

January 21, 1007

CHANGE THE STORY, CHANGE THE WORLD

By David Korten

We humans live by the stories that define our cultural beliefs and values. Herein lays the key to understanding how Empire has maintained its hold on human societies for 5,000 years. Empire's power depends less on its instruments of physical violence than on its ability to control the defining stories of the public culture, thereby inducing a cultural trance that legitimates domination and obscures our ability to see more positive possibilities. The key to turning the human course from Empire to Earth Community is to break the trance and displace Empire stories that deny our human possibilities with compelling Earth Community stories that celebrate those possibilities.

Think of an organization with a social change mission in which you have a leadership role. Describe the prevailing Empire story that must change for the organization to succeed in its mission. What is the Earth Community story that must displace the Empire story? What might the organization do differently if it were to make changing the story an explicit and intentional part of its mission? Engage the organization in a discussion of how explicit attention to a change the story strategy might increase its effectiveness.

During a June 2006 gathering of citizen leaders in Lexington, Kentucky organized by my friend and colleague Jim Embry, I spelled out examples of organizations from my own experience that have helped to turn the human course through their contribution to exposing the fabrications of an Empire story and popularizing a contrasting Earth Community story.

I suggested in my presentation that all organizations committed to advancing the turn to Earth Community embrace the work of changing the stories of the dominant imperial culture as an important and intentional part of their mission. Jim followed up by inviting representatives of several community initiatives to describe their work in terms of the stories they seek to change.

A group that works with inner city youth spoke of its effort to bring forth a new story of minority youth as a valuable community resource. A university professor told how she was bringing forth a new story of her university as a resource to community organizations engaged in creating Earth Community. Another person spoke of promoting stories that honor the positive values and traditions of people who live in the Kentucky mountains

and celebrate their positive efforts to improve their lives. The owner of a local coffee house and gift shop shared her story of the joys of running a business devoted to building a love of one's place and its people by featuring products produced with loving care by local farmers and artisans. She also spoke of her effort to be a center for sharing the stories about the joys and possibilities of sustainable living.

I shared this story of my Lexington experience in a subsequent conversation with [Cecile Andrews](#), author of *The Circle of Simplicity*. She in turn pointed out the central role of discussion circles in building the women's movement as women came together to share and test their personal stories against the prevailing story that for women the key to happiness is to find the right man, marry, and devote their lives to his service. Absent such discussion, women whose experience failed to conform to the story — which included most women — commonly engaged in self-blame on the assumption that they were somehow deficient. By breaking the silence to share their stories they ended their sense of isolation and self-doubt as they came to realize that they were in very good company. Many then lent their voices to a growing chorus of women engaged in changing the cultural stories by which society had long defined women and their roles.

Cecile noted that it is the same for the voluntary simplicity movement. Through sharing stories, people come to realize that the prevailing story that material goods are the pathway to happiness is badly flawed. Finding courage in their awareness that they are not alone, they become more open and intentional in sharing their own stories of how they are improving the quality of their lives by gaining control of their time and reducing the quantity of their consumption.

My favorite personal examples of the transforming power of story telling come from my experience with four organizations: the People-Centered Development Forum, the International Forum on Globalization, *YES!* magazine, and the Business Alliance for Local Living Economies. None of these organizations originally defined its mission in terms of changing a story. Nor did any of them use the specific frame of Empire versus Earth Community. Yet in each instance, by my reckoning, the organization's greatest contribution to turning the human course has come through its contribution to exposing the self-serving fallacies of a favored Empire story and countering with a compelling Earth Community story.

The People-Centered Development Forum

In 1990, while living in the Philippines, I joined with a small group of nongovernmental organization leaders to found the [People-Centered Development Forum](#) as an international support network for citizen activists engaged in promoting the radical idea that authentic development must focus on people rather than on money. These are the contrasting stories that came to frame our work.

Empire's development story: *Economic growth creates opportunity, spreads democracy, lifts the poor out of their misery, and generates the surplus needed to protect the environment. The foreign aid system transfers resources from*

generous rich countries to deserving poor countries to promote their development through economic growth.

Deconstruction: *The economic growth promoted by the foreign aid system creates dependence on foreign money, experts, and technologies, thereby transferring control of economic resources to the institutions and people of the donor countries. This distorts economic priorities, transfers the benefits of economic activity from the people and institutions of recipient countries to the institutions and ruling elites of the donor countries, limits the choices available to the people of recipient countries, weakens the social fabric, contributes to inequality and environmental destruction, and deepens the misery of the poor.*

Earth Community development story: *Authentic development depends on restoring to local people and communities equitably distributed control over local resources and developing the capacities of local people and communities to manage those resources efficiently to meet their self-defined needs and create a better life for all.*

Initially, we carried forward our message through articles distributed mainly through small independent publications and newsletters, conference presentations, and workshops. Our efforts gave particular attention to the harmful policies and programs of the World Bank, International Monetary fund, and other purveyors of neoliberal economic ideologies. We were among the first to call for dismantling the World Bank and IMF.

In the beginning, our numbers were few and our outreach pitifully limited. It seemed we were engaged in a lonely, futile quest. Our small voices, however, helped to break the silence surrounding the dysfunctional reality of a system that claimed to be defending the interests of the world's poor, but was in reality serving only the rich. This encouraged others to lend their voices to what soon became a growing chorus of protest. Within a few years, millions of people were calling for action to stop the devastation caused by neoliberal development policies and mobilizing massive demonstrations that undermined the work and eroded the public legitimacy of both the World Bank and IMF — creating a realistic possibility that one day in the not too distant future these destructive institutions may be decommissioned.

We have come to recognize that changing the stories that frame the public discourse is possibly the most powerful social change intervention that small civic organizations can undertake. This insight now shapes every aspect of the work of the PCDForum, which now centers on the [Great Turning Initiative](#).

The International Forum on Globalization

In the early 1990s, the forces of Empire turned to international trade agreements as their primary instrument for advancing a neoliberal economic agenda of rewriting the rules of global commerce to allow global corporations and financial markets to pursue profit free from the restraint of public accountability — all in the guise of spreading prosperity,

freedom, and democracy. There was growing awareness among a few citizen activists of the deeper implications. In 1994, the Deep Ecology Foundation convened some 50 international citizen activists from different regions of the world, each with important constituencies of their own, to share their experience and insights on these corporate led free trade initiatives. I had the privilege of being a part of that initial gathering. A picture quickly emerged of a well-organized assault by powerful transnational corporations on people, nature, and the institutions of democracy.

We formed the International Forum on Globalization (IFG) to engage a cooperative effort to challenge the forces of corporate-led economic globalization by exposing Empire's globalization story. Gradually we crafted a contrasting story of a planetary system of interlinked, democratically accountable local economies responsive to the needs of people and planet everywhere.

Empire's globalization story: *The beneficial processes of globalization are eliminating rules and borders to create a seamless global economy free from needless barriers to the beneficial power of free markets. Freeing markets and trade from unwarranted interference by self-serving government bureaucracies unleashes a powerful engine of economic growth that is bringing prosperity, opportunity, democracy, and peace to all people and generating the wealth needed to end poverty and heal the environment. The International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank (WB), and World Trade Organization (WTO) are essential institutional instruments engaged in the advancing this beneficial agenda.*

Deconstruction: *Corporate-led economic globalization increases the freedom of corporations to extract wealth wherever they find it without public accountability, and at great cost to democracy and civil liberties. So called "trade agreements" have less to do with trade than with rewriting the rules of commerce to assure that conflicts between community interests and the interests of global corporations are resolved in favor of the corporate interest. This accelerates the concentration of wealth; undermines democracy; pits people, communities, and nations in a self-destructive standards lowering competition for corporate favor; and strips people and nature of essential protections. The IMF, WB, and WTO are primary institutional instruments for advancing the corporate agenda at the expense of people, democracy, community, and nature. These institutions serve no beneficial purpose and should be decommissioned in favor of new institutions accountable to the United Nations with mandates to facilitate democratic local control of economic resources and international cooperation to curb financial speculation and concentration of corporate power, and to advance economic justice, environmental sustainability, and balanced fair trade.*

Earth Community globalization story: *Markets and trade are essential and beneficial human institutions. Like all institutions, however, they require rules that assure fair and honest dealing and protect the health and well-being of children, family, community, democracy, and nature. For reasons of equity,*

sustainability, and democratic self-determination, economies should be predominantly local, largely self-reliant in meeting basic needs, and cooperative in their relationships with one another.

We projected our analysis out into the world through IFG sponsored teach-ins, reports, and books and through the speaking, writing, and networking outreach of our individual members and their organizations. This effort successfully redefined the story of corporate globalization for a growing constituency of citizen leaders. As the new story spread, it unleashed a powerful global citizen movement supported by many millions of people. This movement first burst into the global consciousness with the massive demonstrations that forced an early closure of the 1999 World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle. It has successfully disrupted subsequent meetings of the global corporate elite and their proxy governments, temporarily stalled the corporate-led free-trade juggernaut, gained significant global media attention, and established global civil society as a potent political force.

The Positive Futures Network and YES! magazine

It was already clear by 1995 that although resisting the institutions of Empire and their imperial agendas is essential, resistance alone is a losing strategy. To create a world that works for all, we must have a YES! for every NO!

This insight led to the decision in 1996 to launch YES! magazine and the Positive Futures Network (PFN) to communicate to a larger audience the stories of people engaged in creating the YES! and help them connect with one another. I have since served as board chair of PFN, which is the publisher of YES!. These are the stories that implicitly frame our work.

Empire's story of the limits of human possibility: *There is no alternative to the established course. Materialism, extremes of wealth and inequality, exploitation of people and nature, are all inevitable consequences of inherent flaws in our human nature. Because we humans are prone by nature to greed and violence, our best hope for salvation is to use the police and military powers of the state to impose order and constrain the violence and use the brutal discipline of market competition to channel the greed to productive ends.*

Deconstruction: *The cultures and institutions of Empire actively suppress our higher order human capacities for cooperation and compassion, while creating a self-destructive competitive dynamic of greed and violence. The claim that there is no alternative creates a disempowering, self-fulfilling prophecy that serves the interests of the imperial status quo at the expense of the rights and opportunity for creative expression of the vast majority of humanity.*

Our Earth Community story of unrealized human possibility: *If not for the widely demonstrated human propensity for caring and cooperation, the human species would have expired long ago. Human greed and violence are symptoms of social pathologies exacerbated and perpetuated by the cultures and institutions of*

Empire. Healthy societies based on the partnership principles of Earth Community as set forth in the Earth Charter are possible and millions of people are engaged in living them into being. We humans are a species of significant unrealized potential for creative, cooperative service to the well-being of the whole.

PFN explicitly defines itself as a communications organization. *YES!* magazine, with a circulation of 50,000 and growing, is the center piece of PFN's communications program. The magazine is augmented by web, education, and media outreach programs that get our message of human possibility out to millions of readers and listeners, many of whom are engaged in building the cultural and institutional foundations of societies grounded in Earth Community principles. This is a timely moment for our message. We see evidence that the people of the United States are waking up from a long period of denial about the reality of imperial U.S. foreign policy, the high cost of our consumptive life styles, the precariousness of our democracy, and the unnecessary hardships imposed by predatory economic institutions. People everywhere are looking for new stories to guide their efforts to create a positive future. *YES!* is dedicated to communicating those stories as a contribution to defining a new mainstream.

The Business Alliance for Local Living Economies

Action demonstrations are often the most powerful way to communicate a story of the possibilities of Earth Community. The Business Alliance for Local Living Economies (BALLE), which is communicating the story of community-led economic localization across the United States and Canada is an inspiring example. I was part of a working group of the Social Ventures Network that launched BALLE in 2002 and I currently serve on the BALLE board. The following stories go to the heart of BALLE's work.

Empire's local economy story: *To achieve economic prosperity local communities must compete for the favor of global corporations by offering tax breaks, subsidies, and exemption from regulation to entice them to build local plants and retail outlets that bring jobs for working people and provide low prices for consumers.*

Deconstruction: *The competition to attract footloose corporations through tax breaks, subsidies, and regulatory exemptions fuels a race to the bottom that depresses wages, lowers health, employment, and environmental standards, destroys the bonds of community, creates economic insecurity, and facilitates the expropriation of economic resources to make money for the already rich and powerful.*

Earth Community local economy story: *Business enterprises must make a fair profit to survive, but their primary purpose can and should be to contribute to a better life for all their stakeholders by providing dignified employment at a living wage, providing beneficial goods and services, and contributing to building relationships of trust and caring that are the foundation of a healthy community. Economic localization based on locally owned human-scale enterprises creates*

an essential and enduring foundation of the strong and healthy place-based communities essential to true prosperity, economic security, and democracy.

The Earth Community local economy story is spreading rapidly through the United States and Canada. BALLE had 42 local business networks with more than 12,000 business members as of the beginning of 2007 and continues to experience exponential growth.

Authentic cultures are a product of a vital community life and emerge through broadly participatory processes in which every person has a potential role. It is time to become intentional in our choice of the stories we communicate in our daily lives and through the organizations in which we are involved.

Invite a group of civic leaders in your community to form a book discussion group on *The Great Turning: From Empire to Earth Community*. Focus on developing your skills in identifying Empire stories and articulating the corresponding Earth Community stories. A discussion guide is available at:

http://thegreatturning.net/PDF/TGT_Guide_Version_06.1.pdf

Follow-up with a discussion of how the various social change organizations in which you each have leadership roles might incorporate story changing into their mission statements and what this would mean for what they do. Look for the connections among the story changing agendas of these organizations and discuss the ways you might support one another in changing the meta-stories that currently inhibit community building in the place where you live.

Remember that community building can and should be fun. The more fun you make it, for yourself and others, the more effective you will be.