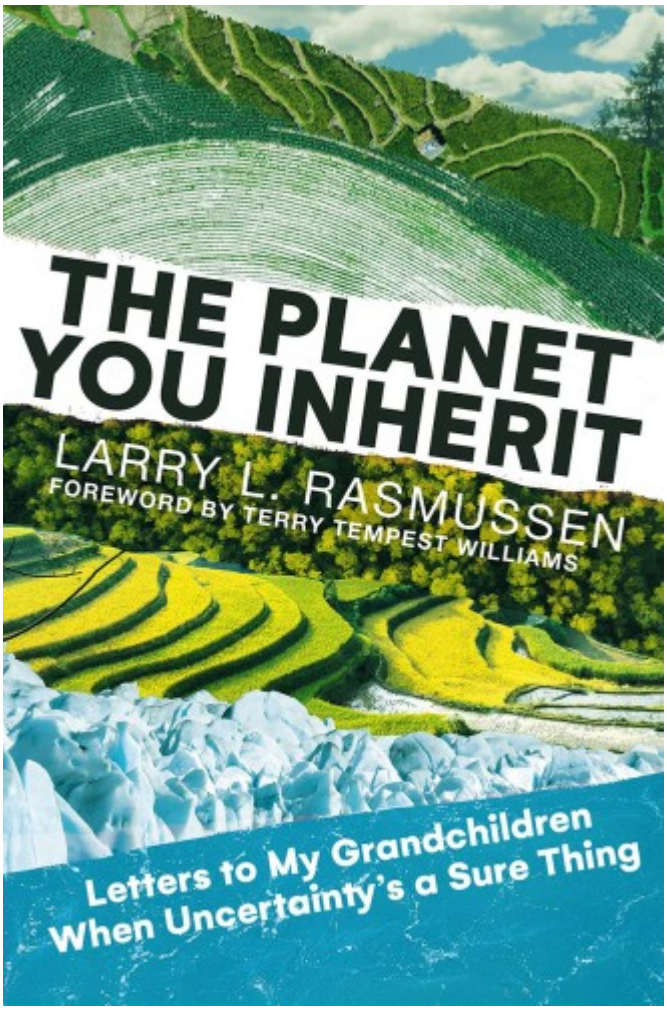
Letters to Anthropocene kids

Ethicist Larry Rasmussen tells his grandchildren the truth about the earth’s peril—and calls them to embrace its beauty.

by Zen Hess in the December 2023 issue

In Review



The Planet You Inherit

Letters to My Grandchildren When Uncertainty’s a Sure Thing

By Larry L. Rasmussen

Broadleaf Books
Buy from Bookshop.org ›

While I was reading ***The Planet You Inherit***, the smoky haze from Canadian wildfires painted the skies of New York City and Washington, DC, an end-of-the-world-movie shade of red. Air quality warnings spanned from the northeast corner of the United States to St. Louis. “Basically, you can chew the air,” wrote Bill McKibben. “It’s Code Grim.” Massive environmental events like this are commonplace these days, but their commonness does not at all entail predictability. We live in an age when climate unpredictability is a certainty, and the certainty of climate unpredictability means that everything else in the future is, well, uncertain.

How might one think, live, and believe in a time of such uncertainty? Larry Rasmussen has been a leading voice in responding to that sort of question in the academy and the church for decades. Now he writes as one for whom “grandparenthood is fast approaching a full-time blessing.” This book is a collection of 22 letters that Rasmussen wrote to his young grandchildren between January 2018 and April 2021. Written to be read when the grandchildren are a bit older, these letters are an invitation to think with their grandpa about their life as “Anthropocene kids.”

And being Anthropocene kids will not be easy. Rasmussen does not shy away from speaking honestly to his grandkids about the dire challenges they will face. He risks, at times, coming off as a curmudgeon (his word!) because “the world is ‘too dangerous for anything but truth’” (here he is quoting William Sloane Coffin). The danger that looms largest throughout these letters is that the earth is being wounded under the burden of humanity, and we have not yet changed our habits to stop the damage. “We’re running Genesis backward,” he writes.

At several points, Rasmussen grieves how his generation has impoverished the earth in ways that adversely affect his grandchildren. “What’s patently unfair,” he writes, “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.” While climate change threatens to disrupt the world in countless ways, Rasmussen repeatedly addresses other threats to society in the Anthropocene. He devotes chapters to racism, democracy, and pandemics. Each of these individually—though they’re also interrelated in important ways—will make being Anthropocene kids difficult.

Yet, it's not all bleakness. He does, after all, finish the William Sloane Coffin quote: "The world is 'too dangerous for anything but truth *and too small for anything but love.*'" Throughout the letters, Rasmussen strikes optimistic notes as he urges his grandchildren to live responsibly, hopefully, and lovingly. The world may be damaged, but it's still beautiful; humans may be "constitutionally flawed," yet "none has ever existed that did not practice love."

For all the times Rasmussen acknowledges the shadow side of humanity and life in the Anthropocene, he never sacrifices the light that remains. He pleads for his grandchildren to see the beauty of the world, because it matters for how they live in the world: "What I most want for you and your baby brother is that you let yourselves be overwhelmed by wonder and lose yourselves in the 'kaleidoscope of creation'—not to escape this harsh world but to better inhabit it." Later, he invites his grandchildren to "dream a world and lace it with a little utopia." But he does not invite them only to dream about that world. They ought to act, he tells them, by working toward that world in small and thoughtful ways, realizing that they do not work alone and that the work takes time (sometimes a very long time). Nevertheless, he urges them, "Yours is certainly not a moment for caution. Toss it!"

Some of my favorite moments in these letters occur when Rasmussen decides to "commit a little theology," as he puts it. He reflects on God's transcendence and nonobjectivity, relishing in the reality that God evades our attempts to reduce, minimize, or simplify: "Living Presence spills over the edges of our words, creeds, and deeds." At the same time, God is intimately and expansively devoted to and connected with creation in its entirety.

Rejecting a form of idolatry that assumes human beings are the only "matter" that matters to God, Rasmussen declares: "I have no attachment to any God who doesn't gather in the entire journey of the universe. . . . Shorn of the universe, the worship of God is worship of a human idol. It's God in our own smudged and diminished image." Elsewhere, he warns his grandchildren that to know God requires constant humility, an ongoing effort to resist objectifying God and thereby substituting the ineffable God with an idol. He says, "Certitude is a perversion of faith. Faith isn't about living with certainty; it's about being confident, even joyous, about living with intractable uncertainty and profound mystery. Absolute certainty has no need of faith." Poignant theological reflections like these abound.

Rasmussen helps us to see glimmers of grace and hope through the grim, smoky haze cast over our age by all manner of dangers, not least climate change. These

letters provide sobering explanations about the state of creation and the people who inhabit it, sage wisdom for those who will inherit the world, and theological wisdom for living faithfully in troubled times. While the Anthropocene kids in our lives may read these letters one day, we would do them a favor by reading this book now and learning to live responsibly in certainly unpredictable times.