Solutionary

Noun

1. A person who identifies inhumane, unjust, and/or unsustainable societal systems and then develops solutions to transform them so that they do the most good and least harm for people, animals, and the environment.

2. A person who brings critical, systems, strategic, and creative thinking to bear in an effort to create positive changes that are equitable, restorative, and humane for all affected.

3. A person who seeks to contribute to humane and sustainable systems by making personal choices that support such systems.

Adjective

1. Pertaining to or characterized by solving problems in a strategic, comprehensive way that does the most good and least harm for all affected.

2. Innovative and far-reaching in a positive way for people, animals, and the environment.

Chapter 1:

A SOLUTIONARY MINDSET FOR NEXT-LEVEL CHANGE

What I've Learned from Improv Comedy

T HE PRIMARY DISPOSITIONS that I believe are essential in the effort to become a solutionary come from what I've learned from improvisational comedy. I'm a huge fan of this art form, not only because I often find it hilarious, but also because it offers meaningful life lessons along with wise approaches to budding solutionaries. This realization came to me when I began taking improv comedy classes with my husband.

There are some basic rules to improv comedy that include the following:

- Build relationships.
- Embrace "Yes, and…"
- Bring the love.
- Help others shine.

With the most minor of suggestions from the audience, such as a location or a made-up title, improvisational actors begin a scene. The first thing these actors will do is establish a relationship. A middle-aged female actor might turn to her young male scene partner and exclaim, "Mom, I've entered us into the parent-child acrobatic competition at school!"

It doesn't matter that the actor does not look like a child or an acrobat or that the mother is male and decades younger. What matters is that a relationship has been established. If the actors are committed to the relationship, the audience will be too.

Perhaps the scene partner says, "Fabulous Brian! We can finally wear the matching pink polka-dot leotards I purchased on ebay!" Now we know that the child is named Brian, Mom may have some binge-shopping

habits, and we may have some gender-bending opportunities at hand. The scene is moving forward because the second actor agreed to the premise and added to it.

Brian can resist wearing the pink polka-dotted leotard if she wants, as long as she doesn't deny that these leotards exist and that Mom is excited. Brian might embrace the costume or use Mom's strange shopping choices as a jumping-off point to move the scene along. What Brian won't do if she is a good improv comedian is start an argument. This is because arguments aren't generally that much fun to watch. In improv comedy, love trumps hate, and improvisational comedians usually look for ways to bring the love and help their scene partners shine.

What do these improv comedy rules have to do with cultivating a solutionary mindset? So much!

Build relationships

In order to successfully solve problems with all stakeholders in mind and strive to do the most good and least harm for everyone, we need to be able to communicate effectively and compassionately with one another. In our polarized societies full of either/or and us-versus-them thinking, we routinely clash, turn others into opponents, defend our positions, stop listening, and wind up *preventing* solutionary ideas and action from occurring.

The first step in breaking free of these dysfunctional patterns of behavior is to build relationships with a diverse array of people, and to build these relationships, we must choose to reach outside of our bubbles. Doing so isn't easy and takes practice, and many (if not most) of us generally take the path of least resistance and actively avoid interacting with others whom we consider "them."[17]

To be clear, many people have legitimate and wise reasons to avoid reaching out to people who do not share their views. Power, class, religious, ethnic, gender, and racial dynamics can put those with less power, and who may be frequent victims of bigotry and hate, at risk of harm or retaliation for speaking honestly. This is all the more reason for those who are not at risk of retribution to step up to the challenge of reaching beyond their bubbles so that they can be better advocates and solutionaries. And for those with privileges, whether based on wealth, ability, nationality,

race, gender, sexual orientation, et cetera, it's important to recognize the power dynamics that may exist when reaching out to people who are relatively less privileged and to consider how to listen more and cede power in order to create a welcoming space for meaningful connection and collaboration.

In 2016, shortly after the election in which Donald Trump won the electoral college vote and became the president of the United States, I was giving a keynote presentation at a conference in Boston. One of the other keynote speakers was a well-known Harvard professor. During his presentation, he mentioned that he didn't know anyone who had voted for Trump. Because he lived in the liberal bastion of Cambridge, Massachusetts, worked as a professor in a progressive department, and was surrounded by like-minded people, I shouldn't have been surprised, but I was. I also felt disappointed. Was he subtly suggesting that Trump supporters were not worth knowing?

He wasn't alone. During the campaign, Hillary Clinton said during a speech to supporters: "to just be grossly generalistic, you could put half of Trump's supporters into what I call the basket of deplorables. Right? … The racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, Islamophobic you name it…."[18]

We know what happened. That statement may have led her to lose the election (though not the popular vote), and some Trump supporters proudly display the name "deplorables" on bumper stickers and T-shirts to this day. The divisiveness in the United States grew.

While I did not vote for Donald Trump, I knew plenty of people who had. Some were new friends of mine from the CrossFit affiliate I'd joined that year, and they were not deplorable. Among them were some of the most generous and welcoming people I knew. The summer before the election, when a friend left our CrossFit gym because there were Trump supporters among us, I was dismayed. She was shutting the door on conversation and understanding and doubling down on living inside her bubble. Had she been a member of a marginalized community, subject to the increased bigotry that arose during the campaign and its aftermath, and at risk for hostility at our gym, I would have felt differently, but that was not the case.

Meanwhile, I felt like I'd never had such a powerful opportunity to practice being a solutionary. I welcomed the chance to build deeper relationships with people who had different views from my own and to be the humane educator I claimed to be. One of my new friends from CrossFit—who voted for Trump in 2016 (though not in 2020)—went on to become one of my closest friends and a generous supporter of my work. Our regular conversations led to both of us learning, growing, thinking more carefully and deeply, and striving to come up with more solutionary ideas than what were being fed to us by polarizing media.

Politics is just one arena where building relationships across differences is helpful in becoming a solutionary. There are all sorts of values and beliefs that lead us to separate ourselves in order to spend all or most of our time with our in-groups and consume the media preferred by those groups.

Having dedicated my life to advancing social justice, animal protection, environmental sustainability, and women's rights, I have been part of a lot of in-groups. It has taken a great deal of commitment to the value of building relationships for me to seek out friendships with people who kill or harm animals recreationally, who fight against a woman's ability to have an abortion, who oppose environmental efforts and regulations, and who say things that I consider to be bigoted. But I know that unless I build such relationships, I will be more likely not only to stereotype, caricature, and possibly even vilify others who have different beliefs but also to miss the opportunities to expand my own awareness and understanding as well as to influence people in positive ways.

To avoid stereotyping, caricaturing, and vilifying others, I remind myself of a few things:

- I don't want to be stereotyped, caricatured, and vilified myself.
- I'm not a paragon of virtue and have plenty of arenas where I can and should do better.
- The great majority of people share a commitment to such virtues as compassion, generosity, courage, perseverance, integrity, and kindness, even if we differ on how they can best be put into practice.

- When I "other" someone, I close the door on building the bridges that may lead to solutionary thinking and action.

If you are reading this book, there's a good chance that you have strong opinions about various issues and are active in some way to make a difference by advancing your beliefs and advocating for the issues that concern you. Building relationships will help you succeed.

Embrace "Yes, and…"

"Yes, and…" refers to the practice of "agreeing" with one's scene partner in an improvisational sketch and adding to the prompts they offer. In the example I used to illustrate an improv scene, the actor who was called "Mom" immediately became Mom. In other words, he implicitly said "yes" to the role of Mom. Then he implicitly said "and" by adding to the scene with new ideas. In improv comedy, experienced actors avoid saying "but" or denying the prompts they are given by their scene partners. If they were to deny their scene partner's ideas, the scene wouldn't go anywhere, and the audience wouldn't enjoy watching it.

What does this have to do with being a solutionary? If we are to successfully and effectively address and solve problems with the fewest unintended negative consequences, we need to consider the perspectives of all stakeholders. Given the human tendency to pit "us" against "them" and to argue and debate with (and too often belittle and disparage) our perceived enemies, there is much to be learned from "yes, and…." When we bring a "yes, and…" disposition, we are actively seeking to understand and agree with whatever we can. In other words, we look for what we are able to say "yes" to and then add what we have to offer by saying "and…".

"Yes, and…" can literally become the language you use in conversations. In discussions with my friend and colleague Mary Pat Champeau, we use this language regularly. We even laugh about it because when one of us says "yes, and…" we know this means we have points of divergence. We also know that we are listening to, acknowledging, and recognizing the value of what the other person has just said, and it's our responsibility to add nuance, ideas, and other ways of thinking, not to reject the other

person's thoughts if we disagree. The language itself primes us to think ever more critically, systemically, strategically, and wisely.

Mary Pat and I agree on most issues, so embracing "yes, and…" isn't usually challenging for us, but I have many friends with whom I disagree strongly about highly charged issues. For example, as alluded to previously, I'm pro-choice, and I have friends who are pro-life. Yet, even with such a divisive issue, it's possible to bring a "yes, and…" approach. Virtually everyone can agree that it would be best if there were as few girls and women as possible facing an unwanted pregnancy. In this sense, it should be easy for pro-choice advocates like me to say "yes" to someone who doesn't want fetuses aborted. Then I can add the "and…" to consider how we can significantly reduce the number of girls and women becoming pregnant who do not wish to have a child. Meanwhile, pro-life advocates concerned about the ability of fetuses to suffer during abortion can potentially be persuaded to support Plan B—the morning-after pill—which can end an early pregnancy during the embryonic stage before there is a fetus that could potentially experience pain.

I suspect many are rolling their eyes at this Pollyanna-ish belief that we might find any common ground on this issue, but solutionaries who are pro-choice and those who are pro-life may want to give it a try. I have successfully influenced pro-life advocates to support Plan B by listening to their concerns about abortion, showing respect, and working to find a place of agreement. While this "yes, and…" example doesn't address the religious belief, which many pro-life people hold, that a fertilized egg is a human being deserving of the full protection of law, it still represents a step toward finding *some* common ground ("yes") and seeking nuance in responding in a solutionary way amidst conflicting beliefs and values ("and"). By bringing a "yes, and…" disposition both to interactions with others, as well as when addressing persistent problems, many of the obstacles to solutionary thinking and action are removed, and new avenues toward solutions begin to appear.

Bring the love

Conflicts on stage aren't generally funny. Sure, brilliant improvisational comedians like Larry David can pull off arguments with humor (which is

pretty much the premise of his show *Curb Your Enthusiasm*), but it's generally funnier to watch love rather than hate unfold. That's why improv comedians make every effort to bring the love.

How does this translate into a solutionary mindset? For many, if not most of us, it is easier to focus on the negative, such as ill-feelings, frustrations, and resentments, than on the positive. How quickly we judge others and feel anger. Litter on the ground? Only a jerk would leave their trash for others to deal with. Cut off in traffic? What a contemptible person. They voted for that dolt? Idiot.

And then there's the Internet, where distance allows us to enter our psychic underworld and unleash our worst qualities through the comfort of our keyboards as we make short-tempered, sarcastic, and mean-spirited comments (or much worse) online. We may think we're not really being nasty or offensive as we criticize, but are we bringing the love?

This is the hardest improv rule to adopt as a solutionary because anger about the problems we're trying to address is often sudden and overwhelming. Yet we have a choice about whether to indulge our worst qualities or to embrace our best.

After Vladimir Putin ordered the invasion of Ukraine, and I was constantly consuming news about the atrocities perpetrated on Ukrainians by the Russian army, my husband and I heard a group of people speaking Russian (a language I love, and which I've studied) in the parking area by a trail in Acadia National Park near where we live. I was blindsided by a pounding heart and a sudden feeling of anger. My mind immediately jumped to judgmental questions: Did they support Putin's invasion? What were they doing to help Ukrainians? Why were they going on a leisurely walk in Acadia instead of risking their comfort to end the brutality of their president? And how was it that I—a person who adores a young man in Russia whom my family tried to adopt for many years when he was a boy—could suddenly be Russophobic?

While all these thoughts, feelings, and questions were swirling through my racing brain, one of the men approached me to ask a question about the hike we'd just been on. I stuffed down my anger and reminded myself that I knew nothing about these people. I didn't even know if they were Russian, since not all Russian speakers are. They could have been Ukrainians!

Mentally noting my own hypocrisy, I also realized that I had not asked myself what I was doing to help Ukraine at that moment, having just gone on my own leisurely walk. As friendly as I could be, I advised these Russian-speaking visitors about the trail. I brought the love. I could have indulged my anger and assumptions and snubbed them, but who would that have served? Not me. Not these strangers. Not Ukrainians. No one. "Bringing the love" didn't just serve the people who asked my advice; it did me a world of good, too.

Help others shine

The best improvisers focus on helping their scene partners shine. They look for ways not to showcase themselves but rather to create scenes that build on the gems their partners share. When everyone is doing this, everyone wins.

The more we shine light on and share goodness, the more we cause it to grow and spread. I can feel the cynics rolling their eyes at such trite "wisdom," but there is a deep truth embedded in this improv comedy rule. To actively seek to shine light on those doing good is to reframe the way we see the world and interact within it and to set the stage for promulgating more good. So look for those doing good in communities, regions, and nations and observe, learn from, emulate, and amplify their voices and actions.

Cultivating a Solutionary Mindset

In 2009, I was listening to the radio when I heard an announcement for an upcoming "Oxford-style debate" sponsored by the Open to Debate (formerly Intelligence Squared) series and held at New York University. The topic of the debate was this statement: "America is to blame for Mexico's drug war." There would be experts representing two sides: the side that agreed with the statement and the side that disagreed.

I marveled at the time and effort that would go into this debate, all while the drug war raged in Mexico, and while so many people were dying through drug-related violence (not to mention through drug use). The idea that Mexico's drug war would be reduced to an either/or question and that a good use of brilliant minds and the public's time would

be to participate in such a debate rather than work together to try to solve the problem of the drug war seemed misdirected to me.

When my son entered high school, one of the requirements for graduation was to participate in a school debate. Students were assigned one side or the other of a fabricated either/or scenario and told to research and strive to "win." I asked myself, toward what end?

While I recognize that people gain useful skills through the debate process, including investigative, critical thinking, communication, analytic, and persuasion skills, they can gain these same skills by working to find solutions to the problems that underlie the debate topic. If instead of only participating in debate, they also collaborated to *solve* those underlying problems, in addition to the skills above, they would also gain skills in systems thinking, strategic thinking, creative thinking, collaboration, cooperation, consensus-building, listening, and of course problem-solving. Rather than a win-lose scenario, they would be striving for a solution in which everyone wins.

Below are other debate topics from the Open to Debate series:

Don't blame teachers' unions for our failing schools
Universal health coverage should be the federal
government's responsibility
Clean energy can drive America's economic recovery
Major reductions in carbon emissions are not worth the money
Don't give us your tired, your poor, your huddled masses
Buy American/hire American policies will backfire
Guns reduce crime
Aid to Africa is doing more harm than good
Global warming is not a crisis
Airports should use racial and religious profiling
We should legalize the market for human organs
Anti-Zionism is anti-Semitism

For each statement, the series had experts debate one side or the other, with the audience voting to determine the winner of the debate. Please

read through the debate topics above once more, then choose one and ask yourself these questions:

- Why did I choose this topic?
- What is(are) the underlying problem(s) that the debate statement addresses?
- Does the statement adequately identify the actual problem(s)?
- If there are interwoven problems, is it useful to separate out one issue and respond to it in isolation?

Then ask yourself what solutions already exist, whether enacted on a small or large scale anywhere in the world, that have successfully addressed these underlying problems or similar problems. If you don't know, how could you find out? And if solutions exist, consider what knowledge and skills you would need to further implement or extend them. How might these solutions improve your own life and the lives of others?

In essence, this manner of questioning and thinking exemplifies the solutionary mindset. It is a mindset that resists arbitrary either/or statements and seeks to carefully identify underlying problems and approach them as solvable. It is a mindset that is dedicated to careful and thorough research and investigation, and which strives to find strategic solutions that can be implemented on a large scale and spread.

Adoption of such a mindset might seem obvious. Who wouldn't want to approach problems this way? Unfortunately, the solutionary mindset is not our default. To the contrary, either/or side-taking is more often the norm, and as soon as we frame a problem as an either/or, we tend to miss the entire spectrum of possible solutions that exist between and beyond the two sides. Once we have created a binary mindset that reinforces an us-versus-them mentality, we tend to lose a "we" perspective. Binary thinking can also lead people to believe that one side of the debate is "good," and the other side is "bad," with little room for considering a variety of options. Such thinking often becomes a reinforcing feedback loop as we seek to continually bolster our "side," which then further discourages us from collaborating across divides to solve problems.

Either/or thinking is so embedded in US culture that it shows up in most of our systems, especially in our political, media, economic, legal, criminal justice, and even our education system. In the US we have only two viable political parties since the other parties are so small and underfunded that they almost never win national elections and rarely win local elections. Yet it's silly to think there are just two ways of thinking about every issue or problem, and that people will fit neatly into a red or blue basket. Most of us know this, which may be part of the reason why the group of people identifying as Independents continues to grow,[19] but the stranglehold that the two parties have on US politics has led to profound dysfunction in governance and the legislative process.

This means that complex problems with competing interests turn into fierce fights that lead to winners and losers. I often point to an example of this from the 1990s—not because I can't find plenty of more recent examples, but because this example has played out in complex ways that continue to this day (and because it's good to remember that polarization is not a new phenomenon). The conflict I'm referring to was generated by placing the Northern Spotted Owl on the list of threatened species.

In the 1980s, scientists began to notice a severe decline in the population of the Northern Spotted Owl, and in 1990, the owl was federally listed as threatened under the US Endangered Species Act. This triggered the protection of the owls' habitat on federal lands in 1991, which meant that the old growth forests where the owls nest could no longer be logged. Thus began the side-taking. Lawn signs and bumper stickers popped up in the Pacific Northwest with people identifying their allegiance to *either* the owls *or* the loggers.

It should come as no surprise that the language used was often dismissive of the concerns of the "other side." Sometimes it was vicious. Politicians joined the fray, and the media amplified the conflict, always pitting loggers and owls against one another. It was rare to hear about people coming together to focus on solutions to the job crisis while simultaneously supporting forest protection. And yet, such a solutionary approach could have worked for the benefit of the great majority of stakeholders.

As one example of such an approach, Amazon conservationist Paul Rosolie, the director of the nonprofit Junglekeepers, was (and continues

to be) horrified and heartbroken by the destruction of the Amazon rainforest from the logging, mining, and agricultural industries. But instead of considering the Indigenous workers employed by those companies as his enemies, he recognized that they had few job options and were doing what they needed to do to support their families. It's not as if they wanted to destroy their rainforest homes. Reaching out to them with respect, empathy, and as potential friends and colleagues, he offered alternative employment—with significantly higher salaries—as forest rangers rather than forest destroyers. Such collaboration and coalition building to meet mutual goals and needs has served the interests of both Indigenous Amazonians and ensured the protection of an ever-growing swath of Amazon rainforest.[20]

What ended up happening in the Pacific Northwest in the fight between owls and loggers? The old-growth forests were protected—which helped countless species—and thousands of people did indeed lose their jobs, although less than one quarter of what the industry claimed would result.[21] Unfortunately, the Northern Spotted Owl population has continued to decline significantly. This may be due in large part to their previously depleted habitat, but it's also being caused by a competing species—the Barred Owl—which has moved into the Spotted Owl's territory.[22] Although no longer in the national news, the current either/or debate revolves around whether to kill the Barred Owls, which is what the US Fish and Wildlife Service wants to do. Where once the either/or debate revolved around people versus a species, now it revolves around one owl species versus individual animals of a related owl species.

If you were someone on the "side" of the Northern Spotted Owl during the years in which the conflict was in the news, where are you now? Are you still on the "side" of the Northern Spotted Owl as a species, or does it seem wrong to you to kill individual Barred Owls simply because they are out-competing their cousins? What would it mean to bring a solutionary mindset to these conflicting interests and resist side-taking in favor of finding solutions that do the most good and least harm for all involved?

Having a solutionary mindset doesn't mean that one never takes sides (nor that it will always be possible to find solutions that are good for everyone). That would be an example of yet another either/or. We do

not have to choose to be *either* a solutionary *or* a side-taker. Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel once said, "We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented."[23] There are times to take sides and times when there are no truly "solutionary solutions"—that is, solutions that address the root and/or systemic causes of problems and solve them in ways that have few unintended negative consequences to people, animals, or the environment. But the fact that there aren't always solutions that are truly solutionary doesn't mean there aren't some strategies that are better than others when considering what will do the most good and least harm.

There is another quote that may temper the penchant for absolutist statements in this regard, and it comes from physicist Niels Bohr, who said: "The opposite of a correct statement is a false statement. But the opposite of a profound truth may well be another profound truth."[24]

A solutionary mindset essentially means that, without absolutism, one brings a solutions-focused disposition and attitude to problems and resists being drawn into binary thinking and side-taking—unless, of course, taking a side is the most solutionary answer to a problem. It also means that one brings a solutionary *lens* to problems.

What Is a Solutionary Lens?

At the Institute for Humane Education (IHE), the organization I co-founded and where I work, we describe a solutionary lens as the effort and ability to:

- *see* unsustainable, inhumane, and inequitable systems that are causing problems;
- *recognize* that problems don't exist in isolation;
- *seek* the perspectives of all stakeholders; and
- *focus* on solutions that do the most good and least harm for the people, animals, and ecosystems that are impacted.

So far, I've given an example of an either/or statement (America is to blame for Mexico's drug war) and an either/or conflict between environmentalists and loggers (owls versus jobs). Often, either/ors revolve

around concepts and labels that lead to us-versus-them thinking, such as conservative vs. liberal, capitalist vs. socialist, believer vs. atheist, et cetera. Intellectually, we know that there are vastly more nuances embedded in these labels and categories, but emotionally we are often inclined to identify with labels. Yet labels shift and morph over time. If we can recognize that these categories aren't static, it's possible to soften our attachments to them. As the co-founder of the Institute for Humane Education, Rae Sikora, once said: "Wherever you draw the line between us and them, draw it in pencil since you'll likely need an eraser."

The more we create sides to which we can pledge our allegiance, the harder it becomes to bring a solutionary lens to the underlying issues and questions that led to the development of those sides. For example, consider the economic localization movement which advocates "buying local" as the answer to myriad problems.

Author Helena Norberg-Hodge begins her TEDx talk, The Economics of Happiness,[25] with this impassioned plea: "For all of us around the world, the highest priority, the most urgent issue is fundamental change to the economy." She goes on to say, "The change that we need to make is shifting away from globalizing to localizing economic activity."

There are many ways in which localizing economies leads to positive outcomes, and it is enormously valuable to embrace efforts to build healthy and resilient local communities. Yet there's a danger when we believe we've found *the* answer, because we may stop looking through a solutionary lens and become attached to a particular perspective, ideology, or solution.

To illustrate what I mean by this, imagine yourself taking Helena Norberg-Hodge's perspective to heart and believing that our highest priority should be a shift toward localization. Perhaps you'll support farmers' markets and eschew products and foods that have traveled far from where they were produced or grown. You may have heard of the *100-Mile Diet,* a bestselling book by authors Alisa Smith and J.B. MacKinnon, who spent a year eating foods produced within 100 miles of where they lived. You may even subscribe to this diet, even though 100 miles is an arbitrary, if nice round number (that doesn't sound quite as compelling when converted to 161 kilometers). But is such a local diet—and localization beyond food choices—the most solutionary approach to our problems?

While farmers' markets and local food initiatives have certainly been beneficial to farmers, communities, and consumers alike, is it realistic, desirable, or even responsible to advocate localization as the primary path to a healthy, happy economy in general? A full commitment to local foods would mean that in Maine, where I live, people would need to give up coffee, citrus, rice, and so much more, and rely on potatoes, wheat, beans, foraged food, hunted, trapped, netted, and hooked animals, and canned and dried food stored from our relatively brief summers. If we went further and included clothing, such a commitment to localization would mean forgoing cotton and wearing primarily linen clothing and animal hides.

Just as there are important benefits from localization, there are also important benefits from globalization. Medicines developed and produced by scientists working in laboratories in one part of the world are regularly exported to places far away where they are most needed, and the key ingredients in those medicines are often discovered in other parts of the world, such as tropical rainforests.

If localization became our primary focus, what would happen to the Ethiopian coffee farmers depicted in the film *Black Gold*, whose organic, fair-trade coffee would no longer have a market outside their communities, or to the sustainable and fair-trade collectives in Central and South America, which are exporting goods, foods, and clothes to the north. These collectives are helping many people who would likely go out of business if their products were only purchased locally. Of course, we need to pay attention to what happens when a commodity, such as the high-protein grain quinoa grown in poorer countries becomes desirable in richer countries, raising the price so that many people in the countries where it's grown can no longer afford it, and to how disruptions in our complex global supply chain can cause significant harm in communities that are reliant on far removed systems they cannot control (as became apparent during the COVID pandemic). These examples point to the importance of recognizing the complexity of problems and interconnected systems and avoiding oversimplified answers.

Too often the phrase "local economy" is associated with small, equitable, sustainable, and humane, and "global economy" with big, impersonal,

and destructive. Yet, there are local companies that are exploitative and cruel (e.g., plenty of pig farms that treat animals inhumanely and cause terrible pollution). There are also many overseas companies that are sustainable and equitable (e.g., plenty of fair-trade cooperative farms).

The localization *versus* globalization argument steers us away from more nuanced choices that arise when we bring a solutionary lens that asks us to examine problems, and the systems that perpetuate them, directly.[26] In other words, we can learn to recognize the positives from both localization and globalization rather than pit them against one another.

If, for example, our primary agricultural problems lie in the following issues, we can and should address these directly and systemically.

- monoculture farms
- poisonous chemicals
- fertilizer run-off creating ocean dead zones
- rampant antibiotic use in farmed animals accelerating antibiotic resistance
- fuel-, water-, land-, and grain-intensive animal agriculture
- exploitation of farm workers and those employed in slaughterhouses
- cruelty to animals
- habitat destruction and soil erosion caused by inefficient food production

Thus, we may find that fair-trade, sustainable, plant-, cell-, and microbial-based food production are meaningful alternatives that shift the economics of agriculture away from exploitation and abuse without closing markets between north and south, east and west, or in the United States between the fertile heartland, citrus-bearing Florida, California (where just about everything grows), and everywhere else.

I'm happy that Maine produces blueberries, potatoes, and lumber for people who live far away from us—although I would like it to do so without toxic pesticides and clear-cutting—and I'm also happy that I can live in Maine and still drink tea and eat avocados produced far away from me.

Global trade currently relies on the use of fossil fuels to transport crops and products across the planet, but as Michael Berners-Lee points out in his carbon footprint assessment of products and foods in his book, *How Bad Are Bananas?,* local doesn't necessarily mean less carbon intensive. His analysis reveals that bananas transported to Northern Europe from equatorial regions in Africa use a small fraction of the fuel needed for the hothouse tomatoes that are grown next door to him in England. And local beef in the United States has bigger global warming impacts than protein-rich legumes transported across the country.[27] Ironically, the energy it takes for local farmers to drive their many pickup trucks to a farmers' market often exceeds the carbon footprint of one semi bringing sustainably produced food from further away.[28] And regardless of whether we rely on locally or globally produced foods and goods, we're going to have to shift to clean energy systems and replace fossil fuels. Once we have made this shift, one of the strongest arguments against global trade will evaporate.

This is all to say that a solutionary lens is not static. It is open to identifying new ideas and ways to transform systems, rarely lands in absolutes, and is always on the lookout for better answers.

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An either/or lens isn't just a problem in terms of obvious polarization. It can emerge even in situations where people are ostensibly "on the same side" but disagree about tactics. For example, consider this quote from Senator Bernie Sanders printed in the January 2018 issue of *The Sun* magazine:

> Real change never takes place from the top on down. It always takes place from the bottom on up. It takes place when ordinary people, by the millions, are prepared to stand up and fight for justice. That's what the history of the trade-union movement is about. That's what the history of the women's movement is about. That's what the history of the gay-rights movement is about. That's what the history of the environmental movement is about. That's what any serious movement for justice is about.

You may not be surprised that my response to reading this was, "yes, and…."

Real change happens in many ways, not just one. Sometimes change is, indeed, primarily bottom-up, as in the women's suffrage and labor movements. Sometimes it's primarily top-down, as in the ban on chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs), which occurred when scientists discovered that CFCs were creating a hole in the ozone layer, and diplomats adopted the Montreal Protocol to phase out these chemicals. Sometimes change comes through more sustainable technologies and innovations that replace more destructive ones.

I write this as someone who will continue to educate about and advocate for environmental, animal, and human rights protections and policies, but I won't be suggesting that there's only one approach to creating positive societal transformations. We can each learn to identify the particular ways in which we want to become a solutionary who utilizes our talents, skills, and knowledge to make positive shifts happen. Some of us will work to gain political and economic support for better systems. Some will be engaged in trying to transform destructive and inhumane policies. Some will become traditional bottom-up activists agitating for change. Some will set new precedents within the legal system that have powerful top-down effects. Some will develop more sustainable and humane technologies and inventions. Some will shift mindsets and beliefs through education. But my hope is we will all be disinclined to accept statements like "real change *never* takes place" or "*always* takes place" through certain means. Social change is more likely to occur through a combination of strategic bottom-up activism, social businesses and innovations, top-down policy measures from experts and those in positions of power, and educational initiatives that shift perspectives. This means that forming coalitions and collaborating across various sectors of society can speed the process.

We mustn't forget that real and significant societal changes happen all the time, and not necessarily for the better. These changes often occur through the impacts of unexamined societal systems that have become entrenched over decades. For example, how did obesity and type 2 diabetes become so prevalent among children in the United States over

the past several decades, disproportionately affecting kids living in poverty?

Industrial agriculture, the Farm Bill, corporate lobbyists, and taxpayer subsidies have made the foods that contribute most significantly to these health problems—refined carbohydrates, fast food, certain kinds of meat, sugary beverages, and junk food—low in price by externalizing the true costs, while fresh fruits and vegetables remain costly because they are not subsidized.[29] Many public school cafeterias have also become the dumping ground for foods that aren't healthful, accustoming children to diets that may harm them. Couple these food system problems with an advertising and legal system that permits ads for unhealthy foods that target children, an educational system that has reduced time for fitness and outdoor play, and a media system with enticing screens that lead to inactivity, and you have a recipe for increased incidence of obesity and type 2 diabetes among children. Hardly a bottom-up change in our society!

How will obesity and type 2 diabetes be solved? We'll look at potential leverage points and solutions to address this problem in chapter 5, and the answers will include a combination of top-down, bottom-up, legislation-determined, education-influenced, and policy-change initiatives.

Solutionary = Next-level Changemaker
Solutionaries take problem-solving to the next level

At the beginning of this book is the definition of the word "solutionary." It includes three noun definitions and two adjective definitions. The first noun definition is this:

> A person who identifies inhumane, unjust, and/or unsustainable societal systems and then develops solutions to transform them so that they do the most good and least harm for people, animals, and the environment.

Embedded in this definition is an ethical imperative. One can solve an engineering problem in order to dam a river or blow up a mountaintop for coal removal, but that does not make one a solutionary. Solutionaries

take problem-solving to the next level by ensuring that their solutions do the most good and least harm for everyone: people, animals, and the environment.

Including animals is a distinguishing feature of the term solutionary, but which animals exactly? "Animals" is a big category that encompasses mammals, birds, fishes, reptiles, amphibians, and invertebrates. A commitment to doing the most good and least harm for animals does not mean that all animals carry equal weight when striving to find answers to problems that may impact multiple species. Animal sentience differs between species, and sentience matters. If an animal has a rudimentary (or no) brain and is unlikely to be able to suffer, a solutionary will weigh "harm" differently for that animal than for those animals who are clearly able to experience pain and suffering. Solutionaries will certainly give the benefit of the doubt when there are uncertainties about the capacity for pain, and will always strive to avoid causing harm to any species if they can, but they will seek to maximize the overall good and minimize the overall harm by taking into account the degree of suffering that the animals in question are capable of experiencing. They will, for example, consider tapeworm medication an ethical solution for an infected dog.

Solutionaries take humanitarianism to the next level

There's an oft-told parable about a child rescuing beached starfish by throwing them back into the sea. A pragmatic adult walks by and tells the child that given the thousands of starfish on the shore, throwing them one by one into the ocean can't possibly make a difference. Tossing a starfish back into the water, the child responds, "I made a difference for that one."

This story is meant to serve as a reminder that doing *something* to help matters, which is why if solutionaries encountered thousands of starfish on the shore, they would surely throw some of them back into the ocean. But solutionaries would go further. They would also ask, "What caused the beaching of these animals?" Assuming the beaching wasn't a natural phenomenon, they would investigate to find out the answer and try to address the problem at its source so that next week, next month, and next year, starfish would not be dying on the shores.

It's not uncommon for people to conflate humanitarian and solution-ary actions, but they are not the same. Volunteering to resettle refugees fleeing war, sending money to a region that's been decimated by wild-fires, or donating blankets to a homeless shelter are humanitarian efforts. They are meant to directly alleviate the symptoms and impacts of an underlying problem. They aren't oriented toward *solving* the problems of war, climate change, or poverty.

Humanitarian efforts are essential. When there are people and ani-mals in need, humanitarians relieve suffering. With that said, our time and resources are limited. If we are *only* humanitarians, we will face never-ending and potentially escalating problems. We must balance our limited time and resources with the imperative to be solutionaries who investi-gate the root and systemic causes of problems and devise solutions so that these problems cease to exist. This is not an either/or but a "both, and." Solutionaries take humanitarianism to the next level.

At the Institute for Humane Education, we have developed the follow-ing rubric to evaluate the "solutionariness" of a solution so that as we work to develop solutions to problems we are better able to distinguish between our humanitarian and solutionary efforts, as well as between solutions that have unintended negative consequences and those that do the most good and least harm for everyone impacted. This rubric isn't meant to discourage humanitarian efforts but rather to clarify the solutionariness of solutions.

EMERGING	DEVELOPING	SOLUTIONARY	MOST SOLUTIONARY
The solution, while well-intentioned, does not yet address root and/or systemic causes (and may produce unintended negative consequences to people, animals, or the environment).	The solution addresses root and/or systemic causes but produces unintended negative consequences to people, animals, or the environment.	The solution addresses root and/or systemic causes and strives not to produce unintended negative consequences to people, animals, or the environment.	The solution **significantly and strategically** addresses root and/or systemic causes and does not harm people, animals, or the environment.

Fig 1.1: Solutionary Rubric. Credit: Institute for Humane Education

In 2015, a TV report highlighted the good work of a man who wanted to solve the problems of food waste and hunger simultaneously. His idea was to create a nonprofit that engaged the efforts of volunteers to bring food that would otherwise be thrown out by restaurants to hungry people. Soon he had built a thriving program with many volunteers transporting food from restaurants to soup kitchens and food pantries.

Based on the rubric above, is this solution Emerging? Developing? Solutionary? Most Solutionary?

While the solution certainly alleviates some local food waste problems and helps many individuals, does it address the systems that perpetuate hunger and/or the systems that perpetuate food waste? Is it a scalable solution? Would it be feasible for volunteers to transport the excess food produced and wasted into the hands of all people living in hunger? And if such scalability succeeded, might that potentially entrench the systems that created the inequity and food waste to begin with? Would the solution solve the primary cause of hunger, which is poverty and lack of access to affordable, nutritious food?

In 2018, I spoke at a conference in New York City, and I showed the TV clip of this man and his volunteers and asked the audience to consider where the solution fell on the solutionary scale. One of the people in the audience was a volunteer at a food pantry that was the recipient of this nonprofit's efforts. I was eager to hear her thoughts from her personal experience. She told us that they sometimes had so much food delivered that they were unable to distribute it and had to dispose of it themselves. Thus, there were times when volunteers were transporting food from restaurants to food pantries, only to have it thrown away by other volunteers. Once again, I am not suggesting that we stop supporting such efforts, which are helping hungry people and reducing the disposal of perfectly good food. What I am suggesting is that we simultaneously work to devise ever more solutionary solutions to address these issues systemically in order to bring our work to the next level.

I'm also not suggesting that assessing solutions on the solutionary scale is like math. There is rarely one "right answer." Opinions will differ, but learning how to carefully assess solutions is important if we want to have the biggest impact we can.

Solutionaries take problem-identification to the next level

Whenever we hear about a problem such as food waste, it's also important to investigate its full implications by asking deeper questions: What food is wasted exactly? When? Where? How? Why?

It's estimated that 30-40% of food in the United States is thrown out—a travesty when you consider all the people who don't have enough food to eat. Yet when we hear reports about food waste, it's usually only about this one aspect of waste. What's rarely discussed is the much greater loss that occurs in the inherently inefficient production of certain foods, especially meat, dairy, and eggs. The vast majority of soybeans, corn, and oats grown for food in the United States is fed to animals, and the conversion rate of crops fed to animals to the meat, dairy, and eggs produced is very poor. It can take many pounds of legumes and grains fed to an animal to produce a single pound of meat, milk, or eggs. And not only are we wasting food through the digestive systems of animals (who then create pollution through their copious waste that exceeds our capacity to use as fertilizer), we're also wasting fresh water, and using excess commercial fertilizers and pesticides, while simultaneously depleting precious topsoil, without which we're hard-pressed to grow anything. Put bluntly, we are despoiling the environment by raising animals to eat rather than by eating plants directly.

In other words, food waste is more complicated than we might initially realize. We need to look further than what's thrown away by restaurants that can't always accurately predict what will be ordered; supermarkets that dispose of produce that doesn't "look" good, as well as products with expiration dates that don't result in any actual danger if those dates pass by days or even weeks; large-scale farms whose nonuniform-sized produce has no market; and consumers whose food goes bad in the back of the fridge, or who throw out food from their plates.

This deeper and solutionary-focused investigation of complex challenges takes problem-identification to the next level.

Solutionaries take activism to the next level

Solutionaries sometimes identify as activists, working as they do to bring about social change and intervene in systems that cause harm, but not all

activists are solutionaries. While there are many definitions of "activist," activism is commonly associated with protests, civil disobedience, and direct action campaigns.

I've attended many protests, marches, and rallies, and to the degree that they have been organized with meaningful goals in mind, draw attention to problems, and maintain a focus on building energy and momentum for well-articulated actions and changes to the law, they can be very significant levers for change. They also motivate participants to engage in lobbying legislators, influencing corporations, educating community members, and shifting policies.

For example, the 1963 Civil Rights March in Washington, DC, attended by a quarter of a million people, was highly influential in galvanizing efforts to pass civil rights legislation. One of the organizers of and speakers at the march, A. Philip Randolph, was clear about the march's ultimate goal when he closed his speech with the promise that "we here today are only the first wave. When we leave, it will be to carry the civil rights revolution home with us into every nook and cranny of the land, and we shall return again and again to Washington in ever-growing numbers until total freedom is ours."[30] Just over ten months later, the Civil Rights Act was passed by Congress, one of the critical steps in an ongoing process to build a racially just society.

With that said, there are times when protests and rallies devolve into shouting, name-calling, and sometimes violence, and this can lead non-activists—who may only see the worst behaviors captured by media that consistently seek to highlight conflict—to reject the activists' important goals because of the method with which they are being pursued and how their message is being portrayed. When this happens, those positive goals become undermined.

The same problems can arise with acts of civil disobedience. Sometimes, such actions can be very effective, gaining media attention for injustices and setting the stage for legal and policy changes. At other times, if these actions have negative impacts on others, for example, by blockading a roadway during rush hour to protest perceived inaction on climate change, they can set back achievement of the activists' goals by creating ill will and backlash.[31]

When solutionary-focused activists experience frustration and anger, as they often do, they strive to vent those feelings in ways that don't undermine their objectives. This can be as simple as expressing pent-up emotions with friends and colleagues to get their frustrations off their chest privately. If they know they have this kind of support, they are often better able to contain their negative emotions in public, even in highly challenging situations where people are insulting, goading, or trying to rile them up. For those who are drawn to "street activism," it can be very helpful to do role-plays and gain practice in order to take activism to the next level and be better prepared for times where emotions may flare.

When I was in my twenties, with fire in the belly to address cruelty and suffering, I sometimes joined leafleting efforts. Armed with my leaflets, I was friendly to passersby as I offered them one of my fliers. I was usually ignored, sometimes sneered at, and on one occasion told to "get a life." When people dropped the leaflet I'd given them on the sidewalk after a quick glance, I could feel my blood boil. Not only didn't they care enough to read the flier, they were now littering! Eventually I realized that leafleting was not my solutionary way because I was not good at managing my frustrations and being a solutionary in situations that triggered my anger. I needed to (and did) find a better solutionary path for myself. But for others with a calmer, more equanimous temperament, leafleting can be a way to educate the public as a solutionary, provided the leaflet provides accurate information and clear, positive steps readers of the leaflet can take to make a difference.

I have a friend, Kim Korona, an extraordinary humane educator who has been an activist since high school, when she created her first petition to address income inequality and support fair wages. Kim has participated in many traditional forms of activism such as leafleting, canvassing, and attending rallies, along with creative forms of activism such as change-oriented dance and theater. She has addressed international and national issues as well as local problems, as when she organized the tenants in her building in New York City to compel the owner to fix the boiler that was emitting toxic fumes and to remove the black mold in the apartments that were making tenants ill. Kim even brought activism to her wedding by providing postcards for guests to sign to repeal the

Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA). It pained Kim that while she could marry her husband, gay and lesbian couples could not, so she made her wedding day an opportunity to engage friends and family in efforts to extend marriage equality, a problem that has since been solved through the work of people like Kim.

Kim is one of the kindest people I know. While she periodically feels sad, she rarely gets angry at people, and her warmth draws people to learn from her. She's a solutionary in so many aspects of her life, including in her activism.