

An Introduction to Ron Engel

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When I was invited to write this article introducing Ron Engel, I was given the assignment of placing his work in the context of environmental ethics. Here is the first story that entered my mind:

At an early 1990s meeting of the American Academy of Religion, I was in the exhibit hall looking with some interest at a new book. Next to me, also looking at the book, was a distinguished looking gentleman whose nametag identified him as one of the foremost figures in the field of environmental ethics. We began chatting about the book. In the course of our conversation, I mentioned that I was formulating a course in Eco-feminism to teach at Meadville Lombard Theological School while Ron Engel was on sabbatical. I will never forget the look in his eyes when I mentioned Ron's name. I could see his estimation of me exponentially increase. He suggested that he needed to look closer at Eco-feminism if that is what Ron's sabbatical replacement was going to be teaching.

Such a story suggests something of the esteem with which those in the field of environmental ethics hold Ron. This was the first of many such incidents that made clear to me that Ron Engel is one of the hidden treasures within Unitarian Universalism, one whose work is more widely recognized outside of our UU movement than within it.

Ron Engel's work has been at the forefront of environmental ethics: there was no such discipline when Ron began his quest to integrate values with biology, nature, and science. As a young faculty member in 1968, the first paper he delivered at the Meadville Lombard Faculty Colloquium was entitled, "Can Theology Help Save the Wilderness?" In the years following that presentation, while working on his Ph.D., Ron became passionate about civil rights, working in the "inner city" neighborhoods of the near north side of Chicago. He and Neil Shadle, his colleague at Meadville Lombard, created an urban ministry, working to revitalize Chicago's Second Unitarian Church while engaging in a wide range of community re-development efforts. During this time, Ron's academic scholarship focused on chronicling the democratic ecological movement to preserve the Indiana Dunes. That work became the basis of his 1983 book, *Sacred Sands: The Struggle for Community in the Indiana Dunes*, a groundbreaking interdisciplinary work in environmental ethics and environmental history that won The Frederic G. Melcher Book Award.

In the early 1980s, Ron was asked by Dr. Loretta Williams, Director of the Department of Social Responsibility of the Unitarian Universalist Association, to join the Ecojustice Working Group of the National Council of Churches. It was there that he began to work in an ecumenical context. Throughout this time, Ron continued to teach at Meadville Lombard in the field of religious social ethics. His

new colleagues in the Ecojustice Working Group became part of the intellectual community that struggled to bring environmental ethics into the discipline of social ethics.

In 1984, after nearly twenty years of teaching, Ron had his first full sabbatical. He used the opportunity to travel throughout Africa and Europe, meeting international colleagues in the environmental field, eventually connecting with the World Conservation Union (IUCN). That fall, Ron spoke before the General Assembly of the World Conservation Union on the contributions of religious traditions to environmental ethics. An Ethics Working Group began that year as part of the IUCN's movement to develop a worldwide strategy for the environment. That organization was a consortium of the major players holding environmental interests drawn from governmental, resource, scientific, and non-profit communities. The inclusion of the new Ethics Working Group signified the recognition that discussions of values, ethics, and religion contribute to secular environmental movements.

Ron was now recognized as an international environmental activist. His interest in Third World sustainable development led to *The Ethics of Environment and Development: Global Challenge, International Response*, co-edited with Joan Gibb Engel, published in 1990. Referenced throughout subsequent literature on the topic, this work stands as the pioneering attempt to look globally at the connections between the environment, religion/worldview, and development. *The Introduction*, republished numerous times, argues that we must critically examine the ethical basis for a global ethic of sustainable development--an ethic that must reconcile the needs of environmental conservation with economic development.

In the early 1990s, Ron's involvement with the international environmental movement led him to work on the World Charter for Nature, a United Nations Resolution. Following the disappointing events of the Earth Summit in Rio in 1992, Ron became a key person in the Earth Charter movement. The Earth Charter is envisioned as a "People Treaty," and is better known in Third World countries, especially Latin America. Initial language for the Earth Charter was drawn from Ron's work on the World Charter for Nature. Ron worked closely with other Earth Charter leaders, suggesting members for the Drafting Committee, including the chair, Steven Rockefeller. The Drafting Committee reviewed input from thousands of people in gatherings throughout the world and has now issued the final draft of the Charter (for more information, see www.earthcharter.org). Modeled after the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Earth Charter is intended to come before the U. N., to be adopted first as a "soft law" agreement, and later to be converted into enforceable law. The document represents "state-of-the-art" environmental ethics.

When I think of the future, I realize that a viable future will be one in which many of the provisions of the Earth Charter come into being. I can imagine future generations of religious liberals looking back to the twentieth century and

focusing on the tremendously important contributions of Ron Engel, understanding him as one who truly made a difference in the movement toward a more just and sustainable world.