

The Flourishing Earth Project

By Cheryl Genet, Ph.D.

I recently convened a conference in San Luis Obispo, California—the third in our *Humanity Conference and Book Series—Science, Wisdom, and the Future: Humanity's Quest for a Flourishing Earth*. I came to this title by way of two related experiences. The first is my desire to expand the scope of my thinking from my doctoral studies in Interdisciplinary Science and Theology to more global inquiries—to issues of faith and cultural interface and our sustainability as a species. The second is my contact with Richard Trowbridge who has done years of intense research on the nature of wisdom and was the first to introduce me to the concept of a “flourishing Earth.”

As far as I can determine, this is not an extensively used phrase, although I find it surprising that it is not, given its inspiring simplicity. Richard seems to have more-or-less coined the phrase in the context of a vision for the future, or coined it independently of other uses, might be the more accurate way to portray it. Google shows that it is also used by Peter Brown in Canada in regards to economics (certainly a critical part of the flourishing Earth equation). Mary Evelyn Tucker uses the idea of human-Earth flourishing in the context of the Earth Charter put forth by the Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale—the concept of flourishing that moves us beyond a goal of merely sustaining our species. It appears on the website of the Earth Community Network and also on Tom Atlee's Co-Intelligence website, proposing “...our long-term collective flourishing as part of a flourishing Earth.” Google also shows that two of the top three entries are from our own previous conferences and the Orion Institute, which I direct.

What first caught my attention in discussions with Richard was his contention that the resources for a truly flourishing Earth are now, for the first time, actually available. The only thing needed is the will to bring such a world to fruition. So what is a flourishing Earth, what does this mean, and what might a Flourishing Earth Project be?

What is a Flourishing Earth?

One approach might be to clearly define “flourishing.” But this might be detrimental to the beauty of this term, which is that it may have the capacity to evoke a positive vision for all who hear the phrase, within their own frame of reference, and without unnecessary cultural restriction. According to Trowbridge:

The concept of flourishing itself has power. It conveys a picture in the mind of the healthy, whole and successful person we know we were born to be. It is easily understood and communicated, and is a dynamic, not a static, concept. It is flexible enough to allow people to discern for themselves what their flourishing would look like. Flourishing is a goal that can be allied with any religious belief or non-belief.

Trowbridge elaborates on his contention that we have the resources to create a scenario in which all people flourish in a flourishing natural world and lays out what he believes to be the three conditions required for the level of functioning necessary for such a scenario:

1. Massively increased production of commodities (e.g. food, technology) and services (e.g. health, education).
2. Adequate knowledge (e.g. regarding development, health and nutrition, microorganisms and epidemiology, development of the individual, society, and the planet, cognitive functioning, learning, emotional health, environmental influences on the individual, particularly early childhood.)
3. A global community based on interactions of equality and mutual respect (including gender equality).

The idea that flourishing “...could be allied with any religious belief or no-belief” might be argued with. It may take considerable future research to determine if this is truly the case. Some long-term goals for research could be set in this initial statement. Certainly it could be argued that the very idea of flourishing is an impossible utopian vision. But, I submit that striving for a flourishing Earth, or even considering its possibilities, is not for the faint-hearted or easily daunted visionary.

As Trowbridge goes on to suggest:

There is one other necessary condition, as I see it: A global consensus that a flourishing Earth is indeed the goal. In forming this consensus, the relative vacuum of meaning in the contemporary world is fortuitous. Humanity has extraordinary newly-won powers that are not being used optimally. Grave perils (such as terrorism and environmental disasters) need to be faced. Only a visionary project that is adequate to both scientific knowledge and to the demand for meaning can focus the new energies and help

provide structure for the new global community. Neither science, nor economic production, nor humanitarian concerns can provide the psychic energies to embark on this “moral equivalent of war.” The Flourishing Earth might.s

What will it take to create a mandate for this project? One can easily imagine that our flourishing can be influenced for good or bad by our environment—family, schools, jobs, neighborhoods and governments, and by the quality of the food we eat and the air we breathe. In order to flourish it is important to understand how the world influences us and how we in turn influence it. The recognition that all things are deeply connected in what Martin Luther King, Jr. called “the network of mutuality” in an idea with explosive power. A quick scan of Google offerings is sufficient to suggest that there appears to be a growing longing for an explanation of our world that is compatible with the new world situation and knowledge, and that draws all humanity, all beings, into a unifying narrative providing a sense of meaning.

What is the Flourishing Earth Project?

After the *Science, Wisdom, and the Future* conference, which considered many of the pieces of the unifying narrative and both the problems for and the contributions to a sustainable, even flourishing future, there was a great sense of wanting to bring more tangible results out of the deliberations. Several of us met over a period of several months, accessing the both the possibilities and our resources. In the end, and at the suggestion of Rob Rutherford at California Polytechnic State University, an expert in holistic management, we focused on two points of view, or rather two sides of the same view.

The Flourishing Earth Project will explore more of the pieces of the puzzle, and more of the “fuzzy, messy” areas (as Rob so aptly puts it), in between the pieces in a way that connects them all into a holistic framework. We will start with a companion volume to the *Science, Wisdom, and the Future* conference book, but the Flourishing Earth Project itself is a larger vision, still somewhat undefined, but a cooperative adventure between the [Collins Foundation Press](#), [the Collins Family Foundation](#), the [Orion Institute](#), and, potentially, other individuals and groups, such as Trowbridge and his [Wisdom Centered Life](#) resource. It is not a formal organization or in any way intended to re-create the wonderful work being done in many areas already, but rather a conversation that may take many forms, all with the intent of connecting disparate pieces and contributing to the building of a flourishing Earth. It is about finding, or building, the will to make happen what is possible, perhaps for the first time in human history.

References

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