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Invitational Essay:
The World Becomes What We Teach:
Humane Education for a Peaceful, Just, and
Healthy World

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I believe that it's possible to create a just, healthy, and peaceful world; to develop sustainable and humane energy, food, transportation, production, construction, and other systems; to end poverty; and to ensure that everyone has equal rights. I believe that we can learn to resolve conflicts without violence; to treat other people and nonhuman animals with respect and compassion; to slow the rate of extinction; and to restore ecosystems. And I believe – based on thirty years of experience – that there is a clear, practical, and positive path to achieve this vision.

That path is embodied in the vision and purpose of humane education, which teaches about the interconnected issues of human rights, animal protection, and environmental preservation and prepares people to be solutionaries for a better world.

Who are solutionaries? They are people who are able to identify inhumane and unsustainable systems and develop solutions that do the most good and least harm for people, animals, and the environment.

Imagine if every child grew up to be a solutionary.

As Mahatma Gandhi said, “If we are to reach real peace in the world... we shall have to begin with the children.” The education of children is the root system underlying all other systems, and for the sake of our children and the world I believe that we must educate youth to be solutionaries.

If we can successfully achieve this goal, we will have created the best hope for thriving generations of people and animals and a thriving planet. This belief in the power of education to prepare youth to be solutionaries stems from my work as a humane educator for more than 30 years.

In 1989, I created a program at the American Anti-Vivisection Society called Animalearn. For seven years our group of humane educators visited schools and offered presentations, classes, and afterschool courses to approximately 10,000 middle and high school students annually. Almost everywhere we taught, there were young people eager to start school clubs, become full participants in citizenship, and make positive contributions to build a more humane culture.

Although it was rewarding to see our programs have an impact, they were add-ons, rather than the core of school curricula. I realized that unless the educational approach in the U.S. and beyond shifted significantly, we would be hard-pressed to solve the challenges that confront us.

In 1996, I co-founded the Institute for Humane Education (IHE), primarily to train and provide professional development to people wanting to teach about interconnected global issues, to infuse their curricula and classes with more relevance and meaning, and prepare their students to be thoughtful, compassionate, and wise problem solvers. IHE created the first graduate programs in comprehensive humane education in the United States as well as workshops, online courses, and an award-winning free resource center for educators everywhere.

Our objectives at IHE include promoting changes in education that are pertinent to today's world and enable students to be effective solutionaries, and providing the tools, resources, and preparation for people who want to teach others – through whatever educational programs they offer – to be deeply humane and successful change agents. Let's take a look at a few examples.

Four stories for envisioning the #SolutionaryGeneration

Twelve-year-old Anabelle is very excited to get to school. She and her classmates have been exploring the answer to this question: *How is it possible that a fast-food burger and an*

organic apple cost the same amount of money? Anabelle has found it fascinating to learn about the various agricultural, political, governmental, corporate, and economic systems involved in the answer to this question and has been researching the many factors that impact costs of food, gaining skills in critical and systems thinking, reading comprehension, math, civic engagement, and research methods. In the process, she has also become more media literate and aware of the psychology of advertising.

Anabelle and her classmates are developing proposed legislation to address government subsidies of unhealthy, unsustainably-produced foods, and they have secured upcoming appointments with their congressional representative and senators. Anabelle has been preparing her presentation to her legislators and is eager to share her knowledge, perspectives, and ideas with them.

At twenty-eight years old, Keisha has just received her Ph.D. in chemistry and has been hired by an innovative company that develops materials for use in the electronics industry. Her research focuses on the elimination of toxins in electronic components and the development of recyclable and biodegradable materials when the individual units are no longer functional.

Keisha traces her interest in chemistry to eighth grade when her class examined a week's worth of school trash. Her teacher had asked how each item in the trash could be avoided by making different purchasing choices; or reused, composted, or recycled. Keisha realized that if she drank tap water instead of juice, or didn't buy anything that was wrapped in plastic or Styrofoam, she would produce less waste, but the truth was that she really liked drinking juice and wanted plenty of things that were over-packaged. As her class discussed how they could reduce their trash, Keisha mused that it would be nice if containers and packaging could be

composted like food waste and turned into soil. Her teacher said this was a great idea and told her that there were companies working to achieve this goal.

Keisha contacted an inventor developing environmentally-healthy packaging, expressing her interest in learning more. Through her dialogue with the inventor, her conversations with her teacher, and her own research, Keisha developed her strong interest in chemistry, which she pursued through subjects she studied both in school and through an internship with the inventor. The seeds planted in middle school and nourished throughout high school and college have now turned into a meaningful and highly valuable career.

Seven-year-old Elijah is lying on his belly with his chin propped up by his hands on a bed of soft pine needles in a park near his school. He's so quiet and still that he's able to hear and observe woodland animals all around him. A squirrel is chewing on a mushroom only a few yards away. He watches, mesmerized, until the sound of a woodpecker distracts him. He rolls on his back to watch the bird pound his beak into a tree. A few minutes later his face breaks into a huge smile when he notices a small screech owl sleeping in a previously hollowed woodpecker hole.

When he began spending time in the woods, Elijah didn't notice these things. In fact, he squirmed and complained to his teacher when she first brought his class to the park. Over time, however, he's become very observant, and visiting the park is one of his favorite things to do. When he and his classmates return to school, they share their observations and their questions.

On this particular day, Elijah is wondering:

- How can the squirrel eat a mushroom that might be poisonous to people?

- How come the woodpecker's brain doesn't get scrambled by hitting the wood so hard?
- Why is the screech owl sleeping in the middle of the day?

The children have a growing question list on the wall, and they learn to answer these questions through books, Internet searches, and during conversations with their teacher and the naturalist who works at the park. Sometimes students with the same questions work together to find the answers. Usually, the answers lead to more questions, and every outing strengthens their knowledge, heightens their curiosity, and deepens their reverence and appreciation for the natural world. Elijah and his classmates are also learning how to make choices that help protect the park and the animals who reside there.

Eighteen-year-old Ramon is a high school senior, passionate about issues of justice. He's been dedicated to learning about human rights issues in school. Over the years he has done research and conducted projects on modern-day slavery, child labor, migrant farm work, and the disenfranchisement and oppression of girls and women in many parts of the world. Every time he learns about these issues, he becomes involved in educating others. A poet, he has performed his social-justice poetry for audiences in and out of school, and several of his YouTube videos have been viewed tens of thousands of times.

At the end of his junior year, Ramon became especially interested in an issue closer to home. He learned that the U.S. incarceration rate is the highest in the world, with U.S. jails housing more than twenty percent of the world's prisoners. Ramon now spends ten hours each week interning with a mentor in restorative justice, which helps offenders repair the harm they have caused rather than simply serve time in prison. As part of his internship he has had the opportunity to tutor Daryl, a high school dropout his own age, in prison for selling marijuana, to

prepare Daryl to take the GED around the same time that Ramon will be graduating from high school. In the process of tutoring Daryl, Ramon has gained teaching and listening skills, and his perspectives on troubling and thorny societal issues have become more nuanced and wise.

Ramon plans to go to law school after college. When asked about a future career, he says he would like to be a judge. He wants to have a positive impact on the criminal justice system, to shift it away from incarceration and punishment toward restitution and the healthy re-entry of former prisoners into educational programs and productive work that enables them to break out of the cycle of poverty. He also wants to help make the criminal justice system truly fair, effective, and humane so that protects society and individuals alike.

Anabelle, Keisha, Elijah, Ramon, and young people like them are the key to creating a more equitable, restorative, and humane world. To solve the challenges we face, we need caring, curious, motivated people with experiences in solving real problems.

Who will give them the opportunities to become such people? Humane educators, and by that, I mean anyone – classroom teacher, college professor, school administrator, non-profit educator, parent, grandparent, mentor, or activist – who helps others to cultivate their compassion; become critical, creative, systems, and strategic thinkers; strive to do the most good and least harm; and solve problems that affect people, animals, and the environment.

About five years ago, I spoke to a group of fifth and sixth graders at a school in Connecticut. The children shared a list of global challenges, which I wrote down on a white board.¹ I asked them to raise their hands if they could imagine us solving the problems they

¹ The list generated by these children was quite similar to lists generated by older students and adults, so while I believe it's important to protect young children from the ills of the world, the reality is that even ten-year-olds know about grave global problems without having been taught about them in school.

named. Of the approximately 45 children in the room, only a handful raised their hands. This was one of the most disturbing moments in my career as an educator. I thought to myself, “If these children can’t even imagine us solving our problems, what will motivate them to try?”²

I knew I had to do something to bring these ten- and eleven-year-old children some hope, so I asked them to close their eyes, sit comfortably, take some deep breaths, and imagine that they were very old, approaching the end of a long life. I described a healthy and humane future, painting a vivid picture of clean air and water, and a world without war, poverty, or cruelty to people or animals. It was a similar picture to the opening paragraph of this essay.

Then I asked them to imagine a child approaching them. This child has been studying history in school and wants to understand how the world has changed so significantly. The child asks this question: “What role did you play in helping to bring about our better world?”³

I ended the visualization by inviting the students to answer the child’s question. With their eyes still closed, I then asked them to raise their hands if now they could imagine us solving our problems. This time, only a handful didn’t raise their hands.

I have come to believe that much of the cynicism and despondency young people feel—at least those who are not enduring poverty, violence, and oppression—may not run very deep. Their belief in a brighter future may lie just below the surface, and it’s our responsibility as educators, parents, grandparents, mentors, and advocates for a more peaceful world to cultivate practical hope among young people.

We have much environmental damage to repair and many systems to transform to create a humane and healthy world for all. The work ahead may seem overwhelming at times, yet it is

² I could understand this hopeless response more if these children lived in poverty-stricken neighborhoods with high crime and limited opportunities, but these were children in a private school in an affluent community.

³ I’ve modified this visualization from one originated by deep ecologist, activist, and educator, Joanna Macy.

doable, and the reality is that we don't need everyone to be engaged in the effort. As anthropologist Margaret Mead once said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." As long as a critical mass of people create equitable, compassionate, and sustainable systems, others will readily utilize and engage with these systems whether or not they were involved in their development.

To inspire the greatest number of solutionaries, however, and to improve the likelihood of success, we must commit to ensuring that young people *believe* a just, humane, and healthy world is possible. If we begin the educational endeavor with this premise, youth will have every reason to engage enthusiastically and fully in the exciting, challenging, and meaningful work ahead of them. In the process, they will come to know, deep in their minds and hearts, that what they do matters.

A few years after my experience with the fifth graders in the Connecticut school, I spoke to fifth graders in a school in Guadalajara, Mexico. When I asked *them* if they could imagine us solving the problems in the world, *every* hand immediately flew up in their air. What was different between the two classrooms? Unlike the children in Connecticut, the children in Mexico were learning about global issues in class (in age-appropriate ways), and their teacher was engaging them in effectively addressing challenges. They knew problems could be solved because they were solving them.

It's so important that humane educators take a broad, comprehensive view of the challenges we face, even if some humane educators focus on a few specific issues. In his 1963 "Letter from Birmingham Jail," Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote, "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny." While specifically written about social

justice, this statement is true about all interconnected systems. Our societal decisions can have negative consequences if we carelessly ignore our “network of mutuality.”

In just the recent past, we saw mortgage loans issued in the U.S. to people who couldn’t afford them (and then bundled into tradable commodities) bring down economies across the globe. Today, greenhouse gasses emitted into the atmosphere in the U.S. and China are leading to rising sea levels in the Maldives, while growing resistance by bacteria to antibiotics, caused by both indiscriminate use of these medicines in animals raised for food and excessive and inappropriate prescriptions, now endangers the health of people everywhere.

While intention matters—and only a small percentage of people *intend* to harm others—our choices may cause suffering and destruction whether we are aware of our impacts or not. This is why it’s so important that humane educators teach students to become cognizant of our interconnected lives and the responsibility we share for the effects of our decisions. It really isn’t enough to teach our children only to be *proximally* kind (kind to those people and animals with whom they interact directly); in today’s world it’s also important to teach our children (and to learn ourselves) how to be kind through *all* of our choices.

To demonstrate how we might teach students to perceive connections and think with systems in mind, I offer you True Price, a critical- and systems-thinking and solutionary-focused activity that can be adapted to fit any number of school subjects (including language arts, science, math, and social studies). It can serve as the foundation for a course, unit, or project and can even become the core of an interdisciplinary program. In True Price, students ask the following questions about an everyday item (e.g., an article of clothing, an electronic device, a food or beverage, etc.).

1. What are the effects of this item, both positive and negative, on you, other people, animals, and the environment?
2. What are the systems that support, promote, and perpetuate this item?
3. What alternatives would do more good and less harm, and what systems would need to change to make healthy, humane, and equitable options commonplace?

Below I demonstrate this activity with an item that is common in most industrialized countries: a fast-food hamburger. As you will see, I only scratch the surface responding to these True Price questions because answering them is a lengthy process that involves research and investigation. My goal in sharing the process of asking and beginning to answer these questions is to offer you a method and approach for helping students understand the ways in which everyday choices are connected to ecological and societal systems, and for fostering students' compassion and sense of responsibility for the impacts of those choices and systems. Let's look at each question:

1. **What are the effects, both positive and negative, of a fast-food hamburger on you, other people, animals, and the environment?** The positive effects of fast-food burgers are obvious, and students do not have trouble articulating them. At the point of purchase fast-food burgers are inexpensive and filling, as well as tasty and convenient. Their production has spread widely, creating millions of jobs and increasing the wealth of millions of people, including those whose retirement funds (whether they know it or not) are invested in fast-food businesses.

Fast-food burgers are also:

- Unhealthy: They are high in saturated fats, sodium, cholesterol, calories, and sometimes chemical residues, and low in fiber. Convincing evidence indicates that eaten regularly

their consumption may lead to heart disease, stroke, weight gain and obesity, diabetes, and some cancers.⁴

- Environmentally destructive and wasteful: According to a 2006 United Nations Food and Agriculture report meat production is a greater contributor to climate change than either transportation or industry.⁵ Meat production also causes significant pollution in the form of manure and runoff from pesticide- and fertilizer-sprayed feed crops, and requires far more land, water, and fossil fuels than plant-based protein sources.
- Inhumane: Much ground beef comes from dairy cows who are no longer able to produce milk. Having been annually impregnated, and their young removed within a day so we can take their milk, these cows are forced to produce five to ten times the amount of milk they would naturally produce, often causing mastitis and other ailments, necessitating antibiotics in their feed. Depleted after several years and often lame, these cows are then sent to slaughterhouses, where processing lines move so fast that some cows are not even rendered unconscious before they are hoisted upside down by their legs, and their throats are slit. Slaughterhouse work is also often inhumane toward employees. Not only are the working conditions extremely dangerous, many workers are undocumented laborers without health insurance or recourse when their human rights are violated.

2. What are the systems that support, promote, and perpetuate fast-food hamburgers?

Because of the ways various systems operate (e.g., energy, agriculture, politics, economics, transportation, advertising, etc.), fast-food burgers are ubiquitous despite the

⁴ For an overview, see New York Times columnist Mark Bitman's "The True Cost of a Burger" http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/16/opinion/the-true-cost-of-a-burger.html?_r=0.

⁵ See this Scientific American article, "How Meat Contributes to Global Warming" <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-greenhouse-hamburger/>. Also see the 2015 United Nations report, "Assessing the Environmental Impacts of Consumption and Production" http://www.unep.org/resourcepanel/Portals/24102/PDFs/PriorityProductsAndMaterials_Report.pdf, which recommends a plant-based diet.

problems they cause. Their low price at point of purchase does not reflect their true cost, which is hidden. Government subsidies—made possible through industry lobbying and campaign contributions that exert influence on legislators—result in the use of tax dollars that prevent the full costs of feed-production, water, land for grazing, transportation, and use of fossil fuels, to be reflected in the price the consumer pays for the burger.⁶ The health consequences are also absorbed by tax dollars and by the high costs of health insurance that we all pay. Were it not for these subsidies, fast-food burgers would be very expensive. Even our legal system, in which disparaging meat is a crime in a number of states, promotes fast-food burgers.

- 3. What alternatives would do more good and less harm, and what systems would need to change to make healthy, humane, and equitable options commonplace?** This question is the crux of solutionary thinking and solutionary action. It's easy to come up with personal alternatives to a fast-food burger,⁷ and students do so all the time. They often suggest eating a homemade burger from grass-fed cows or a veggie burger or beans and rice as alternatives that do more good and less harm.

However, addressing the systems that would need to change to make healthy, humane, convenient, and affordable food the norm for everyone is quite challenging. When identifying such systems, students generate those mentioned above and many more. They learn to rapidly complete a mind map, in which radiating lines from a drawing of a burger connect multiple systems. Since political, economic, legal, corporate, industrial, advertising, energy,

⁶ This is why an organic apple costs more than a burger, the question Anabelle was addressing.

⁷ Although it's not hard to identify more humane, sustainable, and healthy alternatives to fast food, this question can be extremely challenging when other items – such as electronics – are used in True Price, because there are no truly sustainable, humane, and just computers or cell phones. This is why the focus on shifting systems, the second part of this third question, is essential.

transportation, tax subsidy, health care/health insurance, educational, agricultural, transportation, city planning, waste disposal, and other societal systems are all connected to fast food, how can students determine truly solutionary ideas to transform these many interconnected systems?

Where are the points of leverage that might make an actual systemic impact?

There is no single answer to these questions. If there were, we might have already transformed these systems and solved these problems. To delve further into the answer to this last True Price question about system changes, I offer you another question, one that forms the basis of a six-week, secondary school, systems- and solutionary-focused curricular unit that we developed at the Institute for Humane Education.⁸

What do the primary causes of death in the U.S. have to do with the dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico?⁹

It is easy to find information about the causes of the dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico. It is also easy to find information about the primary causes of death in the U.S. Discovering there are causal connections between the many interconnected systems that contribute to both problems require committed investigation, research, and analysis. Below is a brief overview of this process.

When students do some research, they discover that the dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico is located where the Mississippi River empties into the ocean. Because of high nitrogen and phosphorus pollution, largely caused by agricultural runoff (and to a lesser degree treated sewage), oxygen is depleted in the ocean leading to hypoxic areas that cannot support life. The

⁸ Download the unit here: <https://humaneeducation.org/ihe-dead-zone-unit/>.

⁹ This question is a modification of one posed by Oberlin College professor David Orr in his book *Earth in Mind: On Education, the Environment, and the Human Prospect*.

dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico grows and declines annually depending upon the weather: droughts in the states along the Mississippi River reduce the area of the dead zone, while floods increase it.

A little more research reveals numerous systems that contribute to nitrogen and phosphorus pollution in the Mississippi River, including the following:

- **Monoculture agriculture** that utilizes nitrogen- and phosphorus-based fertilizers.
- **Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs)**, which require the production of feed crops to be fed to animals. These feed crops, often produced in states with waterways that empty into the Mississippi River, use vastly more fertilizer because of the poor conversion rate of grain to meat, than crops grown directly for human consumption.
- **Advertising**, which favors the marketing of highly processed, fertilizer-intensive fast foods and junk foods over organically produced plant foods for direct consumption, such as beans, nuts, and fresh fruits and vegetables.
- **Political and energy systems** that support ethanol production, which relies upon nitrogen- and phosphorus-intensive fertilization of corn.¹⁰
- **Economic and legal systems** that extend First Amendment freedoms to corporations, thus allowing companies and their lobbyists to influence legislators through campaign contributions that result in all of the above, along with tax subsidies that keep

¹⁰ Ethanol production seemed like a good idea when it was introduced as a fuel option. It diminished dependence on fossil fuels and offered an alternative to the unpredictable global oil market. By becoming more self-sufficient and using a renewable resource, the U.S. hoped to produce energy, reduce reliance on foreign oil, and make an environmentally sustainable choice. But ethanol production comes with negative effects, including nitrogen- and phosphorus-based fertilizer runoff, and the conversion of forests to corn production, which increases greenhouse gas emissions by reducing the carbon sink that forests provide. Many scientists have now concluded that when all connected systems are examined closely, ethanol production actually increases rather than decreases total greenhouse gases, the opposite effect from its intended use (see “Ethanol Production Consumes Six Units of Energy to Produce Just One,” Science Daily, April 1, 2005, <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2005/03/050329132436.htm>).

environmentally destructive and energy-intensive foods inexpensive at the point of purchase.

When students research the primary causes of death among people in the U.S., they discover that number one is heart disease, followed closely by cancer. Numbers five and seven are stroke and diabetes respectively.¹¹ They learn that diet is one of the leading contributors to heart disease, several cancers,¹² stroke, and type 2 adult-onset diabetes—which is occurring at an alarming rate among children.¹³

With more digging to uncover the systems that contribute to unhealthy diets in the U.S., students learn that many of those systems identified above as contributors to the dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico are also responsible for ill health among people in the U.S., along with other systems including medical education and health care, which often favor treatment of diseases over prevention, and legal, economic, and governmental systems that allow industries to provide nutrition curricula to schools that promote their own products, whether or not they are healthy choices.

The points above only touch upon the systems that connect the dead zone and public health problems. I share them to provide a taste of what problem identification and systems thinking entail (as well as to describe what students will explore if you utilize the curricular unit we've created). Once students determine the root causes of problems, investigate them fully, research the ways in which they have been addressed by others, and identify the impacts of

¹¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 2013 figures, <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/leading-causes-of-death.htm>.

¹² See the World Health Organization's International Agency for Research on Cancer October 2015 report: http://www.iarc.fr/en/media-centre/pr/2015/pdfs/pr240_E.pdf.

¹³ See Medscape Pediatric Type 2 Diabetes Mellitus report: <http://reference.medscape.com/article/925700-overview>.

various approaches, they are then poised to identify systemic solutions that are humane, just, and sustainable for people, other species, and the environment.

What might the students' solutionary ideas, work, and outcomes be? Much depends on what the students uncover in their research, and where their individual interests and talents lie.

Below are some possibilities. Students might:

- Draft legislation to present to elected officials that offers suggested changes and improvements to energy, campaign financing, advertising, and tax subsidy systems (gaining investigative, writing, civic engagement, and public-speaking skills).
- Address the agricultural system through public education, teaching others about healthy, humane, and sustainable food production to increase the demand for foods that are good for people and the environment and humane toward animals, and decrease the demand for unhealthy, unsustainable, and inhumane foods (gaining research, advocacy, and communications skills). Some students might address systems within their own school and work to transform their cafeteria menus and vending machines, while others might build an edible school or community garden (gaining community-building, design, botany, ecology, soil-science, nutrition, and food-production skills).
- Consult and intern with innovators, scientists, and professionals who are: building regenerative and sustainable agricultural systems; developing healthy, affordable, and delicious plant-based proteins and meat cultured from cells; and producing clean, renewable, cost-effective energy options (gaining science, math, business, engineering, and innovation skills).

Looping back to True Price, it is the work described above, and the solutions that arise from it, that ultimately provide students with the answers to the third True Price question about what systems would need to change to make healthy, humane, environmentally sustainable food commonplace.

When students are offered opportunities to analyze their own and society's choices and creatively and collaboratively develop systemic solutions to problems they uncover in their investigations, they gain a deep understanding that we are all inextricably connected, ecologically and societally; they realize their everyday choices have impacts on others; they gain real-life experiences worthwhile for their futures; they are rewarded with the joy that comes from purposeful contribution; and they deepen their sense of responsibility for our collective future.

Humane education is a win for youth. It's a win for teachers and schools. It's a win for communities. It's a win for the world.