Foreword

This is a long overdue book. Clearly, concisely, and logically, it sets out the argument against dissecting or otherwise harming animals in our educational institutions, and presents a variety of examples showing that practices of this sort are not only ethically undesirable but also are by no means the best way of teaching children about living systems.

My own study of chimpanzees, which began in 1960 and continues today, has served to blur, increasingly and definitively, the line that used to be seen sharply dividing human from non-human. We are different, we are unique—but we are not as different as we used to think. A true understanding of chimpanzee nature proves convincingly what I learned from my dog, as a child, that we humans are not the only living beings with personalities, not the only beings capable of rational thought, and above all, not the only beings to know emotions like joy and sorrow, fear and despair, and mental as well as physical suffering.

This understanding leads to a new respect for the living beings around us—not only for chimpanzees but also for all the other amazing creatures with whom we human animals share the planet. It is this respect for life that can be undermined in children when they are required to cut up the bodies of dead creatures or harm living creatures, in class. Of course it is wonderful to learn about the amazing complexities of even simple creatures, to learn more about the way they work. But there are many other ways in which children can obtain this knowledge, as described in this book; ways that will not force sensitive and unwilling students to do something they instinctively hate; ways that do not require the repeated use and discarding of dead bodies of creatures killed in order to teach certain aspects of the life sciences. It would seem in such an instance that the teaching is more about death!
Quite apart from the dubious rationale of learning about living things by cutting up their dead bodies, there is a more fundamental ethical issue: would we be morally justified in killing these creatures to learn how they work, even if it was thought to be the best way of teaching children? The use of animals in medical research, pharmaceutical testing, intensive farming, hunting, and so on is widely—and hotly—debated. The use of animals in education is much less often considered, probably because so few people are aware of just how many animals are killed to satisfy demand. Think of the number of dogfish, frogs, and other animals that are required by one biology class and multiply it by the number of classes in all the schools around the world that teach dissection in biology—every year. This gives some idea of the massive slaughter of animals in the name of education.

This type of education subjects the young people of our society to a kind of brainwashing that starts in school and is intensified, in all but a few pioneering colleges and universities, throughout higher science education courses. By and large, students are given the implicit message that it is ethically acceptable to perpetuate, in the name of science, a variety of unpleasant procedures against animals. They are encouraged to suppress any empathy they may feel for their subjects, and persuaded that animal pain and feelings are of a different nature from our own, and that there is little value in animal life.

More and more students are daring to defy the system, to refuse to dissect when this compromises their ethical values. This book documents the law and policy issues surrounding a student’s rights to claim a more humane alternative. I well remember meeting Jenifer Graham, who was severely penalized when she refused to dissect in class. The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) took up her case and, in a precedent setting move, the school was legally required to restore Jenifer’s grade in the biology class. That was an exciting day, when a courageous young woman and The HSUS together took a major step towards more humane practices in school.

I hope that this excellent and well researched book will be required reading for all educators and find its way into school and college libraries not only in the United States, but in all parts of the world where schools, in order to teach about living things, are responsible for killing millions of those living things each year. The life sciences should teach children about our relatedness to the rest of the animal kingdom, about the interconnectedness of all life forms on planet Earth. As Albert Schweitzer said, “We need a boundless ethic that includes animals, too.” Surely we should do our utmost to help our children move towards a world of compassion and love.

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