

Despair, Hope and the Great Turning

Participating in the creation of the next phase of human culture

Retreat curriculum for
high school and young adults

Objectives

Honor our feelings of despair, worry, sense of helplessness

Recognize our beauty and strength

Use *The Great Turning* as a framework for moving into the future

Session I: Connecting

Name, pronoun & a favorite fall (or the season you are in) memory

Game: Who am I and how do you feel about it [Playful way to come face to face with our biases, it's also a good activity for getting us to see one another](#)

Each person has a name taped to their forehead. People mill around and react to the person as if they were the name on their forehead. People try to guess who they are.

(see Attachment 1 below)

Reflections: Were you surprised by who you were? Were you surprised by the reactions of others to you? By the reactions you had to others' names?

Intro & agenda & expectations

Be Kind, Aware, Brave, Curious

Game: Bounce the Person (From PlayFair, p. 95)

["Being 'bounced' is a soothing, relaxing and centering experience..." It also helps to create/strengthen a sense of connection to one another and increases an awareness of the energy that moves through us and between us.](#)

Partner up with someone close to you in height. Person with the most siblings will be bounced first. Bouncee, close your eyes, relax, hands dangling at your sides, listen to your breathing, you are relaxed but not slumped as if a string is pulling you up towards the ceiling. Bouncer, place the palm of your hand very lightly on the top of your partner's head. This is the hand that is going to help with the bouncing, but in fact you are hardly go to move it at all. Think about your arm getting heavy – send some heavy-weight energy down through your arm, out your palm and down the spine of the bouncee. Bouncee, tune into that energy and sink down a bit with the heaviness of it. Okay bouncer, now think your arm light, energy in your palm is moving up now and bouncee, as you sense that feel yourself ever so slightly being pulled upward. Okay bouncer, find your rhythm, moving energy downward then upward in your palm. Bouncee – relax into it. After a few minutes we'll switch roles.

Reflections: How was that experience for you? Which role did you prefer? Do you know why?

A Holding the Space exercise:

The Web – Physical – Ball of yarn, toss to one another and share something you need from our time together

Group may want to lay under this web as they do News of Me.

News of me out of the silence This is form of worship sharing. It allows people to let the group know where they are emotionally at this time and often allows people to set aside what they are carrying for our time together.

We're going to settle into silence. As you are moved, you can share something that is going on in your life at the moment, something you'd like this group to be aware of. It can be joyful or difficult but the sharing of it should be brief. Share only once. Leave space between offerings.

Free Time/Break

Session 2

Gather in silence

Tai Chi Exercise: *Embrace Tiger, Return to Mountain* (Or some other form of meditative, grounding, energizing movement – yoga etc...)

Name, pronoun & share your Tiger (What do you embrace?)

Game HaHa This is a great group connector both physically and emotionally and is a good preparation for the next activity. In groups of 8 -15, have one person lie down on their back, next person lies down with their head on the belly of the first, third person lies down with belly on the head of the second and so on until everyone is lying down with someone's head on their belly (unless they are the last person to lie down). First person says "ha" loudly, second then says "ha ha", third says "ha ha ha". If giggling breaks out (which it almost always does) start over. If you can't get past the first few people, start in the middle. Alterations are to pick a simple tune to add your "ha's" to.

Diving into Despair in Small Groups (1 poster board per group, china pencil, large index cards and pens/pencils enough for each person in the group)

We are going to spend some time peeling back the layers and discovering what grief and pain our hearts carry. We are not alone. We are here for one another. Let's take a few moments to gather ourselves in silence and to intentionally create a loving space in which to open our hearts...

Say your full name in a voice that expresses your feelings for the current situation of the world

Brainstorm ways in which our world is running amok – share your concerns in as expressive a way as you wish (Someone needs to capture this on poster board).

Look at the list, let yourself step out of this space for a moment and concentrate on the feelings that arise in you as you look at this list. Jot them down on an index card. Now focus on the bodily sensations associated with the feelings on your list. Write those down too.

Share the lists with the rest of your small group participants. Look for patterns in the feelings and sensations. Which drain energy and which produce energy? What types of energy are produced?

Regroup and whole group sharing from small groups

- What patterns did you notice?
- How was that exercise for you?

Game: Universal Connection

Without letting anyone know, choose two people to focus on for the next activity. Stand up. When I say “go” move so that you maintain an equal distance from both your people. “Go!”

Since everyone is trying to place themselves equidistant from their partners the whole group is moving around the space available. Let the activity go on for a couple of minutes until it feels done: a rhythm has been established, chaos is ensuing or people seem to be losing focus.

Observations? Nice visual of our interconnectedness. Also a good reminder that while we may be adjusting our behavior based on others (our role models) we are serving as role models for others who we may not be aware of.

Intro to the Great Turning (See attachments 4 & 5 for more on the Great Turning)

- I. What is it? It is the essential adventure of our time. The transition from the industrial growth society to a life-sustaining society. From Empire to Earth Community. From Domination to partnership. It is happening now. Will it succeed or will the Great Unraveling continue? We don't know.
- II. The 3 Dimensions
 - i. All efforts to slow down the current destruction: soup kitchens, civil disobedience, petitioning etc...
 - ii. Arising of new forms – solar panels, co-housing, permaculture, local currencies etc...
 - iii. A shift in consciousness – this includes “our grief for the world”. A recognition of our interconnectedness.
- III. Personal Guidelines (See attachment 2)

Free time (1-2 hours) Opportunity for people to connect with one another in an unstructured setting. This is also a good space for a meal in a full day or multi-day retreat.

Session 3: Surfacing into Hope – Panel of Young Adult Friends and others in the Good Work

This is an opportunity to create more connections among Friends of different ages/backgrounds. Gather a diverse group of 4 to 5 people in your community who are doing sustaining, forward-thinking good work. Each gives a brief description 10-15 minutes and then open up for questions from the participants.

Free Time and/or work projects (1 hour) Work projects are a great way to mix people up and to give quieter, shyer folks a chance to shine. Raking leaves, picking weeds, planting flowers, cleaning windows, making cookies or other snacks, shoveling snow, cutting wood, clearing trails, straightening library shelves, dusting. Whatever projects might be useful to your host facility and/or to the group. It's nice to have projects that can be done in small groups of 4 to 6 people. Food projects are always a big hit among the youth. Guacamole, pita bread, vegan date caramels, veggie trays, hummus, chocolate covered strawberries – something that can be finished in 40 minutes or so and that 3-4 people can work on together.

Earth Meditation, weather permitting (See attachment 3) or **other centering activity** (perhaps Joanna Macy's *Cradling Exercise* from *Despair and Personal Power in the Nuclear Age*)

Self-space for reflection & taking care of personal needs (1 hour)

This a quiet time, spent primarily on one's own. It allows people to take in what they have experienced thus far in the retreat and to recharge with naps, showers, walks – giving the social mind a break.

Session 4

Gather in Stillness

Game: Will you buy my Donkey

When done well this provokes genuine laughter and allows people an opportunity to ham it up in front of one another. Group sits in a circle. Two people are in the middle. A seller and a donkey. The seller chooses someone in the circle to sell their donkey to. They approach the person and ask, "Would you like to buy my donkey." The chosen person responds, "What does your donkey do?" The seller then extols on a virtue of the donkey (My donkey sings opera or My donkey speaks cat or My donkey is an expert in non-violent communication) and then the donkey acts it out. If the chosen person smiles or laughs at any point in the exchange, they become the donkey, the donkey becomes the seller and the seller sits down in the circle. If the chosen person doesn't laugh, the original pair moves on to someone else. You can also tap into the theme by having the seller

offer to sell an item useful in the great turning instead of selling a donkey. In this case the partner becomes whatever the item is that the seller is selling.

When giving instructions for this game, it's helpful to stress the importance of making your partner look good – choosing something that can be easily acted out and trying to act out what your partner suggests or humorously and supportively declining to do so.

Other community building games will work here too. Definitely use a game here. They are important for keeping joy in the room and allowing us to see one another fully.

Identifying and affirming gifts and seeing where you might put them to use
(in groups of 6 or so)

Name and What “lights you up?” This is a source of Power for you.

Affirmation circle: Focus on each person and let people share the gifts they see in them. (Jot these down on a card for each person.)

Strategize: In pairs or Triads explore ways of transforming the situation you are given (choose one from the list generated in session 2)

- How should things look/be?
- What keeps things the way they currently are? (Who benefits from the way things are?) What stories do they use?
- Look at your card - What powers do you have?
- How can you use them to transform the situation? (To move it from where it is to where you envision it could be).
- What dimension will you work in (stemming destruction, creating new forms or shifting cultural consciousness)

Regroup and share back with the whole group.

Final Group Activity: Soundscape

This is a visceral and moving way to feel the power of the creative community in action. Sometimes you have to stop and start over. Often times the first time people are self-conscious and giggly. Laughter is good for us, so you can let that go on for a few minutes but then restart the process. Stress the tuning into one another, building on each sound, harmonizing, affirming.

Make yourself comfortable sitting or stretching out on the floor. We're going to settle into stillness. Notice your connection with others in the room. I've asked someone to start us off with a note. Take that note in. Tune into. Let it move you. Let your own note or rhythm rise up to join it. We are trying to build on each other's offering not trample or cancel out one another.

Who/What am I and How Do You Feel About It Name Cards.

Create a list of persons, roles, etc...being sensitive to your group composition and being prepared to deal with stereotypes that may manifest. Write one "person" per sticky note or mailing label. This list below is just for ideas.

Jesus	Store Clerk
Buddha	Sunset
Mohammed	Mushroom
Chemical Co. CEO	Oil Rig Worker
US Soldier	US President
You	Coyote
Your mother	Army recruiter
Your father	Peace Corps recruiter
Your sibling	Engineer
Factory Worker	Artist
Iraqi soldier	Lawyer
Peace activist	Sanitation Worker
Dalai Lama	Santa Claus
Priestess	Tooth Fairy
Priest	A water fall
Redwood Tree	A Classmate
Dolphin	A songwriter
Mosquito	An athlete
Bat	Best friend

Personal Guidelines for the Great Turning

Come from Gratitude

To be alive in this beautiful, self-organizing universe--to participate in the dance of life with senses to perceive it, lungs that breathe it, organs that draw nourishment from it--is a wonder beyond words. Gratitude for the gift of life is the primary wellspring of all religions, the hallmark of the mystic, the source of all true art. Furthermore, it is a privilege to be alive in this time when we can choose to take part in the self-healing of our world.

Don't be Afraid of the Dark

This is a dark time, filled with suffering and uncertainty. Like living cells in a larger body, it is natural that we feel the trauma of our world. So, don't be afraid of the anguish you feel, or the anger or fear, for these responses arise from the depth of your caring and the truth of your interconnectedness with all beings. To suffer with is the literal meaning of compassion.

Dare to Vision

Out of this darkness a new world can arise, not to be constructed by our minds so much as to emerge from our dreams. Even though we cannot see clearly how it's going to turn out, we are still called to let the future into our imagination. We will never be able to build what we have not first cherished in our hearts.

Roll up your Sleeves

Many people don't get involved in the Great Turning because there are so many different issues, which seem to compete with each other. Shall I save the whales or help battered children? The truth is that all aspects of the current crisis reflect the same mistake, setting ourselves apart and using others for our gain. So to heal one aspect helps the others to heal as well. Just find what you love to work on and take joy in that. Never try to do it alone. Link up with others; you'll spark each others' ideas and sustain each others' energy.

Act your Age

Since every particle in your body goes back to the first flaring forth of space and time, you're really as old as the universe. So when you are lobbying at your congressperson's office, or visiting your local utility, or testifying at a hearing on nuclear waste, or standing up to protect an old grove of redwoods, you are doing that not out of some personal whim, but in the full authority of your 15 billion years.

From Joanna Macy

SURRENDER TO EARTH — modified from Patrick Anderson

Every moment of our lives we are carried and supported by the Earth. This idea can become a rich experience by paying attention to the ways our body is in contact with the Earth. "Surrender to Earth" uses awareness of our contact with the ground in walking, standing, sitting and lying to bring our connection with the Earth and the Earth's support of us to life.

Walking: "Feel your feet on the ground, your whole weight supported by the Earth. Take a step, feel your weight shift onto one foot. Feel the sensations of contact with the earth in your foot. Take the next step and give your weight to the ground. Notice the way the Earth is present for every step you take, supporting you."

"Give in to the next step, feel the union of earth and foot. Earth matches every contact you make with equal intensity. Yield in the walking. Discover how intimate you can be in your contact with the earth, through every step, through the rhythm of contact. Pressure, lifting away, stretching, placing. Connecting to the earth." [Move around in your own space or take 10 or 20 paces, turn around and walk back and forth for 5 minutes.]

Standing: "Come to a standstill. Standing on the earth. Become aware of the balance of weight on your feet. Aware of the contact with the ground through your feet; grounded, steady, alive. Notice your upright posture, your body rising from the ground, vertical, balanced. Each moment the Earth is holding you. As you stand, your body is swaying in space. Become aware of the top of your head, connecting you with the sky. Grounded through your feet and connected with the cosmos through the top of your head. In between the earth and the sky we live and breathe. Standing, breathing, aware of your body as a column of earth, rising into the sky. etc." [Stand connecting the Earth and the Sky for 5 minutes]

Sitting: "Now moving from standing to sitting. Move slowly, deliberately, letting yourself sink down onto the earth. Stay attentive to your contact with the ground as you lower your body. Find a position that you can relax into, keeping your spine upright. Feel all the places where you make contact with the earth, notice the sensations; pressure, hardness, heat. Experience your body breathing, as it sits on the ground, the flow of air and life in and out of your body. Rest in the sitting, the upright posture. Feel into the support the earth gives each moment. Become aware of your spine, of the energy of the earth rising up your spine. Allow the Earth's energy to fill your body, to fill your being." [sit as Earth for 5 minutes]

Lying: "Relaxing from sitting to lying on the Earth. Allowing the pull of gravity to tug your body down onto the ground. Melting onto the earth. Letting go of the tensions in your body holding yourself separate from earth. Embrace our the earth. Allow the Earth to embrace you."

"Surrender to the earth, to the one who supports every step you take, who rests steady when you stand, who breathes with you as you sit, who is present supporting every moment of your life, who embraces you now as you lie upon your great friend. Embrace the Earth. Surrender to Earth." [Lie breathing, relaxing, embracing, surrendering for 5 minutes]

YES! Magazine Summer 2006 Issue: 5,000 Years of Empire

The Great Turning as Compass and Lens

By Joanna Macy

What it means to be alive at a moment of global crisis and possibility

“Thinking of the Great Turning reminds me I don’t have to save the world by myself; then there’s more energy for my little piece of it — getting the military out of my son’s school.”

— Anti-recruitment activist in San Francisco

“It strengthens me to see my work for renewable energy in the context of the grande virada.”

— Corporate consultant in Brazil.

“I love telling the children in our eco-camp that their restoration project is part of the grosse Wandlung, and they are part of it, too.”

— Teacher in Germany’s Black Forest.

“Now I recognize el gran cambio right here in Barcelona, and at the same time it links me with activists around the world. I feel less isolated.”

—Spanish community organizer

Grande virada, die grosse Wandlung, el gran cambio... Wherever I go, in every group I work with, the Great Turning becomes more rewarding as a conceptual frame. It is a name for the transition from the industrial growth society to a life-sustaining society. It identifies the shift from a self-destroying political economy to one in harmony with Earth and enduring for the future. It unites and includes all the actions being taken to honor and preserve life on Earth. It is the essential adventure of our time.

Of course, most people involved in this adventure do not call it the Great Turning. They do not need that name in order to fight for survival and to fashion the forms of a sane and decent future. Yet more and more of us are finding that concept to be wonderfully useful. For me as teacher, activist, and mother, the Great Turning helps me see what the physical eye cannot: the larger forces at play and the direction they are taking. At the same time, it sharpens my perception of the actual, concrete ways people are engaging in this global shift. In other words, it serves me as both compass and lens.

The Big Picture

From the countless social and environmental issues that compete for attention, we can take on isolated causes and fight for them with courage and devotion. But the forces we confront seem so great and time so short, it’s easy to fear that our efforts are too scattered to be of real consequence. And we tend to fall into the same short-term thinking that has entrapped our political economy.

The Great Turning invites us to lift our eyes from the cramped closet of short-term thinking and see the larger historical landscape. What a difference it makes to view our efforts as part of a vast enterprise, a tidal change commensurate to the crisis we face. What is underway, as many have observed, is a revolution that is comparable in magnitude to the agricultural revolution of the late Neolithic and the industrial revolution of the past two centuries. As the industrial-growth society

spins out of control comes the third revolution, which is even now given names, like the ecological or sustainability revolution, or the Great Turning. While the first two revolutions, as former EPA administrator William Ruckelshaus reflects, “were gradual, spontaneous, and largely unconscious, this (third) one will have to be a fully conscious operation. ... If we actually do it, the undertaking will be absolutely unique in humanity’s stay on Earth.”

As compass, the Great Turning helps us see the direction in which our political economy is heading. Because the industrial-growth society is based on an impossible imperative—limitless increase in corporate profits—that direction leads to collapse. No system can endure that seeks to maximize a single variable. Already our system is on “overshoot,” using up resources beyond Earth’s capacity to renew and dumping wastes beyond Earth’s capacity to absorb. The losses inflicted on the biosphere now affect every system essential to life, and deplete the diversity required for complex life forms. Yet life is a dynamic process, self-organizing to adapt and evolve. Just as it turned scales to feathers, gills to lungs, seawater to blood, so now, too, immense evolutionary pressures are at work. They are driving this revolution of ours through innumerable molecular, intersecting alterations in the human capacity for conscious change.

Still, as Earth’s record attests, extinctions are at least as plentiful as successful adaptations. We may not make it this time. Natural systems may unravel beyond repair before new, sustainable forms and structures take hold. That is part of the anguish that is widely felt.

That anguish is unavoidable, if we want to stay honest and alert. The Great Turning comes with no guarantees. Its risk of failure is its reality. Insisting on belief in a positive outcome puts blinders on us and burdens the heart. We might manage to convince ourselves that everything will surely turn out all right, but would such happy assurance elicit our greatest courage and creativity?

The Great Turning, as a compass pointing to the possible, helps me live with radical uncertainty. It also causes me to believe that, whether we succeed or not, the risks we take on behalf of life will bring forth dimensions of human intelligence and solidarity beyond any we have known. The scene on the ground

This third revolution of our human journey is not only a possibility; it is a present, ongoing, multifarious phenomenon. The Great Turning is like a lens through which we can perceive the extent to which it is happening. This lens is crucial, because it reveals developments that are ignored or distorted by the mainstream, corporate-controlled media. In the words of Gil Scott-Heron, “the revolution will not be televised.” It is hardly in the interests of billion-dollar industries, or the government that serves them, that we should know how they are being challenged and supplanted by grassroots initiatives.

These initiatives are sprouting on all sides, like green shoots through the rubble of a dysfunctional civilization. The Great Turning lens reveals that initiatives as different in character as a wind farm, a lawsuit against election fraud, and a fleet of kayaks protecting marine mammals are all part of an historic transition. It is important to review the three dimensions of this transition because they make it easier to see the Great Turning in action and to recognize our part in it. While presented as first, second, or third, they are not to be taken as sequential or ranked in importance. They coarise synergistically and are mutually reinforcing.

The first dimension includes all the efforts underway to slow down the destruction being wrought by the industrial-growth society. These range from petitioning for species protection to soup kitchens for homeless families, to civil disobedience against weapons makers, polluters, clear cutting, and other depredations. Often discouraging and even dangerous, work in this dimension buys time. Saving some lives, some ecosystems, some species, and some of the gene pool for future generations is a necessary part of the Great Turning. But even if every battle in this dimension were won, it would not be enough. A life-sustaining society requires new forms and structures.

The arising of these new forms constitutes the second dimension. Here we see the emergence of sustainable alternatives, from solar panels to farmers markets, from land trusts to cohousing, permaculture, and local currencies. At no other epoch in our history have so many ways of doing things appeared in so short a time.

Many of them — as in health, animal husbandry, and pest management — reclaim old, traditional practices. Yet, as promising as they are, these forms and structures cannot survive without deeply rooted values to nourish them. To proliferate and endure, they must mirror who we are and what we really want. They require, in other words, a profound change in our perception of reality.

This is the third dimension of the Great Turning: a shift in consciousness. Both personal and collective, both cognitive and spiritual, this shift comes through many avenues. It is ignited by the new sciences and inspired by ancient traditions. It also arises as grief for our world. Irreducible to private pathology, this grief gives the lie to old-paradigm notions of the isolated, competitive self. It reveals our mutual belonging in the web of life.

Now, in this very time, these three rivers — anguish for our world, scientific breakthroughs, and ancestral teachings — flow together. From the confluence of these rivers we drink and awaken to what we once knew: we are alive in a living Earth, source of all we are and know. Despite centuries of mechanistic conditioning, we want to name, once again, this world as holy.

Whether they come through Gaia theory, systems theory, chaos theory, or through liberation theology, shamanic practices, or the Goddess, such insights and experiences are absolutely necessary to free us from the grip of the industrial-growth society. They offer us nobler goals and deeper pleasures. They redefine our wealth and our worth, liberating us from compulsions to consume and control.

So rich is the harvest, that when we claim these new understandings, there's little room for panic or self-pity. Instead, gratitude arises to be alive at this moment, when, for all the darkness coming upon us, blessings abound. They help us stay alert and steady, so we can join hands to find the ways the world self-heals—and see the present chaos as seedbed for the future.

Seeds for the Future

Among such blessings for me now, I count the explorations my colleagues and I are making into the mystery of time. With “deep time” practices, we enliven our felt connections with past and future generations, and open our hurried, fragmented lives into vaster expanses of time. The ancestors, who bequeathed us life, become more present to us, and so do the future ones, whom we carry within us like seeds.

These practices, long a feature of my workshops, gave rise to an extraordinary event last year. In Australia, where the Dreamtime is still a reality to the aboriginals who welcomed us, several dozen of us gathered to devote a full lunar cycle to immersion in deep time. The event was called “Seeds for the Future: Training for the Great Turning.”

There, under the wheeling stars by the southern sea, we felt the power of this planet-time. In our silence, rituals, and role play, we sensed the ancestors and the future ones moving in our midst, encouraging us in the work that is ours to do. In our discussions, we felt the presence of those living now and the magnitude of their manifold efforts on behalf of life. Earth Community became for us not only a promise, but a present reality.

Returned to our daily lives, we call each other seedlings. That’s what the Great Turning makes of us: seedlings of the future. How can I falter now, with so many hands and hearts at work, and all generations lending their support?

*Joanna Macy, Ph.D., a Buddhist teacher and deep ecologist, is widely known for her workshops at the interface between social change and spiritual breakthrough. Her books include *Coming Back to Life*; *World as Lover, World As Self*; and *Widening Circles, A Memoir*. See www.joannamacy.net.*

YES! Magazine Summer 2006 Issue: 5,000 Years of Empire

The Great Turning: From Empire to Earth Community

By David Korten

By what name will future generations know our time?

Will they speak in anger and frustration of the time of the Great Unraveling, when profligate consumption exceeded Earth's capacity to sustain and led to an accelerating wave of collapsing environmental systems, violent competition for what remained of the planet's resources, and a dramatic dieback of the human population? Or will they look back in joyful celebration on the time of the Great Turning, when their forebears embraced the higher-order potential of their human nature, turned crisis into opportunity, and learned to live in creative partnership with one another and Earth?

A Defining Choice

We face a defining choice between two contrasting models for organizing human affairs. Give them the generic names Empire and Earth Community. Absent an understanding of the history and implications of this choice, we may squander valuable time and resources on efforts to preserve or mend cultures and institutions that cannot be fixed and must be replaced.

Empire organizes by domination at all levels, from relations among nations to relations among family members. Empire brings fortune to the few, condemns the majority to misery and servitude, suppresses the creative potential of all, and appropriates much of the wealth of human societies to maintain the institutions of domination.

Earth Community, by contrast, organizes by partnership, unleashes the human potential for creative co-operation, and shares resources and surpluses for the good of all. Supporting evidence for the possibilities of Earth Community comes from the findings of quantum physics, evolutionary biology, developmental psychology, anthropology, archaeology, and religious mysticism. It was the human way before Empire; we must make a choice to re-learn how to live by its principles.

Developments distinctive to our time are telling us that Empire has reached the limits of the exploitation that people and Earth will sustain. A mounting perfect economic storm born of a convergence of peak oil, climate change, and an imbalanced U.S. economy dependent on debts it can never repay is poised to bring a dramatic restructuring of every aspect of modern life. We have the power to choose, however, whether the consequences play out as a terminal crisis or an epic opportunity. The Great Turning is not a prophecy. It is a possibility.

A Turn from Life

According to cultural historian Riane Eisler, early humans evolved within a cultural and institutional frame of Earth Community. They organized to meet their needs by cooperating with life rather than by dominating it. Then some 5,000 years ago, beginning in Mesopotamia, our ancestors made a tragic turn from Earth Community to Empire. They turned away from a reverence for the generative power of life—represented by female gods or nature spirits—to a reverence for hierarchy and the power of the sword—represented by distant, usually male, gods. The wisdom of the elder and the priestess gave way to the arbitrary rule of the powerful, often ruthless, king.

Paying the Price

The peoples of the dominant human societies lost their sense of attachment to the living earth, and societies became divided between the rulers and the ruled, exploiters and exploited. The brutal competition for power created a relentless play-or-die, rule-or-be-ruled dynamic of violence and oppression and served to elevate the most ruthless to the highest positions of power. Since the fateful turn, the major portion of the resources available to human societies has been diverted from meeting the needs of life to supporting the military forces, prisons, palaces, temples, and patronage for retainers and propagandists on which the system of domination in turn depends. Great civilizations built by ambitious rulers fell to successive waves of corruption and conquest.

The primary institutional form of Empire has morphed from the city-state to the nation-state to the global corporation, but the underlying pattern of domination remains. It is axiomatic: for a few to be on top, many must be on the bottom. The powerful control and institutionalize the processes by which it will be decided who enjoys the privilege and who pays the price, a choice that commonly results in arbitrarily excluding from power whole groups of persons based on race and gender.

Troubling Truths

Herein lies a crucial insight. If we look for the source of the social pathologies increasingly evident in our culture, we find they have a common origin in the dominator relations of Empire that have survived largely intact in spite of the democratic reforms of the past two centuries. The sexism, racism, economic injustice, violence, and environmental destruction that have plagued human societies for 5,000 years, and have now brought us to the brink of a potential terminal crisis, all flow from this common source. Freeing ourselves from these pathologies depends on a common solution—replacing the underlying dominator cultures and institutions of Empire with the partnership cultures and institutions of Earth Community. Unfortunately, we cannot look to imperial powerholders to lead the way.

Beyond Denial

History shows that as empires crumble the ruling elites become ever more corrupt and ruthless in their drive to secure their own power—a dynamic now playing out in the United States. We Americans base our identity in large measure on the myth that our nation has always embodied the highest principles of democracy and is devoted to spreading peace and justice to the world.

But there has always been tension between America's high ideals and its reality as a modern version of Empire. The freedom promised by the Bill of Rights contrasts starkly with the enshrinement of slavery elsewhere in the original articles of the Constitution. The protection of property, an idea central to the American dream, stands in contradiction to the fact that our nation was built on land taken by force from Native Americans. Although we consider the vote to be the hallmark of our democracy, it took nearly 200 years before that right was extended to all citizens.

Americans acculturated to the ideals of America find it difficult to comprehend what our rulers are doing, most of which is at odds with notions of egalitarianism, justice, and democracy. Within the frame of historical reality, it is perfectly clear: they are playing out the endgame of Empire, seeking to consolidate power through increasingly authoritarian and anti-democratic policies.

Wise choices necessarily rest on a foundation of truth. The Great Turning depends on awakening to deep truths long denied.

Cultural Turning

The Great Turning begins with a cultural and spiritual awakening—a turning in cultural values from money and material excess to life and spiritual fulfillment, from a belief in our limitations to a belief in our possibilities, and from fearing our differences to rejoicing in our diversity. It requires reframing the cultural stories by which we define our human nature, purpose, and possibilities.

Economic Turning

The values shift of the cultural turning leads us to redefine wealth—to measure it by the health of our families, communities, and natural environment. It leads us from policies that raise those at the top to policies that raise those at the bottom, from hoarding to sharing, from concentrated to distributed ownership, and from the rights of ownership to the responsibilities of stewardship.

Political Turning

The economic turning creates the necessary conditions for a turn from a one-dollar, one-vote democracy to a one-person, one-vote democracy, from passive to active citizenship, from competition for individual advantage to cooperation for mutual advantage, from retributive justice to restorative justice, and from social order by coercion to social order by mutual responsibility and accountability.

Global Awakening

Empire's true believers maintain that the inherent flaws in our human nature lead to a natural propensity to greed, violence, and lust for power. Social order and material progress depend, therefore, on imposing elite rule and market discipline to channel these dark tendencies to positive ends. Psychologists who study the developmental pathways of the individual consciousness observe a more complex reality. Just as we grow up in our physical capacities and potential given proper physical nourishment and exercise, we also grow up in the capacities and potential of our consciousness, given proper social and emotional nourishment and exercise.

Over a lifetime, those who enjoy the requisite emotional support traverse a pathway from the narcissistic, undifferentiated magical consciousness of the newborn to the fully mature, inclusive, and multidimensional spiritual consciousness of the wise elder. The lower, more narcissistic, orders of consciousness are perfectly normal for young children, but become sociopathic in adults and are easily encouraged and manipulated by advertisers and demagogues. The higher orders of consciousness are a necessary foundation of mature democracy. Perhaps Empire's greatest tragedy is that its cultures and institutions systematically suppress our progress to the higher orders of consciousness.

Given that Empire has prevailed for 5,000 years, a turn from Empire to Earth Community might seem a hopeless fantasy if not for the evidence from values surveys that a global awakening to the higher levels of human consciousness is already underway. This awakening is driven in part by a communications revolution that defies elite censorship and is breaking down the geographical barriers to intercultural exchange.

The consequences of the awakening are manifest in the civil rights, women's, environmental, peace, and other social movements. These movements in turn gain energy from the growing leadership of women, communities of color, and indigenous peoples, and from a shift in the demographic balance in favor of older age groups more likely to have achieved the higher-order consciousness of the wise elder.

It is fortuitous that we humans have achieved the means to make a collective choice as a species to free ourselves from Empire's seemingly inexorable compete-or-die logic at the precise moment we face the imperative to do so. The speed at which institutional and technological advances have created possibilities wholly new to the human experience is stunning.

JUST OVER 60 YEARS AGO, we created the United Nations, which, for all its imperfections, made it possible for the first time for representatives of all the world's nations and people to meet in a neutral space to resolve differences through dialogue rather than force of arms.

LESS THAN 50 YEARS AGO, our species ventured into space to look back and see ourselves as one people sharing a common destiny on a living spaceship.

IN LITTLE MORE THAN 10 YEARS our communications technologies have given us the ability, should we choose to use it, to link every human on the planet into a seamless web of nearly costless communication and cooperation.

Already our new technological capability has made possible the interconnection of the millions of people who are learning to work as a dynamic, self--directing social organism that transcends boundaries of race, class, religion, and nationality and functions as a shared conscience of the species. We call this social organism global civil society. On February 15, 2003, it brought more than 10 million people to the streets of the world's cities, towns, and villages to call for peace in the face of the buildup to the U.S. invasion of Iraq. They accomplished this monumental collective action without a central organization, budget, or charismatic leader through social processes never before possible on such a scale. This was but a foretaste of the possibilities for radically new forms of partnership organization now within our reach.

Break the Silence, End the Isolation, Change the Story

We humans live by stories. The key to making a choice for Earth Community is recognizing that the foundation of Empire's power does not lie in its instruments of physical violence. It lies in Empire's ability to control the stories by which we define ourselves and our possibilities in order to perpetuate the myths on which the legitimacy of the dominator relations of Empire depend. To change the human future, we must change our defining stories.

Story Power

For 5,000 years, the ruling class has cultivated, rewarded, and amplified the voices of those storytellers whose stories affirm the righteousness of Empire and deny the higher-order potentials of our nature that would allow us to live with one another in peace and cooperation. There have always been those among us who sense the possibilities of Earth Community, but their stories have been marginalized or silenced by Empire's instruments of intimidation. The stories endlessly repeated by the scribes of Empire become the stories most believed. Stories of more hopeful possibilities go unheard or unheeded and those who discern the truth are unable to identify and support one another in the common cause of truth telling. Fortunately, the new communications technologies are breaking this pattern. As truth-tellers reach a wider audience, the myths of Empire become harder to maintain.

The struggle to define the prevailing cultural stories largely defines contemporary cultural politics in the United States. A far-right alliance of elitist corporate plutocrats and religious theocrats has

gained control of the political discourse in the United States not by force of their numbers, which are relatively small, but by controlling the stories by which the prevailing culture defines the pathway to prosperity, security, and meaning. In each instance, the far right's favored versions of these stories affirm the dominator relations of Empire.

THE IMPERIAL PROSPERITY STORY says that an eternally growing economy benefits everyone. To grow the economy, we need wealthy people who can invest in enterprises that create jobs. Thus, we must support the wealthy by cutting their taxes and eliminating regulations that create barriers to accumulating wealth. We must also eliminate welfare programs in order to teach the poor the value of working hard at whatever wages the market offers.

THE IMPERIAL SECURITY STORY tells of a dangerous world, filled with criminals, terrorists, and enemies. The only way to ensure our safety is through major expenditures on the military and the police to maintain order by physical force.

THE IMPERIAL MEANING STORY reinforces the other two, featuring a God who rewards righteousness with wealth and power and mandates that they rule over the poor who justly suffer divine punishment for their sins.

These stories all serve to alienate us from the community of life and deny the positive potentials of our nature, while affirming the legitimacy of economic inequality, the use of physical force to maintain imperial order, and the special righteousness of those in power.

It is not enough, as many in the United States are doing, to debate the details of tax and education policies, budgets, war, and trade agreements in search of a positive political agenda. Nor is it enough to craft slogans with broad mass appeal aimed at winning the next election or policy debate. We must infuse the mainstream culture with stories of Earth Community. As the stories of Empire nurture a culture of domination, the stories of Earth Community nurture a culture of partnership. They affirm the positive potentials of our human nature and show that realizing true prosperity, security, and meaning depends on creating vibrant, caring, interlinked communities that support all persons in realizing their full humanity. Sharing the joyful news of our human possibilities through word and action is perhaps the most important aspect of the Great Work of our time.

Changing the prevailing stories in the United States may be easier to accomplish than we might think. The apparent political divisions notwithstanding, U.S. polling data reveal a startling degree of consensus on key issues. Eighty-three percent of Americans believe that as a society the United States is focused on the wrong priorities. Supermajorities want to see greater priority given to children, family, community, and a healthy environment. Americans also want a world that puts people ahead of profits, spiritual values ahead of financial values, and international cooperation ahead of international domination. These Earth Community values are in fact widely shared by both conservatives and liberals.

Our nation is on the wrong course not because Americans have the wrong values. It is on the wrong course because of remnant imperial institutions that give unaccountable power to a small alliance of right-wing extremists who call themselves conservative and claim to support family and community values, but whose preferred economic and social policies constitute a ruthless war against children, families, communities, and the environment.

The distinctive human capacity for reflection and intentional choice carries a corresponding moral responsibility to care for one another and the planet. Indeed, our deepest desire is to live in loving relationships with one another. The hunger for loving families and communities is a powerful, but latent, unifying force and the potential foundation of a winning political coalition dedicated to creating societies that support every person in actualizing his or her highest potential.

In these turbulent and often frightening times, it is important to remind ourselves that we are privileged to live at the most exciting moment in the whole of the human experience. We have the opportunity to turn away from Empire and to embrace Earth Community as a conscious collective choice. We are the ones we have been waiting for.

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This article draws from his newly released book, [The Great Turning: From Empire to Earth Community](#). Go to www.yesmagazine.org/greatturning for book excerpts, related articles, David's talks, and resources for action.