What if, by the time they had completed eighth grade, all children were aware of and concerned about the people who make their sneakers, T-shirts, and electronics in factories around the globe, and realized that their money and choices represented their vote for working conditions throughout the world? What if they understood the relationship between the food in their cafeteria, growing obesity rates and ill-health, water pollution and soil erosion, and the suffering of farmed animals, so that with their teachers and school administrators they were able to influence the food service to offer healthy, organic, humanely-produced meals?

What if, by the time these students graduated from high school and college, they could readily identify sustainable practices in various industries that were not only ecologically sound but also profitable, and this model became their personal standard as they forged their own careers? These young men and women would be so fully and naturally aware of the connections between their own actions and the future of the world that no matter what field they pursued—healthcare, engineering, computer technology,
LIVING A LIFE OF VALUE

architecture, business, journalism, politics, law, the arts—their education would have prepared them thoroughly for their pivotal role as successful agents of positive change.

What if, in essence, we raised a generation to care—to know that what they do matters, not just to themselves but also to everyone their lives touch; to understand the connections between both their personal and cultural choices and the fate of other people, other species, and the Earth, and to take responsibility for creating a better world?

Humane education will help us raise that generation by inspiring young people to identify the values that will guide them through life, and then teaching them the process of embodying these values in the face of complex problems and needs.

The times we live in call upon us to make the acquisition of relevant knowledge, skills, and commitment to living ethically, sustainably, and peaceably on this planet the very purpose of education. We must make the curricula that we offer students—from kindergarten through graduate school—evolve fluidly from this purpose so that we teach the next generation what we ourselves are struggling now to learn.

In 1987, when I was twenty-six years old, I taught several week-long summer courses to seventh graders through a program offered at the University of Pennsylvania. One of the courses was on environmental preservation, another on animal protection. Each course included field trips, traditional sharing of information, hands on activities, debate, discussion, and brainstorming for creative actions. I watched in amazement as the students in these classes were transformed in a week. Many made specific changes in their food and shopping choices. Some became activists. One boy who learned about cosmetic testing on animals on Wednesday came to class on Thursday with a pile of leaflets that he’d made the night before. During our lunch break he stood on a street corner handing them out to passersby. A few went on to start clubs at their school and then formed a Philadelphia-area student group that eventually inspired hundreds of young people to develop and participate in positive acts for change.
That summer I realized that I'd found my life's work. Until then I had felt stymied by the question of what I would do with my life. What was going to make the biggest difference? After teaching these courses I discovered that something as ordinary and ubiquitous as education held the key to a peaceful and sustainable future. But it wasn't going to be just any sort of education, and certainly not schooling as it's practiced today with high stakes testing held out as the Holy Grail for a competitive society seeking ever more growth at the expense of the biosphere, other species, and all people. The education I'd stumbled upon was something quite different—it was humane education, that is, education that seeks to create a truly humane world. What exactly do I mean by humane? The word literally means, "having what are considered the best qualities of human beings." Thus, humane education seeks to instill humanity's best qualities in students of all ages in an effort to create a world in which people live in accordance with their most humane values.

To live with compassion, kindness, courage, honesty, and wisdom (to name a few "best qualities") as our guiding values requires a commitment to seeking new knowledge and perspectives, dedication to making examined, deliberate choices with your ethics foremost in mind, and a solution-oriented attitude to destructive systems. While humane education begins by inviting students to identify their values, it does not stop there. Quality humane education uses a four-element approach that includes:

- Providing accurate information about the interrelated issues of human rights, environmental preservation, animal protection, and culture.
- Teaching critical thinking so students can discern fact from opinion and resist forms of manipulation, whether from advertising, media, peers, or social norms.
- Inspiring the 3 Rs of reverence, respect, and responsibility so students will have both the passion for, and the commitment to, bringing about positive change.
- Offering choices for both individual decision-making and group problem-solving so that students can become part of a growing effort to develop sustainable, peaceful, and humane systems by which to live.

Our world faces a host of problems, from genocide, escalating worldwide slavery, and extreme poverty to pollution, resource depletion, and the
LIVING A LIFE OF VALUE

loss of this planet’s biodiversity to widespread institutionalized animal cruelty in our food, fur, and research industries. Young people are neither educated to be aware of more than a few of these problems (and usually only in the vaguest sense), nor are they taught about the connections between them or inspired to come up with viable social and personal solutions. Nor are they prepared to take their place as citizens, future job-holders, and professionals whose role will be to change systems of oppression and destruction into new systems that are healthy, humane, and just.

Yet the problems mentioned above will confront our children all too soon, and we do them a grave disservice if we do not prepare them to be practical and creative changemakers in whatever careers they choose. While it’s important that we don’t offer children a laundry list of disasters and lay upon them the burden of solving problems that generations before them created, it’s imperative that we make surviving well and humanely into the coming centuries the centerpiece of education and help students develop the skills for innovative responses to global challenges. Our children deserve no less than real preparation for the real world and inspiration for an exciting journey toward restoration and peace. I can’t think of any educational approach as relevant and as exhilarating as this. Humane education provides the knowledge, the inspiration, and the tools to create a caring generation of powerful and empowered citizens that won’t simply perpetuate destructive, oppressive, and habitual systems, but will, in fact, create systemic change for the good of all. This may well be the most revolutionary and effective effort that we as a society can undertake to create a peaceful and just world.

What does humane education actually look like in practice? In the humane education classroom, young children in the early grades are offered not only the tools for learning—the ability to read, reason, and compute—but are also given plenty of opportunities for experiencing reverence and respect, whether outdoors in nature, by meeting and learning from wise members of the community, or by hearing stories about heroic, compassionate historical figures. In the older grades and through college, students are taught how to analyze products, advertisements, and the media so that they can discern truth from hype and news from public relations, and then make truly informed choices. They are not only provided with accurate information about the challenges that confront us, but are also given the opportunity to meet visionary inventors and leaders who are creating sustainable technologies and systems to meet those challenges, and they are
encouraged to work together to generate their own realistic solutions to problems as well. Ultimately, these students learn to take individual responsibility for creating a life of value that contributes to the creation of a humane world.

In terms of specific subjects, math classes offer word problems for learning not only arithmetic and algebra, but also for understanding how numerical equations, statistical analysis, and algorithms can be applied meaningfully to solve real-life concerns. Teachers of language arts choose books in which empathy, courage, integrity, and generosity enable protagonists to successfully prevail over adversity and injustice. History becomes far more than memorizing facts and dates, and, for example, might explore such books as Jared Diamond’s *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, in order to understand how and why cultures crumble or thrive and explore methods for achieving a sustainable and peaceful society on a global scale.

In a humane education school the categorization of subject disciplines might itself disappear as students are taught to see anthropology, ecology, geography, social studies, literature, history, art, and philosophy as wholly interconnected. In this way, *Cradle to Cradle*, a book written by architect William McDonough and chemist Michael Braungart that explores cutting edge products and systems that are non-polluting, regenerative, and ultimately civilization-saving, might become the high school text for a semester-long unit on creating a viable future that interweaves technology, engineering, environmental science, physics, chemistry, and social studies. Another unit might be simply titled “Food” (surely a subject worthy of discussion in that none of us can survive without it) and would examine food and its myriad effects through economics, nutrition, history, government, mathematics, marine science, political science, anthropology, psychology, law, health, ecology, genetics, and ethics, to name some of the subjects connected to food. A year-long course could be spent examining a fast food meal in an effort to both unravel a web of interconnected problems and to determine dietary choices and farming practices that are actually sustainable, humane, and healthy.

Humane education is not an educational reform movement; it is an educational revolution that places all of the challenges of our time under one umbrella, refusing to separate and segregate problems—a common approach which too often perpetuates single-issue fixes that don’t lend themselves to the reparation of whole systems. By raising these interwoven
LIVING A LIFE OF VALUE

issues under the rubric of “humaneness”—that is, as part and parcel of being a human endowed with the capacity to live a meaningful and moral life—humane education nurtures the healthy unfolding of both the whole self and all of society. Were humane education to offer only an academic examination of world problems and an intellectual approach to solving them, I suspect it would not succeed in its goal of creating a humane world. But humane education is not simply cerebral; it cultivates empathy, kindness, and integrity. In the humane education classroom, students and teachers look inward to grapple with their personal beliefs, hopes, and values, and the challenges of living their lives as compassionate and responsible citizens. The path inward and the path outward are inextricably entwined and equally essential making humane education both “soft” work and “hard” work; philosophical and practical; deeply traditional and profoundly radical; ancient and brand new.

Whether or not you are a classroom teacher or college professor, you are still part of this endeavor. If you are a parent, a friend, a colleague, a neighbor, or a family member, you are also a teacher, and the most significant way in which you teach is through your example. While what you say matters, what you model matters more. Just as humane education lays the mandate of responsibility upon the shoulders of young people to identify and then live according to their values, so, too, is each of us responsible for embodying the values we seek to instill in others and working toward the creation of a just and sustainable world. We need more than traditional teachers and professors to take upon themselves the goals of humane education. We need everyone who cares.

© Zoe Wei
About the Author

Zoe Weil is the co-founder and president of the International Institute for Humane Education (IIHE). IIHE trains individuals to be effective humane educators and offers the only Master of Education degree in humane education, through an affiliation with Cambridge College, in the US. IIHE also offers humane education weekend workshops throughout the US and Canada. Zoe is the author of The Power and Promise of Humane Education and Aboive All, Be Kind: Raising a Humane Child in Challenging Times.