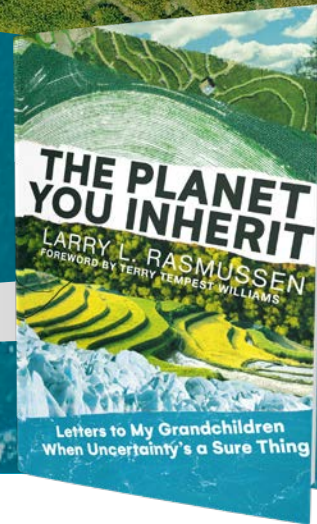


THE PLANET YOU INHERIT

Letters to My Grandchildren
When Uncertainty's a Sure Thing

LARRY L. RASMUSSEN

REFLECTION GUIDE



Introduction

The human imprint is everywhere. It is so deep that not only is the course of evolution shaped by human choice and action but a geological shift is taking place as well. We're moving from the late Holocene (the Wholly Recent Age) into the early Anthropocene (the Age of the Human).

Today's youth and future generations will live on a profoundly different Earth from the one their parents and grandparents knew. What legacy do we wish to leave? What wisdom for life on a changed Earth do we wish to impart? How does love from one generation to another, from one age to another, show itself when uncertainty's a sure thing for future generations, our children, grandchildren, or others in our care?

This book of twenty-two love letters explores that terrain. Readers should imagine themselves writing such letters, receiving them, or both. Empathizing with both the generation of the letter writer and the generation of the recipient, the best way to experience these letters is through their intimate, highly personal, and caring approach, on the one hand, and their radically honest and realistic approach about tumultuous and dangerous changes, on the other.

For study and reflection, you'll find suggested exercises related to letters that cluster around specific topics. The **Author's Note** brings the author's approach into view, as do the first letter and the last one (**Epoch Times** and **Leaving a Legacy**). The remaining letters, even as they cover varied topics, are all framed by the opening and closing letters.

For much more related to the book, readers may wish to go to the author's website, larrywrites.info. There you'll find expanded letters as well as blogs on topics included in the letters. On the website you will also be invited to share *your own* letters to future generations and engage other readers' responses. As the website is itself a work in progress, please check for updated and additional materials periodically.

The Letters

- 1. Author's Note, Epoch Times, and Leaving a Legacy.** As you read the **Author's Note** and the framing letters for the book, reflect and jot down those things that resonate as the most important takeaways. What most startled you or provoked you in these letters, provided insight or challenge? Where did that lead you? Next, jot down what you would most want to keep in mind if you were to write letters to children in your life—your own children or those you care for or mentor—and the legacy you wish to leave.
- 2. Tender Years, Something to Write Home About, and You Finish the Story.** These three letters to Martín (or “Spud”) begin on his second birthday. The first, **Tender Years**, relays his grandpa’s own early years in a rural Minnesota village. A theme is introduced that reappears in later letters: namely, white racism and how it took shape through centuries when no one talked about it and when African Americans and Native Americans were denied the voice to call it out. The second letter, **Something to Write Home About**, introduces another theme later letters elaborate—where Martín and the rest of us fit in the story of life’s evolution on the planet we’ve inherited. This is written to Martín at two and asks how he as a human being was formed, in light of evolution. Is he “only” two or older than Earth itself? The third letter, **You Finish the Story**, asks how Martín might respond to his profoundly changed world and whether, at the onset of a new life, that will be different than his grandparents’ response as they conclude their lives? What animating story will be his, and where will he turn for it? As you consider responding to the chapter, choose any one, or all, of these letters and jot down the recollections, perspectives, and insights you’d pass along to the children and youth in your life as they meet the future world. Contrast the world from which you arose and which you call home, with what you perceive or imagine to be the world of the children of the future. How might they continue the story you and generations before you began? How might they change it?
- 3.** The next three letters, to Eduardo—**Love in a Time of Plague, “Love with Legs,”** and **The Kindness of Microbial Strangers**—are the initial efforts to set out the meanings of love. Comb these letters with a pencil or pen in hand and jot your responses to the following assertions about love: the best synonyms of love; love for whom and what; the painful side of love; the nature of prophetic love or “love with legs”; and love and worlds we cannot see, like those of microbes. As you look at the list, were there surprises for you? Finally, test your own jottings against the “starter list for love” at the end of the **“Love with Legs”** letter. Are there additions you would make, or changes, or perhaps even deletions?
- 4. The Core Keeps Score, We/They R Us, All Too Human, and Different All the Same** are written to both grandsons. While the topics and stories range widely, there is a common quest—the nature of human nature in a time so tumultuous that it represents a change of epochs. Is the human self we share the same in the late Holocene and the early Anthropocene, or not? What elements of the human condition can we depend upon, and how might the continuities of human nature rise to meet unprecedented challenges? Do you agree with the contention that cultural diversity is the grandchildren’s best repertoire for meeting those challenges? Is the author’s assertion about the uniqueness of human consciousness convincing in the letter **Different All the Same**? Again, take pen or pencil or smartphone notetaker app in hand, and make your own notes as you read these letters, in search of common ground rooted in human nature.

5. Martín's middle name is Theo. It derives from *theos*, Greek for "God," and occasions the next three letters: **What's in a Name If the Name Is God?**, **Coming of Age**, and **The Uncontained God. What's in a Name If the Name Is God?** lays out his grandfather's experience of the God of his youth. You might find it of interest to compare that account with your own. In **Coming of Age** and **The Uncontained God**, comparisons are made with Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Albert Einstein. Do you, like the author, find yourself drawn to Bonhoeffer and Einstein? Or to others? How does your understanding of God affect the way you would write your own letter to the children of the next epoch?

6. In the next two letters, **Democracy Endangered** and **Democracy Enhanced**, the author discusses the problems faced by democracy in the US in the 2016 and 2020 elections. For **Democracy Endangered**, you might want to jot down notes or respond to the discussion of Isabel Wilkerson and Taylor Branch about the US becoming a majority of racial minorities by 2042, with whites an electorate minority for the first time. Consider Branch's remark: "So the real question would be . . . if people were given the choice between democracy and whiteness, how many would choose whiteness?" That is, would most whites rather live in a white authoritarian state than in a multiracial nation in which they are a minority and in which there is democracy? In the letter **Democracy Enhanced**, do you find Dr. King's description of genuine democracy—that democracy is power equitably distributed and held accountable across society's economic, political, and social dimensions—congruent with your own? If you differ, where and on what grounds? Reinhold Niebuhr's theory of power and democracy seems to support King's, which would call out the same questions: Do you agree with his assertions about power and democracy? If you differ, where and on what grounds? What do you understand as the essential minimum requirements for genuine democracy? Is a certain kind of love essential?

7. **Aftertime** and **Elsewhere** draw upon Eddie Glaude Jr.'s book *Begin Again: James Baldwin's America and Its Urgent Lessons for Our Own*. Baldwin named two critical "aftertimes"—after the Civil War and Jim Crow, and after the collapse of the civil rights movement. Both betrayed the promised "liberty and justice for all." Baldwin's "elsewhere" was time in Paris and Istanbul as he pondered, from a safe place abroad, what it meant to be Black in America, and as he tried to answer the question, What sort of people, finally, do we Americans take ourselves to be? For the recipients of these letters, Eduardo and Martín, there is, beyond Baldwin's two, a third aftertime—after the murder of George Floyd and the rise of Black Lives Matter. Will the collective response by white America be a third betrayal and a different answer to the question of what we take ourselves to be as a people? Were three not enough, Eduardo and Martín face a fourth definitive aftertime: the time of their Great Work in the Anthropocene, a time when their generation and subsequent ones must 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 manner" (Thomas Berry). How will that be accomplished, or betrayed? It depends in part on the qualities of their "elsewhere" havens and "anticipatory communities." Have you, as a reader, had havens and anticipatory communities that were formative for your future?

8. A thesis implied in many of the letters is that a remapped and remade human Earth requires a different understanding and practice of human responsibility. That becomes explicit in two letters on responsibility, **Responsible by Degrees** and **It's All in the Pronouns**. Measure your own sense of responsibility against the description of human responsibility articulated in the first of these two letters, then reflect on whether it can be, and should be, instructed with responsibility as proposed in **It's All in the Pronouns** through the ideas of Robin Wall Kimmerer and many Indigenous peoples.

9. The penultimate letter, **Becoming Good Ancestors**, is the effort of the author to set out the essential elements of a way of life in and for the Anthropocene. He considers what they might craft so

that they become good ancestors for those who follow. Do these considerations resonate with your considerations for the future generations? Are the markers, or “cairns,” in this letter the ones you’d have chosen? Are there others you’d recommend for future generations and their way of life? Describe any additional cairn you’d create, or modify, and say why you commend it.

10. Finally, let’s revisit a letter you read at the outset, **Leaving a Legacy**. This time, after reflecting on the book, write your own letter for the legacy you wish to leave to future generations. Well and good if reading the letters in this book has helped you shape some of your thoughts. But you may wish to put all that aside and simply let the words flow about the legacy you’d like to leave. When you’ve finished, put your version somewhere where you can give it a fresh look after a few months. Then, if you wish, redraft it as a gift, and put it in the hands of your dear ones for their future reference.