

YOUR GREAT WORK: ADDRESS TO HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS AT THE ALBUQUERQUE ACADEMY

Larry Rasmussen



The writing is on the wall. The wall itself is the north wall of the Santa Fe farmer's market, and the writing is Wendell Berry's from 2003: "To cherish what remains of Earth and foster its renewal is our only hope."¹ It could have been Terry Tempest Williams's two decades later. "Before we can save this world we are losing, we must first learn how to savor what remains."²

You—sophomores, juniors, seniors—have a Great Work before you. It's to cherish Earth's remains and renew it, to save what we are losing and savor what remains. Save and savor, cherish and renew, is your calling now, your vocation.

Your Great Work comes in two steps.

Step one is to become the very first generation to achieve sustainability for the planet.³ That's how you renew the planet and save the world. My ancestors and my generation put us on the path of unsustainability by means of an extractive global economy powered by fossil fuels and high carbon lifestyles. This began a

¹ From Wendell Berry, *The Art of the Commonplace: Agrarian Essays*, ed. Norman Wirzba (Washington, DC, Counterpoint, 2003).

² Taken from the note on *The Comfort of Crows* in *The New York Times Book Review*, December 31, 2023: 22.

³ Hannah Ritchie in conversation with Bill Gates. See the blog of Bill Gates, *Gates Notes*, "Climate Optimism with Hannah Ritchie." February 2, 2024. <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/climate-optimism-hannah-ritchie-management-intelligence-suqbf>.

couple hundred years ago with the Industrial Revolution and undertook a sharp acceleration after 1950 and post-WWII growth. It belongs to your talent, energy, dedication, and smarts to strike out on a different path.

But your Great Work is even more. It's a *civilizational* challenge. How many generations have the chance for a different civilization knocking on their front door? Yours does.

The Great Work is a phrase from Thomas Berry's *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future*.⁴ Berry says that every people and civilization has a Great Work.

The Great Work of the classical Greek world [was] its understanding of the human mind and the creation of the Western humanist tradition; the Great Work of Israel [was] articulating a new experience of the divine in human affairs; the Great Work [of India was] to lead human thought into spiritual experiences of time and eternity and their mutual presence to each other. . . . In America the Great Work of the First Peoples was to occupy this continent and establish an intimate rapport with the powers that brought this continent into existence in all its magnificence.⁵

And your Great Work is to effect "the transition from a period of human devastation of the Earth to a period when humans [are] present to the planet in a mutually beneficial, [reciprocal] manner."⁶

I talk with my grandkids about this. Let me share the Author's Note from my book of letters to them, *The Planet You Inherit: Letters to My Grandchildren When Uncertainty's a Sure Thing*.

I knew my grandchildren confronted the harrowing challenge of moving from industrial to ecological civilization. The Great Transition, it's called. Epic times.

I was ready for that. But my pen was startled to discover a truth that's taken us by stealth: That for the first time ever, humanity's become a geological force. We've slid off the back end of one geological epoch, the Holocene, onto the front end of another, the Anthropocene. The Age of the Human. Thus we face epoch times as well as epic times, and a further daunting transition.

These transitions are the Great Work (Thomas Berry) that awaits my grandchildren. Though they were never asked and didn't get a vote, remapping and remaking the world amidst uncertainty is their calling, as

⁴ Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

it is ours. While their world cannot be ours, and shouldn't be, I wanted to step away from an academic career teaching Social Ethics and just write love letters, love letters that face what they face on a changed and changing planet. I'm certain the letters are urgent. Not because the kids' grandparents are frail but because their world is.⁷

Let me put this to you the way I did to grandsons Eduardo and Martin: "What's patently unfair is that you, as Anthropocene kids, did not create the problems you're inheriting, yet you're forced to be responsible for them throughout your lives. The question is not whether you will have to confront climate catastrophe but how you will respond individually and collectively." I hope you find "your vocation, your calling, to remap the world on an altered Earth for a different way of life in an uncharted future." Giving yourself to that, "I suspect you will find yourself saying 'yes' to life in spite of everything."⁸



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Recall Greta Thunberg. You already know she began the school strikes that became a movement of world youth. You also know she's been unrelenting about urgent action to confront climate calamity. Since her campaign always bore bad news about a worsening reality—a stark planetary emergency is upon us, she

⁷ Larry Rasmussen, *The Planet You Inherit: Letters to My Grandchildren When Uncertainty's a Sure Thing* (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2022), 7.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 39.

repeated over and over—people thought she herself must suffer her own message. Her response? “People seem to think I am depressed, or angry, or worried, but that’s not true. It’s like I get meaning in my life.”⁹ See, leading the charge in a great cause is exhilarating; it gives satisfaction and generates meaning. *You* get to write the next chapters and perhaps even finish the story.

What story? Let me remind you that the Stone Age did not end because we ran out of stones. It ended because the Bronze Age offered a better way of doing things. The Fossil Fuel Age will not end because we ran out of coal, oil and gas, either. It will end because the first generation to achieve sustainability chose renewable sources of energy and savored a renewed Earth.

But I want to hear from your generation. Here’s how we’ll do that. Ask yourself how your experience lines up with my granddaughter’s. Liv Diers-Parsons is seventeen now but was sixteen when she performed her poem at the New York City book launch of *The Planet You Inherit*. She channels her 16-year-old view through a seven-year-old girl Liv has playing on her bedroom floor. Liv knows that most youth her age experience a lot of anxiety about their future. Some know anger and despair and have a sense of environmental doom in the offing. See where you find yourself as you listen to Liv’s poem, titled “You Can’t Shift the Stars”:

In her childhood dreams
she holds onto the earth,
stops the bleeding
with her own two hands,
a little girl sits on her bedroom floor
head tilted towards the stars,
and imagines she could shift them,
reform the heavens into perfection,
reshape the sky till it reflects a prettier world,
maybe everyone is a god at seven years old.

To the little girl dreaming of change from her bedroom floor,
writing novels in your head
between darkness and sleep
because
little girls’ minds run wild
and the world is so vast
and you are so small
and who will be there to save it

⁹ Ibid., 39-40.

when it all burns down

Because it is burning isn't it?
the tv said it is
and mama can't explain
how they're going to fix it,
and you thought mama could mend anything?

You believed in perfection
and infinity.

It all seemed so clear from your bedroom floor:
just tell the leaders
to get down from their podiums
crawl on the floor till they remember their childhood
play in the dirt
pick the flowers
swing from the trees,
remind them what they're losing,
remind them what they're burning,
after all, who could look the earth in her eyes and tell her goodbye.

But you watch the tv
and the leaders are stuck at their podiums
and they have forgotten what it feels like
to be a child,
and you can never play god
and you will never shift the heavens.

But I hope you know
I carry your dreams in my lungs,
I breathe in deeply,
Your hope makes a home in my stomach
It hugs the tired parts of me
till they sprout new dandelions,

Did you know you are a garden?

You have watered yourself since childhood
painstakingly
with love and laughter

even on the days,
especially on the days,
when hope feels impossible.

There is a garden within you,
there is a world within you,
there is a galaxy within you,
but it is up to you to find it.

Take out your pen
take out your paint brush
take out your camera
take out your megaphone

and you will discover that the littlest things
can be a revolution.

You can't stop the bleeding
you can't shift the stars
but you will discover love is powerful
our voices are powerful
our stories are powerful
we are powerful
a little girl on her own can't reshape the universe
but a movement sure can.

I could add that all three of my grandnieces have decided their morality does not allow them to bring children into this world.

I could pass along another voice as well. It's from grandson Eduardo, then seven years old. He gave what he called his "speech" right after Liv. He told me afterward that he was a little scared about speaking before so many people, but "I just pinched my buttocks and went for it." Here's what he said:

Dear Grandpa, Thanks for sharing your wisdom in the letters you wrote to me and Spud. ["Spud" is my nickname for his brother.] I hope that wisdom flows through our blood. Some people on our planet are doing the best they can to save it. But climate change is bad. It was very interesting learning about your life. My life in the Anthropocene's decent, so far. I have recently been learning about the planet and geography, especially the Arctic and Antarctic... I hope they don't melt away.
Love, Edward

P. S. In the first chapter, Epoch Times, you write [that] I can't read it yet. But I'm already reading chapter books without pictures!

Eduardo and Liv's little girls are 2nd graders. I don't know about your 2nd grade but in mine we did not study melting ice caps or applaud people for trying to save the planet because climate change is bad. It never entered our minds that the planet itself was in need of saving, and we certainly never asked, "Who will be there to save it when it all burns down because it is burning isn't it? the tv said it is." Nor did we ever imagine that, at seven or sixteen, we could "look Earth in the eyes and tell her goodbye." We didn't imagine any of this because our planet wasn't the planet of our grandkids. Our planet wasn't yours.

Our time together in assembly is almost up. It might be helpful to mention what motivates people who live in extreme times amidst uncertainty, the uncertainty that will be home for you. What they know, like Thomas Berry knew, is that, in the long haul, we are all part of the journey of the universe, at home in a story billions of years in the making. And when they awaken to that, they are moved by wonder, awe, and love because they live in a timeless land of enchantment.

But people are also moved by fear, terror, and hate. Which will triumph? If you choose joy over despair and love over hate, it's because Earth offers joy and love and wonder daily.

I leave you confident that you will strive to save the planet and savor it, and that you will find your civilizational work meaningful, even exhilarating. There is no question you will face hard times and witness a broken world in tumult. For that you will need communities to carry both the pain and the joy. So, I close with a ritual you might consider.

Jews of the Middle Ages would ascend the Temple Mount in Jerusalem several times a year, turn to the right to begin circling the plaza counterclockwise. That circle voiced the blessings of the past year and sang gratitude for them. Meanwhile, the anxious, the brokenhearted and those mourning or grieving, ascended the Mount, turned to the left, and circled in the opposite direction. With one circle inside the other they met one another.

Those in the first circle would ask the despondent coming their way, "What happened to you?" The reply might be "My father died, and I never got to say what I wanted to him," or "My child is sick, and we don't know what's wrong," or "Fire and drought [or flood] wiped us out." The one in the other circle might reply, "You are not alone," then continue to walk for a while with the one in anguish. "Meet me next year and let's see which circle we're in. Meanwhile I will

hold your sorrow and grief with my love and in my prayers.”¹⁰

I recently spent time with Fr. John Dear, an apostle of nonviolence. He was once talking with his friend and fellow priest Daniel Berrigan, an activist opponent of the Vietnam War and a crusader for civil rights and racial and class equality. Berrigan’s words to Fr. Dear were, “John, you will always be up against forces of death and destruction and tragedy. All the more important, then, is living your life to the fullest in every moment. Savor that—and laugh a lot.”

To be human means to be human in a world of pain, and in a world of meaning and joy. It means that your Great Work is to save and savor, cherish and renew.

Thank you. Be well.

¹⁰ This ritual is reported by Rabbi Sharon Brous in “Two Lessons from an Ancient Text That Changed My Life,” *The New York Times*, Sunday, January 21, 2024:10.