

[Below](#), an interview with the author of *In the Absence of the Sacred: The Failure of Technology and the Survival of the Indian Nations*.

First, a few excerpts from the book itself:

“ . . . technological evolution is leading to something new: a worldwide, interlocked, monolithic, technical-political web of unprecedented negative proportions.” (p. 4)

“ . . . We have lost the understanding that existed in all civilizations prior to ours, and that continues to exist on Earth today in societies that live side by side with our own; we have lost a sense of the sacredness of the natural world.” (p. 187)

“ . . . We still have not developed an effective language with which to articulate our critiques [of the technological juggernaut]. This, in turn, is because we ourselves are part of the machine and so we have difficulty defining its shape and direction. But even if we have this difficulty, there are societies of people on this planet who do not.

### STATEMENT TO THE MODERN WORLD

Millions of people still alive on this earth never wished to be part of this machine and, in many cases, are not. . . . *they* are still aware of certain fundamental truths, the most important of which require reverence for the earth—an idea that is subversive to Western society and the entire technological direction of the past century.

These are people whose ancestors and who themselves have said from the beginning of the technological age that our actions and attitudes are fatally flawed, since they are not grounded in a real understanding of how to live on the earth. Lacking a sense of the sacred we were doomed to a bad result. They said it over and over and they still say it now.

The following is an excerpt from [A Basic Call to Consciousness](#), the *Hau de no sau nee Address to the Western World*, delivered at the 1977 UN conference on Indigenous Peoples, published by [Akwesasne Notes](#).

In the beginning we were told that the human beings who walk about on the Earth have been provided with all the things necessary for life. We were instructed to carry a love for one another, and to show a great respect for all the beings of this Earth. We were shown that our life exists with the tree life, that our well-being depends on the well-being of the Vegetable Life, that we are close relatives of the four-legged beings.

The original instructions direct that we who walk about on Earth are to express a great respect, an affection and a gratitude toward all the spirits which create and support Life. . . . When people cease to respect and express gratitude for these many things, then all life will be destroyed, and human life on this planet will come to an end. . . .

The majority of the world does not find its roots in Western culture or tradition. The majority of the world finds its roots in the Natural World, and it is the Natural World, and the traditions of the Natural World, which must prevail.

We must all consciously and continuously challenge every model, every program, and every process that the West tries to force upon us. . . . The people who are living on this planet need to break with the narrow concept of human liberation, and begin to see liberation as something that needs to be extended to the whole of the Natural World. What is needed is the liberation of all things that support Life—the air, the waters, the trees—all the things which support the sacred web of Life.

The Native people of the Western Hemisphere can contribute to the survival potential of the human species. The majority of our peoples still live in accordance with the traditions which find their roots in the Mother Earth. But the native people have need of a forum in which our voice can be heard. And we need alliances with the other people of the world to assist in our struggle to regain and maintain our ancestral lands and to protect the Way of Life we follow.

The traditional Native people hold the key to the reversal of the processes in Western Civilization, which hold the promise of unimaginable future suffering and destruction. Spiritualism is the highest form of political consciousness. And we, the Native people of the Western Hemisphere, are among the world's surviving proprietors of that kind of consciousness. . . . Our culture is among the most ancient continuously existing cultures in the world. We are the spiritual guardians of this place. We are here to impart that message. ([pp. 191-193](#))

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Editor's note: I can't recommend enough Jerry Mander's 1991 book, [In the Absence of the Sacred: The Failure of Technology and the Survival of the Indian Nations](#). Mander took 10 years to write this book, and a lot longer thinking about it. It is a tremendously refreshing and challenging critical analysis of the impact of technology upon our culture and upon the way we have chosen to live—as well as the way we have had choices unilaterally made for us without our consent and without laying out for us the worst-case as well as the best-case scenarios of a given technology *before* it has been introduced, and consequently, overtaken us and our descendants with its affects and influences. Quoting from the interviewer Catherine Ingram,

*In the Absence of the Sacred* paints a comprehensive picture of how the multinational corporations and the major financial institutions, combined with new technologies, form a juggernaut unhindered by any governmental control and which, day by day, constricts us further.

the following are excerpts from an interview conducted with Jerry Mander that begins [108 lines below](#) this one:

In this culture, we have science and technology as religion. We no longer have a religious or philosophical basis for making choices regarding the evolution of technology. All those decisions are made in the corporate world. But there are other societies where taboos, the very concept of *taboo*, still exist. *Taboo* is probably the only concept that is taboo in this society. But in traditional societies they have had centuries-long discussions about whether to plant or whether to continue being nomads or whether a certain kind of agricultural relationship is a good idea or not. *Taboo* constitutes a philosophical framework.

. . . I have to reject the idea that selfishness is instinctive. It's come to be understood that selfishness is part of human nature, but I think that's in the context of the lives that we have now. We are so isolated that we tend to act only in our own self interest.

. . . The fantasies of utopian existence promoted by proponents of the technological, industrial mode of life for the last one hundred years are now demonstrably false. That's not what we got. What we got was alienation, disorientation, destruction of the planet, destruction of natural systems, destruction of diversity, homogenization of cultures and regions, crime, homelessness, disease, environmental breakdown, and tremendous inequality. We have a mess on our hands. This system has not lived up to its advertising; in developing a strategy for telling people what to do next, we first have to make that point. Life really is better when you get off the technological/industrial wheel and conceive of some other way. It makes people happier. It may not make them more money, but getting more money hasn't worked out. Filling life with commodities doesn't turn out to be satisfying, and most people know that.

. . . We seem to have it backward. In the absence of the sacred, anything goes, because we're completely spun off, unrooted, with no sense of consequences, no family, no community, no nothing.

. . . These technologies do act as drugs. They are what society offers to make up for what has been lost. In return for family, community, a relationship to a larger, deeper vision, society offers television, drugs, food, noise, high speed, and unconsciousness. Not only are those the things that are available, but those are the things that keep you from knowing that there's anything else available. It's easy to see why people go for those things and why they become addicted to them, because each one offers some element of satisfaction. . . . Now if you're asking how we might change that pattern, I can only say that you have to create alternative visions; you have to get people to experience what they've lost.

. . . the difference between native peoples and Western peoples [is that] there are still people who know about what came before, and who know that there's still wild nature available and that they have a relationship to it. Among the native cultures of the world there's still a memory and a philosophical base for resistance.

As to why some people don't resist and are done in by it, I'd say it results from a complex of factors. Politically, they're overpowered. Technology overpowers them . . . We're uprooted, alienated Westerners feeling vindicated by the fact that now the Indians are also going for it. We look at them and say, "They're going for the snowmobiles and they're dropping the dog teams, and they're dropping the traditional communications in favor of television."

Listen, technology has an inherent appeal. It's shiny, it's new; human beings have a genetic programming that relates to new things with great curiosity. When we lived in relationship to nature, we needed to know when something new was coming along that would affect us. So there is an innate human response to something new. In addition to that, machines are very interesting . . . it's very natural, when faced with a new technology, to think, "How great; this is terrific; let's use this." But once you use it you begin to understand the downside. In our culture, it's taken a very long time to understand the downside. My experience is that native people see the downside faster.

. . . Up till now, corporations have not been critiqued as technological forms, or in terms of their inherent characteristics which would reveal why they behave as they do. The common wisdom said that we can get corporations to behave more responsibly if the people in the corporations could be educated in better values and saving the earth and so on. This is naive. The corporate form predetermines the way corporations have to behave. In order to sustain themselves, and be financially viable to banking and other institutions, corporations must produce a profit and they must grow. Profit and growth are absolutely required.

Corporations live in a kind of nether world where they have all the rights and protection accorded individuals by our laws. For example, you can't regulate corporate speech in any way, because they've successfully become "fictional persons" and therefore have the same rights as an individual to free speech. But the difference is that the individual is only able to use handbills and maybe do a little article in a magazine now and then, while the corporations are able to spend a billion dollars in advertising to tell you what to think. . . . Corporations will advertise whatever isn't true because if it were true they wouldn't have the image problem in the first place. If the corporation were a good citizen it wouldn't need to say it is. The truth is that corporations generally act in direct opposition to nature because profit is based on the transmogrification of raw materials into a new, more salable form.

The following interview with Jerry Mander regarding his book, [\*In the Absence of the Sacred: The Failure of Technology and the Survival of the Indian Nations\*](#), (1991, Sierra Club Books), appeared in Issue 192, November 1991 of [\*The Sun, A Magazine of Ideas\*](#).

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# BAD MAGIC: THE FAILURE OF TECHNOLOGY

## An Interview with Jerry Mander by Catherine Ingram

When Jerry Mander suggested in his book [\*Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television\*](#), published in 1978, that television was not reformable no matter *who* controlled the medium, it represented the first time anyone had dared suggest that we do away with television altogether. Mander argued that television is a primary tool in the ongoing [mediation of human experience](#), the visual intoxicant that [entrances the viewer into a hypnotic state](#) and thereby replaces other forms of knowledge with the imagery of its programmers. It infuses young children with high-tech, high-speed expectations of life, so that a walk in nature would likely seem interminably boring. It is the tool used not only to sell the resources that have been dug up, melted, forged, and otherwise appropriated from the earth, [but to sell us back our feelings](#), which the entrancement has eclipsed. [Television colonizes its viewers](#) by way of an artificial reality [replete with its own values](#). From a political point of view, it is particularly dangerous because “it is the one speaking to the many,” as Mander describes anyone from the corporate sponsor to the nightly anchorperson. And it is bad for our bodies as well, creating mental and physical sickness by [the mesmerizing phosphorescent glow of its artificial light](#).

Mander’s latest work, [\*In the Absence of the Sacred: The Failure of Technology and the Survival of the Indian Nations\*](#), took him ten years to write, thirty years to think over. It expands on themes in his earlier book, including the inherent tendency of a given technology to predetermine its use and [render the technology anything but neutral](#), and the marriage of technologies with large corporations that stand to reap the greatest benefit from the manipulation or sales of them. Mander carefully analyzes the fundamental assumptions that have led us to accept almost every technology that has come on line, and he reminds us of the price we pay—in ecological and social breakdowns—for those assumptions. The book also examines alternatives to the technological way of life—alternatives that can be found among tribal peoples who lived for thousands of years in a harmonious relationship with the earth, and who exist to this day.

Mander has that rare quality which makes his views about technology particularly potent—the insider’s perspective. His experience in commercial advertising shifted over the years to advertising for public interest groups, primarily in the environmental movement. But he first became aware of the plight of native peoples when he was working in commercial advertising in the mid-sixties. A shipping company [sent him to Micronesia](#) to assess its impact on the area. During his two months in Micronesia, Mander glimpsed for the first time the ways of traditional peoples. He returned to San Francisco to give the client his recommendation: move the company out of Micronesia and leave those islands the way they are.

A process of self-examination was underway for Mander by this time. Although he had realized his dream of success, going beyond the aspirations of his immigrant Jewish parents, he was no longer comfortable writing ads for audio equipment and Land Rovers by day only to turn to environmental issues by night. He began to feel the contradiction between advocating more consumption while, at the same time, perceiving consumption as one of the root causes of ecological destruction.

Mander had also begun to feel personally disconnected from nature. On a cruise off the Dalmatian coast in 1968, he hit an “emotional bottom” as he discovered he could “see” the spectacular views with his eyes, but he couldn’t experience them within himself. Nature had become “irrelevant,” and he was terrified to realize that “the problem was [him], not nature.”

Meanwhile, his ad agency had been hired by the Sierra Club and later by Friends of the Earth, both under the leadership of David Brower, the renowned environmentalist, who would have a powerful professional and educational influence on Mander. Mander wrote many of the ads that eventually saved the Grand Canyon from the construction of dams, blocked development of the American supersonic transport, and established Redwood National Park and North Cascades National Park. He also wrote the ad that caused the Sierra Club to lose its tax-exempt status while creating sympathetic news headlines and a groundswell of support. As David Brower explains it, “People across the country who didn’t know whether or not they liked the Grand Canyon knew they hated the Internal Revenue Service.” Mander had also begun to work with Hopi Indians on blocking the Black Mesa Mine, again strengthening his ties to native peoples.

By 1972, Mander’s firm had decided that trying to balance commercial and environmental activities wasn’t working, and the agency was dissolved. Mander went on to form the first nonprofit advertising and public relations agency, Public Interest Communications. A few years later, several of its founders, including Jerry Mander, wound their way to Public Media Center (PMC), an offshoot of the original nonprofit organization. PMC has since initiated almost every major environmental ad campaign in the country, as well as campaigns for Planned Parenthood, gun control, and to block Robert Bork’s nomination to the Supreme Court. Jerry Mander has written many of these ads and, as a senior fellow of PMC, continues his work there to this day. As David Brower remarked in a recent interview, “Whenever we get into a new environmental battle and we need a full-page ad to help win it, I say, ‘Where’s Jerry?’”

But it has been through his books that Mander has managed to weave together the threads of what he has learned in studying the ecological and social issues of the past thirty years. [\*In the Absence of the Sacred\*](#) paints a comprehensive picture of how the multinational corporations and the major financial institutions, combined with new technologies, form a juggernaut unhindered by any governmental control and which, day by day, constricts us further.

How can we ever remedy all this? Is Mander actually proposing that we turn back? After all, we’re a long way from the hunting and gathering communities of former times. Mander says

that it is unlikely that we will go back “and hunt for beavers in the Hudson Valley.” But he says that there are, indeed, native peoples from whom we can learn a great deal about life and that we should begin that process by respecting their right to exist. Furthermore, according to Mander, there are a few basic principles—understood best by traditional peoples—which we will need for the survival of this planet: we must abandon values that emphasize the accumulation of commodities and growth economics; we must reduce world population; we must abandon technologies that are incompatible with sustainability and diversity on the planet and we must study the forces which have caused the social and ecological crisis we now face. “This is not going back,” says Mander. “It is going forward to a renewed relationship with timeless values and principles that have been kept alive for Western society by the very people we have tried to destroy.” Among those people, Mander believes, lies the key to our survival.

— Catherine Ingram

**Ingram:** America has had a love affair with each new technological wonder. You suggest that with most of these technologies, we assumed a best-case scenario. What are the questions we should have asked before they came on line?

**Mander:** The point is the way new technologies are introduced to us without a full discussion of how they are going to affect the planet, social relationships, political relationships, human health, nature, our conceptions of nature, and our conceptions of ourselves. Every technology that comes along affects these things. Cars, for example, have changed society completely. Had there been a debate about the existence of cars, we would have asked, do we want the entire landscape to be paved over? Do we want society to move into concrete urban centers? Do we want one resource—oil—to dominate human and political relationships in the world? The Gulf War resulted from our choice of the car a hundred years ago.

**Ingram:** But who could have possibly foreseen any of that?

**Mander:** Well, when a technology is invented much of its effects are already known. A study at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology examined what was being said about technologies at the time of their invention. It turns out that most of the effects of technology are actually known by the people who invent and disseminate them. This is logical because those people put a lot of money into figuring out all possible uses of those technologies. They can then develop marketing strategies based on the assessment of the positive effects. At the same time, they figure out possible negative effects and proceed to downplay those. The car is promoted as freedom—private and noiseless travel, comfort, and so on—without any suggestion of its profound multidimensional effects. There’s no mechanism in our society for hearing the downside. There are no controls on technological invention or evolution.

So the trick is to develop the worst-case scenarios, publicly broadcast those, and then develop a general debate about whether or not society wants to go in those directions. Then we should have the political ability to say no to a technology when it is decided that saying no is the most

logical solution.

**Ingram:** In a way we've had this experience with nuclear power. Nuclear power came into existence without much debate, but then there came a period of great debate, and it was brought to its knees as a viable source of power. Now, we are seeing a resurgence of its popularity.

**Mander:** Nuclear power is the exception that proves the best-case/worst-case rule. The worst-case scenario was visible the first time we ever heard of the thing because nobody knew about nuclear power until it killed eighty thousand people in Hiroshima. It had a staggering impact on everybody's consciousness, and people were frightened by the possibilities of this one piece of technology, no matter where they lived. The best-case scenarios came in the second stage of public debate. Anything that the developers of nuclear power tried to say—that it was going to provide clean, free, unlimited energy—was in the context of Hiroshima; everybody was scared and horrified by it. It is rare that we experience the worst-case scenario before the gigantic sales campaign. Even so, the sales campaign goes on about the positive uses of nuclear energy. Nuclear energy survives as a viable option. It's used in a lot of places and there's a big movement now to employ it even more.

**Ingram:** Let's talk about biotechnology and organ transplants, since those are some of the next major technologies. I just read about a woman who conceived a child in order to have a bone-marrow donor for her older daughter, who was dying of leukemia. This situation calls for hard choices. What mother wouldn't save her child if there was the technology to do it? As our organs become interchangeable, we may have to decide whether or not to give a kidney, or an eye, or whatever we can spare, to a relative. Biotechnologies raise still other questions: if there is a genetically engineered cure for AIDS, are we going to say no to that cure just because we think that, on balance, biotechnology is a bad thing?

**Mander:** Our culture lacks a philosophical basis, an understanding of the appropriate human role on earth, that would inform these developments before they happen. Such an understanding would enable us to say, no, we cannot go in that direction because, as in the case of genetics, it is a direct desacralization of life. The title of my book, *In the Absence of the Sacred*, refers to the failure of any sense of groundedness in the natural world and a lack of any sense of limits. You see, once you're living in an industrial, technological society, choices become much more difficult. Even if you believe that cars are inappropriate, you almost cannot function unless you have a car. You can't function if you don't have a telephone—unless you retire from participation.

**Ingram:** With a lot of money.

**Mander:** Well, not necessarily. I wouldn't say that you need a lot of money to withdraw from the system, but withdrawing from the system means letting the system go on as it is. If you are interested in changing or affecting the system, then you don't withdraw.

However, you can make a lot of personal decisions about what you will or will not do. I do not use computers myself. I do not appear on television. I try to live in a relatively low-tech fashion. I try to limit the amount of technology that I use. And I try to live according to certain principles. Now we all live according to our own principles, and I'm not telling anybody which

set of principles is appropriate for him or her. But I'm saying you do make decisions. This society discourages people from making informed decisions. This society tells you that the way to live is to accumulate more and more, and that technology is the solution to our problems.

Now you can devise questions, as you just did, about genetics. The questions and the individual responses may change; what does not change is the fundamental fact that it is wrong and dangerous for society to go in a direction where these are the solutions.

In this culture, we have science and technology as religion. We no longer have a religious or philosophical basis for making choices regarding the evolution of technology. All those decisions are made in the corporate world. But there are other societies where taboos, the very concept of *taboo*, still exist. *Taboo* is probably the only concept that is taboo in this society. But in traditional societies they have had centuries-long discussions about whether to plant or whether to continue being nomads or whether a certain kind of agricultural relationship is a good idea or not. *Taboo* constitutes a philosophical framework.

**Ingram:** Yet people in our society would see this kind of control—saying no to something before it was developed—as fascist.

**Mander:** Yes, without realizing that this attitude keeps us on a path of development from which it is very difficult to return.

Now when you ask a specific question about bone-marrow transplants, you're dealing with a very emotional situation—one would do anything to save one's kid. I'm for getting rid of those systems of technology where such questions get addressed to individual people, and replacing it with an agreed-upon lifestyle and philosophical system that has its pleasures and values on a different plane than what we have now, a plane where such questions just don't come up.

**Ingram:** I think people often tend to make their decisions from a very emotional and often selfish point of view. This has propelled the human species throughout history. Maybe there are wonderful examples of people who have not been propelled by this aggressive force, but—

**Mander:** May I interrupt and disagree with that point? The statement that people are propelled by their self-interest or their greed applies primarily to industrial society. It may also apply to those who have been deprived of community by the effects of industrial society, where a formerly integrated, cooperative, reciprocal mode of being in nature has been destroyed. But since the beginning of recorded history, there have been many communities that have existed alongside the so-called Western historical civilizations, and which exhibit to this day a mode of experience and living in the world that is cooperative, community-based, consensual—and not primarily in terms of self-interest.

I just read a piece in *The New Yorker* about the Penan people in Indonesia. They were on trial for blocking a bridge that the lumber trucks use to destroy the rain forest. During the trial it became clear that they didn't understand the concept of crime because apparently they didn't have crime. They were asked to give an example in their society of an act that others would disapprove of. They had a little huddle and discussed it, and then said that if someone doesn't openly share what they have, he or she would meet with disapproval. That was the only crime they could think of. So I have to reject the idea that selfishness is instinctive. It's come to be

understood that selfishness is part of human nature, but I think that's in the context of the lives that we have now. We are so isolated that we tend to act only in our own self interest.

**Ingram:** We somehow got to this point. Something within propelled us, and it seems to be quite contagious. It spreads.

**Mander:** I agree that it spreads. Once the intrusion of outside models breaks down the traditional structures where people were acting in concert and on behalf of the whole community, then it's catch as catch can.

**Ingram:** Then how do we address the greed, the aggression, our unwillingness to give up anything? How do we reverse this? How are we to come back into the presence of the sacred and how are we to do this on a mass scale?

**Mander:** This is one of the great mysteries—how do you actually achieve that and how do you keep from falling into despair about the difficulties in achieving it? I don't have a tight little answer that would inspire a slogan but it's obvious that what we have now is not working. The fantasies of utopian existence promoted by proponents of the technological, industrial mode of life for the last one hundred years are now demonstrably false. That's not what we got. What we got was alienation, disorientation, destruction of the planet, destruction of natural systems, destruction of diversity, homogenization of cultures and regions, crime, homelessness, disease, environmental breakdown, and tremendous inequality. We have a mess on our hands. This system has not lived up to its advertising; in developing a strategy for telling people what to do next, we first have to make that point. Life really is better when you get off the technological / industrial wheel and conceive of some other way. It makes people happier. It may not make them more money, but getting more money hasn't worked out. Filling life with commodities doesn't turn out to be satisfying, and most people know that.

**Ingram:** You say that in the case of computers, as with television, it's not a matter of who benefits, but who benefits most; that while the environmentalist derives some benefit from computers, the corporations, military, and financial institutions benefit most. But I would ask you, why then should we have *no* benefit? If we can put a few twigs in the dike, we're still a little ahead of having no twigs in the dike.

**Mander:** I do not tell do-gooders or other people working on Public Media Center activities not to use television. What I say is that we should have *no* television at all. The same could be said of computers. I argue that life would be better, power systems would be more egalitarian, we would have a more even playing field in terms of information flow, and our media would be more democratic, if there were no television. We'd also have a less-alienated population, less pacified, less inundated by other people's imageries. But I also recognize that you can't just remove television and keep everything else in place. It's the nervous system of the technological machine. It's part of a very integrated system, so we have to talk about all of technology when we talk about television.

Now, you can certainly put a few twigs in the dike. My argument is that, on balance, television is going to do a lot more harm than good. It's an idealistic, utopian fantasy to think that the medium could be reformed, given the nature of the technology. It is most efficient at

centralized, top-down usage which imposes imagery and programs people accordingly. The imagery remains in them and then they imitate the imagery. It is a powerful brainwashing and homogenizing machine. It's ludicrous to think that you and I or our friends are going to suddenly get control of this medium and turn everybody into meditating philosophers. The real question is not whether you can put through one or two good things on television; the real question is what are the overall effects of the technology.

**Ingram:** Let's talk about virtual reality.

**Mander:** I've never experienced virtual reality. I'm very skeptical about it. I think it's like every other technology in the sense that it has some entertainment value and maybe it has some interesting uses. I've heard that a new use for virtual reality programs is in training bomber pilots. Aside from such uses, which I find disturbing, what annoys me is the way virtual reality is embraced and celebrated by those who ought to be smart enough to see their way out of this technological maze.

**Ingram:** You mean the new age crowd.

**Mander:** Yes, it's such a sign that the new age has misunderstood something about itself. Proponents of the new age place primary value on the expansion of human consciousness toward some apparently higher level of understanding. They regard human beings as the ultimate expression of evolution, and they regard themselves as the explorers or the astronauts of human consciousness, trying to develop human abilities and live up to their maximum human potential. Such a view justifies any technological or even political development if it somehow is supportive of the drive toward expanding human consciousness. That's why the new age so favors space exploration and almost any other technology that offers new games, new ideas, new capabilities for human expression without any sense of the political or social consequences.

For example, a lot of new age proponents claim to celebrate Indians but they're truly celebratory only of what they think is Indian mysticism, without any appreciation of where that comes from, how that's rooted in community, in the earth, and in egalitarianism. Their interest in Indian spirituality attaches no importance to the political situation that native peoples face on the planet. If the knowledge of native peoples is going to be preserved, then you have to get involved politically to help them. And new age types are not interested in that; they're interested in skimming what they regard as the cream—the mystical aspects, the peyote rituals, or maybe the art. This is just personal aggrandizing, ego-oriented self-indulgence. It is politically right-wing and very counterproductive to the ideals of a survivable, sustainable world, and healthy human consciousness. It sustains a value system that is causing the problems. That kind of new age thinking is, to me, revolting.

**Ingram:** There are some who say that there is nothing which is not sacred, that all of existence is just a grand manifestation of life in its various forms, and even if it's playing out its swan song, that is part of the sacred as well.

**Mander:** To say everything is sacred implies that everything is acceptable, which merely permits whatever situation exists to continue existing, and leaves it to other forces to change that situation.

**Ingram:** Do you think it's possible to work to relieve suffering wherever one sees it, while adhering to the view that everything is sacred? That our work to effect change, relieve suffering, and the suffering itself are part of the great picture of life unfolding — part of the same whole?

**Mander:** Well, you're asking if we can say that nuclear energy is sacred because it's a further manifestation of creation, and still work against nuclear energy. I don't know. As a practical matter, I don't adopt that view. I don't find it a particularly useful way of thinking. Instead, I think about it in the sense used by Native American and other native aboriginal societies: an integrated understanding and relationship with other life which is honored and maintained. When people in the rain forest come up against a dam, they are not going to look at that dam and say, "This is a further sacred manifestation of creation." They're going to look at it and say, "This kills life. This destroys life. This is against the earth." I think this is a much more helpful way of viewing the matter than to say that all things are sacred. What matters to me most is how people view sacredness in light of their activities. Native peoples' view of the sacred involves a value judgment concerning what is OK and not OK to do.

**Ingram:** Randy Hayes, president of Rainforest Action Network, told me that Native Americans might interchange the term "sacred" with the concept of "functional" or "useful."

**Mander:** I was at a conference that considered the relevance of native spirituality and native ceremonies to non-native communities. You know how, in the beginning of a conference, you go around in a circle and say who you are? Our tendency is to say something like, "I'm Jerry Mander, and I work on such and such."

**Ingram:** Yes, when we are asked to say who we are, we usually say what we do.

**Mander:** Right. Well, a woman from one of the Canadian Indian groups took forty-five minutes to describe who she is. She started with her great-grandparents and described where they lived. Some of them were river people, some were mountain people, some were bear people, some came from the other side of the mountains. Some were ocean people. Then she spoke about what she knew about the other ancestors in the area, who they were, what they were like. Then she said that all of those people are her. That was just the historical part. There was a spirit part as well, which had to do with what she does in the world right now and how that is an amalgamation of all those ancestors. What I'm getting at is when you ask who she is, she is telling you something that has to do with her ancestors, with nature, with her community and the way that community has related to that place.

She was saying that you can't talk about spirituality as if it's a codified system, because spirituality comes from conditions existing in the place where all those integrated relationships are manifested. The result of all that is spirituality. When she addressed how we could work toward relating to native spirituality, she was saying that the work lies in preserving the community conditions by which spirituality arises. We seem to have it backward. In the absence of the sacred, anything goes, because we're completely spun off, unrooted, with no

sense of consequences, no family, no community, no nothing.

**Ingram:** Well, we do live in a time of tremendous alienation. Life is so terrifying that many people find solace in watching television or playing their video games. Certain technologies serve as drugs. How are we to take those away and replace them with anything else?

**Mander:** These technologies do act as drugs. They are what society offers to make up for what has been lost. In return for family, community, a relationship to a larger, deeper vision, society offers television, drugs, food, noise, high speed, and unconsciousness. Not only are those the things that are available, but those are the things that keep you from knowing that there's anything else available. It's easy to see why people go for those things and why they become addicted to them, because each one offers some element of satisfaction. Watching television, for instance, keeps you from thinking about other things, it passes the time, it provides "entertainment," it can make you laugh sometimes. It tells you a little bit about what seems to be happening in the world, although it discourages any relationship you might have to it. Now if you're asking how we might change that pattern, I can only say that you have to create alternative visions; you have to get people to experience what they've lost.

**Ingram:** But as you described in your book, within a couple of years, the Dene and Inuit cultures were decimated by the introduction of television. Why is it that watching "Dallas" on television was more appealing than traditional modes of entertainment?

**Mander:** It wasn't that their cultures were decimated by television. The impact of television was tremendous, and they asked me to come there because they were concerned. That was a sign of consciousness, not unconsciousness. And it was a sign that there was an alternative reality still available to them. That is the difference between native peoples and Western peoples: there are still people who know about what came before, and who know that there's still wild nature available and that they have a relationship to it. Among the native cultures of the world there's still a memory and a philosophical base for resistance.

As to why some people don't resist and are done in by it, I'd say it results from a complex of factors. Politically, they're overpowered. Technology overpowers them; they're not only being invaded by television, they're being invaded by oil companies, and in the case of the Dene, by the Canadian government, which wanted them to turn into Canadians to become workers in the oil fields. They are constantly told that the way they are is not OK and that they should be another way. We look at them and we ask how they could give up what they have, but we already gave it up. We're uprooted, alienated Westerners feeling vindicated by the fact that now the Indians are also going for it. We look at them and say, "They're going for the snowmobiles and they're dropping the dog teams, and they're dropping the traditional communications in favor of television."

Listen, technology has an inherent appeal. It's shiny, it's new; human beings have a genetic programming that relates to new things with great curiosity. When we lived in relationship to nature, we needed to know when something new was coming along that would affect us. So there is an innate human response to something new. In addition to that, machines are very interesting: they announce that they are going to do something, such as bring an animal down

from four hundred yards away or move water from here to there or take you someplace much faster, and they do those things. So it's very natural, when faced with a new technology, to think, "How great; this is terrific; let's use this." But once you use it you begin to understand the downside. In our culture, it's taken a very long time to understand the downside. My experience is that native people see the downside faster.

**Ingram:** I've heard that in the United States, some of the young Indians who went off to cities became disillusioned and went back to the reservations. Is there a resurgence of traditional ways among the young Indians?

**Mander:** Yes, it's a great phenomenon, and it's particularly encouraging to see in the United States because these are the people who have been most influenced by outside forces. There is a collaboration in the United States among the young and the old. It's the middle that is sort of gone, the ones who were ripped away from their families when they were young and [forced into Bureau of Indian Affairs schools](#), where they were not allowed to speak their native language, were not allowed to wear long hair, had to wear only Western clothes. This happened all over the United States; they were separated from their families, instilled with a terrible self-hatred, forcibly trained in Christianity and Mormonism. Mormonism teaches that white is good, and that you become white by giving up being Indian.

**Ingram:** In your book, you describe corporations as entities that enjoy the rights of an individual but not the responsibilities. Will you elaborate on this?

**Mander:** Up till now, corporations have not been critiqued as technological forms, or in terms of their inherent characteristics which would reveal why they behave as they do. The common wisdom said that we can get corporations to behave more responsibly if the people in the corporations could be educated in better values and saving the earth and so on. This is naive. The corporate form predetermines the way corporations have to behave. In order to sustain themselves, and be financially viable to banking and other institutions, corporations must produce a profit and they must grow. Profit and growth are absolutely required.

Corporations live in a kind of nether world where they have all the rights and protection accorded individuals by our laws. For example, you can't regulate corporate speech in any way, because they've successfully become "fictional persons" and therefore have the same rights as an individual to free speech. But the difference is that the individual is only able to use handbills and maybe do a little article in a magazine now and then, while the corporations are able to spend a billion dollars in advertising to tell you what to think.

Corporations have many of the rights of human beings: they can own property, they can move, they can speak freely, they can sue if injured. But they have none of the commensurate responsibilities. Communities cannot control them because they can always move to other communities. They do not have *corporeality*; they can't be executed. You can imprison certain people within a corporation if they engage in criminal acts. The corporation itself, however, lives beyond the people in it.

There are two recent examples where you see the difference between the human being and the corporation and what the inherent problems are when a human being tries to behave

responsibly. These are the cases of the Exxon Valdez, where a tanker spilled oil all over a pristine wildlife area of Alaska, and the Union Carbide case, where a chemical explosion in Bhopal, India, killed 2,000 people and injured 200,000. In both instances, the chief executives of the corporations were horrified and made public statements expressing their remorse. Union Carbide's chairman of the board said that he was going to devote the rest of his life to making amends for this mistake.

Now when those executives made those statements they did so as feeling human beings. But the corporation cannot permit them to behave like human beings, because in order for the corporation to survive, it needs to grow and it needs to make a profit. According to United States law, if a corporation doesn't behave primarily in the interest of profit, shareholders can sue the management of the corporations for disregarding their rights as shareholders. In both cases, the chief executives retracted their initial statements. They said that they hadn't been responsible and that they were going to fight all the lawsuits. The chairman of Union Carbide said later that he had "overreacted" initially. At first, they behaved as human beings; later on they realized they were part of the machine and that the purposes of the machine were different from the purposes of the human being. We see it every day in environmental issues. Corporations are talking green now. But it's all just public relations.

**Ingram:** In your book you say that the corporation is lying when it presents itself as environmentally concerned; if it did feel much responsibility toward nature, it would not need to use expensive commercials saying it did.

**Mander:** Corporations will advertise whatever isn't true because if it were true they wouldn't have the image problem in the first place. If the corporation were a good citizen it wouldn't need to say it is. The truth is that corporations generally act in direct opposition to nature because profit is based on the transmogrification of raw materials into a new, more salable form.

**Ingram:** Let's talk about the global merger of economies, such as GATT [the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade], the EEC [the European Economic Community], and so on.

**Mander:** In addition to the EEC, there are plans for the U.S./Canada Free Trade Agreement, the U.S./Mexico Free Trade Agreement, the North America Free Trade Agreement, a Western Hemisphere Free Trade Agreement, a Southeast Asia Free Trade Agreement, and a Pacific Basin Free Trade Agreement. Eventually there will be an East/West Free Trade Agreement.

All such mergers are coordinated to maximize the profits of the largest corporations. With GATT, local standards for health, safety, wages, standards for milk, regulations against pesticides or radiation, or any level of local control would be sacrificed to the central agreement. If California wants to ban pesticides, it won't be permitted to do so under the trade agreements. In Japan there is a law that prohibits large department stores from locating on the same block as neighborhood groceries—mom and pop stores. It's a way of preserving the traditional, small-scale economy that still exists in Japan. But in the GATT agreement, the United States is seeking the elimination of this law, so that if a big department store wants to buy up a block, then you let the market determine whether that's going to happen or not. All the protections for small-scale, self-sufficient economy are going to be lost. What you get from

GATT and all these other agreements is the smoothing of the path for the largest corporate giants. They will be outside the control of any neighborhood, city, state, or even nation.

**Ingram:** You describe the last two uncharted wildernesses as space and genetics. Do you also include consciousness itself as a wilderness that is uncharted?

**Mander:** One can say that the human mind is a kind of wilderness that is uncharted. But in speaking of space and genetics, I mean that they are the last ones the corporate world intends to turn into industrial forms that can be made into profit.

Now television, of course, is also deeply engaged in this “commodifying” process, the purpose being to commodify feeling, consciousness, desire, awareness. The human mind has already been grist for the mill even before the genetic structure and space. Consciousness has already been reshaped to fit and accept the commodification of nature. The invasion of the mind happened a long time ago. The reshaping of the mind is what advertising is there to do. Television does this. The media does this. These are more effective tools than we used to have. Advertising enters human feelings and offers them up in images. Are you pretty enough? Are you cool enough? Are you lively enough?

**Ingram:** Have you phoned that person you love today?

**Mander:** Right. Those are all related to your feelings. They are presented in images; you then react to *yourself*; and then you have to pay something to get back the feelings that they took from you. It’s an amazing process.

**Ingram:** In your descriptions of the West Edmonton Mall, EPCOT Center, and San Francisco as a theme park, you suggest that the advent of these artificially controlled environments—technotopias—is worse than the ecological breakdown that we face.

**Mander:** Right. What you have in those theme lifestyle communities and the mega-malls are utopian creations of life as synthetic re-creations. I try to make the comparison between those places and domed existences in space.

**Ingram:** Terraforming, you call it in the book.

**Mander:** Right, the bubble existences in space. The West Edmonton Mall is a domed city in space. While EPCOT Center doesn’t have a roof on it, every blade of grass and every animal is preconceived for its mix in the experience. It’s the ultimate suburb. They envision a life where there’s no relationship to nature at all and where everything has been done to destroy one’s sense of connection to anything outside of what the corporation and the technological world can provide. And it’s done in a way to make it seem very attractive. EPCOT Center’s book about itself says that its purpose is to get people comfortable with the highly technologized change that is going to take place in the future. These visions are basically a sales system for a future where all human experiences are reduced to push-button experiences or glorious travels with packs on your back through space and time. They envision a general make-over of the world, where authentic places, such as England—old England, or old Norway—would be re-created entertainments of themselves, like theme parks. That’s why I use the phrase “San Francisco, the Theme Park,” because this is already happening here, but it’s also beginning to

happen everywhere else; authentic places are beginning to advertise their features in order to promote tourism. They become commodified versions of themselves.

**Ingram:** The irony is that we are trying to re-create what we've been busy destroying all these years. It's like the example you give of advertisements on television selling us back our feelings of connection. Now we'll have to buy back Eden—in a dome.

**Mander:** Yes, people will have nature inside domes, but little nature outside anymore.

**Ingram:** I saw in the European edition of the *Wall Street Journal* a front page story about a scientist's idea to blow up the moon in order to improve the atmosphere on earth. In your book, you described such technological solutions as the proposed plan, supported by the National Research Council which advises Congress, to spray hundreds of thousands of tons of iron powder onto the seas in order to stimulate algae growth and soak up the carbon dioxide, as the forests have done previously.

**Mander:** All of those solutions are insane because they're so disconnected from any sense of the ramifications of drastically altering an ecosystem. But they're driven by the profit motive, because those are the solutions that work inside the capitalist system.

Gary Coates, a professor at Kansas State University, makes the case that these steps toward re-created life in artificial environments, genetic engineering, space travel, bubble domes in space, and lifestyle parks are really examples of our being already lost in space. We're already adrift like astronauts, without a sense of groundedness, without knowing where we came from, which way is up, which way is down. And what we're really trying to do in all this is to get back to Eden. We're trying to go back to the source. The loss of Eden is the operative myth of Western society.

**Ingram:** Let's talk about some of the stereotypes and formulas that affect perceptions about native peoples, such as the idea that they are always fighting each other and that they have an inability to govern themselves.

**Mander:** In the West, our view of Indians goes back to the debate several centuries ago in the Catholic Church over whether or not Indians were even human beings. The Church was trying to determine whether Indians had souls and were therefore worth saving, or whether they should be slaughtered or made into slaves. There was never a thought given to whether Indians had validity on their own terms. One can quickly see the analogy to nature, because right now people are beginning to talk about whether nature has validity on its own terms, rather than being in service to human beings.

In the case of Western industrial countries, Indians are viewed fundamentally as of the past, out of date; primitive in the negative sense, meaning unable to sustain governments or societies, unable to think great thoughts, contribute to Western ideas, or leave behind beautiful architecture. They're criticized in all the areas that we think we are good in. But there is substantial evidence that the philosophical basis of the U.S. Constitution comes from the Great Binding Law of the Iroquois, which goes back at least to the 1500s; the Iroquois say it goes back a thousand years before that. The Great Binding Law is a system of egalitarian, federated governance with absolute democracy and strong checks and balances, and it actually continues

to exist in some ways at present. Now the U.S. Constitution must have borrowed many of those principles because there were no other democratic and federated models available in the world at that time. In my book, I went to a lot of trouble to talk about Indian governmental systems.

I also talk about Indian economic systems, because the rhetoric of Western society is that technology and Western forms of development deliver people from suffering and slavery. A little investigation of traditional native economies shows that people were able to survive in most parts of the world, certainly in the temperate zones, but even in the extreme zones, with very little work, maximum pleasure and fun, and a minimum of technology.

**Ingram:** And they worked only three to five hours a day.

**Mander:** On the average. And that is when they worked. There were lots of months when there was no work at all.

**Ingram:** What did they do during all those hours and days off?

**Mander:** They hung out. They flirted. They played a lot of music. They slept. They seemed to have a good time. They related. There was a lot of community life. But who knows? I mean, you'd have to go into a Stone Age community now where some of this activity is still alive. People who do go in say that they have a great time hanging out. Not everything is perfect. There are all kinds of intrigues and taboos and so on, things you're not allowed to do and things you try to get away with, and there are retributions. But it's a very intense personal experience.

**Ingram:** They must feel a heightened sense of belonging.

**Mander:** That's what they've got. See, the Western view of Indians is based upon no contact with Indians. The average American has never met an Indian, except maybe a drunk Indian in the city. Indians live in wilderness areas for the most part—in areas where we aren't—so we don't really interact with them, and they are not represented in the media in any accurate fashion. The media presentations have all been stereotypical. First, Indians were presented as savages; then it was as noble savages. Both are inaccurate. They are really just ordinary people living in an ordinary society that has certain structures which have been very workable. So our awareness of Indians is just fantasy. We really have no way of knowing what their societies were like.

The native tradition is a philosophical tradition. Native societies sustained themselves successfully for thousands of years because they had developed a philosophical system rooted in their relationship to nature.

**Ingram:** Are these primarily oral traditions?

**Mander:** They're strictly oral traditions. They don't believe in codification in the same way that we do. [Oren Lyons, an Onondaga leader](#), stresses the importance of the oral tradition of law. When the Great Law was written down, it was filled with distortions because it's actually more fluid than that. Everybody gets together and talks it over and figures out what is right in a given situation. If you spend time with Indians you find out a lot about how the oral tradition works, because their memories are incredible. They remember what you say very clearly, for a very long time, and without the use of tape recorders or notes.

**Ingram:** What accounts for that?

**Mander:** It's because they are awake in that process. They are listening. I believe the oral tradition trains listening. For instance, if you have a digital watch, you don't have to figure out time in the same way. It's all done for you. Calculators destroy the ability to calculate. If we have systems of recording what goes on, then we're not paying as much attention and we don't use our memory. I've seen that so often. In the mid-sixties I was involved in a meeting down on the Hopi reservation. I had gone there to discuss something and everybody sat in a circle and the meeting took the entire day to deal with one subject. When the meeting began, all these people were sitting around the circle with their eyes closed. I thought they were asleep. It became apparent to me only much later in the meeting that they were absolutely awake, and they heard everything that was being said. And not only that, they had a lot to say about everything that was being said, but they had their say very slowly, in turn, at great length, and with absolute, vivid recall.

**Ingram:** In your book, you say that one of the reasons we're not told the truth about Indians in history is that we don't want to face our own guilt, it is not considered good television to show what we did to the people of this land when we came here. I heard that when test audiences were shown a version of "Dances With Wolves" that ended with the slaughter of the tribe, it got a terrible reaction, so they changed it to have the tribe getting away.

**Mander:** Well, I was grateful for no slaughter in the film.

**Ingram:** My point is that we don't want to see what we did in the past; moreover, it's not an old story, it's happening all over the planet—here and now.

**Mander:** Americans are the most resistant to admitting their flaws. Lately, many nations have apologized for various acts. The Germans have apologized to the Israelis. The Russians have apologized to the Poles. The Poles have apologized to their people. These have been formal apologies; they've been negotiated and resolved. The Indians are asking that we apologize for the past as well as for the present, and that we return a lot of the lands we stole from the Indians, because the land is crucial for traditional cultures to survive.

It's time we did that, and if we did, it would surely benefit us at least as much as the Indians. I'm not speaking only of the psychic relief—letting go of that guilt—but, more important, the benefits of sustaining cultures and communities that still have access to an ancient earth-based knowledge that we have lost, a knowledge of the appropriate way for human beings to live on the planet.

### KOYAANISQATSI

**ko.yan.nis.qatsi** (from the Hopi Language) **n.** 1. crazy life. 2. life in turmoil. 3. life out of balance. 4. life disintegrating. 5. a state of life that calls for another way of living.