Ethics for the Anthropocene – Prof. Nancy Howell, Ph.D.

This video was recorded at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History on April 26, 2015

Nancy Howell: 00:25  

[Hello I am Nancy] Howell, professor of theology and philosophy of religion at St. Paul's School of Theology. The focus of my teaching and research is really about the intersections of science, religion and society. Rather than speak like a professor, I hope, I'm going to tell you about the reflective struggle I have when I read such a fine book as Reason in a Dark Age and hear Dr. Jamieson speak. And I realize in thinking about the points that he brings up, that I have to figure out not just something about ethics and morality or even simple action, but I have to take a step back and figure out what I mean by relationships and what the nature of relationship really is in my way of seeing the world. (01:20) So, the first level of thinking about relationships for me has to do with the ecosystem. And for most of us, that's already overwhelming enough when we think about local bioregions. Once I go to the global concept of an ecosystem, I become really overwhelmed with how much I would need to know and negotiate to be a responsible partner in that system. (01:46) So think about something that Dr. Jamieson talks about in his book. We, as individuals, are often overwhelmed by systems, and those systems to which we look for action in the world are economic and political and social and cultural and many other things. And we tend to feel a kind of helplessness in the face of the system because the system often dictates to me what I should be thinking or doing, even against my own wish to have those thoughts and actions. So what becomes baffling is that it is a collective of individuals historically, and in contemporary life, that has shaped what those systems are. (02:37) One of the things that tells me about relationship is that I've become so immersed in the view that individual value is important in the United States and remembering that that's not important in every culture, even in native Indian culture, American Indian culture in the United States, that's the primary value. So I'm obviously shaped by a valuing of my individuality that even makes me talk about collective policies, rather than thinking about how we come together, as people related to each other, to talk about
who we should be and what we have been. Okay. (03:22)

Now, I think Dr. Jamieson in his book brings up something really important, and that is that power dynamics are critical here. And he explores the language of domination that is often been used to talk about the way humans relate to nature, whether we see nature as amoral or as a threat, or as an aesthetic value, our own power and sense of power is reflected in thinking about that relationship and thinking about what kind of power nature has in relationship to us, including the power to have a kind of backlash against the domination that we exercise. (04:06) I want to conclude by thinking particularly about the green virtue of respect. And I want to say that respect can be offered in two different ways, and in two different ways that reflect a human sense of domination. One can be a domination that is kind of negative, that treats nature as instrumental, a mere thing to be utilized by me. Another kind of domination includes the option that I can use nature and be related to nature in a kind of benevolent way. I can try to use my power, my domination, to do good things. As with most things in this world that we create, a very thing that can be used for evil can be used for good as well. (04:57) Respect leads us to think about the fact that whatever we do to damage another, including nature, can be a damage to ourselves. But what worries me about thinking in these ways is that I continue to exercise power within a sense of domination. And I even have a tinge in that language of thinking that the reason for being in a different relationship with nature is because of something I get. (05:35) So what I want to push in our discussion today is what it means to be in relationship. Should I continue to be one who thinks of myself individually and only interacts with others instrumentally so that I may be less damaged? Or do I need a totally different concept of what it means to be in relationship itself, one that speaks toward a greater mutuality and reciprocity? And I don't want to be too stressful about this, but it is an important virtue to think about respect, and whether I think about the other as having value and power is critical. (06:16) So here's the challenge for us. We, as humans, have used our innovation and power and relationality in ways that have had unintended consequences with respect to nature. Can we now turn our innovation toward a new concept of
relationship that can affirm both the individual and our communal relationship, not as a collective, but as persons who realize that every individual is affected by the relationship and has value in the relationship.

Return to the web page for this video, “Ethics for the Anthropocene – Prof. Nancy Howell, Ph.D.”