

We Are All Teachers

By Dale Lugenbehl

Sometimes we wonder: “I’m only one person, I don’t really have much influence on the world. Can I really affect animal suffering or climate change? Does what I do really make a difference? ”

The truth is that we are always making a difference. If I drive an SUV that gets 8 miles per gallon I am making a difference; if I drive a car that gets 55 mpg or an electric car I am making a difference. No matter what I choose, I *will* be making a difference—the only real question is, what *kind* of a difference will I make?

Our actions influence people in ways we may never know about. A student named Josh came up to me after a philosophy class in which we had just spent 2 weeks questioning our cultural assumptions about killing and eating animals. He told me of a recent experience in which he was going through the line in the college cafeteria and was intending to order the chicken stir fry. Before he placed his order, the student right in front of him in line ordered the tempeh stir fry. He said to himself “I’ve been questioning how we treat animals and I had been thinking about trying the tempeh stir fry—this guy’s having tempeh, I’m finally going to try it, too!” And he discovered that he liked it and that he really *could* eat vegetarian and be fine with it. The student in front of Josh in line had a profound impact on Josh, and yet that student will never know it. Josh never saw his face, doesn’t know his name—but his behavior changed Josh’s life (and also changed the world a little bit) for the better.

Whenever we do anything, our behavior has the potential to profoundly influence others. This happens in at least three ways. First, when someone sees me doing something I may be creating a possibility and choice for someone that had never occurred to them before: “Oh, look, one of my friends is putting homemade applesauce on her breakfast cereal instead of milk—what a great idea; I never thought of that.”

Secondly, every time I do something, I am making a nonverbal statement to the world (by the simple fact of doing what I am doing) that I think it is an acceptable or good thing to do. “Oh, Dale drives 80 mph on the freeway so he must think that’s ok.” In effect, that gives my “permission” to others to do the same thing, making it a little easier for them to make the same choice. This is what happened to Josh, except that in his case what he saw was a positive behavior.

And third, if I am out in the world “living my truth,” some people will notice and be curious enough to ask about it, providing an opening for a very useful conversation if we can both share what we know in a nonblaming way, and also listen respectfully to what the other person has to say.

The simple truth is that, whether we like it or not, we are all teachers all of the time. The example we set influences others. *Everything* we do is teaching *something*. Therefore, it is extremely important for us to become very conscious of this fact so that we can reflect on what we are doing and how we are doing it, and thus become as effective as possible in bringing about change in the larger world.

When leaving to take a trip, Gandhi was once asked if he had a message to leave for others. He replied, "My life is my message." This is as true of each of us as it is of Gandhi: *Your* life is also *your* message to the world.

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