

INTRODUCTION

*Do something today which the
world may talk of hereafter.*

— Admiral Collingswood

THE GATHERING OF MOTHERS

A group of mothers was gathered for their monthly potluck dinner. One of the women had just gotten back from a trip out of state to visit an old high school friend, and she told the group that her seven-year-old spent the weekend playing Nintendo with her friend's older boys: "I tried to get him to come to the kitchen for lunch, but he was completely unresponsive and glued to the screen. Even though I was only a few feet away, I had to raise my voice to get his attention. He wouldn't even look away from the TV to ask me to bring him a bag of chips!" Although it had been a beautiful fall weekend, none of

the boys played outside. Then she said, “On the drive home, he was so rude and disrespectful. I felt like I was coming back with a different boy.”

Another mom quickly piped in to share a story about her nine-year-old son: “Tyler got home after playing at a friend’s house last week, and he told me about pictures on the computer of naked people doing ‘gross stuff’ together. He asked if we could look for the pictures on our computer. It turns out an older neighborhood boy found a pornographic site on the Internet and told Tyler and his friend about it, in great detail.”

At that point, the mother of a thirteen-year-old girl confessed, “My daughter has started wearing really skimpy, seductive clothes. We’ve been having awful fights about it. She says all her friends dress like that, and I’m just a prude. She seems to have utter disdain for me these days, and I’ve got no idea how to reach her.”

Another added, “I’m glad I don’t have these problems with my five-year-old, but I *am* worried about her. She won’t eat anything but macaroni and cheese and French fries. She sits in front of the TV for hours, and she’s really putting on weight. I’m scared to say anything, though. The last thing I want is for her to grow up with an eating disorder.”

Then another woman spoke about her six-year-old son’s recent experience at a birthday party: “Luke came home with a party favor bag filled with twenty-eight things. I counted them! They were all plastic junk, and everything was broken and in the trash by the end of the week. I was really disgusted by the waste, but Luke was so sad about all the broken toys that he wanted to go out and get *more*.”

There was a long pause. Finally one mother asked: “Well, what do we *really* want most for our children?” One by one, each woman was able to share a fervent hope for her child. The mother of the Nintendo-loving boy said, “I want my son to be able to find joy and pleasure in imaginative play, rather than television and video games.” Another mother said, “I want Julia to have good self-esteem and not be so susceptible to every trend.” The

mother whose son came home with the party favors declared, “I want Luke to value what is really important in life and not become materialistic.” Another said, “I want my son to be honest so that I can trust him.” The mother of the teenage daughter had tears in her eyes when she told the group, “I want Sarah to have compassion and respect for others and not be so irresponsible and insolent.” Then she added, “I want her to have self-respect, too.”

THE PROMISE OF RAISING A HUMANE CHILD

There is a word that sums up the qualities these mothers want most for their children. That word is *humane*. *Humane* literally means “having what are considered the best qualities of human beings.” The humane child is not materialistic, cynical or snide, and the latest fad does not threaten to eclipse her deepest values. She sparkles with warmth and curiosity. She is gentle, yet also courageous and disciplined. Her spirit is vital, and her heart is full of love.

There are ways to raise your children to embody these qualities. If you embark on the journey to raise your children to be humane, they will know who they are and what is truly important in life. They will meet the world with integrity. Humane children are nourished by deeply held values that help them resist peer pressure and cultural messages that are shallow or dangerous. They believe in themselves and their ability to make a positive contribution with their lives. Such children are successful in the deepest meaning of the word because they are empowered to follow their dreams without harming others in the process.

As their parent, you too will find greater meaning and depth in your life when you set out to raise your children to be humane. Together with your children you will be able to explore the joys and satisfactions that life can bring when lived with the most abiding humane values. Instead of being alienated from one another, you and your children will forge ever deepening connections marked by understanding and mutual respect.

In this book you will learn how to raise your children to be humane within their families and communities. But you will also discover tools to raise your children to be humane in the broadest sense, and this new outlook can be exhilarating. When we are kind and compassionate at home and with our friends and neighbors, our relationships are marked by great beauty, love, and trust, but when we also make humane choices in relation to others outside our circle of friends and family, we actually help to bring peace to our troubled world.

Imagine it's May 1, 2040, and your adult child is reading the newspaper. The headlines include the following:

- Teen activists raise \$1 million for local hospital
- Another species recovers from brink of extinction
- Heart disease and cancer rates plummet for tenth consecutive year
- New survey reports young adults “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with lives
- Population stabilizing around globe
- Skirmish ends in peaceful resolution

A generation raised to be humane will create a world where such newspaper headlines are common. Children who learn how to overcome anger and hatred with understanding and commitment to fair resolution create a better world for themselves and others. When they seek truth and live with integrity, all of society benefits. When they are taught to act upon their compassion in creative and thoughtful ways, they are able to discover peaceful solutions to problems.

We all know this is an idealistic vision, but I believe it is within our grasp to raise such children and to create such a world. Although it is not easy to raise humane children in our complex world, there is nothing more important, more meaningful, or, in the end, more fulfilling that we parents can do. Not only will we reap the personal benefits and pleasures of raising such children,

we will also be contributing to the creation of a better world for them to inherit.

HOW I CAME TO BELIEVE IN THE VISION OF HUMANE EDUCATION

When I graduated from college in 1983, like many 22-year-olds I wasn't sure what I wanted to do with my life. My liberal arts education prepared me for few careers, and so I spent the next several years at a variety of jobs, pursuing various degrees. Then I serendipitously discovered my life's work. A friend told me about a university summer program for secondary school students. I needed a job, and I could teach (I didn't actually have skills to do much else), and so I called the director of the program and told her I wanted to offer some courses. I got the job. When I taught the young people in my courses about what was happening on our planet and encouraged them to act upon their deepest values, their enthusiasm and commitment to be their best and to help improve the world was so heartening and exciting that I was filled with hope and optimism. I had discovered the power and promise of humane education.

After my second summer teaching these courses, I created a humane education program to take to schools. During one course I taught at a large suburban high school, there was a boy who never cracked a smile or expressed empathy. His name was Mike and he was very bright, but his heart was locked within his tough exterior. He appeared detached and apathetic. I felt that I was not reaching him and that my efforts, at least in his case, were in vain. On the last day of class, a week before Mike would graduate, I decided to lead a Council of all Beings, an activity in which students have the opportunity to become, through their imaginations, another being (whether human, animal, plant or landscape) and to share their thoughts, concerns, and wisdom with the rest of the group. I was a bit apprehensive about doing the Council with Mike and wondered how he would react to

such an unusual mode of learning and expression, but my fears were transformed into utter amazement when I heard him speak. During the council he had become the ocean, and speaking as the ocean he raised his voice and addressed the group saying, “My body is crying, and my tears are poison. The life within me is dying, and my heart is broken.” I was dumbfounded. Inside this reserved, seemingly dispassionate young man resided a deeply caring poet. When the Council was over, each student made a small promise to do something to help the being for whom he or she had spoken. Mike promised to learn more about ocean ecology, and to stop buying overpackaged and disposable products that he didn’t need. Then, as everyone was saying goodbye, he said, “Of all the classes I have taken in high school, this is what I’m going to remember.” Whenever I despair that the task of raising humane children in today’s world is too great or that the possibility of creating a humane generation is impossible, I think of Mike.

As I continued my work in humane education I began to notice that students who actively endeavored to be humane were more emotionally healthy than their peers who didn’t. Not only did their lives increasingly reflect compassion and kindness, they were by and large happier. They may have known more about the problems in our world, but because they were engaged in making a difference, they did not experience the apathy of many of their peers. They tended to be more articulate, more empowered, and more successful at achieving their goals, and they did not suffer from the inner turmoil common among many who know in their heart that they are not living with compassion and integrity.

After several years of offering classes and witnessing the enormous positive effects of humane education, I began to train other people to be humane educators, too, and later co-founded The International Institute for Humane Education (IIHE). IIHE launched the first Humane Education Certificate Program and affiliated Master’s of Education degree program focusing on humane education in the United States, and we are now seeing

comprehensive humane education spread across North America and in many other countries. Humane Education Charter Schools are starting up, and humane education programs are proliferating.

While it's exciting and rewarding to be part of the humane education movement and to help students explore how to live according to their deepest values, something else happened in my life ten years ago that added a whole new dimension to the vision. I became a mother. I realized that I could bring all the skills I had learned as a humane educator to the parenting of my own son and that I could share my knowledge and experience not only with professional teachers, but also with other parents. After all, we parents are our children's first and most important teachers, and we have the most vital and significant task: to nurture and rear the next generation. That realization turned into this book.

BACK TO THE GATHERING OF MOTHERS

After the women had shared their stories and their most fervent hopes for their children, one of them suggested that they help each other with the situations they had discussed. Before they went home to their families, they talked over each problem in detail, offered ideas, reminded one another to be patient, and agreed to come back in a month and talk about what happened when they tried out the suggestions of the group.

This is what transpired: The seven-year-old boy who had played Nintendo all weekend had been asking his mother for his own Nintendo ever since they'd gotten back home. At the suggestion of one of the women in the group, she read up on the effects of video games on the brain. She then sat down with her son and talked about what she noticed happening to him when he played the video game. She mentioned his glazed eyes, his change in behavior and personality, and his inability to divert his attention from the screen, and explained that she didn't think Nintendo was good for him and therefore wouldn't let him get

it. She told him how much she loved him and how it was her job to protect him from things that she didn't think were healthy for him. Then she pulled out her old chessboard and gave it to him. It was a beautiful wooden board with intricately carved pieces. Her son had always loved it, and he couldn't quite believe that she would give it to him. "Are you sure?" he asked her. "Yes," she said, "come on, let's play." They got into the habit of playing a game of chess each day when he got home from school, and he stopped asking for Nintendo. "You know," she told the group, "we've really been enjoying each other's company."

The mom whose son had inadvertently learned about pornography used the situation to teach him about the sacredness and beauty of sex, and made his exposure to a perversion of sexuality into an opportunity to share her own values. She was still concerned about how his introduction to pornography might affect him, but she found that having opened the door to discussions about sexuality she was able to talk about love and relationships more easily and was better able to impart her values to her son.

At the suggestion of the group, Sarah's mother, Sharon, planned a weekend trip to visit her own mother, Maria. Maria had been a refugee as a child and had watched her sister and both her parents die. She had never talked much about her past and had become an embittered woman. The group of mothers encouraged Sharon to reach out to her mother, to tell Maria she needed support with Sarah, and to ask Maria to share her life experiences with her granddaughter. They all felt that if Sarah could learn about the suffering of her own grandmother, she might become less self-absorbed and disrespectful. Sharon was nervous asking her mother to talk to Sarah, thinking that she would refuse, but Maria surprised her by saying that if it would help Sharon, she would try to speak the unspeakable. On the four-hour drive to her grandmother's house, Sarah was either complaining or listening to music on her headphones, but on the trip back, Sarah talked to Sharon nonstop about Grandma Maria, about how she'd never understood what had happened to her

grandmother, and about how she now could see why her grandmother was so bitter. She even said to her mother, “It must have been hard growing up with a mom who was so mean and critical.” It was the first time in years Sharon could remember Sarah showing her any empathy.

The mom whose daughter would only eat macaroni and cheese and French fries borrowed several whole foods cookbooks from another woman in the group, sat down with her family, and explained that she was going to start cooking in a new and healthier way. All her children balked at the change, but no one wanted to take over the job of food preparation, and when they realized that she was not going to break her resolve they started to eat the new foods. She had to try out a variety of different dishes, and she almost gave up when two of her children complained each night and left dinner sitting on their plates, but then she found a couple of recipes that everyone liked and used these as staples while she kept experimenting to find a few more meals that pleased everybody. She also set limits on television watching, and she planned one family outdoor activity each week. Everyone grumbled about this change, too, but the truth was that they had fun, and her overweight daughter actually looked like she had lost a few pounds by the end of the month.

The mother whose son despaired of his broken toys had a good talk with him about what toys he really enjoyed and which ones were made to last. Then he asked her, “Why would anyone make a toy that would break in a few days?” His question sparked a discussion about moneymaking and business ethics, and she was surprised at the wisdom of her young son. Then she talked about the beautiful earth and how it hurt the earth when we made too much garbage. The next thing she knew, her son was trying to figure out how to repair or reuse things rather than throw them out, and she and her family set up a thorough recycling system.

When the women gathered the next month, they had much to share and much to discuss. They had confronted obstacles that had seemed impossible to overcome, and they had made

progress. Things weren't perfect, but all the women were enthusiastic about continuing their efforts.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Above All, Be Kind will give you the skills not only to respond effectively to situations like those that confronted the group of mothers above, but also to proactively cultivate the “best qualities of human beings” in your children so that they will grow up to be humane in the broadest sense. But before you can take your children on the journey toward humane living, you must first embark upon the journey yourself. In the first chapter you will be invited to explore humane qualities and to reflect upon whether you are currently embodying them in your own life. Next you will learn specific tools for raising a humane child. There are four elements that come into play when raising children to be humane: providing information; teaching your children to be critical thinkers; instilling the three Rs of reverence, respect, and responsibility; and offering them positive choices. You will also discover how you can use these four elements in your own life to be a better role model for your children, and through a questionnaire you will be able to take stock of your life and determine ways in which you would like to change and make more humane choices. The book will explore how to bring the power of example and the tools of raising humane children into play during three developmental stages: the early years, the middle years, and adolescence. *Above All, Be Kind* ends with the inspiring stories of some especially humane young adults. Their lives, stories, and wisdom demonstrate that the promise of raising humane children and creating a humane world can be fulfilled.