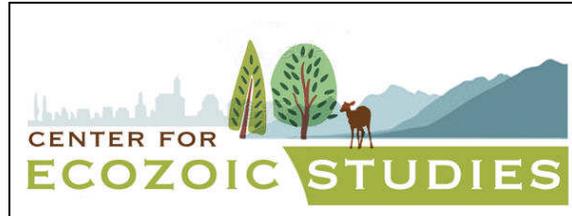


CES Monthly Musings

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*Seeking integral community
in an ecological age*

“Ecozoic” means “community of life.” An “Ecozoic Society” is a life-giving society.

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**The “Ecozoic Era” is a time of mutually enhancing relationships
among humans and the larger community of life.**

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The “Great Work” is bringing into being ecozoic societies.

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In this issue: “Living in Accord with the Rules of Life: A Review of Ellen LaConte’s *Life Rules*” by Herman Greene.



Ellen LaConte

Ellen LaConte has worked freelancing articles, essays and stories for magazines including *The Sun*, *East/West Journal*, *New Perspectives*, *Odyssey*, *Country Journal*, *Countryside*, *Convergence* and *Gaia: A Literary & Environmental Journal*, and working as a stringer for organic gardening magazines, trade journals, newspapers, and advertising publications. Her new book, *Life Rules*, is a meta-synthesis of knowledge gained from thirty years of writing, correspondence with visionaries in diverse environmentally-related fields, extensive research in ecology, economics, evolution, complex systems and sustainability theory, democracy, history, consciousness evolution, organic gardening and farming, and her life experience. www.ellenlaconte.com

LIVING IN ACCORD WITH THE RULES OF LIFE: A REVIEW OF ELLEN LACONTE’S *LIFE RULES*

With clever triple entendre, Ellen LaConte announces in her new book that *Life Rules*: Life rules because it makes our planet habitable; life sets the rules; and in the end life will rule—so we better pay attention. Then she does something I have never seen another writer do, she describes the crisis of civilization and prescribes the antidote, in each case, in terms of ecological principles. She has not only understood Thomas Berry’s idea that the rules by which the human community lives and flourishes are derivative of ecological rules, she explains what this means from the ground up. This is an inversion of the common approach and gives surprising results. For example, with respect to gigantic financial institutions “Too big to fail” becomes “Too big NOT to fail.”

I have had the opportunity to watch *Life Rules: Why So Much is Going Wrong Everywhere at Once and How Life Teaches Us to Fix It* (iUniverse: New York, 2010) come into being over a period of six years. I have been to Ellen’s house and have seen the racks of books she has read in order to write this book. Further I have seen her go through more than three major revisions of her work. What compelled Ellen to write was that she knew we have reached a point of “critical mass” in the size of human impact on Earth and that this was not being presented in an understandable way to the masses. Of course, she knew

people everywhere are exposed to information about this impact. What she was concerned about was that to really understand what is going on involves understanding a great amount of information and concepts and then putting 10,000 and 10,000 together. She has achieved the creative synthesis she sought and has made it all obvious: It's the ecology stupid!

The book begins with the diagnosis—"We are living beyond Earth's means." We don't, however, necessarily see this. We see disturbances—floods, droughts, food riots—and then back to business as usual . . . or is it? I remember she wrestled with how to describe a condition that is an illness but one that doesn't cause us to feel sick all the time and yet grows progressively worse. Many people have compared human impact to cancer. "Humans are a cancer in the Earth system," writes one author. A cancer would fit the description of a disease that begins silently and grows worse. In a flash of insight, Ellen came upon AIDS as the proper analogy. She describes what is happening to humans and to Earth's life systems as suffering from the destruction of Earth's immune systems.

Drawing on James Lovelock's basic insight that life on Earth works in a way that is similar to an organism, she puts humans right into the mix. Life has over hundreds of millions of years learned how to maintain the conditions that make life possible. Life has many checks and balances and self-regulating mechanisms. We humans were born into that, almost unnoticed at first, to become the dominant species—one that has a capacity to break life's rules for a considerable period of time, but not forever. Ellen writes, "Earth's diverse natural communities and ecosystems have . . . worked together to provide the same sort of protective, defensive and healing services for Life as a whole that our immune systems provide for us." To undermine those activities is to undermine life, both human and otherkind. AIDs caught soon enough can be treated but not cured. In a late stage it cannot be treated at all. Ellen believes we are approaching the critical mass that will make the disruptions of life systems untreatable in historical timescales.

She identifies the root cause of critical mass as the global industrial capitalist economy, a shorthand for the way we live, produce and consume. The global economy has gone viral with the pretense that it is larger than life. The economy brings forth its larger than life manifestations as peak oil, climate change, hyper-urbanization, population boom, habitat loss, acidification of oceans, and so forth.

The industrial capitalist economy breaks life's basic rule: Live within Earth's means. There are many warning signs of pending collapse, but the economy powers on through corporate personhood, funny money, and control of the political and cultural systems. It doesn't understand how life works.

In contrast to the global economy, life is self-supporting-in-integral-community. Life is a biocracy and a democracy. Everyone participates and everyone is cared for, locally. That's not the way it is in the human community now. For the first time, most humans are incapable of caring for themselves. They are dependent on the global economy, the one with the funny money. They care about the global economy, but it doesn't care for them—for many in the short run and for all in the medium term. It's not sustainable. Life is. The global economy is breaking life's rules.

Here is where *Life Rules* gets really interesting. Ellen gives marvelous lessons on how life works:

The forest is sung to sleep by spring peepers and whistling bats, haunted by owls, awakened by brilliantly-colored song birds, traversed by deer and bear, moose and mind, fox and quail, snakes and geckos and snails and such other wild things of all shapes and sizes . . . Fungi and ferns, lichens and worms and mosses turn its fallen trees into rich soil that gives life to the next generations of under-story shrubs and ferns and trees. It's [the] forest in which over thousands of years every living thing learned its limits and works *with* Life.

The global industrial economy simplifying all of this complexity and diversity produces monocultures of nature and mind. The economy recognizes no limits. It just grows and grows and grows turning off those antibody-like actions that keep things right-sized and reciprocal within the community of life. In contrast, life doesn't allow any species or even a handful of them to take the lion's share of Earth's resources.

“Even lions don’t really take what we mean by ‘the lion’s share.’” No part of nature can outgrow its natural limits. The human community in thrall to the global economy can . . . until . . . it gets too big NOT to fail.

Life has fluid, adaptable, equitable forms. Civilization has tended toward rigid, hierarchical forms. The pharaohs discovered they could build larger, taller pyramids if the stones rested on a wide square base. Such became the model of society. Today the pharaohs are what David Rothkopf named in his book the *Superclass*—a group of six thousand financially influential people or so in a world of nearly seven billion who are a shadow government running our media, our governments, our militaries, of course our economies, and even a good deal of organized crime and terrorism.

Then Ellen makes a controversial assessment: The prognosis for global solutions to these problems is poor. Her analysis is that the global economy is the basis of civilization and so the superclass as well as many of the best intentioned people understandably try to make the global economic system work better to solve the problems of jobs, living wages, environmental decay and so forth. What people do not see, according to Ellen, is that these efforts will not help. The longer this system stays in place, the worse things will get. Her further analysis is that appealing to actors in the global system is futile because they must play by the rules. You can’t win a political campaign by saying “let’s not grow,” and you certainly can’t run a corporation or bank by advocating less growth. Further the ability of the powers that be to act will become increasingly less. This is illustrated by the age of austerity sweeping nations and states as budget deficits and financial collapses take their toll. And ominously there may well come a point at which their ability to act will be really compromised—when critical mass gives way to collapse.

The fundamental reason why the global solutions will not work, according to Ellen, is that they don’t follow “life’s rules.” We must learn from life how to act: In her words:

**We can obey Life’s rules,
Adopt lifeways that mimic Life’s ways
And by that means live within Earth’s means**

The second part of her book involves how to do this beginning with learning how life has dealt with critical mass disturbances in the past. Dealing with major extinctions, climate crises, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, overpopulation and other events life has evolved by creating diverse ecosystems and living within Earth’s means. Life has learned an *eco*-nomic survival protocol:

- Life’s successful (long-lasting and sustainable) economies waste nothing and produce no waste they cannot consume or sequester.
- They run directly or indirectly on inexhaustible forms of energy, the foremost of which is solar.
- Life’s successful economies are relatively equitable, common good economies.
- Life’s basic units of economic activity are locally self-reliant, interdependent, mixed-species communities.
- Locally self-reliant natural communities organize, regulate and govern themselves within limits set by their environments and by the needs of the larger communities of which they are a part.
- They exchange information and pool intelligence in real time.
- They distribute leadership according to task.
- In hard times, Life’s successful—long-term sustainable—communities cut back.
- Natural communities operate in ways that are inherently organically—democratic.

What is persuasive about Ellen’s teaching is that she illustrates it with examples of how life does this in natural communities. Life is a bottom up affair. It started with bacteria and developed into diverse communities. Bacteria are still essential to life, but now they live in diverse communities even making up a large proportion of our bodies. *Eco*-nomical communities are the basic building blocks of life, not individuals—though individuality is what makes the diverse communities sound. Communities of life are not nouns, they are verbs with the emphasis on bustling activity in living communities. Living can’t be

done alone, it depends on “interviduals.” And these interviduals are grounded in place, partnership, and purpose. There is competition, but even more there is cooperation and conserve-atism.

A place-based community plus an environment is an ecosystem. A local ecosystem is related to other ecosystems much as individuals in a single ecosystem are related in community. To replenish soil, the Amazon rain forest depends on mineral dust from the Sahara and the rain forest, in turn, makes its own contribution to the world by giving off oxygen. Life doesn’t just depend on its environment, it makes and regulates its environment. “Every partner contributes to the well-being of the other partners by regulating and governing its own economic activities in ways that maintain the health of the environment on which it too depends.” We deplore subsistence economies, but subsistence *eco*-nomies are what life is about. Every member of the community is fully employed, for example, in recycling waste from the primary producers (plants) to the consumers of plants to the decomposers. “Maintaining the health of its environment is a natural community’s highest purpose.”

Life’s learnings are in sharp contrast to the learnings of the global economy. Can it be that economics is so at odds with *eco*-nomics, that the global economics is so at odds with life? And if economics is dependent on life, is there any wonder that it should fail? Modern economics which sees life as either given or incidental is an abstraction from Life.

Community <i>Eco</i>-nomics	The Global Economy
Local economies	National & global economies
Self-reliant	Dependent
Mutually supportive	Self-interested
Embedded in place	Abusive/indifferent to place
Resource-based	Money-based
Subsistent	Consumptive
Periodic downtimes	Constant economic activity
Equitable	Inequitable
Solar	Fossil-fueled
Reuse, recycle, renew	Use up, discard, pollute
Waste nothing	Wasteful, polluting
Organized from the bottom up	Organized from the top down
Self-organized	Organized by a few
Adaptive	Inflexible
Self-governed	Professionally governed
Communitarian	Individualistic
Common good	Private gain
Primarily cooperative	Primarily competitive
Share vital information	Withhold vital information
Task-based leadership	Power-based leadership
Self-limiting	Unlimited
Proactive, response-able	Reactive, irresponsible
Resilient	Vulnerable
Sustainable	Unsustainable

In the final section of the book, Ellen considers what human community would be like if it learned from life. More specifically she considers how the human community could respond to the current mass disturbance if it learned from life. We would, she writes,

create clusters, coalitions and networks of regionally interdependent ecological communities that provision themselves and each other using human and natural resources that are regionally available and forms of energy that are inexhaustible or renewable, and, in large measure, regionally produced and cooperatively managed.

[W]e would persuade our leaders . . . to use a significant portion of our remaining fossil fuels and funny-money to pay for the transition to local and regional [eco-nomies.] And then we would . . . [reorganize and govern] ourselves locally and regionally according to Life's organically democratic model.

She proceeds to describe what that would look like and ends by imagining "ecozoic" communities of life. Her ideas about what we would do to act on the principles that she—no "Life"—has laid out are worthy and much to be studied.

In closing, she observes that trying times have brought forth great leaders, including great spiritual leaders who have brought about "great turnings." This is such a time: We must leave the powers of our time and the viral global economy behind. We must choose to obey life's rules and live within Earth's means.

I recommend this book both for individual and group study. It may be purchased at <http://www.ellenlaconte.com/ordering-information-for-life-rules-the-book/> on Amazon and from other sources.

Herman Greene

The mission of CES is to offer a vision, through dialogue, of an ecozoic society and contribute to its realization through research, education and the arts.

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