

## What is the “Story” of Living Economies?

### *Toward a Language of Empowerment*

Frances Moore Lappé

Stories are important. Many years ago it dawned on me that only one thing could be powerful enough to make human beings create a world that as individuals we abhor, a world violating our common sense and natural sensibilities.

It is the power of ideas. Human beings are creatures of the mind; for us there is no unfiltered reality. Our big organizing ideas cohere into a story – what some call our frame, worldview, or mental map. This story explains our reality. It determines -- in many cases, literally -- what we can see and what we cannot see. It is carried in often-unexamined assumptions about human nature itself.

In all WFC papers, reports, books, hearings, website, and speeches, what is the story we are offering the world? Here’s where I am now in my attempt to summarize today’s dominant story and, in contrast, an emerging story I find much more accurate and liberating. For me, it is always work in progress and I present the following in the spirit of dialogue.

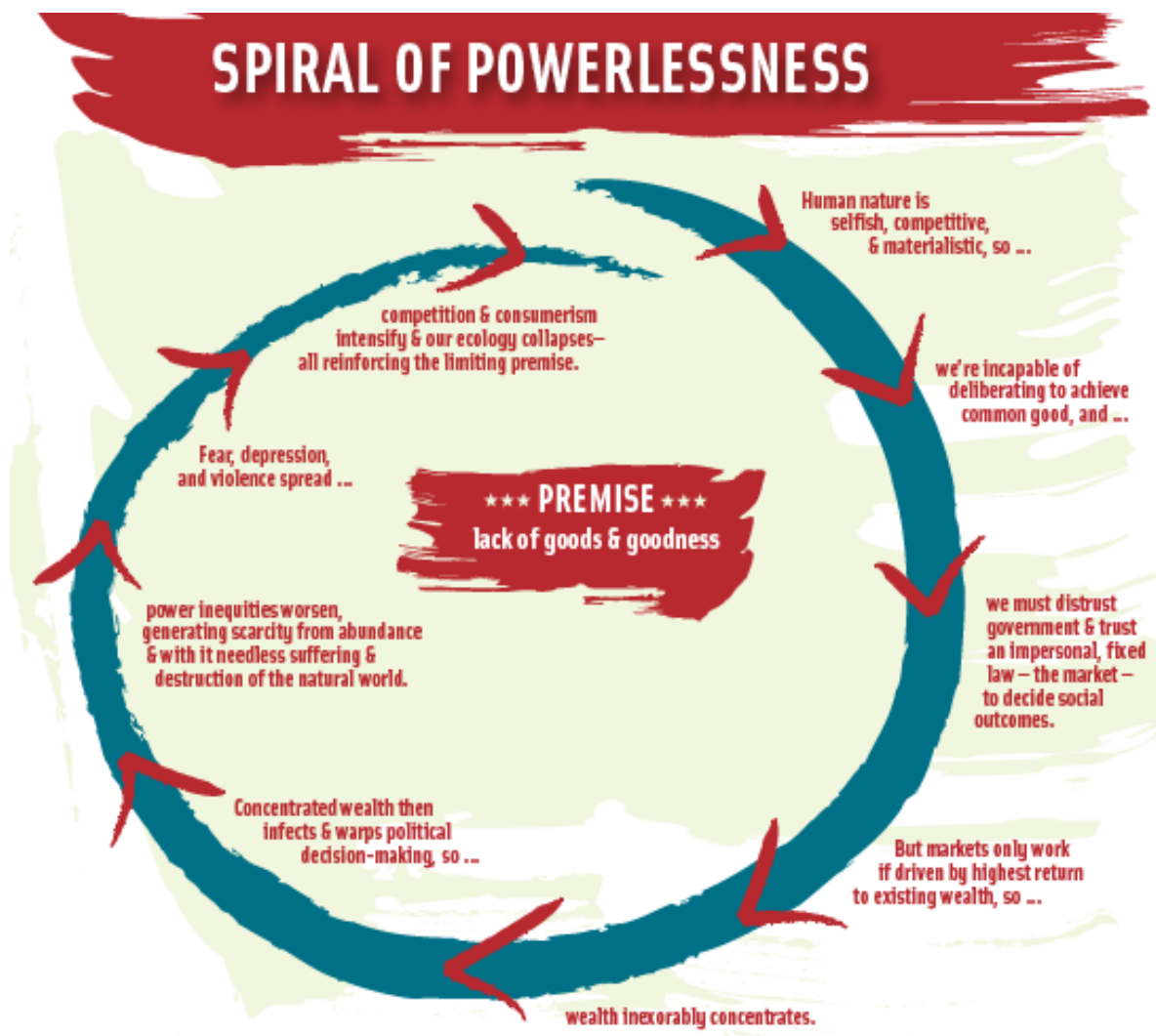
### **The Dominant story: A Spiral of Powerlessness**

In *Getting a Grip: Clarity, Creativity and Courage in a World Gone Mad* I include two graphics, one simplifying my understanding of today’s dominant frame and an alternative I see emerging. You find the graphs below. The dominant frame starts from the premise of lack. I call this premise the assumption of “scarcity of goods and goodness.” It is life-defeating. Assuming the earth lacks enough food, energy, love – enough of just about anything essential, we see competitive struggle as unavoidable; and assuming that people lack enough goodness – that we are in essence materialistic, competitive and selfish -- we see ourselves incapable of coming together in common problem solving, the essence of democracy. With a dim view of ourselves, of course we believe we must turn over our fate to experts and authorities, but, preferably, to an infallible law, to determine outcomes for us. And many have believed they have found that automatic force: the market, or, as Ronald Reagan called it: the “magic of the market.”

In this dominant view, ironically, most people consider themselves to be okay but assume that the evils of the world result from others, the bad ones, those lacking basic goodness. As we turn over our fate to a market – in recent human history a market increasingly driven by the single rule of highest return to existing wealth – power concentrates inexorably. (It is almost literally

the game of Monopoly – very soon all but one of us are bankrupt.) That narrowly held power then corrupts political decision making in its interests – generating, in effect, “privately held government” -- and misery spreads. The spreading misery and feelings of powerlessness then confirm our dim view of humanity – quickening the downward spiral of misery. We see the destruction of life, but feel there is no alternative.

So nothing is more important than breaking this life-denying spiral and reversing it.



## **An Emergent Story: A Spiral of Empowerment**

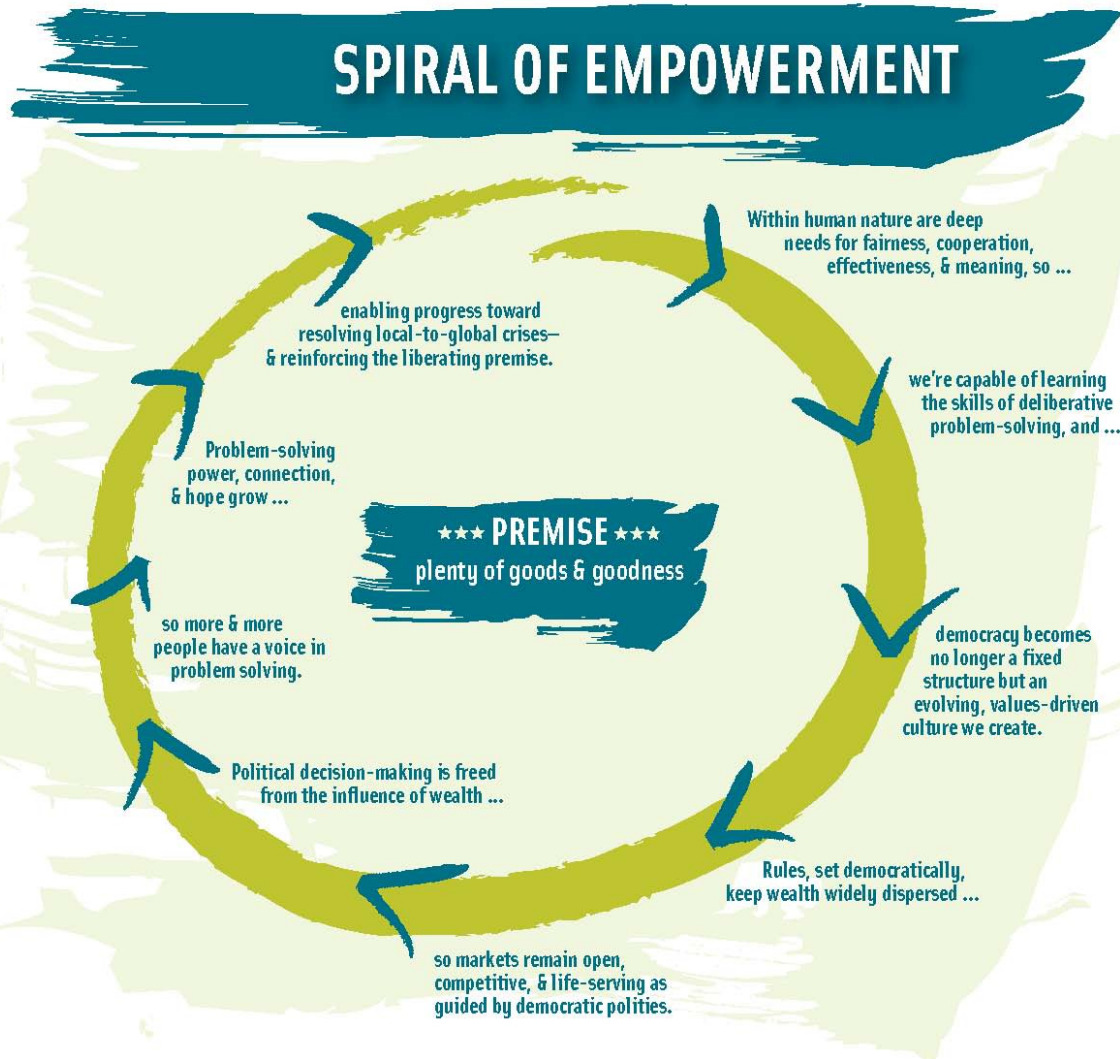
To interrupt and reverse this downward spiral, we can begin with a very different, evidence-based premise: the premise of “plenty of goods and goodness.” Scientists, for example, now estimate that the sun provides the earth each day with 15,000 times the energy we now use, mainly in deadly fossil fuels; and that more than enough food grows worldwide to make us all chubby.

As to goodness? Interrupting the negative cycle begins by accepting human complexity: that we are hard-wired for pro-social qualities, including empathy, cooperation, a sense of fairness, and a need for efficacy. At the same time (and this is even more difficult for most to accept), the vast majority of us, not just a few, will become cruel, even brutal, in certain conditions. The history of genocide proves this to be true, as do instances such the treatment of prisoners by “normal” American soldiers in Abu Graib prison. Laboratory experiments on humans reveal the same truth. So we can ask, Just what are the conditions now proven to bring out the worst in us? Among them are extreme concentrations of power, anonymity, and rigid ideologies creating in-group/out-group “othering” and scapegoating.

The good news inherent in our species’ maturing to accept both aspects of our nature is that we are then able to stop blaming the “evil other” and begin creating the conditions that bring out the best in us, while keeping the worst in check: the opposite of these negative conditions. In other words, we can work to create social systems that continually disperse power; dissolve anonymity through transparency and community; and spread an appreciation of the universality of the potential for, and conditionality of, human expressions of either good or evil.

From this frame of possibility, we can each see a place for ourselves. Acknowledging our proven pro-social qualities, we sense that we are, of course, capable of deliberation for a common good – democracy itself. We no longer feel we must simply defer to an impersonal market or expert authority but can together set in place mutually agreed upon values-based rules that keep power and wealth circulating and make all aspects of governance and economic life ever more transparent and trustworthy. We can also build trust – resisting scapegoating – by conscious attention to generating communities of shared power and mutual accountability.

This path, too, becomes self-reinforcing, as it produces conditions that deepen our confidence in ourselves and fuel our energy to meet the unprecedented challenges of this time.



The dominant, self-defeating frame is carried in a great deal of today’s language, even language of many working hard for positive change. We can strive to replace the life-destroying story with a life-enhancing one as we examine every framing term and metaphor we use, asking:

- 1 Does it reinforce fear of loss and scapegoating, or open us to possibility and renew trust?
- 2 Does it suggest that the roots of our crises lie in flawed human nature or in rules and norms that humans made and can therefore change?
- 3 Does it focus on symptoms or link proposed actions to addresses causal forces?
- 4 Does it suggest and offer positive images of new ways of living in community that are aligned with ecology and are thus much more satisfying than our failing system?

- 5 Does it help people see powerful, rewarding roles for themselves in solutions?
- 6 Is it self-reinforcing, building energy for continuing life-enhancing change?

Let me offer a few examples of what I mean:

### **One: Human Nature**

**Disempowering Message:** *The problem is human nature.*

Examples include esteemed biologist E. O. Wilson who writes that to save species diversity, his focus, we must get beyond “Stone Age” emotions. British writer Philip Pullman writes that we evolved to suit a “way of life that is acquisitive, territorial, and combative,” and in “only about 6,000 years [we have] to overcome the millions of years of evolution.” The suggestion that we must change human nature to save our planet is, for me, the most disempowering message of all. It seems highly unlikely to succeed!

**Empowering Message:** The problem is that societies are, in too many ways, organized to bring out the worse in us: and we can change that. A useful and, I believe, accurate message, is that we can *accept* our nature – the good, bad and the ugly. And when we do, we are free to create the world we want. We can discern, based now on much historical evidence and neuroscience, how to organize ourselves to elicit our deepest positive qualities, as I outline above. In sum, the task is not to condemn human nature or try to change it, but to align our societies with what we know of our nature.

### **Two: No-Growth or Alignment?**

**Disempowering Message:** *The root of the environmental crisis is growth; the solution is no-growth.*

First, this framing is misleading. It suggests that a non-growing economy in itself would save the natural world, when a non-growing can also destroy earth and lives. A non-growing economy, especially if fear intensifies, could even increase the worst environmental devastation of, say, coal mining and burning, toxic pesticides, species loss and so on.

Second, let’s accept that most human beings experience growth as positive – to the lay person trees grow, children grow, love and trust grow. There is no point in fighting against the positive associations with the word “growth.”

Third, using a term most people see as positive to characterize today’s industrial economies does not serve us and is not accurate: for its productive processes are generating

unprecedented waste, disruption of natural cycles, and destruction of species. It's been estimated, for example, that nearly 60 percent of the energy in the U.S. economy is wasted. Well less than 10 percent of all resources mobilized to generate goods actually end up in products we use.

Fourth, calling for no-growth in a world of vast deprivation and in which most people lack essential goods only fuels fear, which blocks reason and creativity.

So let us term what we have been doing as an “economics of waste and destruction.” Let us focus on explaining how dominant economies disrupt nature’s capacity for regeneration.

**Empowering Message:** Let’s align our economies – from household to nation -- with the laws of nature. Let us advocate and work toward movement from a life-destroying economy to a living economy. Let us turn to ecology itself to guide us and our metaphors. In so doing, we reduce, fear and amplify hope and creativity.

Acknowledging that we do live within ecological laws offers great relief. We realize nature offers non-arbitrary guidelines for action, which for human beings is a wonderful thing. Unboundedness is actually what makes humans insecure and anxious. We can stop debating levels of growth and ask, What policies reinforce rather than disrupt natural processes on which life depends? We can ask, not how do we reduce growth but what policies are most aligned with the recovery and vitality of the natural world? We can call growth that which enhances life: celebrating growth in diversity, fertility, health, art, pleasure, love, beauty -- growth in life that enhances nature’s regeneration.

### Three: Government

**Disempowering Message:** *Government is more problem than solution.* Given the weakness of human nature, it always ends up in corrupt hands; whereas the market responds to individual human needs and desires. It reflects our selfishness, so it is also realistic. The market typically works better, therefore, than an always-corruptible, inefficient bureaucracy.

This remains the prevailing assumption. But even many who do not subscribe to it, and would like to view government as a tool for citizens to realize our common interests typically operate as if the best we can do is accept an existing concept of democratic government and press for changing specific policies to make the market work better.

In this version of the prevailing frame there is little focus on *how* government is constituted and how it functions -- but narrowly on *what* policies to pursue.

**Empowering Message:** From an ecological worldview, humans exist in a network in which we create our reality moment to moment. The “government” is therefore not apart from us, neither is the market. If government is failing, we can peel back the layers of causation to see that most governments are not serving majority needs, and not enhancing life, *for a reason*: We have accepted a peculiar notion of one-rule economies, which so concentrates wealth that private power infuses itself into and distorts public decision making. “Privately held government” becomes an appropriate oxymoron.

An immediate case in point is the U.S. financial crisis, where fingerprints of private wealth in public decisions are everywhere in what brought on the crisis. Consider that in 2000, the U.S. Senate overwhelmingly passed a bill keeping “derivatives” clear of Commodity Futures Trading Commission oversight. To an 11,000-page appropriations bill, Senator Phil Gramm attached a rider limiting the C.F.T.C.’s authority. Few, if any, U.S. senators likely read the bill, which passed late at night, just Congress was leaving for the Christmas holidays. Virtually no Americans were aware of that rider, freeing the derivatives market to skyrocket, in less than a decade swelling fivefold to help unravel the entire world economy. The derivatives industry was able to help draft this legislation because, as one close observer put it, they’d “bought tickets” to the table. The financial industry is a heavy contributor to political campaigns in the U.S.

The implication is that one can move away from simply blasting greedy traders as manipulators and focus with laser precision on what rules and norms have given them the power to harm.

The empowering message is that we can not only change policies but change the way *lawmakers are selected*, the way *citizens’ voices are continually brought into policy making*, and the ongoing way *officials are held accountable*, so that democracies become truly answerable to citizens.

In the U.S., for example, it means focusing on the removal of money from politics, on which so many citizens have given up. We can fight despair by pointing out that three states, through voluntary public financing, have removed most of the power of private wealth in selecting the majority of legislators. In today’s financial crisis, this approach would include for example, Jakob’s second proposal concerning civil society and others in the supervision of financial rescues paid for by taxpayers. As to new channels for citizens’ voices? This implies, for example, the use of citizen assemblies, citizen juries, and participatory budgeting in guiding public policy creation -- as in British Columbia where regular citizens engaged in an extended, thoughtful, official deliberation to arrive at an improved voting system for the province. It was well received by the people at large because they trusted the process by which it was generated, and may soon receive the required super-majority to go into effect. And, as to continually

holding officials accountable? Here, transparency is key and the internet offers greatly enhanced possibility.

In this focus, the empowering message is that government is not simply “over” us or “big brother” offering hand-outs. We see government as an instrument, a facilitator, convener of key parties, a broker of solutions, and, in many cases -- such as Medicare in the U.S. or national health insurance in many countries – an efficient fiscal agent, providing the organization of vital services much more efficiently than the private sector.

#### Four: The Market/Trade

**Disempowering Message:** *The economy is separate from democracy and operates on its own, for the most part. Anyone who differs is anti-market and is advocating a state-controlled economy, proven to be disastrous.*

**Empowering Message:** We make clear that we are not against the market. Far from it. In fact, we are its real defenders. Left to its own devices, the market becomes so tightly controlled that it destroys the open-entry and competition that are among its primary virtues. In other words, a healthy market economy depends on a living democracy, one not controlled by private, monopoly interests. A healthy market depends on citizens’ creating “values-boundaries” around the market that keep it open, transparent and competitive so that power relations are balanced to avoid coercion.

In this regard we reject the term “free trade,” and make clear that it is fiction. Markets are monopolistic, oligopolistic or fair, depending on how the rules governing them are created. We are for fair markets, created to serve the interests of all players.

#### Five: Democracy

**Disempowering message:** *Democracy is a set system that is complete, finished. Today’s form of democracy is the culmination of human experience and the best we can do. Thus, little is expected of citizens beyond voting (optional), working and shopping. It is something done to us or for us, not with us or by us. This understanding of democracy is all we can hope for because most people only want to be left alone in their private lives.*

**Empowering message:** We can leave behind the notion that democracy is a set system and embrace an emergent view of democracy as *set of system values* that apply in economic, social and cultural life with equal power as they do in political life: values such as inclusion, fairness

and mutual accountability. We can consciously work to develop and find language for this arising understanding of self-in-society -- living democracy, democracy as a way of life. It builds from the premise that humans could not have evolved today's complex societies if we were innately content to be victims and spectators. Most human beings have a deep need for efficacy, to feel that they are useful and contributing to that beyond their own survival. This understanding of democracy is consistent with an ecological worldview – in which, as Hans Peter Duerr writes, there are “no parts, only participants.” It might be called an “ecology of democracy.”

### Six: Freedom

**Disempowering message:** *Freedom means freedom from Big Brother government.* Right-wing activists in the U.S. have called theirs the “Leave Us Alone” coalition.

**Empowering message:** We can actively reclaim this beautiful term. We can make clear ways that our dominant economic and political frame denies the deeper meaning of freedom – “freedom as the liberation of talents” (from political philosopher Harry Boyte) and freedom as real, unmanipulated choice that is possible only with knowledge and opportunity.

### CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

I hope through these examples, you get a sense of the power of framing and the need to get ever clearer on the “story” we are offering the world. The quality of our story and our effectiveness in communicating it will largely determine the impact of our work. I hope these ideas are received in the spirit of ongoing dialogue, not as finished positions.