

By the author of the international bestseller  
*When Corporations Rule the World*

DAVID C. KORTEN

The Great  
Turning

*From Empire  
to Earth  
Community*



An Excerpt From

***The Great Turning:  
From Empire to Earth Community***

by David C. Korten

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## PART I

# Choosing Our Future

*The capacity to anticipate and choose our future is a defining characteristic of the human species. The recent global spread of communications technologies has combined with a confrontation with planetary limits to present us with a unique opportunity, and the necessity, to use that capacity with conscious collective intent.*

*The defining choice is between two contrasting models for organizing human affairs. Give them the generic names Empire and Earth Community. Empire, which features organization by domination and which has been a defining feature of the most powerful and influential human societies for some five thousand years, appropriates much of the productive surplus of society to maintain a system of dominator power and elite competition. Racism, sexism, and classism are endemic features of Empire. Earth Community, which features organization by partnership, unleashes the human potential for creative cooperation and allocates the productive surplus of society to the work of growing the generative potential of the whole.*

*The defenders of Empire teach that we humans are by nature limited to a self-centered and ultimately self-destructive narcissism. Their favored organizing model suppresses development of the higher orders of human consciousness and thereby creates a self-fulfilling prophecy. The organizing model of Earth Community, by contrast,*

*nurtures expression of the higher-order human capacities for responsible service that Empire denies. A convergence of imperative and opportunity unique to the present moment in the human experience sets the stage for an intentional collective choice to put the way of Empire behind us as we live into being a new era of Earth Community.*

## CHAPTER 1

# The Choice

Energy always flows either toward hope, community, love, generosity, mutual recognition, and spiritual aliveness or it flows toward despair, cynicism, fear that there is not enough, paranoia about the intentions of others, and a desire to control.<sup>1</sup>

*Michael Lerner*

All societies are patterned on either a dominator model—in which human hierarchies are ultimately backed up by force or the threat of force—or a partnership model, with variations in between.<sup>2</sup>

*Riane Eisler*

**In the early 1970s**, while teaching at the Central American Management Institute in Nicaragua, I made several visits to a cattle ranch in Costa Rica I'll call Hacienda Santa Teresa. The simple but compelling story of this ranch captures for me the essence of the tragedy of unrealized human possibility that plays out at all levels of society, from relationships among nations, to relationships within nations, between races and genders, within families, and among individuals. The names are fictional. The story is true.<sup>3</sup>

### HACIENDA SANTA TERESA

When Juan Ricardo took charge of the Hacienda Santa Teresa as manager in 1970, its lands, roads, fences, and buildings were in poor repair; many of its cattle were in poor health from a lack of necessary mineral supplements and vaccinations. Most of the *sabaneros*, the workers who looked after the cattle, were single men who lived in a dilapidated, unpainted one-room bunkhouse, where they slept on wooden planks. The *peones*, who did the manual labor, shared a similar but separate facility

in which they simply slept on the floor for lack even of wooden planks. Each received a small wage plus a ration of rice, beans, lard, coffee, and occasionally corn flour for tortillas. These conditions were standard for the region.

Sabaneros in those parts were often related to one another and formed tight-knit groups. For the most part they were cleaner and more concerned with the appearance of their quarters than the peones, but were still lax in their personal hygiene and generally in poor health. They had a reputation for honesty, did their jobs well, and commanded a certain grudging respect from the ranchers, who depended on them to care for the cattle on distant pastures.

Like most others in the region, the *sabaneros* at Hacienda Santa Teresa were responsible for providing their own equipment, which was often in poor repair. Their bridles had no bits, their ropes were old, and they lacked basic rain gear even though heavy rainstorms were common. The ranch provided their horses, which received minimal care. The *sabaneros* did not know how to trim their horses' hooves properly and took no care to remove ticks from the animals' hides.

The peones built fences, repaired roads, cleared land, and constructed corrals and buildings—tasks for which some of them had considerable skill. They were, however, considered incorrigible thieves who needed strict supervision. They were expected to respond to any order with subservience and respect. Because labor-code provisions only took effect after three months of employment, many ranchers made a point of never keeping a *peón* that long. The *sabaneros* were disdainful of the peones, whom they considered dirty, unprincipled, irresponsible, and ignorant, and felt they were entitled to give the peones arbitrary orders.

Ricardo observed that many of the peones, who were paid hourly wages, were hardworking and, by working voluntary overtime, sometimes earned more than the salaried *sabaneros*. However, the peones lived in complete filth and took no initiative even in matters directly affecting their own comfort and well-being. At the end of the workday, they dropped their tools where they stood and returned to the bunkhouse unless otherwise instructed. The next morning they lined up awaiting orders. If a *peón* saw a cow walking through a hole in a fence, he would stand and watch unless ordered to retrieve it. Petty theft was a continuing annoyance.

Ricardo concluded that both the ranch and its staff had unrealized possibilities. He set out to test his theory that by treating his workers



like responsible adults they would respond accordingly. One of his first steps was to improve their health by providing each with a raincoat and a mattress and adding eggs, meat, vegetables, and cheese to their diet. He then raised the wages of the *sabaneros* by 25 to 30 percent, raised the starting wage of the *peones* by 20 percent, and implemented a policy of deducting the cost of lost tools.

He appointed the informal leader of the *sabaneros* as head *sabanero* and gave him an additional raise and a wristwatch. However, instead of assigning each *sabanero* ten to fifteen horses, as was standard in the area, he cut them back to three, bought them new saddles, and taught them to de-tick their horses and trim the hooves. The initial blow to the *sabaneros'* status from the reduction in their number of horses soon gave way to a sense of pride in having the best horses in the region.

Ricardo took a similar approach with the *peones*. Instead of simply issuing orders to the *peones* when they gathered for work in the morning, Ricardo started asking them to suggest what work most needed doing—for example, cleaning a field or digging post holes. At first, they were confused. One quit, complaining he was being asked to make too many decisions. Others, once they got used to speaking up, became contentious, insisting they should finish one job before doing another that Ricardo considered more urgent. Ricardo recognized this as a normal and necessary part of the process.

At the time of my final visit to the ranch, two years after Ricardo's arrival, the ranch and its workers were advancing toward an extraordinary transformation. The *sabaneros* were regularly treating the cattle for parasites, vaccinating them, providing them with salt licks, doing pregnancy tests, and managing breeding.

Ricardo had assigned individual *sabaneros* and *peones* responsibility for managing remote sections of the ranch. For the *sabaneros* this meant tending to the cattle. For the *peones* it meant maintaining the fences and pastures. For the married workers among them, Ricardo was also building individual cement blockhouses in which a worker would live with his family on his assigned section of the ranch. Ricardo had upgraded other *peones* to positions as tractor drivers and carpenters. One was responsible for heavy-equipment maintenance.

During the two-year period the herd had increased from seven hundred to thirteen hundred with no increase in the size of the staff. The calving rate had increased from 33 percent to 62 percent, and Ricardo hoped to get it up to 85 percent by the end of the next year.

## DEMONSTRATING POSSIBILITIES

By replacing relationships based on domination and disdain with relationships based on partnership and mutual respect, Ricardo awakened otherwise suppressed potentials in both his workers and the natural productive systems of the ranch, enhancing the life of the whole and all its members—including the horses and cattle.

Long conditioned to subservience and degrading living arrangements, the *sabaneros* and *peones* needed time to respond. For some, accepting their own potential for skilled and responsible self-direction was more than they could handle and they took their leave. Others, however, found the courage to embrace the opportunity that Ricardo presented to them.

I find an important lesson in this story for those inclined to describe human nature in terms of some basic characteristic of individualism, selfishness, or greed. Anyone who observed these men at the time of Ricardo's arrival might have concluded, with justification, that it was their nature to be lazy and incapable of responsible self-direction. Anyone who saw them three years later would likely conclude it was their nature to be hardworking and self-managing. Both conclusions, however, describe only possibilities. Neither describes the workers' nature, which embodied a remarkable capacity to adapt to their circumstances.

Such stories of microexperiments are almost a cliché in the field of organizational development. Skilled and thoughtful managers have achieved such results endless times in countless settings. Negotiate the turning from the organizing principles of Empire to the organizing principles of Earth Community, and long-suppressed creative energies flow forth to actualize extraordinary potential. The results of such microexperiments, however, are rarely sustained. The reason is a lesson in the implications of a world organized by the dominator principles of Empire.

Consider a larger truth not addressed in the story of the Hacienda Santa Teresa as presented above. The real power resided not with the *sabaneros* and *peones*, nor even with Ricardo, but with the owners of the ranch.

These were three wealthy playboys who lived in the United States and used the ranch as a tax write-off. The grandly elegant ranch house served as a secluded trysting place for liaisons with the U.S. girlfriends they from time to time brought down in their private airplane on tax-deductible

vacations. Ricardo was also a U.S. citizen of European extraction. He took great pride in his work and in particular his role in the transformation of the hacienda's workforce, but he was not an owner and would one day return to the United States. The positive innovations he introduced notwithstanding, the legal relationships of a dominator society remained in place.

For instance, Ricardo retained the power to fire any of the workers at any time with minimal recourse. Similarly, the owners had the power to fire Ricardo at will and reestablish the old way of working. Furthermore, the profits from what Ricardo and the ranch hands accomplished went to those absentee owners, who had had no part in transforming the ranch into a profitable enterprise and for whom even the profits were an incidental windfall.

For these reasons, although the case powerfully demonstrates a range of human possibility, the organizational context in which it occurred also exemplifies the injustices of an imperial global order. We can imagine, however, the possibilities if one day those whose labor made the ranch productive were to become its worker-owners and thus truly the masters of their own fate.

For me, the Hacienda Santa Teresa story has come to serve as a metaphor of the human condition in a world divided between those who rule and those who live in dependence, exclusion, and marginalization. When juxtaposed with the missed possibility of how things can work, the human condition as we know it is a tragic, self-inflicted crime against ourselves.

I also see in this story an important lesson in practical politics. Creating societies that support all their individual members in realizing their full humanity is neither a distinctively liberal nor a distinctively conservative cause.

Ricardo's approach honors both liberal and conservative values. He increased individual initiative and accomplishment at the same time he increased the sense of community and mutual responsibility. He increased the productivity of the ranch and at the same time made it far more equitable, democratic, and alive. His innovations increased freedom, discipline, individual responsibility for the self, and collective responsibility for the overall performance of the ranch.

There was greater competition to excel but also more genuine cooperation. Ricardo pursued neither ideology nor personal power, but

rather a mature vision of human possibility and the benefits of a healthy living community of people, plants, and animals. In so doing, he affirmed and expressed his own humanity.

## THE DEFINING CHOICE

Within the limits of its ownership structure, the Hacienda Santa Teresa case illustrates two primary models of organizing human relationships. The first approach features the classic model of a dominance hierarchy, in which direction flows from top to bottom. The second, quite different approach emphasizes teamwork and self-direction. Cultural historian Riane Eisler calls these, respectively, the *dominator* and *partnership* models.<sup>4</sup> One both denies and represses the human potential for creative self-direction, cooperation, and voluntary service to the well-being of the whole. The other nurtures and rejoices in it. Each creates its own self-fulfilling prophecy. The differences in outcome can be breathtaking, as the Hacienda Santa Teresa case illustrates.

Throughout this book, I use *Empire* and *Earth Community* as generic labels for these two contrasting models for organizing human relationships. Each model is supported by its own cultural values, institutional forms, and supporting narratives. Since pure cases of either model are rare in the complex world of human affairs, think of them as competing tendencies. Table 1.1 summarizes their defining characteristics. By recognizing their contrasting natures and consequences, we can be more conscious of which we serve in each cultural, economic, and political choice we make.

I have chosen to use the term *Earth Community* rather than simply *Community* throughout *The Great Turning* to underscore the integral

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TABLE 1.1: The choice

Empire	Earth Community
Life is hostile and competitive	Life is supportive and cooperative
Humans are flawed and dangerous	Humans have many possibilities
Order by dominator hierarchy	Order through partnership
Compete or die	Cooperate and live
Love power	Love life
Defend the rights of the self	Defend the rights of all
Masculine dominant	Gender balanced

relationship so important to the human future between human communities and the natural communities that sustain them. The term *Earth Community* comes from the Earth Charter, a “Declaration of Interdependence and Universal Responsibility” created through a multiyear collaborative process involving hundreds of organizations and thousands of individuals of diverse religious faiths, cultures, races, languages, and nationalities.<sup>5</sup>

### Competing Narratives

Empire and Earth Community flow from sharply contrasting world-views.<sup>6</sup> The narrative of Empire, which emphasizes the demonstrated human capacity for hatred, exclusion, competition, domination, and violence in the pursuit of domination, assumes humans are incapable of responsible self-direction and that social order must be imposed by coercive means. The narrative of Earth Community, which emphasizes the demonstrated human capacity for caring, compassion, cooperation, partnership, and community in the service of life, assumes a capacity for responsible self-direction and self-organization and thereby the possibility of creating radically democratic organizations and societies. These narratives represent two sides of a psychic tension that resides within each of us. One focuses on that which divides us and leads to fear and often violent competition. The other focuses on that which unites us and leads to trust and cooperation.

These competing tendencies are expressed in the tension between the feminine predisposition to bond for mutual protection in the face of danger and the masculine predisposition to fight or take flight. Yet while one tendency or the other may be more fully expressed in a given individual or society, both reside in each of us—male or female—which helps to account for the wide variety of the human experience. Healthy social function depends on maintaining a balance between these tendencies. Empire’s five thousand years of male domination demonstrate the tragic consequences of imbalance.

The competing narratives are also reflected in the range of qualities attributed to God in different cultures. At one extreme is the wrathful God of Empire who demands exclusive loyalty, favors one people over another, lives apart from his creation, rules through anointed earthly representatives, and extracts a terrible vengeance on his enemies and the unbelievers. At the other extreme is the universal loving God/dess of

Earth Community, the intrinsic, omnipresent living Spirit beyond gender that manifests itself in every aspect of Creation.

Love and fear are both integral to our human nature and necessary for our full development. Love is a binding spiritual force that opens our minds and hearts to life's creative possibilities. Fear alerts us to real dangers and focuses our attention to ensure that we do not neglect our own survival needs. However, when fear awakens our defenses, it also evokes our capacity for violence, including violence against those we love. How we resolve the tension between love and fear has major consequences for the course of our lives—and our politics. The deep democracy of egalitarian civic engagement that is integral to Earth Community necessarily depends on a mature sense of mutual trust, responsibility, and caring.

### Relationships of Empire

Empire, which gives expression to the authoritarian impulse, features a drive for *dominator* power, to use Eisler's term: the power to take, control, and destroy by coercive means. It organizes every relationship at every level of society according to a hierarchy of power, control, status, and privilege. The ever present focus is on attaining more power by co-opting and monopolizing the power of the many below, often at great cost to the whole.<sup>7</sup> Males have been socialized to specialize in the cultivation of dominator power.

The cultural and institutional systems of Empire support a monopolization of resources by the ruling elites, whose lives become consumed in competing with one another for the top positions in the dominance hierarchy. Because power struggles are continuous and often treacherous, relationships commonly feature a substantial element of distrust, fear, and duplicity. Fear is Empire's friend, as it creates a psychological need for certainty, control, and structured relationships that motivates acquiescence by those below.

Empire routinely extends rights and freedoms to those at the top of the hierarchy that it denies those on the bottom. By the logic of Empire's narrative, the smartest, toughest players have the right and the duty to seize and hold power by whatever means are available to impose peace and order on an unruly world in the interest of all—a service for which they believe themselves to be rightfully rewarded with even greater power and wealth. The legitimating culture extols the virtues of

the powerful winners, attributes the condition of the hapless losers to incompetence or a lack of character, and communicates a message that the only alternative to the power elite's domination is chaos—along with a scornful insinuation that trust, compassion, and cooperation are for fools and cowards.

### Social Pathology

Empire's hierarchy of dominance creates an illusion of order and security. In fact it is a social pathology that feeds a violent and self-destructive competition, suppresses creative potential, and promotes a grossly inefficient use of resources. Feeding on its own illusions, Empire becomes a kind of collective addiction—a psychological dependence on domination, violence, and material excess. The afflicted embrace it as a crutch because it satisfies their need for a sense of power and security—albeit in a tragically self-destructive way.

Empire places nations and individuals alike in a situation akin to that of the hapless gladiator in the pit of the Roman Colosseum: fight for a chance at living another day or accept immediate death. Kill or be killed. Be a winner or be a loser. Rule or be ruled. Empire has its own golden rule: "He who has the gold rules." So "Go for the gold," and be sure you get more of it than your neighbor.

Once the basic winner-take-all dynamic is in place, it creates what political analyst Jonathan Schell calls an "adapt or die" system—more accurately a "compete or die" system—from which it becomes extremely difficult for either individuals or societies to break free, as thousands of years of human history demonstrate. Commit to the winner-take-all competition and submit to its draconian rules, or suffer the loser's fate of oppression and exclusion.<sup>8</sup> The high stakes create a powerful incentive to win by any means and exert a strong downward pressure on ethical standards, a pattern endlessly repeated at all levels of imperial societies. Once the cultural and institutional dynamics of Empire are in place, the generative choice of Earth Community is off the table.

The dynamics and consequences of Empire are documented in detail by Andrew Schmockler in his social science classic *The Parable of the Tribes*.<sup>9</sup> In the parable, a number of peaceful tribes live together harmoniously for many generations, until one day a tribe with an aggressive warrior culture appears, begins to overrun the peaceful tribes, and forces them to embrace the ways of the violent tribe, run away, or be decimated.

The pathology of Empire spreads from one society to another through this dynamic. The culture and institutions of the infected society undergo a gradual transformation from supporting and rewarding relations based on partnership to supporting those based on domination.

Rulers are reduced to a choice: conquer and absorb the territory of their neighbors, or risk being conquered and absorbed by them. The greater the wealth and power of a ruler, the more covetous his foreign and domestic enemies, the larger the armies required to secure the realm, and the greater the need for subject lands and people to meet the insatiable patronage demands of the retainer classes on whom the ruler's wealth and power rest. The work of growing the potential of the whole to the mutual benefit of all is subordinated to the work of maintaining the system of domination. The cost to society in lost lives, resources, and opportunity is beyond calculation, even comprehension.

It is for good reason that history provides few examples of wise and benevolent kings. Only the most ruthlessly ambitious are capable of the violence and treachery required to reach the highest levels of power in an imperial system. Those of sound mind and mature ethical sensibility are prone to withdraw voluntarily, and those of less mature sensibilities are likely to eliminate those of more mature sensibility who attempt to stay the course without sacrificing their principles. It is not simply that absolute power corrupts. More to the point, it is the corrupt who are the most highly motivated to seek absolute power.

Empire offers a Faustian bargain even for the winners. Wealth and power come at the expense of the qualities that make both winners and losers fully human. Empire is a psychological, as well as a social, affliction that is at once both cause and consequence of our collective failure to actualize the potential of our humanity. This failure presents a crucial barrier to making a collective human transition from the dominator relationships of Empire to the deeply democratic partnership relationships of Earth Community, because the successful negotiation of the transition will require the creative contribution of every person.

### **Relationships of Earth Community**

Earth Community, which gives expression to the democratic impulse, features a drive for what Eisler calls *partnership* power, the power to create, share, and nurture. It organizes through consensual decision making, mutual accountability, and individual responsibility. Its focus is on



cultivating mutual trust, caring, competence, and an equitable distribution of power and resources. This is more fulfilling, more efficient, and ultimately more human. In addition, it allows for a massive reallocation of the available human surplus away from maintaining hierarchies of domination to the work of improving the lives of all.

Because females have been socialized to specialize in the cultivation of partnership relations, recognizing the possibilities of Earth Community often comes more easily to them than to males. Indeed, much of the pathology of Empire has arisen from suppression of the feminine. Part of the transformation of social relationships at Hacienda Santa Teresa involved a shift from all-male bunkhouses to family living units, which brought wives and children into the social mix of the ranch. The current global turn to more balanced gender relationships is a significant source of hope for the future of the species.

The golden rule of Earth Community is “Do unto your neighbor as you would have your neighbor do unto you as you work together to create a better life for all.” Service, compassion, and cooperation are valued as essential social goods and considered a measure of healthy maturity. If each individual has the opportunity to experience the intrinsic rewards that come from responsible service and shares in the benefits of the growing generative power of the whole, then trust, compassion, and cooperation become self-reinforcing. Conflict can be embraced as an opportunity for creative learning. It becomes natural to expand the circle of cooperation in anticipation of the increasing opportunities for mutual gain that expanded cooperation makes possible.

In Earth Community, violence and competition for dominator power are considered irrational, because they destroy the cooperative nurturing relationships essential to the welfare of the individual and society. It becomes self-evident that such behaviors are morally wrong because they are destructive of life. Through their daily experience, people learn that meaning and purpose are found in equitably sharing power and resources to explore life’s creative possibilities in ways that secure the well-being of all.

The *cultural* principles of Earth Community affirm the spiritual unity and interconnectedness of Creation. They favor respect for all beings, nonviolence, service to community, and the stewardship of common resources for the benefit of generations to come. The *economic* principles of Earth Community affirm the basic right of every person to a means of livelihood and the responsibility of each person to live in

a balanced relationship with their place on Earth without expropriating the resources of others. They favor local control, self-reliance, and mutually beneficial trade and sharing. The *political* principles of Earth Community affirm the inherent worth and potential of all individuals and their right to a voice in the decisions that shape their lives, thereby favoring inclusive citizen engagement, cooperative problem solving, and restorative justice.

## THE LAST FREEDOM

Like every other species, we humans must contend with the inherited physical limitations of our genetic coding. However, the limits of human possibility are more psychological and cultural than genetic and are largely self-imposed—a consequence of individual and collective fears that blind us to our own and to life’s creative possibilities.

One of the most powerful commentaries on human choice in the face of seemingly impossible odds comes from the report of the distinguished European psychiatrist Viktor Frankl on his years in the German death camps at Auschwitz and Dachau.<sup>10</sup> For the prisoners, life in these camps was a nightmare of deprivation and dehumanization, with the constant threat of instant, arbitrary, and meaningless death. One might think of these camps as a brutal study in the variety of human responses to the most extreme of Empire’s dehumanizing dynamic. The range of responses by both prisoners and guards to circumstances none of them had chosen left a deep impression on Frankl. In Frankl’s words, some behaved like saints, others like swine.

There were always choices to make. Every day, every hour, offered the opportunity to make a decision, a decision which determined whether you would or would not submit to those powers which threatened to rob you of your very self, your inner freedom; which determined whether or not you would become the plaything of circumstance, renouncing freedom and dignity to become molded into the form of the typical inmate....

Man does not simply exist but always decides what his existence will be, what he will become in the next moment.<sup>11</sup>

By Frankl’s account, some prisoners enthusiastically curried favor with the guards by informing on their fellow prisoners or serving as

overseer, cook, storekeeper, or camp policeman—positions from which they might participate in the arbitrary treatment and humiliation of their fellow prisoners. Others, who remained steadfast in their dignity and humanity, “walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.”<sup>12</sup>

Much the same range of possibility was observed among the guards. Some were sadists in the purest clinical sense, finding special pleasure in inflicting physical and psychological pain. Known to both officers and prisoners, they were the ones assigned to conduct interrogations and administer punishment. Others, despite the brutal environment of the camp, refused to take part in the sadistic measures. Some extended acts of genuine compassion to the prisoners. The SS commander of one camp secretly paid considerable sums out of his own pocket to purchase medicines for his prisoners from a nearby town.

Although our circumstances may limit our individual choices, human circumstances are often collective human constructs and thereby subject to collective choice. The excuse that “it’s just human nature” carries no more moral weight than the young child’s claim that “everybody does it.” It is our nature to be creatures of choice. We humans are ultimately the architects of our own nature.



*Empire* and *Earth Community* are generic names for two models of organizing human relationships at all levels of society, from relationships among nations to relations among family and work-group members. Empire orders relationships into dominator hierarchies that monopolize power in the hands of elites to expropriate the life energy, and thereby suppress the creative potential, of the rest. Earth Community orders relationships by partnership networks that distribute power equitably to nurture the well-being and creative potential of each individual and the whole of the community. Each model is within our means, and ultimately it is ours to choose between them.

Cynics argue that the idea of human societies organized on the principle of partnership is idealistic nonsense beyond our capacity, because

we humans are by nature violent, individualistic, and incapable of cooperating for a higher good. Failing to recognize that our nature embodies many possibilities, the cynics look only at the readily observable lower-order possibilities of our nature and neglect the higher-order possibilities. It is ours to actualize these higher-order possibilities. First, however, we must acknowledge their existence.

this material has been excerpted from

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