

FINDING OUR WAY TO AN ECOLOGICAL CIVILIZATION

Grounded in the Earth Charter Principles

David Korten

David Korten is a global philosopher, visionary thought leader, and full-member of the Club of Rome. Holder of an MBA and a PhD in organization theory from the Stanford Business School, he worked as an establishment insider for several decades with institution-building assignments that involved 3 years residence in Ethiopia, 3 years in Nicaragua, 5 years in Indonesia, and 10 years in the Philippines. During this time, he served as a high-level advisor for the Ford Foundation and USAID. He also served for 7 years on the faculty of Harvard University.

As he awakened to the devastation wrought by conventional economic policy, he severed his ties to the establishment and joined forces with global thought leaders framing an alternative vision of the human future. Today he is a leading voice for deep cultural and institutional transformation to advance the transition to an Ecological Civilization grounded in the Earth Charter Principles and dedicated to the wellbeing of life.

He is author of many books, including three international best-sellers: *When Corporations Rule the World* (1995, 2001, 2015); *The Post-Corporate World: Life After Capitalism* (1999); and *The Great Turning: From Empire to Earth Community* (2001).

I am thrilled to be reconnecting with so many Filipino friends and colleagues as we reflect together on the defining challenges now before us.

I suspect many of you know that the Ateneo School of Government that is sponsoring this session traces its origin to two civil society organizations known for their contributions to advancing the interests of workers, farmers, and other traditionally marginalized groups. I know that many of you who do not have direct current connections to the Ateneo School of Government are from organizations advancing similar great work. It is a critical element of the essential work of our time as a now globally interdependent species.

We, the human species, have arrived at a defining moment of challenge and opportunity. Our guiding imperative is to create an interdependent global society in which all people enjoy meaningful and productive lives. The people of Southeast Asia, and especially the Philippines, are positioned to play a distinctive role in advancing that vision. You are known for your extraordinary caring culture in a world in need of your distinctive commitment to caring for one another and Earth.

Our current human work requires a melding of Eastern and Western experience, traditional wisdom, the findings of modern science, and the spiritual understanding of the world's great religions. Together we can create a new civilization, a truly civil Ecological Civilization defined by the Earth Charter consensus envisioning the world all mature humans want.

The West has provided the often-oppressive leadership of the Imperial era we must now put behind us. Much of the leadership for the era ahead must come from the East, with its traditional emphasis on family and community.

We must recognize and honor life's extraordinary interdependence and capacity for cooperation. We must meld recognition of and appreciation for life's never-ending cycles of birth, growth, and death—and its eternal evolution toward ever greater complexity, beauty, awareness, and possibility.

I was born in 1937 between the end of the Great Depression and the beginning of WWII. In the years immediately following that war, the United States and much of the world experienced a brief burst of commitment to achieving a universal global middle class free from extremes of wealth and poverty. By 1959, the year I graduated from college, the United States was in the midst of a post-WWII economic boom that brought an estimated 60-70% of Americans into the middle class.

American corporations came out of WWII with a strong commitment to serving the needs of all their stakeholders, including their workers and the communities in which they did business. In the United States of that day, workers were paid fairly for their contributions. Manufacturing jobs were plentiful, paid middle-class wages and funded comfortable pensions. Union membership in the United States was at its peak.

From 1945 to 1973, worker productivity in the United States rose 97%, and wages rose 91%. Over 35% of American workers were unionized. The GI Bill funded college education for veterans, thus increasing economic mobility. Wages grew in line with productivity. This allowed a great many Americans to afford homes, cars, and education. High taxes on the wealthy funded government investments in infrastructure.

I wanted to be part of ending global poverty and making this a model for the world. It was the context within which I made my decision at that time to spend my life bringing the lessons of U.S. business success to the world's poor in a drive to end global poverty.

Tragically, the commitment of U.S. business to the public interest did not endure. The neoliberal economic theory promoted and financed by aspiring oligarchs gained public traction in the 1970s, achieving a sudden and dramatic shift in corporate culture. The established business commitment to societal wellbeing gave way to a business commitment to maximizing profits for the corporation's richest owners.

From the beginning of 1970 to mid-1975, I was a member of the faculty of the Harvard Business School. I was stunned by the speed and impact on my

faculty colleagues of the rapid cultural shift then sweeping through the global business world.

I later learned that shift was driven by the absurd assumptions and false promises of neoliberal “free market” economic theory. It presented itself to the world as a values-free science. It’s proponents claimed that if we all ruthlessly compete to exploit one another and Earth in a quest to maximize personal financial returns in unregulated markets, we will ultimately maximize the wellbeing of all of Earth’s people. Far from being a values free science, neoliberal economics is a deeply flawed dehumanizing ideology based on badly flawed logic.

The predictable outcome of the transformation of corporate culture fell far short of its promise. It has advanced extreme and growing inequality. Environmental devastation. And endless wars.

Since 1979, worker productivity in the United States has grown by 64%, but wages have grown only 17%. Union membership has fallen to 10% of the corporate workforce, significantly weakening worker protection. Many U.S. manufacturing jobs moved overseas. Previously well-compensated manufacturing worker transitioned to lower-wage service jobs. Guaranteed private pension plans all but disappeared. Inflation adjusted health care costs are 10 times higher than in 1970.

The U.S. middle class has shrunk from roughly 70% of the U.S. population to roughly 50%. Many Americans now live paycheck to paycheck, unable to save for retirement.

This is hardly a model for the world. The fear and anger of the U.S. working class explains the results of the 2024 U.S. election.

The deeper truth is that the United States was never a model for the rest of Earth’s people. We have never achieved equal rights and opportunities for women and minorities. And our economic model at the peak of our economic prosperity took no account of the limits of the finite planet Earth.

Control of the U.S. government is now in the hands of billionaire oligarchs who appear to be intent on demonstrating to the world that we are a nation that no sane person of any gender, class, or color should want to emulate.

The billionaires behind our current disaster have used the political and communication resources at their command to keep those traumatized by the damage, focused on blaming each other. Thus, they deflect attention away from themselves—the predatory oligarchs responsible for the working-class trauma.

Meanwhile, the middle class in Asia and Latin American has been growing, especially in China. But it is under constant threat from the instability of a global financial system controlled by Western billionaire bankers and financiers.

The rich get richer and more arrogant as they grow their financial wealth and power. Some inequality is inevitable and acceptable. But the current global level of human inequality exceeds comprehension and must be eliminated.

I want to return for a moment to Southeast Asia. And how my experience there shaped the rest of my life. As some of you know, my wife Fran and I lived for nearly 15 years in the Philippines and Indonesia from 1978 to 1992. By 1991, Fran and I had come to so love Southeast Asia and its people that we decided we would make it our home for the rest of our lives.

Shortly after we came to that conclusion, I met in India with our close friend, colleague Smitu Kothari, a widely known and respected Indian intellectual. Smitu listened intently as I shared with him the news of the decision Fran and I had made to make the Philippines our permanent home. He looked me in the eye and said:

“We know that you and Fran came here to help us. And we are truly grateful. But if you want to continue to help us, you must now return home to the United States and focus your attention on teaching your own people what you have learned during your time abroad.”

Wow. I was stunned. Smitu's message had never previously occurred to me. Yet his message rang clear and true. Fran and I would best serve the rest of the world by returning home to the United States to advance change in our own country based on what we had learned during our time abroad.

I earlier mentioned that in my youthful innocence I had decided in my senior year of college to devote my life to taking the secrets of U.S. business success to the rest of the world so that all nations could become middle class democracies like the United States. What I had learned in my years of deep engagement in Africa, Latin America, and Asia was that the United States and the transnational corporations it has spawned have put humans on a path to self-extinction.

After I returned to the Philippines from my conversation in India with Smitu, Fran and I discussed his assessment and concluded—that Smitu was right. We must return home and teach our fellow Westerners what we had learned from our experiences living and working in Africa, Latin America, and Asia.

We moved from Manila to New York City and bought an apartment near Union Square between Wall Street and Madison Avenue. Fran continued to work for the Ford Foundation. I set about writing what became *When Corporations Rule the World*, which helped to expose the world to the consequences of a global economy dominated by transnational corporations devoted to growing the fortunes of billionaires.

I became an active member of the International Forum on Economic Globalization, at that time the world's leading advocacy group in opposition to oligarchy and corporate rule. Fran and I later joined in founding YES! Magazine to communicate inspiring stories of human possibility. And we engaged in countless thought leader discussions exploring the choices now before the human species.

We, the people of Earth, have arrived at a defining choice point. The economic trajectory of the last forty years has put the human species on a path to extreme economic inequality, ecological breakdown, and authoritarian rule. The combination of accelerating climate disruption, biodiversity collapse,

rising authoritarianism, and runaway financialization of the economy has put us on a path to human self-extinction.

I have recently begun exploring the potential of Artificial Intelligence, specifically ChatGPT. I asked ChatGPT to give me its best estimate of the likelihood that the human species will find our way to a viable future. It's answer:

Quote: **“There is a 60 to 70 percent chance that humanity continues down a path leading to self-inflicted collapse within the next century.**

“But that also means **there is a 30 to 40 percent chance that we find our way to a just and sustainable future.** This window—narrow as it may be—is wide enough to act. And history has shown that rapid, transformative change is possible when movements, vision, and necessity align.

“Whether we tip toward extinction or regeneration depends on our willingness to confront financial predators, democratize economic power, and embrace models of cooperation, solidarity, and ecological stewardship. The challenge is immense, but so is our potential.”

Unquote

That is our warning from ChatGPT.

The obscenity of current growing global inequality merits further elaboration. Unless we address the oligarchy problem, we have no hope of healing the environment or ending war and other forms of potentially terminal violence.

The current world population is 8.2 billion people. [The beginning of 2024 Oxfam reported,](#) that just since 2020 the five richest of Earth's 8.2 billion people more than doubled their combined fortunes from **\$405 billion** dollars to **\$869 billion** dollars. These five oligarchs averaged \$174 billion each in financial assets and their aggregate assets were growing at a rate of **\$14 million per hour.**

Note that \$1 billion equals 1,000 million dollars. A person with a job paying \$75,000 a year, a solid middle-class income in the United States, would have

to work more than 13,000 years to produce a total income of just one billion dollars.

So those at the top, the billionaires, are doing extremely well. What about those on the bottom?

The UN and World Bank set an income of \$2.15 per day per individual as the line above which they celebrate the economy's success at having lifted another individual above absolute poverty. This absurd low standard is part of a global con job advanced by economists eager to avoid acknowledging the extent of the economy's failure to address the needs of those at the bottom.

In the Philippines a basic meal at Jollibee costs the equivalent of \$2-3 U.S. dollars. Assume that meal is lunch. At an income just above the poverty line, that means no breakfast. No dinner. No place to live. No family. No medical care. No education. No life.

Current global standards relating to poverty are grossly inadequate. ChatGPT estimates that "Roughly 50 to 60% of the world's population lives under real, daily conditions of significant insecurity and deprivation."

Humanity has reached a defining choice point. Will we continue our exploitation of people and Earth to grow the fortunes of billionaires as we continue down our current pathway to human self-extinction? Or will we transition to an Ecological Civilization, humanity's first truly civilized civilization, free from exploitation and violence against one another and dedicated to the wellbeing of life. Equality is not just about bringing the bottom up. It is also about bringing the top down.

So, what are the defining characteristics of an Ecological Civilization? In my view, the Earth Charter provides humanity's best example of a true global consensus on a vision of the future that most of Earth's people want. Written over a period of some ten years (from 1990 to 2000), it involved the participation of more than 100,000 people from over 100 countries. The final document was launched in 2000.

It opens with this call to action:

Quote. “We stand at a critical moment in Earth's history, a time when humanity must choose its future. ...To move forward we must recognize that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny. We must join together to bring forth a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace. ... We must realize that when basic needs have been met, human development is primarily about being more, not having more.” Unquote

Looking beyond our long-established human obsession with our human rights, the Earth Charter is distinctive in its call to us to embrace four interdependent human responsibilities to:

1. Care for Earth.
2. Distribute wealth and power equitably.
3. End war and other forms of needless violence.
4. Engage in cooperative, democratic decision-making.

These are the essential elements of the **Ecological Civilization** that aligns with our true human nature and to which most mentally healthy humans aspire.

Junie Kalaw was a leading figure in crafting the Earth Charter. A major inspiration came from the International NGO Forum of the 1992 Rio Earth Summit. I participated with Junie, Tony Quizon and other Filipino colleagues as a member of the Philippine delegation under Junie’s overall leadership. Together in Rio we crafted the People’s Earth Declaration, which became one of the many documents that helped to inspire and shape the Earth Charter.

Let us now turn to crucial insights from the African ancestors from whom we have a ultimately descended. To this day some of these ancestors speak of **ubuntu**, an ancient concept that translates “*I am, because you are.*” Or in its more expansive expression: “*I am, because we are.*”

Ubuntu is an ancient expression of a recent breakthrough in modern scientific understanding that I was first introduced to in May 1997. I was attending a meeting of the International Development Society in Santiago de Compostela, Spain. I was approached during a break by Dr. Mae-Wan Ho, a micro-biologist of Chinese descent and British citizenship. She introduced herself as a **new biologist** familiar with my work. And suggested that her research might be relevant.

I asked her, “So, what is a new biologist?” She explained that a conventional biologist grinds up a living cell, then studies the dead cell’s chemical composition, and thinks they have learned something about life. That was indeed the limited state of the biological sciences less than 30 years ago. Dr. Ho went on to explain:

“As a new biologist, I study living cells and their continuing exchange of nutrients, water, energy, and information. We now know from observation with modern scientific instruments that each human body is comprised of literally tens of trillions of living cells, half of them microorganisms. With no mechanism of central control, these organisms together self-organize to create and maintain each human body, the vessel of our individual consciousness and the instrument of our individual agency.”

I was stunned by the self-evident truth of Dr. Ho’s observation—and its extraordinary implications for our understanding of life and how we organize as living beings.

By this time in my life, I had a PhD in organization theory from the **Stanford** Graduate School of Business and had taught for five and half years on the organization faculty of the **Harvard** Graduate School of Business—plus three years on the faculty of the Harvard School of Public Health. I had never before heard anyone express this **obvious, self-evident truth** about life’s extraordinary ability to bring together many billions of intelligent living beings to self-organize from the bottom up with conscious intelligent intent with no intervention by any central authority.

In less than a minute, Dr. Ho had fundamentally changed how I saw life and the world in which we all live. In subsequent conversations, she observed that Earth is a far larger and more complex self-organizing living organism. It is an even more breathtaking example of life's interdependence and the wonderful capacity of living beings to self-organize from the bottom up to produce ever more extraordinary life forms.

Again, there is no intervention by any central authority. Sometimes the process fails, but more often it succeeds.

Dr. Ho was using the increasingly powerful instruments of modern science to connect ancient indigenous wisdom and modern science in ways that brought new depth and meaning to both.

She and I arranged to sit together on the flight from Spain to her home base in London to continue our exchange. By the time my ongoing flight landed me in New York City where I then lived, I had outlined my next book: *The Post-Corporate World: Life After Capitalism*. In it, I explored the implications of Dr. Ho's fundamental insight for the future of Earth, humanity, and the global economy.

Soon after I met Dr. Ho, I connected with Elisabet Sahtouris, Janine Benyus, and the work of Lynn Margulis—all remarkable female biologists—new biologists by Dr. Ho's definition—pushing the frontiers of our human understanding of life.

It turns out that life has both competitive and cooperative elements. Early biologists chose to focus on the highly visible competitive elements related to life's need for food. The leading new biologists, mostly women, have recognized that life's competitive elements are a subtheme of a much larger theme of cooperation, including among humans.

Our current choice relating to the human future is now clear and depends on our answer to a simple question. Are we humans primarily financial beings whose wellbeing depends on competing for the numbers we call

money? Or are we living beings whose wellbeing depends on cooperating to secure the wellbeing of all of Earth's community of life?

The answer seems obvious. We are living beings. Our wellbeing depends on the wellbeing of each other and the living Earth. But we are killing Earth to grow the phantom wealth numbers labeled money stored in the financial accounts of billionaires. Meanwhile we compete to destroy the real living wealth of the living Earth.

We have been seduced into organizing the global economy around a premise so absurd that it should be dismissed as a very bad joke. Yet that premise is taught in most of our universities as a valid social science. This must change.

All our universities should be teaching a true **ECO-nomics**—as in **ecology**. A proper eco-nomics will meld the wisdom and understanding of indigenous peoples, our greatest religious teachers, and the leading edge of modern science. Its foundational discipline will be ecology—not finance.

Should we so choose, the stunning technological breakthroughs of the past 30-40 years give us, the people of planet Earth, the means to change direction with a speed unimaginable earlier in the lives of many of us on this call.

Tragically, these same technologies give us a small group of billionaire oligarchs with enormous power and the undisciplined egos of unruly young children. They control the world's most powerful corporations and many governments. And they use that control to grow the power their already obscene fortunes give them.

In the United States, we witness the appalling disregard of leading oligarchs for the interests of the angry struggling members of the working class. Yet it was those voters who put the oligarchs into positions of unprecedented power in the 2025 U.S. presidential election.

The oligarchs are correct in their claim that we are in desperate need of deep institutional change. But the changes they seek are generally at odds with the changes needed to achieve the equality, peace, living democracy, and healthy Earth of the Ecological Civilization we seek.

I have already noted that there will be no winners on a dead Earth.

Furthermore, in our interdependent modern world, there can be no freedom without responsibility. And when we turn to consumption to satisfy our search for meaning, there can never be enough. Because our true human satisfaction comes from serving, not from consuming.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, corporations like Google, Microsoft, Space X, Tesla, Amazon, and Meta have amassed enormous financial power for their chief executives and primary owners. That financial power combines with their control of information and digital infrastructure to render democracy a meaningless façade.

Advocates often cite Adam Smith as the founder of the economics that guides current capitalist practice. Smith was in fact an advocate of community economies served by small family businesses. He warned of the dangers of monopolies and the undue influence of financial elites on government policy that we now see playing out all around us. Adam Smith would have been appalled by the economics we currently teach.

As I have previously noted, money is nothing but a number—phantom wealth—that has no meaning or utility beyond the human mind. It is a sometimes-useful tool. But to make the creation of money our defining human purpose is an act of collective insanity. We cloud our minds when we refer to money as wealth and end up allowing predators to make the growth of the phantom wealth we call money, our defining human priority.

We now have information technologies that give us the capability to recognize and embrace the implications of our extraordinary interdependence as living beings born of and nurtured by a living Earth. With this recognition, we can reverse the devastation to which our seduction by an obvious fallacy has led us.

The new capabilities created by our recent advances in communications technology are breathtaking. When I made my first ventures into Asia and Africa in the 1960s there was no internet. I communicated with my family and friends on the far side of the world via written letters delivered by the post office—one person per letter that took at least a week to deliver. The gathering in which we are participating at this moment is an example of our extraordinary contemporary ability to reach beyond the communication barriers of our past. Indeed, millions of people the world over are at this moment engaged in similar conversations.

Most of the world's people, including many of the very poor, now have low-cost internet access to virtually everyone in the world. Instant translation between any two languages. And instant access to virtually all the human store of knowledge. This creates truly transformational possibilities. Today's youth take it for granted. My generation has experienced it as a transformational advance.

To put this in a yet larger perspective, humans have long asked, "What is the purpose of our existence?" Our instruments of astro observation now give us the ability to observe creation's unfolding since the beginning of time. Thereby, we gain the ability to infer creation's purpose as it unfolds toward ever greater complexity, beauty, awareness, and possibility.

We are also achieving unprecedented advances in our understanding of life's extraordinary complexity and capacity for cooperation. As Mae Won Ho helped me understand, while life has strong elements of competition, the deeper dynamics depend on cooperation.

We now have the means to bring an end to the violent competition of 5,000-years of Empire to achieve our true potential as the extraordinary living beings we are.

During the height of the U.S. civil rights movement, Martin Luther King, Jr., in his quest for peace and justice for all people, expressed his deep commitment to what he called the Beloved Community. He aligned in this quest with India's Mahatma Gandhi and South Africa's Nelson Mandela.

Together, these three great leaders inspired the world with their recognition that violence and exploitation dehumanize both the perpetrator and the victim. Each challenged their opponents in their respective homelands to recognize and actualize their own humanity. Calling the outcome Beloved Community, King envisioned a world grounded in mutual caring for one another in recognition of our shared humanity. King thus framed the communitarian ideal that our current institutions deny us.

One of my life's most extraordinary experiences came in January 1992 during South Africa's transition from apartheid. I was invited by a South African colleague to teach in a course for a group of Black leaders who had had been imprisoned along with Nelson Mandela. They had endured years of extreme violence, torture, and degrading imprisonment imposed upon them by their white jailers. I was stunned when they spoke with compassion for their jailers. They explained to me that the apartheid system had dehumanized both themselves and their jailers.

Their extraordinary compassion reminded me of the compassion of Jesus forgiving his executioners as they nailed him to the cross. "For they know not what they do." This was Jesus calling us to love our enemies. What a different world we would now have if we took that teaching seriously.

Compassion for our jailers is a call to those who seek pleasure in harming others to recognize that I am because you are AND you are because I am. It works in both directions. Life depends on caring compassionate reciprocity. A defining challenge of our time is to create institutions that support rather than suppress our human capacities for reciprocity and compassion.

As background, let me fill you in on what has been happening in my home country, the United States, the country I once envisioned as a model for the world. We have been taken over by a few ego-drive billionaire oligarchs guided by an ego-centric ego-nomics and devoted to creating an **extractive** global economy that reduces most of the world's people to a modern form of slavery.

The ultimate economic competition is between two economies. On one side are the institutions of transnational phantom wealth capital and the self-

centric billionaire oligarchs who control the world's most powerful corporations. On the other side are the people and institutions of local community economies devoted to the wellbeing of people and Earth.

Viewing our situation from an historical perspective, traditional monarchy gave way to capitalism, which claims to be democratic, but is in fact a competing form of oligarchy. Capitalism replaced the royal families of the early imperial era with the billionaire oligarchs who now rule the world in the imperial era's final stage.

The details of the process by which a few billionaires have enslaved the hapless many are complex. But the basics are quite simple. The excessively rich take control of our access to food, water, shelter, healthcare, education, and other essentials of a healthy meaningful life. At the same time they take control of producing the money they demand from us in return for giving us access to the essentials of living. They then lower the wages offered for our labor, raise interest rates on money loaned to the poor, and raise the prices they demand in return for access to the non-financial real wealth—air, food, water, information, and all else on which we depend as living beings. This reduces all but the richest among us to a modern form of slavery.

Here is a quick summary of how the money system currently works. Too big to fail banks gamble with speculative investments in derivatives, private equity, and cryptocurrencies. They get public bailouts to avoid bankruptcy when their speculative pyramid schemes come crashing down. Be clear that financial derivatives are counterfeit financial assets created from nothing that are structured to match the price of some real asset in financial market trades. Crypto currencies are privately issued money backed by nothing other than the hope that gullible buyers can be suckered into purchasing them.

In mid-2023, various sources estimated that the global value of fabricated financial assets [was over \\$1 quadrillion](#). This was more than 10 times the total world GDP. Not all goods and services included in GDP are beneficial, but most at least relate to something real. In short, this surplus of privatized

money serves no purpose other than to give the already excessively rich additional power over the rest of us.

In the United State the most powerful private banks fund risky speculative investments while protected against default by the U.S. Federal Reserve, which is managed by these same banks. The Fed has the capacity to issue official U.S. currency virtually without limit with little more than a computer key stroke. The Feds' power to create money could be very beneficial to the common good if used for a public purpose like Earth care or providing health care for the poor. It becomes devastatingly destructive when it further empowers self-serving oligarchs to exploit the rest of us.

The current takeover of the U.S. government by predatory billionaire oligarchs removes all doubt about the seriousness of the threat they pose not only to Americans, but to all of Earth's people. It is an essential priority of our time to radically redistribute financial wealth while restructuring corporations to assure they serve a true public purpose.

Our extraordinary new information technologies give us unprecedented potential—if properly used—to achieve the institutional transformation on which a viable human future depends. That future depends on we the people gaining control of these technologies to speed our transition to an Ecological Civilization with thriving local economies free from extremes of wealth and poverty.

In an Ecological Civilization, we will organize around securing the wellbeing of life, working together to eliminate hunger and violence. The goal is a world in which everyone has a home and a meaningful means of living, but no one has significantly more than they need. A world in which every child grows up with the support of a loving family and a caring community. Where neighbors care for one another and the place where they live. A world free of the devastation of war and its massive wasteful destruction.

In this world, most of us will meet our daily needs within walking or biking distance of our home with minimal need for cars and parking lots. We will enjoy safe and attractive free public transit to more distant places. We will

have beautiful parks, lush gardens, family farms, and abundant nature. It will be a world of middle class one person one vote democracy—with no billionaires. A world of more joy and less stuff.

Our current communication capabilities and economic interdependence give us the ability, incentive, and the responsibility to imagine and choose our common future with previously unprecedented conscious collective intention and global impact.

We must move beyond institutional systems that reduce most of us to lives of servitude in meaningless jobs devoted to maximizing profits of transnational corporations. We are now called to ask, “Given the choices now at hand, how do we want to live? What gives our lives true meaning?”

Those of us committed to eliminating the economy’s abuse of nature used to speak of sustainability. Conventional economists co-opted and corrupted the term sustainability to mean sustained GDP growth. A new term that better describes the basis of a wellbeing economy is **regeneration**.

Regeneration goes beyond simply stopping the carnage of the current economy. It engages the challenge of restoring and enhancing environmental health by converting waste into beneficial resource inputs.

- Regenerative agriculture goes beyond simply eliminating the use of chemical fertilizers and heavy machinery. It actively restores soil health through topsoil regeneration and restoration of biodiversity and the natural water cycle.
- Regenerative ocean farming grows mixes of seaweeds and shellfish while sequestering carbon and rebuilding reef ecosystems without requiring special inputs.
- Regenerative forestry restores the diversity of natural forestlands and rebuilds healthy soils to support a variety of human uses, including recreation and selective harvesting with little need for regular maintenance.

- Regenerative parks are planted with diverse native species that survive and flourish with no dependence on chemical agents.
- Regenerative cities restore environmentally enhancing natural self-managing exchanges between humans and the natural food, water, and energy systems from which the city draws resources for its sustenance.

Achieving a regenerative wellbeing economy requires changes in how we track our economic performance. We must differentiate between true investments that use money to facilitate mutually beneficial exchanges, and predatory financial games that create money from nothing to facilitate extraction by the rich from the poor.

Getting our indicators right is foundational. GDP, our currently favored measure of economic performance, is a measure of growth in the consumption of purchased goods. We also track and report daily stock indices that measure growth and decline in the financial assets of those fortunate enough to have them.

Neither of these indicators tell us **anything** about whether the basic needs of the world's people are being met. Whether we have the equitable distribution of wealth and power essential to a healthy society with a functioning democracy. Or whether we are maintaining the health of the water, land, air, forests, fisheries, and all else that nature provides to meet our essential needs as living beings.

We must continuously ask, who is in control? Capitalism, socialism, and communism all feature top-down control of the many by the few. None of these competing top-down ideologies has convincingly demonstrated an ability to secure the wellbeing of Earth and its people.

We must learn to organize as life organizes, from the bottom up through radically participatory processes in response to diverse and ever-changing local conditions. All our institutions, including the institutions of business and government, must be restructured to support these bottom-up processes.

Visionary author, Frances Moore Lappe speaks of Living Democracy as the deep democracy foundational to an Ecological Civilization. Conventional democracy is essentially reform tacked onto the authoritarian organizations of

the imperial human era. Approved voters are invited to choose which among a group of aspiring rulers will hold power to craft the laws that will dictate authorized behaviors for some number of years or until revised by future elected rulers.

Living democracy is a way of life we occasionally experience in highly effective workplaces, neighborhoods, and everyday interactions. It is cultivated from early childhood through education and family and community life. It requires distinctive institutional rules and structures. But even more, it requires a distinctive institutional culture supportive of shared responsibility and decision-making focused on maximizing community well-being.

In business it involves shifting ownership power from billionaire owners of transnational corporations to worker and community owners with a natural interest in the wellbeing of their neighbors. A leading example is the Mondragon worker coop in the Basque region of Spain.

The Mondragon worker cooperative is a well-known example of an exceptionally successful worker cooperative of significant size and accomplishment that works in a mutually supportive relationship with local government. Each worker—including those assigned specific management responsibilities—owns one share in the company and has one vote. That share can only be sold back to the cooperatively owned corporation for purchase by a new worker-owner.

Because shares are not available for public sale, control is firmly rooted in the Basque community. Cooperative community ownership and a related commitment to community wellbeing is well secured. There is no risk of a takeover by outside interests seeking to maximize profits for personal gain.

What generally gets less attention is the complex history of the relationship between the Mondragon cooperative and the people and government of the Basque region. The Basque people are known for the extreme poverty of their past, their traditional culture of mutualism and solidarity, and their years of violent armed conflict with Fascist Spain. The Basque region now stands out as one of Spain's most prosperous and autonomous regions, with control over

its own police force and its systems of taxation, education, and healthcare. The people of the Basque region have completely reshaped their local economy in ways consistent with the vision of the Ecological Civilization to which we aspire.

By fostering local wealth retention, promoting cooperative values, driving innovation, investing in education, and influencing social and political structures, Mondragon sets an example for other economic sectors in the Basque region. All feature a range of independent, worker-owned enterprises that, together, reinforce the region's commitment to local democracy, economic resilience, and social cohesion. The Basque region experience has much to offer the world as an example of how we find our way to a viable human future.

A defining challenge of our time is shifting power from profit-maximizing transnational corporations to people who are committed to securing local community wellbeing.

For business, a modest profit is essential for survival, but profit must never be the defining purpose of a responsible business. A profit-maximizing corporation is an illegitimate institution. Monopoly power and limited liability make a corporation's illegitimacy more extreme and self-evident.

The law relating to corporations was crafted centuries ago when the then ruling kings and queens first faced democracy as a threat to their absolute rule. The corporate charter facilitated centralized control and exploitation of assets beyond oversight by emerging democratic institutions.

There is no mention of corporations in the U.S. Constitution nor any of its Amendments. Corporate charters are issued in the United States only by individual states. And they were originally issued only for a designated period of time to fulfill a specified public purpose like constructing a canal or a dam specific to the state's territory. The founders who drafted the Constitution assumed that oversight by state governments would be close and strict.

A corporation is created when the government issues a charter to a group of private individuals to fulfill a public purpose. The defining question here is: What is a true public purpose in contemporary society?

Every business needs a modest profit to stay in business, but profit is never in itself a proper purpose for a business—or a life. And competing to excel in serving your community is very different from competing to make money at the expense of your neighbor.

The earliest corporations were created by kings and queens to develop trade, colonize new territories, build infrastructure, and manage public utilities in service to royal rule. We now assume, without reflection, that corporations fulfill a public purpose when they grow GDP by maximizing financial return to shareholders in another country. That may have been a valid public purpose under imperial rule. It is not a valid public purpose in a post-imperial civilization.

Among Earth's countless living organisms, we humans have a distinctive capacity for individual and collective self-aware choice. And a responsibility to serve the continued unfolding of creation through our care for the diverse living communities into which we are born—adapting, serving, and learning as we go.

This is what our ancestors learned to do together before the arrival of the modern institutions of government, religion, business, finance, education, science, and media that organize from the top down, thus enabling the few to rule and exploit the many.

What we currently call democracy provides periodic opportunities to participate in choosing the temporary top-down rulers of what are essentially authoritarian institutions. Life's existence, as we are now coming to recognize, depends on constantly adapting to ever changing local circumstances. Think of it as life's version of living democracy.

Organization theory speaks of subsidiarity, a principle of social organization that says decisions should be made at the most local level possible to

facilitate adaptation to distinctive and ever-changing local needs and conditions. This principle recognizes that the people or institutions closest to a problem are usually best equipped to address it, provided they have the necessary resources and capabilities.

Within this frame of thinking, it is the responsibility of those “in charge” at a higher system level to facilitate those processes of local adaptation without seeking to control or dictate them. It is essential to our wellbeing and that of the living Earth that we organize from the bottom up if we are to get to an Ecological Civilization.

It is now within our means to create a **regenerative** economy with a **regenerative** financial system that treats money as a sometimes-useful tool, not a purpose. And supports investments that enhance our ability to meet the real needs of a living Earth and all its people.

It is time to put to rest the imperial era and the authoritarian rule that defined it. It should now be clear to all—rich and poor alike—that a viable human future depends on deep institutional transformation consistent with our true nature and needs as living beings.

Every community needs businesses devoted to providing its residents with goods and services responsive to their needs and wants. Many needs are well met by small family businesses catering to distinctive local tastes and preferences. For example, a local restaurant or clothing shop.

Needs for manufactured products will likely be met by larger firms. Some products like space ships, large airplanes, and ocean liners can only be produced by very large firms with highly skilled and specialized staff.

Here is a four-part reform agenda aimed at achieving an equitable distribution of income and assets to achieve a good life for Earth and all of its people. It will require serious and difficult international coordination.

1. **Break up transnational corporations and convert the pieces to cooperative worker or community ownership.** The goal is to

assure market competition, while strengthening accountability to the communities within which each business does business.

2. **Shift all for-profit financial institutions to public or cooperative community ownership.** Here the goal is to limit the ability of private interests to create phantom financial assets from nothing for personal financial gain.
3. **Redistribute the wealth of the world's billionaires.** We might start with a top marginal tax rate of 90% on annual incomes over \$2 million to discourage excessive executive salaries and keep executive and corporate profits modest relative to worker wages.
4. **Collect a small financial transactions tax on all speculative financial transactions.** The goal here is to eliminate financial speculation and encourage beneficial investments producing beneficial goods and services.

So, how might we achieve such dramatic change? We cannot expect those who persistently abuse their personal power to now take responsibility for resolving the failures of the system that they celebrate and abuse. Leadership for the transformation must come from a self-organizing meta-movement that brings together in common causes the billions of people—both rich and poor—who are committed to creating a world that works for all.

That meta-movement has begun to form. We see it in countless individual initiatives and micro-movements. Successful action depends on these initiatives joining in unified support of one another in to advance the Earth Charter goals of peace, equality, and environmental care.

Movement leadership will come from emotionally healthy people of all ages and backgrounds as we learn to share and care for one another and Earth using money as a tool to facilitate cooperation when appropriate.

This is our moment of mutual awakening as a unified human species. A time to take action together to create the world that can be.

We have covered many issues in the past hour. You'll be excused if you are feeling a bit overwhelmed. I have basically conveyed to you the lessons I've been learning over my 87-year lifetime.

Here is a brief summary of those lessons and their implications.

1. The most basic lesson is our emerging human understanding of how life organizes—the lesson that Dr. Mae-Won Ho brought to my attention. Life is conscious, intelligent, and has an extraordinary capacity for bottom-up self-organization and learning as it evolves toward ever growing complexity, beauty, awareness, and possibility. Once we understand that basic truth, it tells us a lot about how to live together as intelligent beings on this finite living Earth. Throughout the Imperial era, we have created all manner of centralized organizations of government, business, religion, education, and science that are in many ways in fundamental violation of how healthy living systems emerge, learn, and thrive. A viable human future requires that we learn to create institutions that are rooted in communities of place and support bottom-up learning.
2. A larger lesson centers on how we have gotten our sense of our human purpose terribly wrong. We are living beings. Life, not money, is our purpose. We have given control of our lives to people who control our access to money. To regain control of our lives, we the people of Earth must take control of the creation and allocation of money. In a viable human future, money creation and allocation must be transparent, public, and dedicated to securing the wellbeing of Earth and all its people.
3. Our problems run deep. We are not dealing with a broken system in need of repair. We are dealing with a failed system in need of replacement. It is not a small challenge. We have long spoken with pride of the advances of human civilization, ignoring the self-evident truth that few, if any, of what we have called civilizations in our past have

been truly civilized. The institutions of the imperial era of uncivilized civilizations are collapsing. A viable human future depends on deep transformation to bring forth a truly civilized civilization, an Ecological Civilization dedicated to the wellbeing of the finite living Earth and all its beings. The good news is that we have already created many of the elements of such a civilization that now exist in various places. Our job is now to pull together these elements in a process of deep learning unified in our pursuit of a world of peace, beauty, community, and the wellbeing of all.

How do we get there? In the words of Myles Horton and Paulo Freire, two of the 20th century's most prominent social change leaders, "We make the road by walking."

Together we can walk that road. The time is now. The choice is ours. We are the ones we've been waiting for.