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## A CONVERSATION WITH RUAH SWENNERFELT: THE TRANSITION MOVEMENT AND PEOPLE OF FAITH

Interview by Riane Eisler, JD, PhD (h)

**Abstract:**

Riane Eisler talks with Ruah Swennerfelt, author of *Rising to the Challenge: The Transition Movement and People of Faith* and president of the Transition Town Charlotte board, about the role of faith and faith communities in the Transition Town Movement, dedicated to localized ways of living in harmony with our Earth.

**Keywords:** transition towns; people of faith; caring; post-carbon; permaculture; global warming; domination; partnership; sustainability; re-localization

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**Riane Eisler:** Thank you, Ruah, for your important work in the Transition Town movement, which is in so many ways aligned with the cultural shift from domination to partnership. As you know, this journal is dedicated to gathering and publishing the best scholarship on this subject, as well as contributions from practitioners and others working to facilitate and accelerate this shift.

**Ruah Swennerfelt:** It's an honor to have this conversation with you, Riane. Thank you for reaching out.

**Eisler:** In your book, *Rising to the Challenge: The Transition Movement and People of Faith*, you write about events in your life and relationships that led to your deep involvement in the Transition Town movement. Can you please tell us about that?

**Swennerfelt:** At a Quaker conference in Honduras in 1991 I picked up a pamphlet that

had the following words: “There will be no peace without a planet.” That was a wake-up call for me. I had been actively involved in peace and justice issues, but hadn’t considered the environmental impact on the poor and oppressed. I began to see how all the social issues were interrelated, and I immersed myself in learning about the environmental issues we faced.

A few years later I began a couple of decades serving as General Secretary for Quaker Earthcare Witness (QEW), and during that time I had the opportunity to learn about many of the causes of how our planet has been stressed by human actions. QEW was focused on nurturing the spiritual transformation that is necessary to find ways to mitigate and adapt to those stresses. We also encouraged local action. In fact, while asking for donations, I would say, “Many good organizations ask for money and work on behalf of the donor. But QEW asks for donations and the donors have to do the work where they live. QEW then finds ways to support that work.” It was kind of a joke, but was also the truth. We need to focus on local action.

My husband, Louis Cox, and I both worked for QEW and have spent many years creating a personal sustainable life in rural Vermont. We have calculated our ecological and carbon footprints and worked diligently to reduce them. However, the uncomfortable truth is that, even with all our efforts, if everyone on the planet lived as we do, we would need several more planets to support us! We began to search for ways to continue to work toward sustainability without total despair taking over.

At a QEW meeting one year we learned about the Transition Movement. We recognized the effective tools being offered through the movement and saw how the ethics and principles could apply anywhere. That began our journey of working locally for a resilient future, beginning with finding others interested in founding a Transition Town group in Charlotte, Vermont, the town where we live.

**Eisler:** You've said that you are a Quaker. How has this influenced your life, your writing, and your activism?

**Swennerfelt:** I've been a Quaker since 1975. I was drawn to Quakers because of their non-violent activism during the Vietnam War. The Religious Society of Friends is a non-creedal Christian denomination. It began without paid ministers, and many Quaker Meetings today continue that practice, including my own, Burlington Friends Meeting. We enter the worship space and sit in "expectant waiting" for leadings from the Spirit that dwells in all of us. If there is vocal ministry, it comes from those who have felt the Spirit move them to share. Rather than relying on a professional clergy, we are all ministers to one another. This means that the work of caring for the spiritual and physical health of the congregants and the quality of worship are the responsibility of all the participants. We have committees that attend to many of the tasks and obligations of the Meeting community, but we all still have the welcome burden of doing the work. This was an important training ground for taking on responsibilities within society.

Although Quakers don't adhere to creeds, we do have some basic beliefs, or "Testimonies," which bear witness to the working of Truth in our lives. These are summarized as Simplicity, Peace, Integrity, Community, Equality, and Sustainability. We believe that if we live by these values, we will live responsible lives in the midst of all the irresponsible actions humans have taken. These Testimonies guide my life and prompt me to actively work for social change wherever it's needed. I strive to live a life of integrity—where I live, in the way I care for the land, and how I get involved in local, national, and international issues. Sometimes it has guided me to direct action, which has resulted in my spending some time in jail. Sometimes it has guided me to rejoice in the gifts of our planet and to dance and sing and honor Earth. And I feel called to share what I know through writing and speaking.

**Eisler:** How would you describe the core principles and practices of the Transition Movement?

**Swennerfelt:** One of the founders of the Transition Movement, Rob Hopkins, was teaching Permaculture when he and his students became aware that the Permaculture

ethics and principles could be as useful for communities as for agriculture. The ethics, explained simply as, “People Care, Earth Care, Fair Share,” are synonymous with a life lived with Earth integrity and compassion.

The 12 principles, which readers can find explained at <https://www.timberpress.com/blog/2013/02/12-principles-of-permaculture/>, describe a way of being on the land, as well as a way of being in the world:

1. Observe and interact.
2. Catch and store energy.
3. Obtain a yield.
4. Apply self-regulation and respond to feedback.
5. Use renewable resources.
6. Produce no waste.
7. Design from pattern to details.
8. Integrate rather than segregate.
9. Use small and slow solutions.
10. Use and value diversity.
11. Use the edges.
12. Creatively use and respond to change.

While Hopkins was translating Permaculture ideals into community living, across the Atlantic an author and neo-pagan leader named Starhawk was translating them into political activism. She developed a two-week course called “Earth Activist Training,” which awards a Permaculture Design Certificate and provides in-depth lessons on using the principles at the front lines of protest. I participated in one of those trainings years before I learned about the Transition Movement, and Louis and I have implemented Permaculture techniques and ethics on our land. I’ve also been influenced by Starhawk’s work and have had the privilege to get to know her through the many workshops and week-long camps she has led. I learned to love Earth as my sister.

**Eisler:** Why do you believe that the Movement's principles and practices present an intelligent response to the spiritual and cultural crisis we face?

**Swennerfelt:** I wrote at the end of my book, “Without the label of ‘faith,’ the Transition Movement is a faithful community of people, respecting one another and Earth, looking for a transition from a fossil-fuel-based consumer society to one that cares deeply for healthy relationships, walking gently on the earth, and rising to action on behalf of all that lives.”

The Movement is not political. It's not sectarian. Everyone is invited to the table. That's not always easy, but it helps to consider Transition's “friendly disclaimer”:

1. If we wait for governments, it will be too late.
2. If we act as individuals, it will be too little.
3. But if we act in community, it might be just enough; just in time, we will do all we can to work with all the people in our community.

Louis and I joined the Grange (a 19<sup>th</sup> century organization focused on supporting farmers and rural communities) for that very purpose. It would help us get to know people in our community who weren't the ones coming to our house for potlucks, and who were known to have different political views from us. If we had not been involved with Transition, we wouldn't have done it. And today, five years later, the Grange is collaborating with the Transition Initiative in Charlotte on many projects in the town. And we are very involved in the Grange.

The basic premise of Transition is to help communities become resilient in the face of the many dire issues that challenge us. I believe that, community by community, we will change the culture and the world.

**Eisler:** In your book you tell stories about some leaders in the movement whom you met personally in your travels. Could you tell us about that?

**Swennerfelt:** Well, there are many examples of people doing amazing things in their communities, more than we have time to share here, but I'll choose a few. When I met Rob Hopkins, the inspiration and co-founder of the Movement, at the international Transition Conference in England, he told me about his path to Transition, and I quote him in my book:

In 1990 I visited the Hunza Valley in northern Pakistan and got my first tantalizing glimpses of a society that lived within its limits and had evolved a sophisticated yet simple way of doing so. There I found the most beautiful, tranquil, happy, and abundant place I have ever visited before or since. In this remote valley I felt a yearning for something I couldn't quite put my finger on but which I now see as being resilient: a culture based on its ability to function indefinitely, to live within its limits, and to thrive for having done so.

Hopkins's inspiration, prolific writings about the movement, cheerful and sincere demeanor, and clarity of purpose continue to draw people to Transition.

I met Naresh Giangrande at the All-France Transition Conference in 2011, and he shared his journey to Transition. "While visiting Totnes, England, in 2005, I found a kindred spirit in Rob Hopkins. In particular, Hopkins's practice of permaculture seemed to offer a new way of looking at and dealing with peak oil and climate change and other major systemic problems." The two decided to collaborate, and the Transition Movement was born. Hopkins wrote the book and Giangrande created the trainings. Giangrande asks himself from time to time whether there is any other urgent task that might take him away from Transition work, and the answer is always, "No," because Transition is such a positive, nurturing, hopeful process.

In Tervuren, Belgium, Marc Van Hummelen is a forest ranger and founder of Transition Tervuren. For Van Hummelen, the Transition Movement is a synthesis of other activities that he was already part of. Those activities were all from the same perspective of creating a better environment, but the programs acted independently, without much

communication. He had talked to people about creating an umbrella organization, but it didn't catch on. Then he found Transition. It was just what he was looking for. Overall he's pessimistic, but that is part of his drive to change things and to encourage more people to come to this Initiative. According to Van Hummelin, "If I was content with the world, maybe I wouldn't have helped start Transition Tervuren." He is living his own vision of the future in his backyard and home, using Permaculture, living simply, using a simple composting toilet, etc.

While not yet a Transition leader, Murad Al Khuffash, a Palestinian Muslim, has embraced permaculture for farming his family's ten-generation farm. He embraces the Transition approach to reaching out to the members of his small town of Marda in the West Bank. I was so impressed with his perseverance in growing food in the face of scarce water for irrigation. He used Permaculture techniques for capturing rainwater and, based on my observation of the lush vegetables he grows, it works. He's teaching the local farmers how to do the same. His farm is a working farm and demonstration site for Permaculture principles, techniques, and strategies. A few years ago, Starhawk led one of her Earth Activism Trainings there. Al Kuffash said that he is doing this work because he likes to plant seeds and watch things grow. He likes to eat healthy food and provide it for others in his village. Murad is an example of the many people who have risen to leadership in the Transition Movement. Often permaculture farmers see the natural connection to working in their communities, and Murad does that by reaching out and teaching his neighbors ways to be successful farmers. It's a first step. He's aware of the Movement and hopes one day to begin the initial steps to start an initiative in his town.

**Eisler:** One of the leaders you write about summarizes his core goals in the movement as transitioning "to a low-carbon, energy-lean way of life that is also ecologically sustainable, socially just, and spiritually fulfilling." Would you say that this statement is representative?



**Swennerfelt:** Yes. Even though their paths towards those goals are different, their cultures are different, and their communities are different, everyone I've met has shared the same ideals. It's typical that the people involved with Transition are trying to "walk their talk."

**Eisler:** What strategies do you think have been most successful in communities that became Transition Towns?

**Swennerfelt:** When I asked those I interviewed about what drew them to the movement, they answered: "Because everyone is welcome to the table; because it's egalitarian; because I care about the fate of the planet and know I can't do it alone; because of the focus on the Inner Transition; because it's fun." Two things I haven't talked about yet are the Inner Transition work and fun.

I'll begin with fun. All the Transition books and leaders emphasize that it's important to have fun together - that it makes the work easier. They say that to entice people to join, they won't be interested in yet one more, dreary meeting. In Great Britain many "Transitioners" meet in pubs. Potluck meals usually begin a planning meeting. And I've seen that idea adopted wherever I go.

Hopkins shared a memory of the beginnings of Inner Transition, which I also quote in my book:

It wasn't very long into the evolution of Transition in Totnes, in 2006, that Hilary Prentice and Sophy Banks came round to my house to discuss the seeds of what would eventually become known as 'Inner Transition,' or the 'Heart and Soul' of Transition. Their argument was that any successful Transition process needed to be as much about the inner life of the people and groups making it happen, with attention paid to group health, dynamics and resilience, as it needed to be about solar panels, carrots, and Energy Descent Plans. Now the concept of Inner Transition runs through Transition like a golden thread.

**Eisler:** Why did you direct your book towards a multi-faith audience? Is the book only for people of faith?

**Swennerfelt:** I wanted to introduce the faith community to the Transition Movement since the ideals, beliefs, principles, and practices align so well with those of every religion. As well, I wanted to help Transition communities find new sources of people to become part of their efforts, and thought they would be interested in the interviews with people of various faiths and the faith communities' quotes about caring for Earth. It's a perfect match. But I am not looking for Transition to become religious. It's important that it's a secular movement, so that no one feels left out. But people of faith will bring their ethics to the work, and that will be welcomed. So, no, it's not only for people of faith. It's also somewhat of a primer about the Transition Movement, providing some history and background that would be of interest to anyone new to the ideas.

**Eisler:** What role can scholars play in spreading the principles of partnership and sustainability that Transition Towns advocate and try to practice? What role can this journal play?

**Swennerfelt:** It's an interesting question. In my Quaker work I began to understand that caring for Earth was really a united concern once the vocal ministry included messages about the spiritual basis for the tragedy that has gripped the planet. Then I began to understand that when these concerns are commonly espoused in sermons on Fridays, or Saturdays, or Sundays, people of faith will have finally woken up to hear the crying of Creation.

So the same idea would be for scholars or editors of this journal. I don't think every town or city needs to declare itself a Transition community. But I deeply believe that the blueprint for resilient communities that is offered in the Transition platform is the best I've seen. It's what gives me hope. We can rise to the challenges together. We can invite everyone to the table. We can learn what would make our communities resilient

and then do what we need to do to make it happen. When scholarly texts and journals such as this one are regularly writing about and encouraging participation in the principles and practices of the Transition Movement, even without naming them, then change will happen. It will then permeate campuses, places of worship, neighborhoods, towns, hamlets, and every place where people live. And that gives me hope.

**Eisler:** Is there anything else you would like to add?

**Swennerfelt:** Transitioners often talk about unleashing the creative genius in the group. I've seen it happen. You've seen it happen. An idea is floated and as each person shares their ideas, another builds on the previous expressions and soon an idea, different from what was first presented, emerges and everyone says, "Yes!" Let's find the ways to get to "Yes" and we will move the focus from doom and gloom to reveling in what is possible.

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Riane Eisler, JD, PhD (hon) is President of the Center for Partnership Studies (CPS) and Editor in Chief of the Interdisciplinary Journal of Partnership Studies. She consults on the partnership model introduced by her research, teaches in the CPS online Leadership Training Program, and keynotes conferences worldwide. She has been a leader in the global human rights movement and has received many honors, including honorary PhDs and the Distinguished Peace Leadership award. She is the author of numerous books and hundreds of articles drawing from her research. For more information, see [www.rianeeisler.com](http://www.rianeeisler.com) and [www.centerforpartnership.org](http://www.centerforpartnership.org)

**Ruah Swennerfelt** is a founding member of Transition Town Charlotte and a member of Burlington Friends Meeting (Quakers) in Vermont, USA. She served as General Secretary for Quaker Earthcare Witness (QEW) for 17 years. During her tenure with QEW she helped Friends and Friends Meetings to become aware of the spiritual relationship that humans have with Earth and to make changes in their lives that would bring them more in harmony with that relationship. After leaving her work at QEW, Ruah traveled in Israel, Europe, and parts of the United States interviewing people involved in Transition and visiting their Initiatives. Much of what she learned from those visits inspired the writing of her book, *Rising to the Challenge: The Transition Movement and People of Faith*, published in 2016 by Quaker Institute for the Future.

Ruah currently serves as president of the Transition Town Charlotte board, and serves on the Transition US Collaborative Design Council and as clerk of the New England Yearly Meeting Earthcare Ministry Committee. She has given many presentations, workshops, and keynote talks across North America and in England. She has written numerous articles for *BeFriending Creation*, *Friends Journal*, and *Quaker Life*. She has co-edited a book, *Earthcare For Friends*, published by Quaker Earthcare Witness, and has authored and co-authored chapters in several books. She blogs at <[transitionvision.org](http://transitionvision.org)>.

She and her husband, Louis Cox, live in rural Vermont where they grow most of their vegetables and fruits, make their own electricity, and heat their water from the sun, attempting to live lives that are more sustainable, rich, and meaningful.

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