



February 2020

Action Is the Path to a New Ethics

Contribution to GTI Forum [Toward a Great Ethics Transition](#)

Gwendolyn Hallsmith

Brendan Mackey's [call](#) for an ethical transition informed by the Earth Charter needs more than a formal procedure, an international institutional base, and strong, credible leadership. The Earth Charter had all this twenty years ago. It had a UN mandate coming out of the Rio Earth Summit of 1992, three high-level international leaders, and a process that engaged people from all walks of life all over the world. Those of us who participated in the Johannesburg Summit in 2002, where the hope was that the Earth Charter would be adopted by the UN as a counterpart to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights but was not, saw that these elements were not enough to effect the change we all wanted at the time: an ethical transition in international law and practice.

Where can we find the driving force for the ethical transition? Some, like [Mary Evelyn Tucker](#), would say world religions, pointing out how the Earth Charter principles are in alignment with religious tenets and wisdom traditions around the world. But the capacity of the world's religions to provide moral direction and inspiration for a flourishing community of life is questionable. Where I live now in rural Vermont, this capacity is a bit higher than other places I have lived—Central Asia, Europe, Canada, urban US—but it is still tiny when compared to the economic forces at work shaping people's worldviews and lives.

For hope, I would turn toward the climate justice movement. The diverse calls for climate justice articulate a new vision for society, one that unites the Earth Charter's links between ecological integrity, social and economic justice, democracy, non-violence, and peace. They also call everything into question—our culture, our assumptions about technology, our views about

“normal” consumer values, monetary systems that reinforce inequality and drive growth, industrial dominance, agriculture, and centralized, white, male power.

Inspired by the need for climate action, the new generation of young people are now challenging their forebears in ways that have never happened before. The rise of Greta Thunberg and her clear call for ecological integrity linked to social and economic justice has resonated with millions around the world. People are waking up.

But is waking up enough? Does human action follow ethics, or do ethics follow action? A call for an ethical transition would seem to imagine that if we could somehow get lots of people to line up behind something akin to the Earth Charter 2.0, this would change things, even when most human institutions are still working with and for the systems driving us to destruction.

Don't get me wrong: I love engaging people from all over the world in the essential discussions about values and ethics. If Brendan Mackey's vision of a renewed Earth Charter materializes, count me in. I also think those of us who resonate with the Earth Charter need to look more critically at our own cultural assumptions, and our basic economic systems, and then look for the structures we can create for human interaction that are aligned with Earth Charter principles. Action to change systems might be the first thing to do if we hope vast populations will ever ascribe to new ethical principles. Adopting a principle to eradicate poverty, for example, is a start, but we need to empower all people to rise up and take their rightful place as children of the Earth. We need more action. The Green New Deal's link to action and systems change in the context of the climate justice framework could be Earth Charter 2.0.

About the Author



Gwendolyn Hallsmith has over thirty years of experience working with municipal, regional, and state government in the United States and internationally. She is the author of six books on community resilience and sustainable economics. She founded Vermonters for a New Economy in 2012, and is currently working on legislation for a Vermont State Bank. She lives in an ecovillage in Cabot, Vermont, called the Headwaters Garden and Learning Center, where she and her husband write topical songs about the new economy for their small musical group called The New Economistas. She has a Master's degree in Public Policy from Brown University and studied theology at the Andover Newton Theological School.

About the Publication

Published by the [Great Transition Initiative](#).

Under our Creative Commons BY-NC-ND copyright, you may freely republish our content, without alteration, for non-commercial purposes as long as you include an explicit attribution to the Great Transition Initiative and a link to the GTI homepage.



Cite as Gwendolyn Hallsmith, "Action Is the Path to a New Ethics," contribution to GTI Forum "Toward a Great Ethics Transition," *Great Transition Initiative* (February 2020), <https://greattransition.org/gti-forum/ethics-transition-hallsmith>.

About the Great Transition Initiative

The [Great Transition Initiative](#) is an international collaboration for charting pathways to a planetary civilization rooted in solidarity, sustainability, and human well-being.

As an initiative for collectively understanding and shaping the global future, GTI welcomes diverse ideas. Thus, the opinions expressed in our publications do not necessarily reflect the views of GTI or the Tellus Institute.