

Canvas or plastic?

Weil engages others to make conscious choices

By CAROLYN COE

BLUE HILL—Zoe Weil wants people to think before they buy a bottle of water or use a plastic bag. With props like a T-shirt, a plastic cheeseburger, and an empty Fiji water bottle, she opens a conversation about the choices that do the most good and least harm.

She began her work in humane education with an animal issues class she taught one summer in the late 1980s. She soon realized that “I had found my life’s work—to engage people to make a difference.”

The cofounder and president of the Institute for Humane Education in Surry, Weil spoke as part of George Stevens Academy’s summer speaker series on July 28. She invited the 40 gathered to help explore the impacts of people’s choices and encouraged all to work to change the systems that perpetuate oppression.

Weil said that when she would lead humane education workshops in the public schools, she sometimes brought a bag full of items like a plastic and cloth bag and ask: Which of these things does the most good and least harm to ourselves, to others, to animals, and to the environment?

She is still asking that question and acknowledges that it is often difficult to answer.

People may lack the knowledge to make the choices that do the most good and even the will to gain this knowledge, for it can create a conflict between their desires and values. “Zoe, don’t tell me that. I don’t want to know” may be the response of a reluctant receiver of information.

When people do have knowledge, they may still struggle to make choices that do the most good. “Our behavior is largely determined by the situation we are in and the system we are a part of,” she said. Agricultural subsidies, for example, help promote consumption of artificially low-priced foods that may not be the most healthful choices. Social norms may also discourage humane choices.

Working in the public schools, Weil was engaging with about 10,000 students, but she was not content. She wanted to reach more people, so she started IHE to encourage others to become humane educators. IHE now offers “most good” or MOGO workshops and other programs throughout the U.S. and abroad.

The MOGO principle has seven keys. The first key is to “live your epitaph,” identifying the way you want to live your life and then trying to live this intention.

The next key is to pursue joy through service. Weil said that people are more likely to attract others to their cause if they love what they are doing and exude enthusiasm.

The third key is to make connections and to self reflect. As an example, people might consider why they buy bottled water and explore its costs. Advertising has convinced people that they need to buy water where once they didn’t, Weil said. The true cost of bottled water includes environmental costs such as the draining of local aquifers, transportation, and waste generation. Weil said 80 percent of plastic bottles enter landfills.

The fourth key is to model your message and to work for change. This means “to the

best of your abilities, putting your values into practice.” Weil gave the example of Katie Redford who filed a successful lawsuit against Unocal using The Alien Torts Claims Act. During law school, she realized that the federal statute could be used to hold the California-based international corporation accountable, in U.S. courts, for human rights abuses in Burma.

The fifth key is to find and create community, and the sixth is to take responsibility.

The final key is to strive for balance. “Start small and do what you can,” she said.

Weil, through writing and workshops, keeps working to transform education systems. Her goals are for every teacher to be a humane educator and for students to be working on solving real-life global problems.

More information about IHE’s upcoming workshops, their Master in Education and certificate programs and access to free downloadable activities visit www.humaneeducation.org.



Zoe Weil presented the key concepts in her book *Most Good, Least Harm: A Simple Principle for a Better World and More Meaningful Life* at George Stevens Academy recently. Photo by Carolyn Coe