
Living the Future into Being

David C. Korten

Many of the essential elements of local living economies are already in place. More are being created every day by people who believe a better world is possible and are doing their part to live it into being. These elements include land trusts, local organic farms and farmer's markets, enterprises producing and marketing innovative environmental services and products, community supported agriculture initiatives, local restaurants specializing in locally grown organic produce, community banks, local currencies, buy local campaigns, fair trade coffee, family businesses that take pride in community service, employee and community owned businesses, production networks of small producers taking on large projects, new business incubators, minority entrepreneurship programs, recycling business, independent book stores that serve as community learning centers, independent media, community sustainability indicator initiatives, green business directories, independent business alliances, and many more.

Educator Parker Palmer describes the process through which cultural awakening translates into political and economic change. According to Palmer, the individual who has experienced an awakening of consciousness eventually decides to live divided no more and attempts to bring their personal, family, work and community life into line with their values. Trying to live by authentic values in an inauthentic culture leads to a growing sense of isolation from family, friends and work associates that can be broken only by joining with like-minded persons to form communities of congruence. Initially small and isolated, these communities eventually grow and meld into larger alliances. These alliances create authentic cultural, political, and economic spaces that gradually displace the inauthentic spaces of the dominant system.

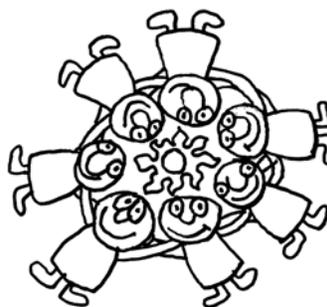
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http://www.pcdf.org/Living_Economies/VI_Living.htm [C.ELDOC.6009322]

This pattern is playing out in many ways, including in the world of business. The search for authenticity leads one or more *Cultural Creatives* to launch a living enterprise, which in turn attracts mindful customers who want to live their values through their purchasing decisions and mindful employees who want to live their values through their work. Each living enterprise forms the nucleus of an expanding community of congruence and demonstrates practical alternatives to the ways of the suicide economy.

The search for congruence in all its dealings leads the living enterprise to buy from suppliers that are also living enterprises. Each new relationship among living enterprises redirects life energy from the suicide economy to the growing web of relationships that define a living economy. As the web grows in size and strength, the flow of energy and resources among the participating enterprises increasingly emulates the circulating flows of energy and resources that give mature ecosystems their stability, efficiency, and resiliency.

Although emergent processes are a self-organizing, self-directing expression of the needs, values, and aspirations of their participants, it is important to recognize that they involve mindful intentional action. And it is possible and appropriate for mindful individuals, enterprises, and nonprofit organizations to focus and accelerate these processes through public education and initiatives that:

Grow the web. Facilitate the extension and deepening of the web of relationships. The greater the number of members and links in the web the greater the life energy that participating enterprises may potentially attract and recycle within the living economy, thus increasing the strength and viability of both the web and its individual members.

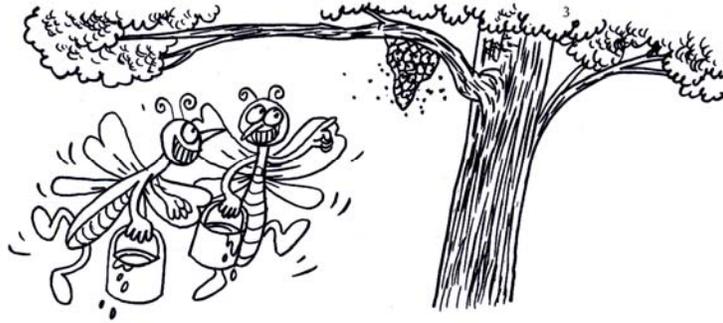


Ground it locally everywhere: Maintain an active local preference in both purchasing and sales. This applies to individuals, as well as living enterprises. A healthy living economy is locally rooted and intimately adapted to its local social and natural ecosystem everywhere. Firms and individuals that buy local products and services from local independent firms and in turn sell their products and services locally whenever reasonably possible increase the vitality of the local living economy. They also create a secure and stable foundation for the growth of relationships among similar local economies that may eventually weave millions of living enterprises and hundreds of thousands of locally rooted living economies into a locally rooted planetary web of cooperative economic relationship.



Encourage walking away from the institutions of the suicide economy: Build relations with like-minded persons and enterprises and walk away from relations that strengthen the dysfunctional institutions of the suicide economy. Walking away from the evil they opposed was key to the successful change strategies of both Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. Gandhi called it non-cooperation and its practice was a key to gaining India's independence from British rule. King learned it from Gandhi, and his call to refuse to cooperate with evil was the moral basis of the Montgomery bus boycott that was a critical moment in the civil rights movement. In the present instance, it is a matter of choosing life over money and exercising all reasonable opportunities to transfer life energy from the suicide economy to the

living economy by walking away from institutions bound by law and structure to serve money to the disregard of life.



Walking away from dealings with the institutions of the suicide economy may be the most difficult part of growing a living economy. It is also one of the most essential. The living economy is about mutuality and partnership, democracy, equity, and sustainability. All of these are incompatible with global rule by powerful institutions that are obligated by law, custom, and structure to use their power to the exclusive short-term financial benefit of absentee shareholders. For a healthy living enterprise to do business with a publicly traded corporation is like a healthy body trying to form a partnership with a cancerous tumor.

It is important here to distinguish between corporations – exclusive clusters of legally and culturally defined relationships – and the persons employed in their service doing the best they can to make a positive difference under adverse circumstances. Tens of thousands of former corporate employees have made an intentional choice to live divided no more and have walked away from their former corporate employers to join the living



economy — often by starting new businesses aligned with their values. They were once among the suicide economy's best and brightest. Now they are birthing a living economy and providing role models for others from the corporate world who feel a similar discontent.

Some corporate defectors to the living economy may bring corporate resources with them by spinning off a human-scale piece of their former employer and taking it private through a stakeholder buyout. A more ambitious effort might break an entire corporation into human-scale units for sale to mindful stakeholders.

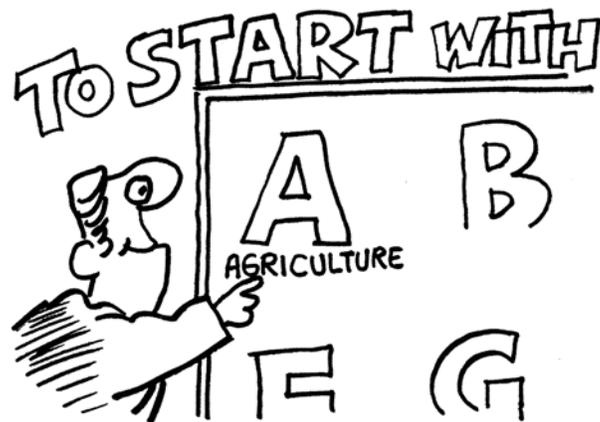
It is important for those who own and lead living enterprises to be mindful of the pressures to grow beyond a natural human-scale placed on them by the culture and structure of the suicide economy. Growth



creates a need for financing, which creates an incentive to sell public shares, which creates demand for larger profits, and makes the enterprise vulnerable to take over by a still larger publicly traded corporation. It is a tragic path from health to pathology. Author and entrepreneur Jamie Walters calls keeping an enterprise small a lifestyle choice. In *Big Vision, Small Business: The Four Keys to Finding Success & Satisfaction as a Lifestyle Entrepreneur*, she provides guidance and encouragement for those who want to keep their businesses healthy, and life serving.

Many social entrepreneurs are motivated to grow out of a sense of pride in the positive contribution their enterprise is making to providing good service, good jobs, and healthful, quality products. It is a slippery slope. The more promising way to replicate the success of a living enterprise is by helping others with similar drive and values to create similar businesses that may eventually choose to form themselves into a buying, branding, and promotional alliance accountable to its members.

In many communities, those interested in growing a living economy will find food and agriculture a logical place to start. Everyone needs and cares about food. It can be grown most everywhere, is freshest and most wholesome when local, and is our most intimate connection to the land. A farmers' market or a restaurant selling locally produced organic foods can serve as the initial organizing catalyst.



From there it is a matter of asking: What do local people and businesses regularly buy that is or could be supplied locally by values-based, independent enterprises? Which existing local businesses are trying to practice living economy values? In what sectors are they clustered? The answers will point to promising opportunities to grow the

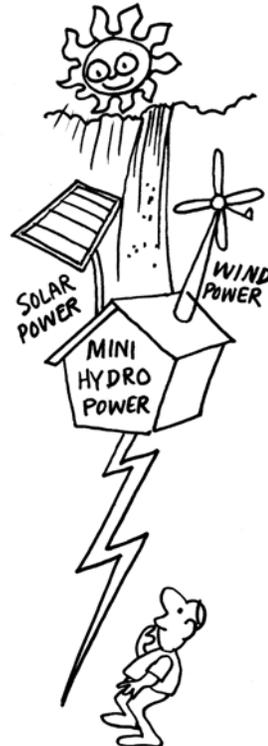
web.

There is a wealth of possibilities. For example, a cluster of businesses devoted to energy conservation and the local production of solar, wind, and mini-hydro power may form a living economies web devoted to advancing local energy independence. A group might issue an interest free currency that supports local business and facilitates transactions among local people and local living enterprises. Perhaps a group of socially conscious local investors might establish an independent community bank dedicated to financing independent, local enterprises.

The larger and more diversified the web of an emergent living economy, the more self-reliant, secure, and stable it becomes, and the greater its potential contribution to the larger planetary web of local living economies.

We have become so dependent on the institutions of the suicide economy for our daily needs that we see no viable alternative. Thus, we remain hostage to their dehumanizing demands even though we may know they are killing us.

Many of the elements of healthy living economies are already in place. They need only be grown into webs of healthy, productive, life-serving relationships. The stronger and more visible these webs become, the easier it is for each of us to transfer our life energy from the suicide economy to the living economy by our individual purchasing, employment, and investment choices. Each choice for life demonstrates



the possibilities of a more attractive and satisfying way of living — and moves humanity toward a more positive future.

RESOURCES

Exploration of the many possibilities for action toward the creation of a living economy goes beyond the scope of this essay.

For additional suggestions and resources see

"What You Can Do To Build a New Economy," *YES!* magazine issue #9, Chapter 14.

"Engaging the Future" in David C. Korten, *The Post Corporate World*;

Michael H. Shuman, *Going Local: Creating Self-Reliant Communities in a Global Age* (New York: The Free Press, 1998);

Richard Douthwaite, *Short Circuit: Strengthening Local Economies for Security in an Unstable World* (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 1996);

Ellen Schwartz and Suzanne Stoddard, *Taking Back Our Lives In the Age of Corporate Dominance* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2000);

Colin Hines, *Localization: A Global Manifesto* (London: Earthscan Publications, 2000);

Jaime S. Walters. *Big Vision, Small Business* (San Francisco: Ivy Sea: 2001; and

Barbara Brandt, *Whole Life Economies: Revaluing Daily Life* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1995).