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## The New Politics of Earth Community

David C. Korten

**W**e face the upcoming election at a defining moment for our nation and the species. One thing most all Americans seem to agree on is that we have a desperate need for new leadership. New leadership at the top of our federal government, however, will only be a start on the work at hand. No matter who the winners in this election turn out to be, their immediate priority will be to resolve our economic and health care crises and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. They will have little energy or political motivation to take on the far larger social and environmental mess we humans now find ourselves in as a legacy of 5,000 years of Empire.

Our species has a brief window of opportunity to navigate a Great Turning from a self-destructive Era of Empire, characterized by relationships of domination enforced by violence, to an Era of Earth Community characterized by peaceful partnership and based on the principles of the Earth Charter. The leadership in addressing that challenge must come from civil society, from we the people.

The imperial establishment is just beginning to emerge from denial to look for ways to profit economically and politically from the unfolding

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social and environmental tragedy that threatens the survival of the species. Meanwhile, millions of people are engaging the real work—awakening from the cultural trance that for 5,000 years has impaired our ability to actualize the higher potential of our human nature

that makes a partnership society possible. They are creating a new politics based on being and doing the change they seek. Call it the politics of Earth Community. It has little in common with the traditional politics of Empire in which opposing elite factions engage in a divide-and-conquer competition for the ultimate power prize.

In *Blessed Unrest*, Paul Hawken estimates that globally two million organizations are already practicing the new politics. They are working through their local governments, businesses, churches, educational institutions, and civic organizations to build vital, dem-

ocratic communities to achieve balanced relationships with one another and Earth. They are rebuilding local economies, campaigning for peace, promoting a living wage, advancing minority rights, reforming electoral processes, running for office, reviving local agriculture, organizing discussion groups, mentoring the young, creating intentional communities, promoting green building and solar energy, developing interfaith alliances, practicing holistic medicine, hosting local talk shows, and much more.

### Three-Fold Crisis

Earth Community politics from below is growing the new culture and institutions needed to resolve a potentially terminal three-fold crisis.

- **Excess Consumption:** Growth in human consumption resulting from 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.
- **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.
- **Institutional Pathology:** The most powerful institutions on the planet—global financial markets and the transnational corporations that serve them—are 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. They offer palliatives that leave the deeper cause of our potentially terminal environmental and social crises untouched, because they are the cause.

### The Imperative

These conditions create the imperative to:

1. Reduce aggregate consumption, which means renouncing economic growth and obsessive over-consumption as our defining economic priority, 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. Transform our institutions and cultures to support the above.

### The Opportunity

Properly understood, the imperative creates an unprecedented opportunity to create a world that unleashes long-suppressed human possibilities and 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. 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.

Success depends on facing up to the extent to which the crisis is a consequence of deep social and institutional pathology. Although green technologies will have an essential role, there is no technological fix. The fate of our children turns on our current irrevocable choice between two contrasting ways of relating to one another and Earth. One is the Way of Earth Community, the way of partnership, sharing, reconciliation, mutual responsibility, and respect for all life. The other is the Way of Empire, the way of domination, greed, violence, wasted lives and environmental devastation that got us into this mess.

### Global Awakening

Empire has always met resistance from those who saw the truth that violence and injustice are symptoms of deep cultural and institutional dysfunction destructive of our higher order human possibilities. Mostly, this resistance was geographically isolated and the institutions of Empire easily contained it. That has changed. We now have the means to render Empire's divide-and-conquer tactics impotent.

Modern communication technologies have breached the barriers of geography to link ordinary people into a seamless global web of communication that breaks the communications monopoly of Empire,

accelerates an awakening from our collective cultural trance, and gives us the ability to function as a collective intelligence to restore balance and act as a whole in the service of the whole.

### The Work

The institutions of Empire that have led human societies to the brink of collapse in their insatiable quest for power will not act from within to voluntarily

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relinquish that power. Leadership for the turning must come from popular civic initiatives centered outside the institutions of Empire. This leadership is emerging everywhere and moves forward on three fronts:

- **New Stories:** Through dialogue, replace the stories that frame the Empire culture with the stories of an Earth Community culture.
- **New Rules:** Through political action, replace rules favoring ruthless competition with rules that favor caring cooperation.
- **New Institutions:** Through local organizing, create caring, cooperative communities to bring forth new institutions grounded in principles of partnership.

Much is at stake in the forthcoming election, but we must not allow the old politics of Empire to divert our attention from the work of growing the new politics of Earth Community. Our collective future turns on the success of the latter. It is the greatest and most creative human adventure in all of human experience.

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In these dangerous and often frightening times, it is important to regularly remind ourselves that we are privileged to live at the most exciting moment of creative opportunity in the whole of human experience. The time is now. ~

### EMPIRE

Korten uses Empire (with a capital "E") as a generic term for the coercive, hierarchical ordering of human relationships that creates competition for power between nations, religions, classes, races, and genders. It is the root cause of the violence, alienation, and exploitation of Earth that now threaten the human species with social and environmental collapse.