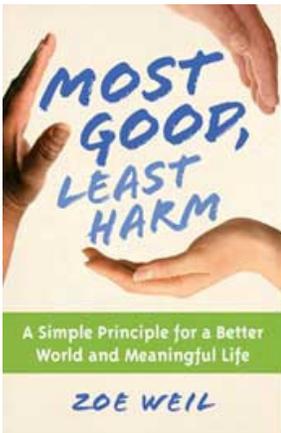


Most Good, Least Harm: a Q and A with author Zoe Weil



Q: Why did you write *Most Good, Least Harm*?

A: *Most Good, Least Harm* is a book that's been brewing in my mind for almost a decade. As a humane educator, I wanted to give the general public what I've been giving my students for years – the inspiration and tools to live deeply humane and meaningful lives that contribute to a better world. So much is changing so rapidly right now, and I think the time is right for people to embrace the MOGO (Most Good) principle wholeheartedly and make doing the most good and the least harm the overarching way in which we as individuals, as communities, and as governments approach everything we do.



People everywhere are deeply concerned about issues like global warming, loss of biodiversity, human rights abuses, and animal cruelty, and they are yearning for both meaning and vision, for a world that works and souls that are at peace. They want proactive, visionary, positive ideas for creating change that works for all: themselves, the environment, other people, and animals. The MOGO principle is really quite simple to understand, but it's going to take a deep commitment to put it into practice in ways that transform our world positively. I think people are ready and eager to do so. I guess when it comes right down to it, the reason I wrote the book was because it was the MOGO thing for me to do at this time.

Q: What is the MOGO principle, and why is it important?

A: MOGO stands for “most good,” which is a short version of the principle of doing the most good and the least harm for ourselves, other people, animals, and the environment. When we do the most good and the least harm through our daily choices, our acts of citizenship, our communities, our work, our volunteerism, and our interactions, we create inner and outer peace. This is the MOGO (Most Good) principle.

The MOGO principle requires that we're willing to continually reexamine our lives with the greatest good in mind and commit to conscious and deliberate choice-making for the benefit of all. Living with MOGO as a guiding principle opens us to growth, joy, renewed and renewing energy, and many and varied opportunities in life, work and our relationships.

The choices we make in our lives matter to us, to our family, friends, and neighbors, and to all those whom our life impacts. They matter to the people who work in mines to extract the minerals we rely upon, who grow, pick, and slaughter what or whom we eat, who make our clothes, who put together or deconstruct our electronics, and so much more. They matter to the animals whose habitats are being destroyed and whose lives are made miserable for a dietary preference or a product choice. They matter to the overall health and well-being of the planet and the ecosystems that connect us all when our choices cause destruction, create excessive carbon in the atmosphere, pollute, or cause unsustainable resource depletion and waste. Thus, it matters that we identify our deepest values and live accordingly.

Ultimately, when we adopt the MOGO principle we:

- Have a simple, helpful, and meaningful guide for every choice, conflict, issue, and life decision that we will ever face.
- Cultivate our own wisdom and kindness.
- Increase our freedom from others' imperatives, whether these come from advertisers, social norms, the media, or individual people telling us what we should or shouldn't do.
- Improve our own lives without unknowingly or unjustifiably harming others or the environment to do so.
- Remain honest, humble, open, and nonjudgmental.
- Balance strong concerns with level-headed choice-making.

- Develop our self-discipline and equanimity.
- Free ourselves from the specter of guilt, indignity, or shame caused by unreflective, inhumane, or rash decision-making and are liberated from the oppressive pursuit of perfection.

Q: What’s the central message of *Most Good, Least Harm*?

A: Your efforts to help improve the world will also improve your life (and the reverse). Choosing to live by the MOGO principle and do the most good and the least harm is personally enriching and helps to bring about a peaceful, sustainable, and humane world for all.

Q: Who would be interested in your book? What does your book offer the average person?

A: *Most Good, Least Harm* is for anyone who’s eager to make a positive difference and who wants to live a more meaningful, fulfilling life.

Q: How is this book different from all the sustainability and “green living” books that have been published recently?

A: In two ways: it’s not simply about green living, but about making choices that do the most good and least harm for everyone: you, other people, animals, and the environment. It’s also about improving and enriching your own life, not a prescriptive how-to book of “right choices” or a series of things to do or not do. It bridges personal growth and development with practical steps for improving all aspects of the world.

Q: Many “green” books have focused on a list of small or simple actions to take. Why and how have you taken a different approach?

A: Often we see two different approaches to creating change. One is a laundry list of dos and don’ts. These are the books with 100 ways to do x, y or z. The other is policy focused, recognizing that individual personal choices won’t save the world. The truth is, we need both. When, through our individual choice-making, we demand and support new technologies and systems of production and agriculture in order to live with integrity and to not personally cause harm, these solutions develop more quickly. Yet, we also need systemic political, economic, educational, and other changes in order to make significant, rapid, and practical change. So the actions to take are both small and personal (buy those foods, products, and clothes that you support ethically, and boycott those you don’t), as well as large and far-reaching (engage in work, volunteerism, activism, and democracy to make substantive change take hold). Of course, the latter involvement doesn’t have to be big and overwhelming, but it does require our attention and engagement.

Q: Isn’t the MOGO principle about sacrifice and doing without? Isn’t it unrealistic to expect most people to make such choices?

A: Virtually all of us are willing to sacrifice for a greater good. We do it all the time! We sacrifice for our children, our elderly parents, our friends and neighbors in need, and much more. Military families sacrifice every day for what they perceive as a greater good, risking their lives for their ideals. Sacrifice sounds negative, but those who do the sacrificing don’t think of it that way. They might tell you that *not* sacrificing would devalue their lives, taking away their greatest meaning and purpose.

Most of us find the greatest joy in our lives comes when we give to others, when we’re part of creating good in the world. In the industrialized world, there’s so much self-centeredness, but real happiness is on the decline. My premise, based on both personal experience and research, is that when we do the most good and least harm in a broad way, sacrifice becomes

a misnomer because we feel joy in being part of a the creation of a better world and meaningful life. When we joyfully and deliberately commit to such meaningful choices, they become positive habits, not sacrifices.

Q: Isn't the MOGO principle primarily for people with wealth who can *afford* to make different choices?

A: People with wealth have an enormous opportunity to improve the world with their resources, and I believe they also have a responsibility to do so. But people with wealth are also more likely to buy lots of resource-depleting, pollution-causing stuff, to live in big houses that gobble lots more resources, and to have a much larger carbon footprint. Those without wealth may be making MOGO choices because they are more affordable (hanging laundry on a clothesline, using public transportation, shopping at thrift stores, etc.).

Some MOGO choices are more expensive initially, such as installing solar panels (which pay off over time), and this makes it more difficult for people with low incomes to participate in such actions. But there are SO many ways to participate in the creation of a better world – many of them DON'T cost a lot of money -- and everyone can find their niche that inspires and enlivens them. MOGO is the opposite of class warfare; it's a principle that is meaningful for every individual who wants to lead a better, more positive, more healthful and helpful life.

Q: What do you think prevents people from making MOGO choices?

A: Fear, apathy, greed, laziness, inconvenience, destructive systems, and lack of knowledge and support all come into play. We humans are capable of extraordinary goodness, and terrible cruelty, of altruism and selfishness (and everything in between). But even if we were to harness all our best qualities, we'd still have trouble always making MOGO choices, because there are so many systems in place that are unhealthy, exploitative, and destructive. For example, the U.S. food system – supposedly the envy of the world – promotes and subsidizes unsustainable, cruel, and destructive forms of agriculture, rather than those that promote health, restoration, and humaneness. It can be quite difficult to find unprocessed, organic, locally-produced, cruelty-free, whole foods at affordable prices. Bad systems like this are a huge impediment to MOGO living, which is why one of the most important MOGO choices a person can make is to participate in the process of changing destructive systems into healthy ones. But here again, our apathy, fear, and laziness can sometimes hold us back. We can get caught in this vicious cycle, or conversely, we can engage in an inspired, inspiring, and joy-inducing cycle of problem-solving and personal integrity.

Q: Most “green” books address conserving and protecting different species, but don't include animals as individuals within their circle of concern. *Most Good, Least Harm* does. Why?

A: Here in the U.S. we love our dogs and cats. We recognize that they are sentient, like us. They feel; they suffer; they experience happiness. We have laws to protect them. It would be illegal to go home and press a hot iron into the flesh of your dog or cat to leave a permanent mark. It would be illegal to put your pet bird into a cage so small she couldn't stretch a wing or to cut off half her beak with a hot blade. Yet these are normal practices in farming today, and we even have names for these things (branding and debeaking). But there's no difference between a dog and a pig, or a cow and a cat, or a chicken and a parakeet in terms of their ability to feel pain or pleasure. That we call certain things cruelty when perpetrated on one species and normal agricultural practice when done to another is not MOGO.

Environmentalists talk about protecting biodiversity, which is critically important, but the MOGO principle includes not only the environment, but all people, all species, and ourselves. I've never understood single-issue caring. Don't get me wrong: I understand why it's important for groups and individuals to work on single issues in order to advance them; I just don't understand not *caring* about ending suffering and destruction *wherever* it occurs.

Most Good, Least Harm asks us to connect the dots and see the interrelationships among all forms of oppression and destruction so that we can create the most viable, meaningful, and positive solutions for all, including animals as individual beings.

Imagine arguing that genocide is wrong simply because it might extinguish a certain group of people -- including their culture and language -- but not caring about the individuals who are being brutally murdered. That's an absurdity to us, but that's the approach environmentalism has often adopted when it comes to other species. I see no reason not to consider both individual protection and species protection. This isn't an either/or. We can find both/and solutions that offer compassion and respect to species and individuals alike.

Q: What did you learn from writing *Most Good, Least Harm*?

A: It was both humbling (my life is far from the MOGO ideal I seek) and liberating (MOGO is an ongoing process, not an outcome).

Q: Where should people who've read *Most Good, Least Harm* and want to continue pursuing a MOGO life go for resources and support?

A: Our website at the Institute for Humane Education (IHE) (<http://www.humaneeducation.org>) offers a variety of helpful resources (weblinks, suggested books, magazines, etc.) so that individuals can access additional information about MOGO issues. IHE also publishes a monthly Humane Edge E-Newsletter and a frequently-updated blog, Humane Connection (<http://humaneeducation.org/blog/category/humane-connection/>) both of which often include ideas and resources relevant to MOGO. IHE has a Facebook page through which interested people can connect and share (<https://www.facebook.com/InstituteforHumaneEducation>) as well.

Also, one of the 7 keys to MOGO is to build community. The greatest support comes from others who share your passion for going on this journey to lead a MOGO life, so find others in your community who share your concerns and interests and support each other! *Most Good, Least Harm* offers suggestions about how to do this.

Q: Why have you focused on humane education in your work?

A: The sooner we transform our educational systems so that young people are offered relevant education for creating a peaceful, sustainable, and humane world, the better. Humane education teaches about the most pressing challenges of our time to help the next generation become creative changemakers for a viable, healthy future. I believe this is the most important work we need to do today, and if we neglect it and hope to just solve our problems without educating young people about the issues and engaging their creativity and sense of responsibility and care, we will be hard-pressed to succeed. Humane education can actually infuse existing curricula, although focusing on the topics covered in humane education – human rights, environmental preservation and restoration, animal protection, and media and cultural issues – provides opportunities for even more meaningful solution-making. I'd like to see humane education and the MOGO principle become the guiding philosophy of education that underlies all that we teach.

Some might argue that we don't have time for humane education; that we need to work immediately toward putting out the fires of destruction we've started. I agree that we need people putting out those fires, but if we don't commit to humane education, to raising a generation with the knowledge, tools, and motivation to create systemic positive changes, we'll be putting out fires endlessly, and there will be new fires igniting every day. We must prevent those fires from starting – that's what humane education does. We wouldn't want our citizenry to be comprised solely of firefighters. That's why we have smoke detectors and lightning rods, and all sorts of methods of preventing fires from starting. We all know that prevention is better than cure, yet we often put more of our resources into cures over prevention. We need to get this balance right.

Q: Who inspires you? Who have been your teachers in making MOGO choices?

A: So many! There are obvious historical figures like Mahatma Gandhi and Rosa Parks, but really I'm inspired every day by the students and graduates of our M.Ed. and certificate programs, as well as the staff at the Institute for Humane Education. They're my biggest daily teachers.

Q: What other books have you written, and what's your next project?

A: I wrote *Above All, Be Kind: Raising a Humane Child in Challenging Times* (2003) for parents, and *The Power and Promise of Humane Education* (2004) for educators. I've also written three books for youth: *Claude and Medea: The Hellburn Dogs* (2007), which is my first fiction book for children, and which recently won the 2008 Moonbeam Award gold medal for juvenile fiction; *So, You Love Animals: An Action-Packed, Fun-Filled Book to Help Kids Help Animals* (1994), and *Animals in Society: Facts and Perspectives on our Treatment of Animals* (1990, out of print).

My next project is very big, but I look forward to starting it: I want to write a book about what's wrong with our educational system and how we can truly transform it so that we can educate a generation with the knowledge, tools, and motivation to be part of creating a healthy, peaceful world. This book will look at all aspects of public education, including funding, teacher pay, class size, evaluation systems, structure and curriculum, even school buildings and cafeterias. It will be a huge undertaking to do this project well and will take lots of research and meeting with educators, administrators and educational policy-makers to do it right.

Q: What do you like to do when you're not writing or teaching?

A: I spend as much time as I can outdoors: hiking, gardening, swimming, running, and kayaking. I love summer street pan music (where I embarrass my son by being one of the first to start dancing). I also enjoy improvisational comedy, which sometimes finds its way into my teaching. I read voraciously. But most of all I love spending time with my family and friends.

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