

Book: Life Rules - how we can live in harmony with Earth

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I found this article thought provoking. How can I live more in harmony with Mother Earth? What things do I have that aren't necessary?

Michael

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People of conscience face two crucial challenges today: (1) Telling the truth about the dire state of the ecosphere that makes our lives possible, no matter how grim that reality, and (2) remaining committed to collective action to create a more just and sustainable world, no matter how daunting that task. It's not an easy balancing act, as we struggle to understand the scope of the crisis without giving into a sense of hopelessness.

Ellen LaConte's new book, *Life Rules* (<http://www.ellenlaconte.com/life-rules-the-book/>), is a welcome addition to the growing literature on these crises. The subtitle — *Why so much is going wrong everywhere at once and how Life teaches us to fix it* — captures the spirit of the book. LaConte offers an unflinching assessment of the problems and an honest path to sensible action. In an interview, I asked her to elaborate on her background and path to the insights of the book.

Robert Jensen: *For me, your book came out of nowhere. I had never read an article by you or heard your name. So, as I read Life Rules and was so impressed with the breadth and depth of your analysis, I found myself wondering, "Who is she and where does she come from?"*

Ellen LaConte: The short answer is that I've worked for almost 40 years as an old-school print writer and editor, mostly for small magazines, about organic gardening and farming, appropriate technologies, organizational communications, homesteading, history, education, alternative economics, evolution, democracy theory and practice, complex systems. I'm a generalist and seem instinctively to synthesize and simplify big ideas like those in *Life Rules*.

I like living a small-scale, small-pond, hands-on, quiet life. I had a paternal grandmother who lived on the remains of what had been a family farm in Pennsylvania Dutch country outside Lancaster and maternal grandparents who had a half-acre or so in north Baltimore that was dominated by my grandfather's vegetable and fruit gardens. I adored hanging out with him while he made compost, taught me about worms and ants and the living soil, talked to me non-stop about what he was doing and why. He was one of J.I. Rodale's first fanatics (<http://www.rodaleinstitute.org/history>). I also grew up surrounded with books and magazines, was bookish pretty much from the start. I learned to love hand tools — my grandfather had a workshop full of them — and what was called “handiwork.”

My childhood was a perfect set up for the homesteading/owner-built/simplicity /self-reliance movement that in the 1970s — when I was in my 20s — seemed to me the most appropriate response to present and promised oil shortages, and a saner and more spiritually sound and grounded response to future shock than the globalized hi-tech, expansive, consumptive, grab-and-get one that also was popular in the '70s. It also suited my somewhat reclusive, contemplative nature.

Though my childhood was churched, Protestant, I didn't really enter onto any kind of serious spiritual study or path until I was in my late 30s. I suppose I'd call myself a Tao, Zen and Sufi influenced Christian with decided mystical leanings. I somehow missed the 1960s, both the protest and the flower-power/drugs/sex /rock-and-roll parts. I don't like crowds, noise, confrontation or argument. I lack both irony and edge, or maybe what's called “edginess.” It's my nature to want to fix things, smooth them over when possible, broker agreement or simply yield.

RJ: *You say you don't like confrontation or argument, but your book is a radical analysis, and you obviously realize that many — maybe most — people will argue with its thesis.*

EL: I prefer writing about my convictions and worldview rather than explaining or arguing about them in real time. I don't have a podium-proselytizing personality. Argument, even the constructive kind, is often reactive and impulsive. I'm

emotionally impulsive enough by nature that I've learned — or tried to learn — that one ought to rein in one's impulses and emotions about things as important as convictions.

The cartoon character Linus from "Peanuts" said, "I love mankind, it's people I can't stand." I'm the flip side: I love people, it's humanity I have a hard time with. I've always preferred and been fortunate to be able to work alone or with or for just one or two people. This, and my general disinterest in and ignorance about politics, seem contradictory for someone writing about community and democracy and promoting a deep Green movement. But it's why I've been able to write about those things.

RJ: *It does appear to be a contradiction. I assume you are suggesting that there are many different ways to contribute to making a better world.*

EL: I spoke recently to a college Philosophical Society about the book. I told them that it seemed to me that to love wisdom, to be philosophical in the truest sense, meant to be to some degree detached from day-to-day events, from immediate things. Not to be disinterested or unaffected, but less buffeted or influenced and consumed by them. One of the reasons I could synthesize so much of what's going wrong in the world now is that I've had time, as well as the calling and inclination, for it. I could stand back, meditate, read, engage in independent research, wait for understanding to come, question conventional assumptions, including my own, and look almost leisurely for the largest context in which we humans live our lives, which would be the context that should guide how we live our lives and deal with the Critical Mass of crises we presently face. Given how caught up I get in other people's lives, if I'd been busy organizing, protesting, working full tilt and full time, trying to respond to the needs and input of multiple colleagues, I'd have had less mental space and stamina to do that. I'd never arrived at the simple but elemental understanding that Life rules, we don't.

RJ: *Please explain that title. Do you mean that Life — something bigger than us — rules? Or that we need to follow Life's rules?*

EL: Yes, both. The largest context — the largest high-functioning complex system within which we live our lives — is not the nation, nation-state system or global economic system but Life itself, the whole-earth, emergent and self-maintaining system of natural communities and ecosystems. That system, the ecosphere, teaches us the physical laws, the relationships and behaviors discovered in physics, biology and ecology and exemplified by the so-called “mystical” spiritual teachers, that we have to obey if we want to remain viable as a species. We aren’t the ultimate authority, and none of the systems we’ve created possess ultimate authority. It’s Life that has created the physical conditions that make it possible for us to exist. We depend on Life for our lives. More specifically, we depend on *Life as we know it* for our lives, for the climate, resources, natural communities, and ecosystems that provide us with what we need to live.

Life has encoded in every other-than-human species a sort of protocol or blueprint of economic rules for survival, a set of behaviors and relationships that allow Life as we know it to live within earth’s means, to be long-term sustainable. In the physical/material realm on this planet, Life calls the shots. Life rules, we don’t. Other species have no choice but to obey those economic rules. We alone have a choice. And lately, as a species living under the influence of a global economy that has, in the vernacular, gone viral, we’ve chosen pridefully and foolishly to break all the rules. The way we live in the present Global Economic Order — capital G, capital E, capital O — isn’t sustainable. It’s pathological. It works at cross purposes to everything small g, e and o — “geo,” everything earthy. In particular, the GEO works at cross purposes to Life.

RJ: *That sounds simple, almost simplistic, pointing out that humans live within an ecosphere that is governed physical laws and not limitless. But all around us in the First World is evidence of a society out of balance, apparently seized with the belief that we can defy ecological limits indefinitely.*

EL: If you condense the 100,000 years or so that Homo sapiens sapiens, humans like us, have been around into the 24 hours of one day, the Global

Economic Order has been in existence for less than a minute. We can live without a GEO, but we can't live without or apart from Life as we know it. So we have two choices: We can forego our present economic model and choose to learn and obey Life's economic rules. Or we can choose not to. In which case Life will rule us out, adapt to our trespasses like an apple tree adapting to a lightening strike, and get on with its experiment in creating and sustaining more life just fine without us. Life rules, we don't.

RJ: *You suggest that because of the way the GEO works, we are close to a Critical Mass. What do you mean by that term?*

EL: There's actually a pretty good explanation for the now almost total disconnect between our perception of reality and our actual reality, between our sense as a species of being larger than Life and the inarguable fact that we are dependent on it for our very existence. Actually there are a couple of explanations.

One is money. Since we use money — or its funny-money kin, such as credit and its ever-funnier-money kin like default swaps — to acquire the things we need and want, we don't provide those things for ourselves, we've lost track of where the things we need and want actually come from. We have little or no knowledge of the sources of our provisions or the damage done to living systems by the way we acquire them and the amounts of them we acquire. We've put our faith in the economy's ability to deliver what we need to us, so long as we have enough money. Money has come between us and substantial things — the real goods, resources and ecosystem services that we actually need to live. Money has kept us from seeing the truth of our circumstances, which is that soon there will be insufficient fossil fuels, plastics, clean fresh water, forests, living soil, grains, seafood, congenial and predictable climate, functioning governments. You name it, we'll run short of it ad infinitum.

Another explanation for our ignorance of the reality of our present circumstances is that most people have never heard of or taken seriously the limiting factor on a finite planet called "carrying capacity" — the number of a species or a collection

of species that an ecosystem can support long-term without suffering damage in excess of what the ecosystem itself can repair. In accounting, exceeding carrying capacity is called going bankrupt. That's where we're headed environmentally as well as financially right now. But most of us don't realize that's where we are yet because in those previous 23 hours and 59 minutes of human history we've either had more places — more “New Worlds” to move to, conquer and plunder — or new technologies that would do a better job of plundering the places we were in to provide for us.

We have just recently — in, say, the last 30 seconds of that last most recent minute of human history — hit that point in our global economic assault on living things and living systems both human and natural, that there's no going back. We have just hit what I call Critical Mass, which is the name I've given what others are calling collapse, the tipping point, the long emergency, or bottleneck. It's my name for our previously latent and slowly unfolding, now rapidly worsening planetary equivalent of HIV/AIDS.

RJ: *That analogy to HIV/AIDS runs throughout the book, which may strike some as an odd comparison. Can you explain that?*

EL: Critical Mass names a syndrome of converging, mutually-reinforcing environmental, economic, political and social crises that we think about and try to address as if they were separate and unrelated, but they are not. They are symptoms of one disease, a viral, a *pathological* global economy that is undermining the ability of human and natural communities — Earth's equivalent of an immune system — to provide for, protect, defend and heal themselves the same way HIV undermines the ability of our immune systems to protect and heal us. There are two pages in the book that compare HIV and the GEO, characteristic for characteristic, and the similarities are startling and frightening. I think we are presently at the HIV stage of the disease; it hasn't quite yet become full-blown planetary AIDS. But I insist in the book that doing more of what we've been doing to exceed Earth's physical means as well as our own fiscal ones —

in other words, trying to heal and grow the very kind and scope of economy that caused this disease — is akin to injecting a patient who already has HIV with more HIV. That's precisely what we're doing.

RJ: *From the diagnosis, I want to go back to the treatment plan, and your assessment of where the solutions to Critical Mass might be worked out.*

EL: Since all economies depend on earth and Life as we know it consistently and continuously delivering the goods — resources, ecosystem services like living soils, pollination, marine fisheries, oxygen, carbon sequestration, air filtration, sufficient clean fresh water, a habitable, predictable climate — then it seems to me the treatment plan has to be one that doesn't exceed earth's means of supporting us, doesn't run against Life's grain, and doesn't compromise the health of the living systems. And the only examples of how to do that come from Life itself. I argue in the book — with support from geneticists, microbiologists, evolutionary theorists, and paleobiologists — that the oldest and first living things, single-celled entities like bacteria, spent the first 2 billion years learning how to provide for themselves in ways that would be sustainable over the long term. When they did learn it — after nearly putting themselves and the Life experiment on Earth out of business — Life locked in, genetically encoded, what they'd learned.

Simply put, after going global and inducing the equivalent of our present Critical Mass three times, bacteria adopted a sort of Ten Commandments of Sustainability that can be synthesized for our purposes as five new behaviors. They went 5D: they downsized, diversified, decarbonized, dematerialized and, most importantly, they organized themselves in ways that are profoundly democratic. Over the past 2 billion years, other-than-human living things have mastered the arts of solar energetics, recycling, sharing and interdependence, self-regulation, self-limitation, restrained competition, cooperation and collaboration, grassroots organization, self-governance, ecosystem management and — this is profoundly important for us — community building. Life is a cross-

species, communitarian phenomenon. Their organically democratic eco-economies are local and regional, place-based, functionally self-reliant, interdependent, mutually supportive, regenerative, restorative and resilient.

The salient point is that Life and only Life can teach us how to live eco-logically, within Earth's means. If we learn what Life teaches us and create lifeways that mimic Life's ways, we can survive this round of Critical Mass we've induced and manage to avoid inducing it again. Janine Benyus wrote a book called *Biomimicry* that reported on and inspired a movement to copy, for example, the ways other species and living systems produce what they need sustainably. You could call what I'm suggesting in *Life Rules* radical or full-bore biomimicry.

RJ: *Given how detached most of the contemporary world is from understanding, let alone mimicking, the natural world, is this realistic?*

Adopting Life's rules will require, of course, a huge transformation of the ways we think about our place in the community of living things and the ways we live. My book offers three chapters of examples of what we can do and some communities are already doing, if in a very preliminary way. We'll need to revise what education is for, what needs to get taught and where, when and how learning needs to occur. I would suggest again that Life is the primary teacher, its economic, production, consumption, relational and organizational rules the curriculum. The particular ecosystems — the geographic places — we live in and are presently destroying are the classrooms. And as Post-Carbon Institute Senior Fellow Richard Heinberg proposed in *Powerdown*, the most important and hardest lesson we will need to learn as a species is self-limitation. Where material consumption is concerned, "less is best" will absolutely have to replace "wars for more" as our collective ethical prime directive.

The good news is, if we take our cues from Life, if we decide to transform our ways of living and providing for ourselves, we don't need governments as we know them or any sort of global agreement or institutions to begin and to succeed. Sustainability is by nature a grassroots undertaking. Both the learning and the mimicking can, and must, be engaged in particular places with the

natural and human communities that live in those places. Life's a collection of local phenomena, a community of communities, as John Cobb and Herman Daly propose in their books, for example, *For the Common Good*. If we need a goad to transformation, there's this one: If we don't *choose* to transform ourselves and our lifeways, Life will force us to. Life rules, we don't, and Life will not hesitate to rule harshly and even rule us out.

RJ: *Does that mean we have ugly times ahead of us?*

While there's no reason to believe we will engage in this transformation willingly or that there will not be violence on the way to Life-likeness, a lot of communities around the country and in other countries have already begun to explore and experiment with aspects of Life's Protocol for Economic Survival, though they don't have my name for it yet. The relocalization, Transition Town, post-carbon, 350.org, local currency, slow food, ecozoic and new economics movements, for example, all teach and apply one or more of Life's lessons. Paul Hawken's team at the WiserEarth website is creating a data base of information about organizations involved in movements like these. They've accounted for around 125,000 and think there may be twice that many. Hawken suggests we think of these organizations and their members as anti-bodies helping healing the planet's immune system of this AIDS-like, economically induced disease I call Critical Mass. These organizations and movements represent a starting point.

But a viable treatment plan for this virulent, life-threatening, economically-induced syndrome of crises cannot engage in just one or two or even three of the 5Ds, and cannot engage in them scattershot or only to a degree that doesn't upset business as usual. Eco-logic requires that we incorporate, integrate, and practice *all* of Life's rules, that we stop behaving as if we were larger than or apart from Life and become constructive participants in it.

RJ: *It seems clear that the kind of change you describe as necessary is not possible within capitalism and that capitalism is a serious impediment to such*

change. Earlier you said we have to “forego our present economic model,” but not all the movements and experiments you mention are anti-capitalist. How do you negotiate that?

EL: I kept religion, politics, parties, personalities and “ism” analysis pretty much out of the book in order not to allow any of those divisive topics to set up straw figures and distract readers from the central point: By present economic methods and models, we are living beyond earth’s means. I suggest in the book that unregulated, growth-dependent capitalism only appears to succeed because it has been enabled by the mechanisms of globalism to have the whole earth at its disposal and by the machinations of the Powers to make grab-and-get/pillage-and-plunder its operating principles. Once it has been globalized, the one thing a capitalist economy can’t be is not-global. And as a globalized phenomenon, it cannot help but exceed earth’s means of supporting it. It is the globalization of the capitalist — and, I would add, colonialist — industrial economy that is doing-in Life as we know it. And as I also suggest in the book, the system is too big not to fail since the resource base — or, to retrieve my HIV/AIDS analogy, the host planet — it depends on is finite. When AIDS sufficiently ravages a human patient’s body, the virus dies along with the patient. Consequently, along with ecosystems, species, human and natural communities, human lives, quality of life, and Life as we know it — the global capitalist economy itself is in its terminal stages.

Taking on capitalism head on would have gotten up the backs of too many potential readers. And while they might waste time arguing the merits of capitalism or arguing the possibility of no-growth capitalism, they cannot successfully argue the merits of a globalized economic system of any kind. Globalized bartering or socialism or communism would equally challenge the earth’s human and natural communities and the biosphere’s functioning. Kirkpatrick Sale and E.F. Schumacher had it right: Scale matters and where sustainability is an issue, which in the matter of human survival it is, small is not only beautiful but self-limiting, survivable, and sustainable.

So, no, not all the movements and examples I mention in the book are anti-capitalist. The measure of an experiment's success is not that it is anti-capitalist but that it works in harmony with living systems, and in the ways that living systems work. An experiment need not be in and of itself the cure for Critical Mass but is exemplary of one or more elements of Life's *Economic Protocol for Survival*, which as I've said, would lead us to integrate and obey *all* of Life's rules. Doing that would automatically move us away from capitalism as we know it and probably from any conceivable model of capital as an economic end-all and be-all. Provisions themselves are what we need to live, not the funny-money with which we presently purchase them if we are lucky enough to have any.

RJ: *Perhaps that is the bottom line: What we need to live. Perhaps that's an appropriate last question. What do you, Ellen LaConte, need to live?*

EL: Much less than I presently have and very much less than is currently available to me if I were willing to use credit to acquire it. Like everyone else, I need food, clean air and water, clothing, some sort of shelter, preferably warm in winter, occasional medicine or medical care, spiritual and physical exercise, colleagues, friends, family, if possible books, lots of quiet, a garden to work in, woods and wild not too far off. To love and be loved. To carry no debt. To believe there is some sort of livable, desirable future for the next seven generations. I've been fortunate never to lack for these.

To be happy, I need good work to do, work that I feel is, in my late mentor Helen Nearing's terms, "contributory." (See a review of LaConte's book about Nearing, *On Light Alone* , <http://www.yesmagazine.org/issues/sustaining-watersheds-of-the-pacific-n...>)

I have, in addition, most of what most middle and upper-middle class Americans have. My partner and I have a house that in absolute terms is bigger and less efficient than I'd like, a car, the usual appliances (though we are not appliance or gadget sophisticates), a computer, a television, arts and entertainment if I choose to access them, electricity, running water, public services (for the time being), air-conditioning, various kinds of insurance, every kind of retail outlet you

can think of within five miles or so, most of which I never patronize. I do not need these things, but I have them. Or, more accurately, they and the economic system of which they are the accoutrements have me.

Thus, I need periodically to contemplate what I have that I don't need, what harm having it causes and whether I'm willing to discomfort myself and my partner enough to un-have it, or at least some of it.

Robert Jensen is a journalism professor at the University of Texas at Austin and board member of the Third Coast Activist Resource Center in Austin, one of the partners in the community center "5604 Manor," <http://5604manor.org/>.

*He is the author of *All My Bones Shake: Seeking a Progressive Path to the Prophetic Voice*, (Soft Skull Press, 2009); *Getting Off: Pornography and the End of Masculinity* (South End Press, 2007); *The Heart of Whiteness: Confronting Race, Racism and White Privilege* (City Lights, 2005); *Citizens of the Empire: The Struggle to Claim Our Humanity* (City Lights, 2004); and *Writing Dissent: Taking Radical Ideas from the Margins to the Mainstream* (Peter Lang, 2002).*

Jensen is also co-producer of the documentary film "Abe Osheroff: One Foot in the Grave, the Other Still Dancing," which chronicles the life and philosophy of the longtime radical activist. Information about the film, distributed by the Media Education Foundation, and an extended interview Jensen conducted with Osheroff are online at <http://thirdcoastactivist.org/osheroff.html>.

Jensen can be reached at rjensen@uts.cc.utexas.edu and his articles can be found online at <http://uts.cc.utexas.edu/~rjensen/index.html>. To join an email list to receive articles by Jensen, go to <http://www.thirdcoastactivist.org/jensenupdates-info.html>.

Editor's Notes

[Photo](#) of Ellen LaConte is taken from [her website](#). Interviewer Robert Jensen is a regular contributor to Energy Bulletin. -BA

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