

BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

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Is Compassion the New Black?

Teaching Kindness Could Be All the Rage In Your Child's School by Anne Pelletier

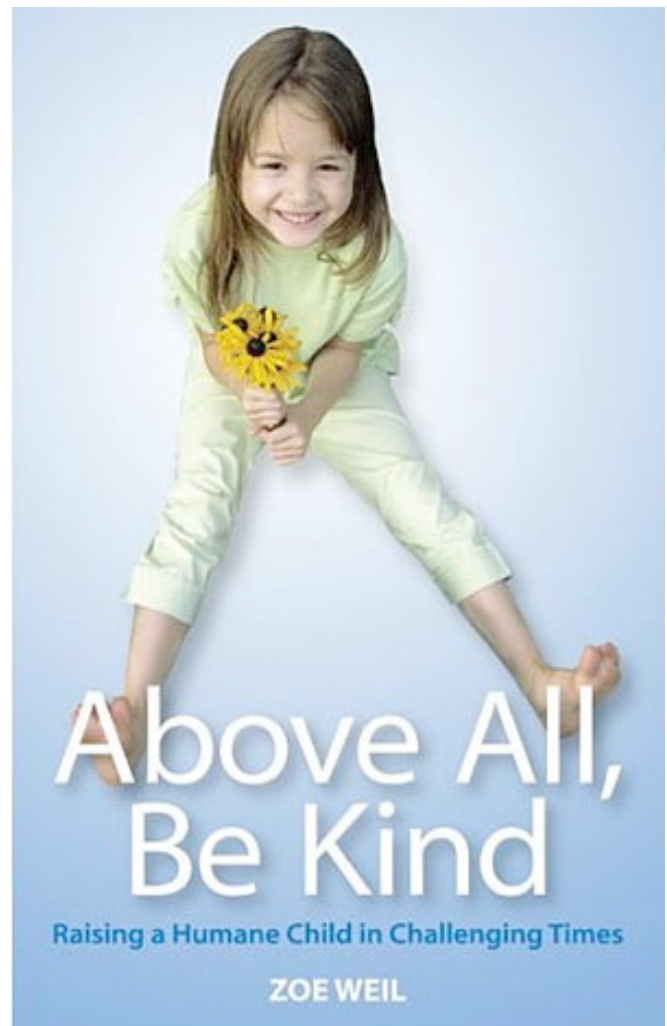
Zoe Weil is the author of several books on humane education, including *Above All, Be Kind*, a book for parents, and *Claude and Medea: The Hellburn Dogs*, a book for children age 9 and up, which will be available this month online at lanternbooks.com. Zoe (rhymes with Joe, not Joey,) is co-founder and president of the International Institute for Humane Education, located in Surry, Maine (www.iihed.org). The *Rail* recently corresponded with Zoe by email about humane education, spotted owls, \$100 sneakers, Pacific Islanders and seeking social justice on a skateboard.

Rail: I understand Humane Education got its start in movements targeted to specific issues such as children's rights and animal exploitation. But you saw a need for something more encompassing that would include those ideas along with human oppression, ecological degradation and materialism in an over-arching way?

Weil: Yes, it is much harder to do this than it is to work on single issues, but it is ultimately the only way to build societies that work for everyone. By exposing children to these issues and by raising their awareness we can help them to become critical thinkers, problem solvers who can address the challenges that face our planet.

Rail: Meager education budgets leave barely enough room for necessities. Where are schools to get the funds for courses in humane education?

Weil: The trend right now works against humane education at every step, not only because of dwindling financial resources but also because of "high stakes" and frequent standardized testing. So, where can schools get funds for humane education? First, they have to recognize the value of humane education. A humane education has 4 key elements: 1) providing accurate information about issues of importance in our world, from human rights to creating sustainable societies to protecting other species to living healthy lives in accordance with our own deepest values; 2) nurturing the three C's of Curiosity, Creativity and Critical Thinking so that people can discover innovative solutions to entrenched challenges; 3) instilling the three R's of Reverence, Respect and Responsibility so they will care enough to make informed, compassionate decisions in their lives and 4) providing positive choices so they will feel empowered and able to make a difference.



Rail: While many people would, no doubt, welcome the idea of values and ethics being part of the curriculum, some may view it as a “slippery slope” that could lead to things like prayer in the schools, thought police, etc. What do you say to them?

Weil: The word “humane” means having what are considered the best qualities of human beings. I’ve asked thousands of students to list what they consider to be humanity’s best qualities and the lists are always similar: compassion, kindness, honesty, integrity, courage, wisdom—these are mentioned over and over again. What the humane educator does is help people identify the qualities they value and then to embody these values in their lives. A humane educator never tells a student what to believe or do. Instead, he uses the four elements I mentioned to help students determine for themselves how to put their values into practice.

Humane educators inspire students to come up with answers to difficult questions rather than to just take sides. The media and politicians tend to do the reverse. For example, when a conflict arose in the 1990s between loggers and environmentalists who sought to protect the endangered Northern Spotted Owl, the media and politicians painted the situation in either/or terms (either loggers have to save jobs or we save the owls.) This is a simplistic and false dichotomy. What if, instead, all of us had been educated to seek out good answers to such conflicts, to dig deeper, to learn more, to think both short-term and long-term and to work together to find the best answers? Of course we could come up with better solutions!

Rail: As you encourage children to have a conscience about the environment, how far do you go? You would encourage recycling, for example. And conservation. Would you encourage them to take part in a march? Passive resistance? Eco-terrorism?

Weil: Humane educators encourage students to come up with answers and some kids will become active recyclers and some will grow up to be architects, business people and engineers who create eco-friendly buildings, products and systems. Others will share their creative ideas with legislators and write letters to the editors of newspapers and magazines and may ultimately become politicians and journalists who search for the best answers to conflicts and who strive to create a healthy, more prosperous society through their careers. Still others will attend a march or a protest and they may grow up to be activists. The key is that the humane educator would serve as a guide.

Rail: Are you seeing a groundswell of interest in humane education recently? If so, how much of this has to do with the events of September 11? How much interest has been generated by people’s disillusionment with the war in Iraq? Do you think there is a “sea change” in the population in general that perhaps mirrors that of the late ‘60s/early

‘70s—I mean in reaction to the unpopular war in Vietnam when there was an outpouring of interest in things like peace studies, back to the land/organic farming, anti-materialism, etc?

Weil: There is absolutely a groundswell of interest in humane education, but I don’t feel confident pinning that interest on specific events such as 9/11. I do think that everything you mentioned is part of that interest as is the awareness that current educational reform efforts (like No Child Left Behind) are misguided and not particularly effective. Citizens, whether liberal, conservative, progressive, libertarian or some combination of these, all see that we’re in trouble on so many levels and they want real answers and a better way of educating youth. True, most people who come to our workshops and enroll in our M. Ed. Programs lean toward progressive thinking, but there is less side-taking and more problem-solving among those drawn to humane education. We do very little advertising but people keep finding us and when they do, they repeatedly say, “I can’t believe this exists! This is what I’ve been searching for!”

Rail: Is humane education a middle class phenomenon? That is, does it assume a certain amount of education, purchasing power and choice in the marketplace that may not be available to everyone living here? Does my neighborhood bodega offer cruelty-free shampoo and organic tomatoes?

Weil: Some aspects of humane education are more relevant to the middle and upper classes than to migrant farm workers or the underclass, but it’s interesting how the reverse is often true as well. About half of the humane education programs I’ve taught in the past twenty years have been in poor, run down, inner city schools and so many of the issues are completely relevant to those kids. Who suffers from the high cost of brand name sneakers? If I can help students see that not only are children in Central and South America and Asia suffering in sweatshops to make their shoes for a pittance while the CEO of the corporation is bringing home millions of dollars a year, but they themselves are being manipulated to feel that their self esteem depends upon a \$100 pair of shoes, then I open the doorway to a different way of thinking and choosing.

Rail: Is humane education U.S.-centric? I've heard the example of making children aware of whether the shampoo they're using is tested on animals. Certainly, children in many parts of the world don't have the luxury of such considerations.

Weil: I don't think the 4 elements of humane education are U.S.-centric. I think they provide a broad framework that can be applied everywhere. With that said, the first element (providing accurate information) could easily be U.S.-centric if all it did was provide the same information across the globe. You're absolutely right about the shampoo. In America, it makes sense to let people know about the consequences (to themselves, to other people, to animals, to the environment) of a simple choice like what shampoo to use. But if I were invited to do a humane education program on a Pacific Island, that's not going to be the most important information I would share with the students. What is important to share with a Pacific Islander? That depends, but if you think about a book like Jared Diamond's *Collapse: Why Societies Choose To Fail Or Succeed*, you discover that some Pacific Island nations deforested their islands and thereby extinguished their societies while others learned to live sustainably with their resources. A humane educator on a Pacific island would presumably know the issues pertinent to the people and offer the 4 elements in such a way that the students learned about important issues relevant to their lives.

We're contacted frequently by teachers and activists in other countries who want to bring humane education to their schools and who seek our expertise. They've come from Nigeria, Pakistan, Croatia and Vietnam, among many other countries, and they don't consider humane education irrelevant to their nations at all. To the contrary. Given the power of the U.S., it is crucial for other countries to raise their children with excellent critical and creative thinking skills so they can forge a path in the world economy from a place of knowledge, awareness and solid values, and so they can resist the pervasive materialism and waste that is, unfortunately, a fundamental aspect of economic globalization.

Rail: About your Lantern Books project—I'm interested in why you chose to serialize your book online before releasing it in print. What do you hope to accomplish with the series?

Weil: *Claude and Medea Book 1: The Hellburn Dogs*, which is going to be posted, free of charge, chapter by chapter on Lantern Books website (www.lanternbooks.com)

beginning this month, is a work of fiction and the first book in a series about two 7th graders from very different backgrounds who, through the influence of an eccentric substitute teacher (really a humane educator) become clandestine activists in New York City. They and their skateboarding friends solve mysteries, face dangers, and have extraordinary adventures all in the name of making a difference for others. It's written for kids nine and older.

My goal in writing it is, first, to create exciting characters and stories that engage kids, and second, to inspire young people to see themselves as potential heroes in the world. In the first book, Claude and Medea solve the mystery of a rash of Manhattan dog thefts. In the next book, I'll take on child slave labor in the garment district, and book three will deal with a polluting factory in Harlem, challenging environmental racism. Lantern books wanted to serialize it as an experiment. I hope people will visit, tell their friends and order a print copy, but what's exciting to me is that any kid with access to a computer can read it free of charge and pass along the link to their friends.

Rail: Imagine you could talk to President Bush right now about the importance of humane education. What would you say to him?

Weil: Mr. President, what do you want your legacy to be? You've worked to improve education, and you've recently committed to an America that's kicked its addiction to oil. Most of all, you've wanted to keep us safe, and you've considered this your highest priority. Yet our educational system is failing, we're a long way from a post-oil economy and we're not any safer today than we were on September 12, 2001. But there is a way to succeed in achieving a profound legacy, and that is through a nationwide commitment to humane education. Imagine if every child were given the knowledge and the skills to tackle our most pervasive problems. Imagine they were clear and creative thinkers who were so full of compassion that they would bring their talents and passions to bear on the most entrenched problems of our time. Making humane education the basis of education today and into the future will give us this generation. If you lead the way, you will leave the greatest legacy of any president.

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