

# Science, Religion, and Spirit: A Sacred Story for Our Time

---

By David Korten

For people, generally, their story of the universe and the human role in the universe is their primary source of intelligibility and value....The deepest crises experienced by any society are those moments of change when the story becomes inadequate for meeting the survival demands of a present situation.”

—Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*

Humanity’s current behavior threatens Earth’s capacity to support life and relegates more than a billion people to lives of destitution. This behavior has deep roots in the stories by which we understand the meaning of our existence. We need a new cosmology—a new story of the origin, nature, and purpose of creation—that reflects the fullness of our current human knowledge to guide us to mature relationships with one another and the living Earth.

## Three Stories

Three distinct cosmologies demonstrate the implications of our deepest beliefs for how we live. Two are familiar. The third is long known, but rarely told.

1. **The Cosmos is a Grand Machine.** This is the cosmology of science. It is the standard story of Newtonian physics, evolutionary biology, and much of academia. In this cosmology, only the material is real. The formation and function of the cosmos and the evolution of life are a consequence of physical mechanism and random chance. Life is an accidental outcome of material complexity and has no larger meaning or purpose. Consciousness and free will are illusions. Before scientists introduced the element of chance into this story, the cosmos was commonly described as the equivalent of a mechanical clock works gradually running down as its spring unwinds.



Building on the basic framework of classical physics, classical biology holds that life evolves through a combination of chance genetic mutation and a competitive struggle by which the fitter survive and flourish as the weaker perish. Competition for survival

and territory is the basic law of nature.

According to the Grand Machine cosmology, as for all life, it is our human nature to compete for survival and for material and reproductive advantage. A primary function of the institutions of civilized societies therefore is to use the structures of hierarchy and markets to channel our dark human instincts toward economically productive ends, a process that ultimately creates prosperity for all.

2. **The Cosmos is Created and Ruled by a Distant Patriarch.** This is the cosmology most commonly associated with Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In this cosmology, creation is the work of an all knowing, all powerful God. From his home in a separate sacred dimension called Heaven, He observes and judges our obedience to his commandments handed down to us through sacred texts and interpreted by His anointed religious authorities.



This cosmology focuses on our individual relationship with a personal, but distant God as expressed in Michelangelo's famous rendering of a God portrayed in the image of man. By implication, relationships with one another and with nature are secondary to this primary relationship. Although some

adherents believe that we have an obligation to care for God's creation in this life and to show compassion to our fellow human beings, in many interpretations of the Distant Patriarch story, life on Earth is but a way station on the path to paradise. Nature exists for our temporary human use and comfort. Authority is rightfully exercised by those who demonstrate by their pious religious observance their closeness to God and their understanding of His intention.

3. **The Cosmos is a Manifestation of an Integral Spirit.** Threads of this story are found in the [traditional wisdom teachings of indigenous peoples](#) and the religious mystics. In this cosmology, all of creation is the manifestation of an integral spiritual intelligence. That intelligence is engaged in a sacred journey of discovery to know and actualize its possibilities through an ongoing process of becoming. Our world, and indeed, the universe we know is more than God's creation, it is God made flesh.

We come to know the nature, purpose, and intention of this divine force through our inner experience and our observation of its physical manifestation. All beings,



stars, planets, humans, animals, plants, rocks, and rivers are expressions of this divine force—each with its place and function in service to the whole. The human brain evolved to reward cooperation and service. Extreme individualism, greed, and violence are pathological and a sign of physical, developmental, cultural, and/or institutional failure. Appropriate moral behavior is defined not by rules, but by relationships.

We humans participate in and contribute to the divine journey. We can apply our distinctive capacities for reflective consciousness and choice to advance evolution's thrust or to disrupt it. Together, our individual choices determine our collective fate and shape the course of the journey far beyond our time.

This cosmology is consistent with the findings of quantum physics, which reveals that the apparent solidarity of matter is an illusion. At a deeper level, only relationships are real. In my experience this is the underlying cosmology of many Catholic nuns, a surprising number of religious leaders and congregations of various faiths, and most people who define themselves as spiritual, but not necessarily religious.

It is, however, a story without institutional sponsors to give it public recognition and remains a largely private belief system. This forestalls its reduction to ideological dogma. But, lacking public currency, it is not picked up in public opinion polls and so we have no idea how widespread its acceptance actually is. Furthermore, those who align with its foundational insights may not recognize themselves as a group, which limits their ability to share their insights and join together to fulfill the responsibilities the Integral Spirit story implies.

## Why Creation Stories Matter

The cosmology of the Grand Machine strips our existence of meaning and purpose. In so doing, it supports consumerism and an ethic of individual material gratification as a distraction from the terrifying loneliness and despair of an otherwise meaningless existence. By characterizing life as essentially competitive it provides the ideological basis for social Darwinism, colonial imperialism, racial domination, and the unrestrained competition of market fundamentalism. It neglects the far greater role of cooperation and synergy on which all living systems—and human society, civilization, and culture—depend.

The Distant Patriarch cosmology characterizes our Earthly existence as a separation from the divine goodness and grace of heaven. Our lives are a test of faith, a burden to be endured and ultimately left behind in an eventual ascent of the righteous to reside with the creator in paradise. This cosmology reduces the purpose of life in the present to earning credits toward a divine judgment that will determine whether our fate after death will be to join the saved or the damned.

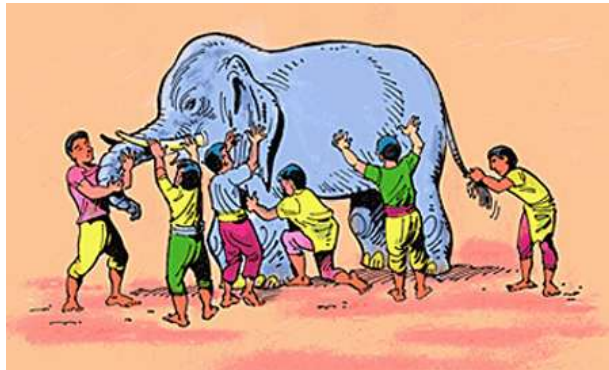
Though sharply at odds regarding the presence or absence of a spiritual intelligence, both the Grand Machine and Distant Patriarch cosmologies affirm the self-destructive

individualism, materialistic utilitarianism, and separation that leads us to behave in ways that threaten Earth's biosphere and our future as a species.

The cosmology of the Integral Spirit, by contrast, infuses all we behold in this life and beyond with profound meaning. All of creation is a sacred and ultimately unified expression of an eternal and intimately present divine will. All beings are interconnected and our fates are inextricably intertwined. As participants in and contributors to the ongoing process of creation, we each bear a sacred responsibility. Our lives take on meaning and purpose in relationship and service to the sacred whole.

## The Blind Men and the Elephant

In thinking about the relationship between these three seemingly mutually exclusive cosmologies, I'm reminded of the story of the [six blind men describing an elephant](#). The first feels its side and proclaims "An elephant is like a wall." The second gropes its tusk and counters, "No, it is like a spear." The third feels the trunk and says, "Truly it is like a snake." The fourth feels a leg and insists, "An elephant is like a tree." The fifth feels its ear and pronounces it to be "Like a fan." The sixth grasps the tail and says "Nonsense, an elephant is like a rope."



We understand and relate to our world largely through our basic senses. The spiritual dimension, however, lies beyond our direct sensory experience. When we seek to describe it, we are like the blind men groping the elephant. Their story is a warning that any interpretation of the infinite is likely to capture only a part of a much larger reality.

Scientists made a decision to devote themselves exclusively to understanding the physical dimension of reality—that which can be observed and measured—and to ignore the rest. This resulted in a cosmology we can characterize as the Grand Machine story. The original choice allowed us to master a vast array of advanced technologies. That the underlying story describes only one element of a larger reality does not invalidate the truth or utility of its application within its relevant domain.

The methods of science, however, can neither prove nor disprove the existence of an intelligent spiritual consciousness. We do ourselves a great disservice if we embrace the findings of science as the whole story, rather than as one narrative within a larger and more inspiring story.

Many religions, by contrast, have chosen to devote their attention to understanding and interpreting the unseen through the metaphor or image of a Distant Patriarch. Like the Grand Machine story of science, the religious story captures an important element of a larger story, but in itself provides woefully limited insights into the wonder and responsibilities of our relationship with a Living Earth in a Living Cosmos.

In earlier times, matrilineal societies tended toward feminine imagery and worshipped images of the Goddess. More gender-balanced societies worshipped both the Sky Father and the Earth Mother. Each chose the images most readily understood in relation to its culture.

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all arose in male-dominated societies in which patriarchs were familiar figures and symbols. Each sought to emphasize the unitary spiritual dimension of creation. Given that the patriarch was a readily understood figure, it was natural that they would turn to an image of a distant all-knowing, all-powerful patriarch as a favored metaphor for God.

Over time, these religions forgot the patriarch was a symbol and embraced the metaphor as the reality. It is much like the process by which science forgot that it deliberately chose to recognize only the material dimension of reality as the realm of its investigation.

We may as well discern another broad pattern over time in the human understanding of the infinite. Generally the earliest peoples experienced an enchanted world inhabited by a multitude of spirits with magical abilities to manipulate human fate and the material world.

The monotheistic religions, which arose in reaction, emphasized the unitary nature of the spirit and took a step toward bringing a greater sense of order to human understanding. The scientific focus on material mechanism took the search for order in the cosmos to a whole new level with an extraordinary, but confining sense of discipline. Each made an essential contribution to our human understanding.

The emerging, evolving Integral Spirit cosmology seeks a more comprehensive frame that both expands and deepens our understanding of order in the cosmos. It is at once new, in that it incorporates the most current of scientific understanding denied to earlier generations of humans, and it is ancient, because it incorporates the fundamental insights of all that has come before.

Science, philosophy and spiritual experience all confirm by their own methods the reality of consciousness as both a fact and a mystery of incalculable significance. Reconciling the age-old controversy between different ways of knowing, we are in search of a more comprehensive narrative consistent with scientific observation, rational thought and spiritual intuition, a story that can serve as a useful guide to a balanced human relationship with Earth's biosphere, an allocation of resources that meets the needs of all, and a deeply democratic Earth Community. To my mind, the story of an Integral Spirit best meets this test.

## **Distributed Intelligence**

We know a great deal more than we generally acknowledge about the creative capacity of the processes through which the Integral Spirit manifests. We have much to learn from and contribute to these processes—but first we must acknowledge and celebrate them.

We know, for example, that at every level, the cosmos has an incredible capacity to self-organize toward greater complexity and potential.



Distributed cognition or intelligence theory suggests that multiple minds have capabilities inherently greater than the capabilities of a single mind. It seems that creation has learned to apply this principle on a grand scale in the design of its endless fractal structure of self-organizing systems. It is a key to the creativity and resilience of the cosmos.



Earth's biosphere, the exquisitely complex, resilient, and continuously evolving layer of Earth life, is perhaps the highest expression of the potential of distributed intelligence within our immediate human experience. We might think of all of the biosphere's complex choice-making processes as occurring within the mind of God. To do so, however, would obscure the complexity and differentiation of the biosphere as a living system comprised of many trillions of individual choice-making living organisms self-organizing to capture, share, and organize energy, nutrients, and water to bring Earth to life.

The human body is another example of how creation utilizes self-organizing systems of distributed intelligence to achieve extraordinary outcomes.

The physical body that hosts my consciousness is comprised of tens of trillions of individual living cells, each a decision-making entity with the ability to manage and maintain its own health and integrity under changing and often stressful circumstances. At the same time, each cell faithfully discharges its responsibility to serve the sometimes demanding needs of my entire body on which its own health and integrity (and mine) depend.

Working together, the trillions of cells constitute a self-organizing organism with the potential to achieve extraordinary feats of physical grace and intellectual acuity far beyond the capability of an individual cell.

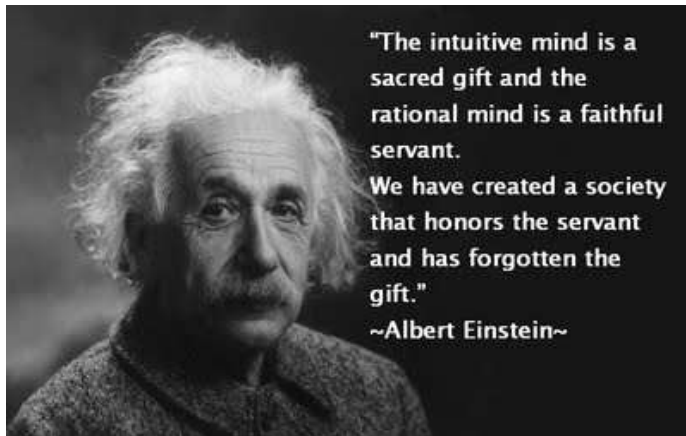
These individual decision-making resource-sharing cells are more than interdependent. Each is integral to a larger whole of which no part or system can exist on its own. Together they create regulatory mechanisms internal to the whole that work to assure that no part or system asserts dominance over the others or monopolizes the body's stores of energy, nutrients, and water for its exclusive use. Resources are shared based on need.



One of the many impressive expressions of the body's capacity to self-organize is the process by which [many of the body's cells continuously renew](#) with no loss of body integrity. The cells lining the human stomach have a turnover of only five days. Red blood cells are replaced every 120 days or so. The surface of the skin recycles every two weeks.

All the while the body's cells are organizing to fight off a vast variety of viruses, cancer cells, and harmful bacteria, adapt to changing temperatures and energy needs and variations in the body's food and water intake, heal damaged tissues, and collect and

provide sensory data from the environment to the brain in a form that the conscious mind can process and utilize in its own choice making—while at the same time providing us with intuitive insights from sources beyond our awareness.



Most of this cellular and molecular activity occurs far beyond our personal awareness. So long as we maintain the general conditions of nutrition, hydration, rest, and exercise, our body's cells fulfill their responsibilities to maintain our healthy function without specific instruction from our conscious mind—or in most instances even from our brain.

So how do the cells decide what to do? Is there some form of conscious intelligence involved at the cellular level? The Grand Machine story says no, that the processes are based on mechanics. The Distant Patriarch story doesn't address the question beyond suggesting that whatever happens is God's will. The Integral Consciousness story says yes—because conscious intelligence in its many expressions is the ground from which all life and the material world manifest.

Is the consciousness of a cell a form of consciousness that would be in any way familiar to the human mind? Probably not, but we may never know because that consciousness—in whatever form—is not subject to our direct experience or observation—even by highly sophisticated scientific instruments. What we do know is that intelligent choice-making is a pervasive hallmark of living organisms at all levels.

One critical insight from recent findings in biology is that most of the body's self-organization is managed at the cellular level through intercellular communication and choice making independent of direct intervention or direction by the brain and central nervous system.

Similarly, although the biosphere is global in scale, it organizes locally everywhere without evident central direction. Global dynamics are generally a consequence of local events and choices.

Exactly how it all works is still largely beyond our present human understanding. Based on what we do know, it seems that our bodies, the biosphere, and the cosmos are all comprised of fractal structures that self-organize from the bottom up rather than from the top down—exactly the opposite of what the Distant Patriarch story suggests. And contrary to the foundational assumption of the Grand Machine story, intelligence—and presumably some form of consciousness—is not only present in the material world, it is distributed throughout it and drives the cosmic unfolding toward ever greater complexity and potential.

If all of creation is a manifestation of God made flesh then it is axiomatic that the image of the cosmos and the image of God are one and the same. If so, we humans are



expressions of God's image, but only as a tiny element of an image so grand as to be beyond our perception or understanding.

Given what we know about the expressions of distributed cognition/intelligence, it seems likely that the relationship between the individual cells of our body and our

conscious mind is similar to the relationship between our individual human selves and the higher levels of consciousness we call God. This suggests that just as I'm not conscious of the activities of the cells that comprise my body, neither is the Living Earth conscious of my individual activities as a human cell in the body of Earth.

Scaling up, the Living Cosmos would not be conscious of the activities of the Living Earth, nor of me as an individual. So although there may be a higher God consciousness, it is unlikely it has any more awareness of my individual human self than I am of the individual cells of my body. It is quite natural that I feel a personal reverence for the infinite. It is unlikely, however, that this feeling is reciprocated by the infinite in any meaningful personal sense.

I believe in Spinoza's God who reveals himself in the orderly harmony of what exists, not a God who concerns himself with the fates and actions of human beings.  
—Albert Einstein

This does not necessarily mean that the Integral Spirit is indifferent to the existence of humans. Our existence may in fact be crucial to the great unfolding of the cosmos. Nor does it mean that Integral Spirit is uncaring. Some believe that love is the binding force of the universe.

Accepting the reality that even God has a limited attention span and may be no more aware of our individual presence and activities than we are conscious of the presence and activities of our individual cells presents a blow to the human ego comparable to the revelation of the Copernican Revolution that the Sun and planets do not revolve around Earth. This acceptance, however, is essential if we are to take the step to species maturity and accept that we are responsible for our own choices and their larger consequences, both for ourselves and creation. We cannot count on any magical protector to save from our reckless choices—be it God, the market, or a new technology.

We are among the cells that determine the health of the body of Earth. And Earth is among the cells that influence the health and trajectory of the Cosmos. We have a sacred responsibility to work in integral partnership with all of Earth's many beings to restore and maintain Earth's health and vitality for the sake of all, just as our cells work together to maintain our health and vitality.

Freedom without responsibility is an illusion. We are not children who can rely on watchful parents to save us from our missteps. Our fate is truly in our hands. We must take the step to adulthood and accept our responsibilities to and for one another and Earth as members of an Earth Community.



## Transition to an Ecozoic Era

The foundational insights of the Integral Spirit cosmology hold the conceptual key to our collective passage to what cosmologist Brian Swimme and eco-theologian Thomas Berry call in their book, *The Universe Story*, the Ecozoic Era, the fourth in the succession of life eras identified as the Paleozoic, the Mesozoic, and the Cenozoic. They note that our passage to this new era depends on a fundamental shift in the human relationship to Earth grounded in four foundational insights:

1. “The universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects.” (p. 243)
2. “The Earth is so integral in the unity of its functioning that every aspect of the Earth is affected by what happens to any component member of the community. Because of its organic quality, Earth cannot survive in fragments....The integral functioning of the planet must be preserved.” (p. 243)
3. “Earth is a one-time endowment....Although the Earth is resilient and has extensive powers of renewal, it also has a finite and nonrenewable aspect....Once a species is extinguished we know of no power in heaven or on Earth that can bring about a revival.” (pp. 246-7)
4. “Earth is primary and humans are derivative.”



As Berry elaborates in an earlier lecture::

“The Earth economy can survive the loss of its human component, but there is no way the human economy can survive and prosper apart from the Earth economy....There is no such thing as a human community in any manner separate from the Earth community. The human community and the natural world will go into the future as a single integral community or we will both experience disaster on the way. However differentiated in its modes of expression, there is only one Earth community—one economic order, one health system, one moral order, one world of the sacred.” [\[Thomas Berry, “The Ecozoic Era”\]](#)

Earth is the sacred source of life. Our lives and the [human rights we hold so dear are derivative of the life and rights of nature.](#)

Failing to recognize this fundamental truth, we humans relate to Earth as a reckless, predatory invasive species, the equivalent of cancer cells systematically destroying Earth’s living body. Is it consistent with our nature to relate in a different way? It depends on the story.

The Great Machine story says no. It is our inherent nature to be individualist, competitive, greedy and violent. The Distant Patriarch story is ambiguous, with many

contrasting versions from which to choose. The Integral Spirit story, says yes. Humans evolved to cooperate, share, and serve.

Our self-destructive relationships with one another and Earth are a sign of deep self-inflicted pathology resulting in substantial measure from flawed stories—in particular the mechanistic version of the evolution story that legitimates flawed economic theories that celebrate the behavior and ethics of the psychopath as a cultural ideal.

## **In Search of a Shared Story for a New Era**

To find the human place of service as participants in creation's epic journey of self-discovery, we must rethink the values by which we define our responsibilities to and for one another and nature. These values are rooted in our shared beliefs about the origin, nature, and purpose of creation. A transformation of values necessarily begins with an open and self-critical public discourse that goes far beyond the current unproductive debate between Grand Machine evolutionists and Distant Patriarch creationists. The goal, as stated earlier, is a shared story that is consistent with the sum total of our knowledge and experience and up to the task of guiding us to a future rich with meaning and opportunity for ourselves and all of Earth's descendants to the end of time.

The conversation might begin with a comparative examination of the three primary creation stories from the perspective of historical experience, current knowledge, and implications for the path ahead. The frame of that discussion should make explicit that for all our scientific advances, we remain far from a full understanding of the deep mysteries of the cosmos. Although the Integral Spirit story appears to have many of the elements of the story we seek, it too remains only a partial story.

We humans seem naturally drawn to unsolved mysteries, which may be one key to discovering and fulfilling our intended role in creation's epic journey of self-discovery.

We know not where the journey leads, nor whether a final destination is even a meaningful concept. The attraction is the inherent thrill of participating in a creative journey for which participation is its own reward.

---

[Dr. David Korten](#) is the author of *Agenda for a New Economy*, *The Great Turning: From Empire to Earth Community*, and the international best seller *When Corporations Rule the World*. He is board chair of [YES! Magazine](#), co-chair of the New Economy Working Group, a founding board member of the [Business Alliance for Local Living Economies](#), president of the [Living Economies Forum](#), and a member of the [Club of Rome](#). He holds MBA and PhD degrees from the Stanford University Graduate School of Business and served on the faculty of the Harvard Business School.

My thanks and deep appreciation to Fran Korten's for her insights and tireless critical intellectual and editorial contribution to this reflection. Also my thanks for helpful critical suggestions from Kat Gjovik, Garry Jacobs, Graeme Maxton, Brian McLaren, Bill Phipps, and Brian Swimme.