

***Making Democracy Work for People and the Planet - A MAHB  
Dialogue with Author, Humanist Frances Moore Lappe***

**Geoffrey Holland**



Sharing our World | Photo courtesy of the author

*Frances Moore Lappe is an American researcher, author and social change activist in the area of food and democratic policy.*

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*“In this moment on our planet the opposite of evil is no longer goodness. It is courage. Goodness without courage is no longer good enough.”*

**Geoffrey Holland: You gained notoriety more than two decades ago with the launch of your now famous book, *Diet for a Small Planet*. Can you talk about the important lessons in that book for the way we eat and the way we live our lives?**

*Frances Moore Lappe: The core lesson of *Diet for Small Planet* is that we humans have been living in the false frame of scarcity. Presuming the world is lacking, we become fixated on production and cannot see the systems we create that are actually creating scarcity out of plenty.*

At the time I wrote *Diet for a Small Planet*, the experts were telling us that we’d run out of food. Pouring over the figures in the UC Berkeley library, I realized that there was more than enough food in the world to make us all chubby! It’s just that we were creating political and economic systems of concentrated power that reduce potential supply and block millions from accessing the abundance.

Soon after the book came out, I started saying that hunger is not caused by a scarcity of food but by a scarcity of democracy. For me, “democracy” is shorthand for humans coming together and making decision ways in which we each have a voice in meeting our needs and furthering our values. The scarcity of that democracy is the underlying crisis.

Also, one core theme of the book is that in every choice we make, we either contribute to the problem or the solution. As we learn about and make dietary choices that are best for our bodies and for the earth, we become part of the solution. I do believe that changing something as personal as the way we eat, with the goal of creating a world that works for all, is a daily reminder of our power.

**GH: Why is ‘eating lower on the food chain’ a big part of responsible planetary stewardship?**

FML: A meat-centered diet is the least efficient way of feeding ourselves imaginable. Note that we use three quarters of all agricultural land to produce animal foods, but they supply us with only 17% of our calories. Imagine the waste! For example, in the meat we consume, us humans get just 3 percent of all the calories that go into feeding beef cattle. Thus, eating lower on the food chain already places much less burden on the planet.

Eating animal food has enormous climate-change implications. Animal food production overuses land that could be storing carbon. Livestock also contribute enormously to greenhouse gas emissions. Overall, livestock contribute 14.5% - 20% of all human generated greenhouse gas emissions. The emissions impact of eating plant protein is just 1/20<sup>th</sup> to 1/50<sup>th</sup> the impact of eating beef protein.

Livestock production also contributes to the overuse of water, which is increasingly under stress. Plus, the pesticides and fertilizers used to produce so much animal food contribute greatly to the degradation of water. Finally, some experts report that livestock production is the greatest threat to biodiversity in the world.

**GH: How does the human compunction for consumption exacerbate the conflict between ourselves and the natural world?**

FML: I would argue that there is no innate proclivity to overconsume. We humans are influenced by our social context. Much of our consumption reflects our need, fed by incessant advertising, to establish status with our peers. Being accepted in our tribe is of overwhelming importance to our species. Clearly, the structure of our peculiar type of market economy means that there is a very weak relationship between consumption and life satisfaction. So much of our conflict with the natural world is a product of the dominant economic mindset, driven by fear of exclusion.

**GH: How important is gender equality to the process of building a sustainable future?**

FML: Very. Our dominant cultures are still largely wasting the insights and talents of females. On farming, I've always been intrigued by the realization that the movement toward an ecological approach actually helps empower women and therefore balance gender roles. In Africa, for example, it is very hard for females to gain access to credit. Fortunately, agroecology, because it does not depend on purchased pesticides and fertilizers, balances the scales. Women are not disadvantaged by lacking access to credit when they buy these inputs. Therefore, some of the most interesting and inspiring examples of ecological agriculture in the world are led by women.

**GH: What would be worthy fundamentals for building a sustainable human society? How do 'Dignity for all' and 'Shared Responsibility' fit in?**

FML: More and more I've come to believe that the concept of dignity is central. It is necessary for moving beyond the seeming deadlock between the conservative notion of freedom--defined as letting the market rule-- and the liberal goal of social justice. Dignity is a value that I believe has not been sullied or captured by one ideological bent.

Dignity is hard to define, which might be a good thing. I think people understand that dignity involves having a voice, being taken seriously as an actor and contributor--not just as a recipient. Therefore, I think dignity is a very helpful goal in designing and creating democratic forms of governance and economic life that enable the voice of each of us to be heard.

I would go so far as to say that the very essence of democracy is dignity. I think it's what our nation's founders were getting at, in the Declaration of Independence, when they included the phrase "all men are created equal". They certainly did not mean equal in economic wherewithal or intelligence or strength. They meant equal in basic human value. That, to me, is dignity.

**GH: The current world human population is about 7.6 billion, likely increasing to 10 or more billion by mid-century. Does shaping a future that is life affirming and ecologically sustainable require the stabilization, followed by a gradual reduction, of our planet's human population?**

FML: First, note that population growth has stabilized in most parts of the world. We must stop thinking about population growth as an independent variable and see it as closely related to the empowerment of women and broader progress in equitable development. The very process of creating fair economic progress and gender equity slows population growth. Fertility and population growth rates have dropped dramatically; so today countries with high fertility rates are home to only 9% of the world's population. They include only seven poor countries, plus 9 states in India. Fertility rates decline as women gain access to education, health care and employment. That's what we must focus on to avoid projected, unsustainable population growth.

**GH: You write that saving our planet from ourselves requires overcoming our natural resistance to rules. Can you talk about that?**

FML: Actually, in *Ecomind* I argue the opposite. Rules and boundaries, spoken and unspoken, give our lives shape and structure. Rules also offer meaning and a sense of purpose and connectedness to others – – think of the 10 Commandments or the Bill of Rights or wedding vows. Every sort of human activity – – from marriage to mergers, from driving to dancing, from bed making to baseball – – involve rules. Even Little tykes are sensitive to playing by the rules. Perhaps all humans, even Americans (despite our supposed passion for “freedom”) love rules.

The question is not “rules or no rules.” Human beings have a deep sense of fairness, and we like rules that enhance this value. Right now, we need rules more than ever, to protect nature from the disastrous effects of climate change and other forms of degradation. I think most people on earth can grasp that. So what matters most is whether we perceive ourselves as living in a democracy where we each have a voice in creating rules that are fair to all. Thus, the deeper problem is lack of that confidence in our political system, now captured by private wealth in many places by those who benefit from hindering the rules meant to protect the Earth.

**GH: Public policy over much of the world is driven by the money and the political power of bankers, billionaires, and corporate profiteering. How do we get from the corrupt political and economic system we have now to a genuine democracy that puts the needs of people first?**

FML: We start where we are. In the United States we have dug ourselves into a deep hole by allowing concentrated wealth to exercise enormous influence over our political system. However, most thrilling to me right now is that, for the first time in my life, there is a strong, rising Democracy Movement. It is bipartisan. It is a movement of movements. What I mean by that is that organizations and individuals focused on a particular issue, such as the environment, are now seeing that, without democracy system-reform, they cannot achieve their goals. That’s why organizations as different as Greenpeace, Sierra Club, Common Cause, NAACP, and Communications Workers of America have come together to create a broad coalition for democracy reforms. It is called Democracy Initiative, now with about 70 organizations involved. People all over the country are demanding voting rights, money out of politics, and an end to partisan gerrymandering.

**GH: The sub-title of your book, *Ecomind* is *Changing the Way We Think to Get the World We Want*. Can you talk about how we need to change the way we think?**

FML: There is widespread proof that human beings create the world according to deep belief systems, which then create mental frames. Literally, we cannot see outside of these preset frames. The biggest challenge right now is helping identify those frames that are destructive and creating more life-serving ways of seeing. Among the themes in my life’s work is moving, as I’ve said, from the frame of scarcity to the frame of alignment. In other words, we can let go of the

notion that we've hit the earth's limits. More accurately, our economies are not aligned with the nature of nature, that is, the laws that allow regeneration.

Another piece of this reframing has to do with discarding the notion of "solving by dissection." Rather, the science of ecology is teaching us to see everything in relation to all else. Therefore, the ripples of our actions go much further than we'd ever imagined.

**GH: You write about choosing civic courage. How does that idea figure into restoring governance in America to something that would qualify as genuine democracy?**

FML: I'm particularly grateful that you asked me about this point. Often, we hear that our primary human problem is that we are too individualistic, too self-centered. I argue almost the opposite: The larger problem is that we are too social. By nature, it's very hard for us to break with the pack. Yet, because of the mindsets described here, the dominant pack is now "heading over Victoria Falls" to disaster. Still, it is hard for most of us to break free. This is where courage comes in. It means thinking of fear no longer as a stop sign or a warning that we are in the wrong place at the wrong time. The sensation of fear may mean simply that we are called upon to step out and be different from others.

Perhaps we can come to rethink our fear sensations in this extraordinary time and use them to be alive on this planet. Here is a little trick that's helped me. I myself do not like to be different from those around me but when I know I have to speak out and my heart starts to pound I used to silently put myself down, saying to myself "you wimp." Some time ago, it occurred to me that I should reframe my pounding heart not as a sign of weakness but as my inner applause cheering me on.

In my most recent book, *Daring Democracy*, with Adam Eichen, we end with the observation that in this moment on our planet the opposite of evil is no longer goodness. It is courage. Goodness without courage is no longer good enough.

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*Frances Moore Lappé is an American researcher and author in the area of food and democracy policy. She is the author of 19 books including the three-million copy, 1971 [Diet for a Small Planet](#) that [the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History](#) describes as "one of the most influential political tracts of the times." She is the co-founder of three national organizations that explore the roots of hunger, poverty and environmental crises, as well as solutions now emerging worldwide through what she calls Living Democracy. Her most recent books include *Daring Democracy: Igniting Power, Meaning, and Connection for the America We Want*, coauthored with Adam Eichen, and *World Hunger: 10 Myths*. with Joseph Collins.*

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