

Larry L. Rasmussen, Union Theological Seminary



Larry L. Rasmussen is the Reinhold Niebuhr Professor Emeritus of Social Ethics at Union Theological Seminary, New York. His volume *Earth Community, Earth Ethics* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996) won the prestigious Grawemeyer Award in Religion of 1997. From 1990–2000, Rasmussen served as comoderator of the World Council of Churches' Justice, Peace, Creation unit. His most recent book is

Earth-honoring Faith: Religious Ethics in a New Key (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

Humankind is on a venture for which we are not well-prepared — life in a new geological age. Given the name Anthropocene by scientists because of the domination of cumulative human activities, this age succeeds the late Holocene, the era that has hosted all human religions and made possible all human civilizations to date.

In Bill McKibben's phrase, ours is a "tough, new planet" and our collective crisis is not so much an environmental as a civilizational one. How do we make the hard transition from an industrial–technological civilization with no durable future to an ecological one? How do we undertake what Thomas Berry called the "Great Work" of moving from the largely destructive presence of human beings in the community of life toward a stance of mutual enhancement with the rest of life? How do we become a viable species on an already diminished and vulnerable planet? What are the roles and responsibilities of religious communities in this task?

Key Transitions for a New Moral Framework

In my recent book, *Earth-honoring Faith: Religious Ethics in a New Key*, I lay out the transitions that are needed:

A *perspectival transition* — in which we understand ourselves as a species among species, no longer inhabiting the same planet *Homo sapiens* have known for a very long while. Altered perception includes a certain reenchantment that counters what Max Weber called the "disenchantment" of the world, by which nature was rendered little more than a repository of resources for human use. Reenchantment restores to human consciousness and feeling that nature is a community of subjects, the bearer of mystery and spirit, the ethos of the cosmos,

and the womb of all the life we will ever know.

An *economic transition* — in which economics and ecology merge to become “eco-nomics.” Eco-nomics embeds all economic activity within the ecological limits of nature’s economy and pursues the three-part agenda of production, relatively equitable distribution, and ecological regenerativity. Growth as a good is not precluded, but growth must be ecologically sustainable and regenerative for the long term. It must reduce rather than increase the ecosocial instability that large wealth and income gaps generate, and it must bolster rather than undermine the capacity of local and regional communities and cultures to nurture and draw wisely upon their cultural and biological diversity. In all events, “the first law of economics must be the preservation of the Earth economy.” (Thomas Berry, “Conditions for Entering the Ecozoic Era,” *The Ecozoic Reader* vol. 2:2, Winter 2002: 10.)

A *demographic transition* — in which human population levels off or slowly declines and the negative impact of a high population on the rest of nature gives way to mutual enhancement with other life.

A *polity transition* — in which the basic conception of democratic capitalism shifts, if indeed democratic capitalism is retained. It shifts from a society that fosters virtually unrestricted liberty to acquire and enjoy wealth — in which the right to property and its uses is more basic than the role of government as an equalizing force — to a society that fosters the common good through the process of democratizing social, political, and economic power in such a way that the primary goods of the commons — earth, air, fire, water, light — are cared-for requisites of a shared good, a good for both present and future generations of humankind and otherkind.

A *policy transition* — in which policies are as integrated as nature itself. Climate change, poverty, energy, food, and water are all interlaced in the planetary economy. They, and the wicked problems they represent, cannot be siloed and targeted separately for either analysis or solution. Integrated policies need to mirror the systemic character of nature’s own integral functioning, just as human technologies must cohere with the technologies of the natural world (Thomas Friedman, “Connecting Nature’s Dots,” *New York Times Week in Review*, 23 August, 2009: 8).

A *religious and moral transition* — one that recognizes planetary health as the primary and human well-being derivative, so that the center of ethics shifts from the ego to the ecosphere.

Human creatures, embedded as nature *in nature*, are inseparable from the rest of nature — from which we have evolved, upon which we depend, and whose fate we share. This makes planet-keeping the common calling of all religions, stretching the moral framework beyond a fixation on the human species to include responsibility for the ecosocietal, the biophysical, and the geoplanetary.

The Earth-honoring Faith Project at Ghost Ranch

At Ghost Ranch, a retreat and conference center set amid the red and yellow mesas of northern New Mexico and made famous through the paintings of Georgia O’Keeffe, we launched Earth-honoring Faith as a decade-long project to develop congregation and community-based theological education around compelling social issues that are vital concerns for religious communities. Each year, seminars examine a different dimension of the ecoreligious practice:

- Energy and How We Live (2008)
- Ritual and Loving the Earth Fiercely (2009)
- Water and a Baptismal Life (2010)
- This Planet as Paradise: Beauty and Ecological Restoration (2011)
- Food, Glorious Food: The Eucharist and Your Foodshed (2012)

The Earth-honoring Faith project models lay-led and clergy-led theological education that draws on a wide range of expertise, bringing together scientists, artists, community practitioners and elders, policy makers, and worship leaders to engage in mutual learning on a critical issue for a changing planet and its religious communities. We call upon multiple sources of expertise — science, the humanities, worship and the arts, theological and religious traditions and practices, the experience of historically underrepresented peoples and traditions, and community organizing. Our 2013 seminar, “A Desert Faith for a Desert Time,” will bring together:

- Terry Tempest Williams, Annie Clark Tanner Scholar in environmental humanities, University of Utah, and author of *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* (Pantheon, 2000), *Red: Passion and Patience in the Desert* (Pantheon, 2001), and *When Women Were Birds: Fifty-four Variations on Voice* (Sara Crichton Books, 2012)
- William P. Brown, McPheeters Professor of Old Testament, Columbia Seminary, and author of *The Seven Pillars of Creation: The Bible, Science, and the Ecology of Wonder* (Oxford University Press, 2010)

- Talitha Arnold, senior pastor of United Church of Santa Fe, and author of *Worship for Vital Congregations* (Pilgrim Press, 2007) and *A Desert Faith for a Time of Global Warming* (forthcoming)
- Larry Rasmussen, project organizer and author of *Earth-honoring Faith: Religious Ethics in a New Key*

Multiple Intelligences for Cultivating Earth-honoring Faith

Throughout our work, we use multiple “intelligences” to explore old and new terrain. We craft a symbol-rich setting: “Water and a Baptismal Life” held all sessions in the presence of water, including sessions at and in the Chama River and around a pool constructed in the worship space. “Food, Glorious Food” used an “at table” motif, based in early Christian and Greco-Roman meals, that moved seamlessly from study and discussion at roundtables into worship at the same table.

Field trips and community practices engage another dimension of intelligence. During “Food, Glorious Food,” we spent a day at an organic farm cared for by farmers whose Buddhism helps shape the farm as their way of life. For “This Planet as Paradise: Beauty and Ecological Restoration,” we gathered at Christ in the Desert Monastery to explore the theology and practice of a Benedictine sense of beauty, as well as to partake in a geology and farming lesson in the red-rock mesa country of the remote monastery.

During each seminar, we choose an “anchor book” as another vehicle of learning, inviting the author as one of our instructors. During “This Planet as Paradise,” Rita Nakashima Brock engaged us using the study of *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire* (coauthored with Rebecca Ann Parker, Beacon Press, 2008). Norman Wirzba joined us for “Food, Glorious Food” with his book *Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), while James Martin-Schramm and his book *Climate Justice: Ethics, Energy, and Public Policy* (Fortress Press, 2010) framed our study during “Energy and How We Live.” The seminar calls participants to study together and engage in extended discussions with the author.

We also cultivate the imagination to develop new or revised religious practices. After the “Water and a Baptismal Life” seminar, one congregation added an additional vow to their baptismal

promises. Each baptism now asks, “As we bless this water of baptism, will you give thanks for God’s gift of water and promise to care for all the waters of creation?” This congregation now celebrates an annual festival of baptism and has selected water issues in the drought-stricken American Southwest as a focus in its environmental ministry. The bulletin for their most recent baptismal festival included this sentence for reflection: “To live a baptized life is always to remember two things — the ones who live downstream from us and the One who is the source of all water and all life.”

Ritualizing practice represents an important way of knowing. During the “Food, Glorious Food” seminar, we reflected on how central, identity-defining meals such as the Eucharist, Seder, or Eid al-Fitr speak to food production, distribution, and nutrition, and how this call might be embodied in the food practices of religious communities. One congregation started two urban community gardens as well as an “edible church yard”; another now hosts beehives and a composter. During its blessing of the composter, the congregation proclaimed, “Trash is a testimony to our beliefs.”

The Earth-honoring Faith project at Ghost Ranch assumes that moving from an industrial–technological civilization to an ecological one on a tough, new planet means that religious communities must undertake a common calling of planet-keeping and “creation justice.” Creation justice calls for an expanded moral universe, one that centers the primal elements — earth, air, fire, and water — as the generative elements of all life. It involves a notion of “neighbor” that includes future generations of both human and other-than-human life. It entails God-talk that encompasses all 13–15 billion years of the universe’s pilgrimage to date and the immense wheeling of 50–100 billion galaxies, each swimming with innumerable stars and planets; God-talk that gathers in all species come and gone, as well as those leaving as we speak; and God-talk that embraces the whole drama of life in all its misery and grandeur. Shorn of the universe, the worship of God is worship of a human species idol.

Earth-honoring Faith assumes that creating new capacities for enhanced responsibilities in an emerging geological age entails learning together via multiple sources and diverse ways of knowing. Some of this involves the retrieval and reformation of what has been earth-honoring in the past, but has since been forgotten or dismissed by modernity. But it also creates new knowledge and new practices tuned to the realities of what Thomas Friedman terms a “hot, flat, and crowded” planet. Not least, the project assumes that exploring the great theme of most religions — death and renewal, birth and rebirth — and undertaking anew the millennial work of religious communities — that of shaping human character and conduct in fundamental ways for a viable way of life — is the journey of theological education now.