

# Introduction

*“Only when we understand can we care; only when we care shall we help; only if we help will all be saved.”*

— Jane Goodall

AS I WRITE THIS INTRODUCTION, I’m imagining you holding this book. You may be a teacher wondering what humane education is all about. You may be an activist hoping to educate others about the pressing issues that concern you. You may be an educational reformer or student of education wanting to create more effective and powerful curricula for meeting today’s challenges. You may be a humane educator wanting new ideas. You may be a parent wishing to engage your children in an effort to create a better world. You may simply be a lifelong learner curious about humane education. Whether you are a teacher, activist, educational reformer, student, humane educator, parent, lifelong learner (or a combination of these), this book is for you. I have written it for two reasons. First, quite simply, I want to see the evolution of a peaceful and sustainable world, and that is what humane education promises to help create. Second, I would have liked to have a book to help me when I began my work in humane education in the mid 1980s, so I felt that it was time to share what I’ve learned in order to help others.

## 2 THE POWER AND PROMISE OF HUMANE EDUCATION

This book will give you ideas about and concrete examples of ways to teach about the most important issues of our time so that you will be part of a growing movement that is dedicated to bringing about a humane world through education. In the pages that follow you will find the tools to educate young people to be more humane so that together we can bring about such a world. I begin with a vision of what humane education is and what it has the potential to achieve. Next you'll find activities and lessons that you can use to put humane education into practice whether in classrooms, camps, nontraditional educational settings, after school programs, or homeschooling situations. Finally, you'll find information and resources that will help you become a more knowledgeable and effective humane educator.

I had wanted to write this book without listing the dangers we face on our planet and without sounding the alarm about the doomsday scenarios that could be our future. I did not want readers to open this book, sigh, and think, "Oh, not again. Please don't offer me a litany of horrors." Yet it is precisely the suffering, destruction, and cruelty on this planet that necessitate this book. It is because our world is still rife with violence and exploitation that we need humane education. I came to realize that I couldn't write this book without describing some of the problems in the world, because unless you agree that we confront serious challenges, you will not be convinced that humane education is so critical and necessary. With that said, I promise that I will confine the challenges we must address only to the next couple of pages. The rest of this book discusses humane education as the way to meet these challenges.

Here are just some of the problems we face:

- Thousands of species of plants and animals are becoming extinct every year, with thousands more threatened and in decline.
- Holes in the ozone layer of our atmosphere that protect life from harmful solar radiation continue to develop and grow.
- The vast majority of scientists agree that global warming is a serious and growing threat.

- Nuclear waste continues to be produced with no safe or permanent methods for storage or disposal.
- In 1900, the human population was approximately one and a half billion. In 1950, it grew to two and a half billion. The human population now exceeds 6 billion and will continue to grow into the foreseeable future. Even if we were all to live modestly, the Earth is unlikely to be able to support these numbers. As standards of living rise and more and more people emulate a consumer-based culture, the Earth's ecosystem will be unable to withstand such resource depletion, pollution, and production of solid, and often toxic, waste.



- Warfare, terrorism, and violent answers to violent times are escalating around the globe as humans fail to achieve peaceful solutions to our conflicts.
- The disparity between rich and poor continues to grow around the world, paving the way for more conflict, suffering, inequity, and war.
- Human slavery is on the rise. Today, an estimated 27 million people, including children, are enslaved around the world. Slaves work in various industries, from brick and coal production to prostitution to farming.
- One quarter of the people on Earth do not have access to clean water.
- One billion people in the world are malnourished or starving.
- Sweatshops, where workers are not paid a living wage, are routinely fired for illness or pregnancy, and work 12- to-14-hour days, are proliferating around the globe. Many sweatshops employ children.



- Tens of billions of chickens, turkeys, cows, pigs, and sheep are raised annually under cruel conditions before they are slaughtered for food. Factory farming accounts for the vast majority

of modern agribusiness and includes severe confinement where animals are unable to move as well as mutilations such as branding, castration, tail removal, ear notching, and debeaking — all without pain relief or anesthesia.

- Tens of millions of nonhuman animals are used in product tests where they have chemicals, cosmetics, and household products dripped into their eyes, smeared on their shaved skin, or force-fed to them (all without anesthesia).
- More than five million dogs and cats are killed per year in the U.S. alone for lack of homes.
- More than one hundred million wild animals are killed in the U.S. by recreational hunters per year.
- Wild animals continue to be caught and stolen from their homes for zoos, circuses, sea parks, and the exotic pet trade.

This list could well go on and on. Many books have been written on each of these issues. However, this won't be one of them. Instead, this book offers a solution to all these problems: humane education. As a comprehensive field of study that draws connections between all forms of social justice, humane education examines what is happening on our planet, from human oppression to animal exploitation to ecological degradation. It explores how we might live with compassion and respect for everyone: not just for our friends, neighbors, and classmates, but for all people; not just for our own dogs and cats, but for all animals; not just for our school and home environments, but also for the Earth itself, our ultimate home. It invites students to envision creative solutions and to take individual action so that together we can bring about a world where kindness, integrity, and wisdom are the guiding principles in all our choices and relationships.

I wish that we did not need humane education, that it was enough to educate our children in the basics of language arts, science, math, social studies, and health, with plenty of room for the arts. But the times we are living in call upon us to teach young people about what is happening on this planet and to give them tools to

make choices that will create a better, safer, more peaceful, and less cruel world. It is imperative that we commit ourselves to humane education. If we fail to teach the next generation how to be wiser decision-makers, we further imperil our world and all its inhabitants. In the face of war, bigotry, cruelty, and the destruction of our environment, humane education may be the most important subject we can teach.

Although I have called myself a humane educator for almost twenty years, for a long time I was uncomfortable with the word *humane*. The term *humane*, with *human* embedded in it, seemed to offer false hope for the problems we *humans* cause, and the struggles we *humans* face. Then one day I looked up the word *humane* in Webster's Collegiate dictionary and among the definitions I found this one: "*having what are considered the best qualities of human beings.*" Humane education suddenly became so straightforward — my goal became to nurture the best qualities in students and to offer young people the tools to live accordingly.

And what are the best qualities that constitute being humane? After years of asking people to answer this question, I've generated the following list:

- Kindness
- Compassion
- Honesty and trustworthiness
- Generosity
- Courage
- Perseverance, self-discipline, and restraint
- Humor and playfulness
- Wisdom
- Integrity
- A willingness to choose and change

Ask students to write down their own answer to the question: "What are the best qualities of human beings," and, most likely, their lists will be similar to the one above, regardless of ethnicity, class,

gender, or religion. I doubt very much that you will ever hear a student say “greed” or “cruelty.” In our hearts and minds, each of us knows that kindness, compassion, and integrity are desirable attributes, and that wisdom and honesty are values worth cultivating.

Identifying humanity’s best qualities provides a guide for young people’s own lives, but knowing what it means to be humane is not enough. Without knowledge and critical thinking skills, without awareness of and access to humane choices, they won’t really be able to put their list into practice in a very far-reaching way. For example, if a student writes “kindness” on her list, even if she is very kind in school and with her family, she is not fully living the value of kindness if she is buying a product that was produced through the labor of enslaved people half way around the world. But how would she know? Some of the kindest people I know — people who do not gossip, who have a warm smile for everyone, who are loving toward all whom they meet — live in ways that routinely cause significant suffering to others. We all do! Whether it’s by using paper that comes from clearcut forests, purchasing products that pollute, buying clothes produced by exploited workers, eating factory farmed eggs and bacon at breakfast, even the kindest people can unwittingly cause harm. What humane education does is provide students with knowledge, awareness, and information-gathering skills so that they are able to choose to live according to their list of best qualities to the greatest extent possible.

Some may think that exposing young people to the ills of the world is harmful, not helpful. I share the concern that young children must be protected from too much knowledge about the suffering in the world, but elementary school students can certainly be inspired to live with compassion and kindness. As our children reach middle and high school, however, they will undoubtedly begin to know about the challenges we confront on this planet, whether or not we teach them about these ourselves. My experience has shown me that when humane educators impart information with the goal of inspiring positive solutions, rather than disempower youth, they empower them. Living according to our values, especially in the

expansive way that humane education explores, is not easy, but it's exhilarating and deeply meaningful. The self-respect that a person who really strives to live according to her or his values develops is priceless. Despite what they know, despite the suffering and destruction they've been exposed to, young people who are offered humane education in age-appropriate ways usually become positive agents of change, and their cynicism and apathy diminish. They make wiser, kinder, more respectful decisions that better them as they better the world.

We have a clear, though challenging, task ahead of us. If we raise a generation to be truly wise and deeply compassionate, we can change the dangerous course we are on. To those who might think that we don't have enough time to educate the next generation with the knowledge and power to chart a different course (but instead must work to stop specific problems through legislation, activism, and other campaigns), I say that we don't have enough time *not* to teach our children to be humane. While it's essential that we continue to put out the fires of oppression and destruction, we need to stop the fires from spreading. Children who learn to live with genuine kindness toward others, to think critically about their choices and their lives, and to make wise decisions, help prevent future suffering and disaster.

Every teacher can be a humane educator. Whether in math, science, language arts, health, or social studies, humane education can become imbedded in the curricula so that it infuses the standard subjects. At the same time, humane education will achieve its greatest potential when courses taught by teachers specifically trained in humane education proliferate in the same number as math or social studies classes. Since the problems we face are so dire, so complex, and so interconnected, becoming a humane educator requires a thorough personal education on a host of issues: environmental ethics, human rights, culture and society, and animal protection. We need teachers who understand these subjects and the links between them, who have grappled with the complexities of these challenges as well as the conflicts that arise when trying to find solutions that

are just and humane for all. It will be up to you to continually seek out information so that you can appropriately and powerfully educate your students and children. Humane educators do not simply send their students on the journey toward humane living — they go on the journey themselves. It is my hope that you will be inspired to keep learning more about these issues so that you can use the activities and ideas in this book to their fullest potential.

Some may think that we can't possibly add another subject, another set of standards, and another requirement for schools. If you are a teacher, you may feel weighed down by an additional burden being laid upon your shoulders when the task should be shared by parents and society in general. I agree that it must be shared, which is why I've also written a book for parents, *Above All, Be Kind: Raising a Humane Child in Challenging Times*, since raising a humane generation cannot be the job solely of teachers. But that doesn't mean that teachers don't have a crucial role to play in this profound task. And I am convinced that you will find humane education to be anything but a burden. It is an exciting, innovative, meaningful, and satisfying education that brings about such positive changes among young people that it becomes deeply rewarding and joyful work. Let it not be something that simply adds to your workload but something that ultimately enlivens and lightens it.