival serve no higher purpose?

While I was struggling with this, I read Thomas Berry’s *Dream of the Earth*, in which he says, “For peoples, generally, their story of the universe and the human role in the universe is their primary source of intelligibility and value. The deepest crises experienced by any society are those moments of change when the story becomes inadequate for meeting the survival demands of a present situation.” This accurately describes our present situation.

At this same time, I received and read Duane Elgin’s book *Awakening Earth* that speaks of a conscious universe and the emergence of the self-reflective human consciousness. This opened my eyes to a very different way of looking at reality in which consciousness is the foundation of everything.

Later on I encountered the new biology through the work of Mae Wan Ho of the Open University in London and Elisabeth Sahtouris, whose work I expect many of you know. The new biologists look at life on its own terms rather than through the narrow ideological lens of material mechanism imposed by conventional science. They find that life is at its core a profoundly cooperative emergent process and that the species that survive and prosper in the long term are not the most aggressive and brutally competitive. Rather they are the species that find their place of service to the whole.

In her book *What is Life*, microbiologist Lynn Margalies, makes the stunning observation that “Life is matter with the capacity to choose.” Choice is fundamental to what life is about and we humans are the ultimate choice making species. What an extraordinary contrast to the conventional science story that consciousness and free will are illusions.

In 1999, just before the historic WTO demonstrations in Seattle, the Seattle and Washington State church councils held a conference on economic justice. Marcus Borg, a well-known Christian writer, and I were both plenary

speakers. This was my first exposure to Marcus and I have never forgotten his defining statement, "Tell me your image of God and I'll tell you your politics."

The image of God as jealous patriarch creates a hierarchy of righteousness and leads to a politics of power and domination, the politics of Empire. By contrast, the image of God as integral spirit from which all being manifests, leads to a politics of love and partnership, the politics of Earth Community.

There is, however, yet a third creation story vying for our embrace; this is the material evolutionist ideology of classical science. According to this story, the universe is best understood as a mechanical clockworks that was set in motion at the beginning of time and is gradually running down to a [heat death](#) as its spring unwinds. Only the material is real. Life is nothing more than an accidental outcome of material complexity; consciousness and free will are illusions. Life evolves through random genetic mutation and a competitive struggle in which the fit survive and the unfit perish. Theories of Darwinian competition, selfish genes, and economic man tell us it is our human nature to be individualistic competitors and profligate consumers. Competition for wealth and power is the natural order and victory is proof of superior worth.

Since the birth of the scientific revolution in the 1500s, Western society has been shaped by a deep conflict between science and religion that plays out in the contemporary contest between the patriarchal Creationism story of religious fundamentalism and the material Evolutionism story of science fundamentalism. These are the religion and science stories most familiar to the public mind and both support the dominator values of Empire.

Less known to the public, are the stories of the religious mystics and of those forward-looking scientists who have liberated their minds from the mechanistic interpretations imposed by the ideology of conventional science to look at the findings of quantum physics, evolutionary science, and biology through fresh eyes. These scientists see profound evidence of the same integral spiritual intelligence the religious mystics have been teaching about for millennia.

If you were paying close attention, you may have noticed that I have defined three competing stories featuring three very different premises about the existence and locus of creative intelligence or lack thereof in the cosmos. The first is the religious story of an external intelligence embodied in a distant patriarch that plays out in a human politics of domination and violence. The second is the science story of a mechanistic Cosmos devoid of intelligence that plays out in a human politics of greed and material excess. And the third is the spirit story of an integral intelligence manifest in all being that plays out in a politics of love, compassion, and sharing.

These contrasting images play out in very different views of the purpose of our lives and our relationships with one another and Earth.

1. The distant patriarch story leads to a belief that life on Earth is only a way station where the faithful await the Rapture when Christ will return to lift them to heaven to be in relation with God. Caring for Earth is pointless.
2. The science story supports efforts to control and dominate Earth for human indulgence and convenience.
3. The spirit story calls us to celebrate Earth, care for it, and cultivate our capacities for loving creative expression and service to Creation's continued unfolding.

The human future turns on which of these three stories we choose as the basis for defining our relationships with one another and Earth. As Matthew Fox so eloquently teaches, particularly in *One River, Many Wells*, over the millennia the mystics of the world's varied religious traditions have all described an integral flowing river of the spirit as the unifying force of Creation.

So tell me the image of God that frames the global culture and I will tell you the fate of humanity. Domination and violence? Greed and material excess? Or love and sharing? Our combination of the religious story of the patriarch and the science story of a mechanistic universe results in a culture of domination, violence, greed, and material excess. WHAT A DEAL! Perhaps it's time to turn to the ancient story of the mystics and the contemporary story of the new physics and new biology, embrace the integral spirit, and bring forth a world of love and sharing.

This suggests a great challenge for our religious institutions to recreate themselves as true centers of spiritual inquiry devoted to the pursuit of an ever deepening understanding of our human nature and place in Creation—an inquiry that draws from all the vast pool of human knowledge, insight, and inspiration.

I believe that we humans are a cosmic experiment in the potentials of a reflective consciousness. Empire suppresses this potential. Earth Community nurtures and liberates it. To fulfill our distinctive role as co-creators in Creation's epic creative adventure, we must liberate our potential by taking the step to species maturity. It is our ultimate test as a species. If we pass, we face the prospect of creative possibilities beyond our current imagination. If we fail, [we will be swept away to make way for the emergence of a new experiment in reflective consciousness.](#)

This is arguably the most exciting time to be alive in the whole of the human experience. Creation is calling us to reinvent our cultures, our institutions and ourselves. It is in our hands. We have the power. We are the one's we've been waiting for.

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