

Address by Daniel Quinn delivered August 16, 1997, at the annual conference of the North American Association for Environmental Education, Vancouver BC
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In a recent semi-documentary film called *Garbage*, a toxic waste disposal engineer was asked how we can stop engulfing the world in our poisons. His answer was, "We'd have to remove everybody from the face of the earth, because humans GENERATE toxic waste, whether it be pathogenic organisms that we excrete from our bodies or whatever. We are toxic to the face of the earth."

What is your gut reaction to this assessment? Please raise your hands if you agree that humans are inherently toxic.

I understand that many representatives of the First Peoples are attending this conference. I hope there are many in this audience. Please raise your hand if you belong to an aboriginal people. Thank you. Now I'd like to ask you the same question I asked the whole group a moment ago. If you consult your traditional teachings, do you agree that humans are inherently toxic to the life of this planet?

Those who know my work will know that you've just demonstrated one of my basic theses, that the people of my culture, whom I call Takers, have a fundamentally different mythology from the First Peoples, whom I call Leavers. In Taker mythology, humans are indeed viewed as inherently toxic to the world, as alien beings who were born to rule---and ultimately destroy---the world. As *WE* are currently ruling and destroying the world. In Leaver mythology, by contrast, the world is a sacred place, and humans are not perceived as *alien* to that sacred place but rather as *belonging* to it. In other words, in the Leaver worldview, people are no less a part of the sacred framework of the universe than scorpions or eagles or salmon or bears or daffodils. . . .

When I first proposed to speak here about how we're preparing ourselves and our children for extinction, the organizer of the conference wondered if this topic wasn't directed too exclusively to members of "our" culture---the culture I call Taker culture in my books---the dominant culture of the world, found wherever the food is under lock and key and people have to work to get it. I think it's important that you hear my answer to this question.

The reality is that, even if you're a member of one of the First Peoples, you and your children are constantly bombarded with messages from Taker culture by way of books, billboards, movies, newspapers, magazines, radio, and television, and of course pre-eminently by way of the schools.

In other words, it doesn't really matter whether you belong to our culture or not in this regard. If you or your children watch television, go to movies, listen to the radio, and go to our schools, then, like it or not, you're preparing yourselves and your children for extinction.

But what do I actually mean by this outrageous statement? I'll tell you this in a nutshell and then offer some examples of what I'm talking about. In a nutshell: We have been taught---and are therefore teaching our children---that, individually, we are all pretty much helpless when it comes to saving the world. That is, unless we happen to have the power of a world leader---the power of a Clinton or Yeltsin. Or unless we happen to control some vast multi-national corporation like Shell Oil or Du Pont. Or unless we happen to control some big organization like the Red Cross or Greenpeace or the World Wildlife Fund. We've been taught (and are therefore teaching our children) that, as individuals, all we can do is wait for OTHER people---POWERFUL people---to save the world. Oh sure, we can do our little bit. We can reduce, reuse, and recycle, and this is very nice and very useful---but *really* important and far-reaching global change *must* come from the TOP. We just have to wait and hope for the best. We're like people standing around watching a neighbor's house burn down because we've been taught that this is a problem for PROFESSIONALS to handle. We mustn't interfere. Until trained fire-fighters arrive, we're just supposed to stand there and watch---and if they NEVER arrive, then the house will just have to burn down right to the ground. . . .

Since my novel *Ishmael* appeared in 1992, I've received well over five thousand letters from readers---many of them young people. When they write to me, they don't say, "Why have I been taught that individually I'm helpless?" This teaching is revealed in a more subtle way. They say to me, "Since I'm not a world leader and don't control a multi-national corporation or a big NGO, I'm looking for a career that will enable me to make a difference. I'm thinking of going into environmental engineering or something like that. Can you make a suggestion?" Now, until you think about it, this might sound like someone who's on the right track here. But listen to what he's really saying.

Environmental engineers can make a difference---but not *electrical* engineers.
 Environmental engineers can make a difference---but not optometrists.
 Environmental engineers can make a difference---but not English teachers.
 Environmental engineers can make a difference---but not bus drivers.
 Environmental engineers can make a difference---but not homemakers.
 Environmental engineers can make a difference---but not mail carriers.
 Environmental engineers can make a difference---but not grocery store clerks.
 Environmental engineers can make a difference---but not potters. I could stand here and extend this list all day---this list of occupations in which people can make no difference. It includes virtually every occupation being pursued on the face of this planet today!

Here's a statement from an actual letter, from a young woman in Knoxville TN. She writes, "I've been in graphic design since I finished high school in '86, and I'm still there, but I'm starting to look more and more seriously at environmental policy, national and world politics, and similar areas. I've always despised and hated politics." Do you see what she's saying? "I'm thinking of going into something I've always *despised* and *hated*"---because she can't make a difference as a graphic designer. For her, the question is no longer, "What am I really GOOD at?" It doesn't matter that she might be a terrific graphic designer and a rotten politician. She has come to believe that

graphic designers can't make a difference. Only very, very rare people can make a difference.

Here's another, from a young man in Waco TX: "I treasure the ideals of your novel, and pledge my services toward getting something started. I do have one question that I think only you can answer for me, and that is: What can I do to find a job that adheres and advances the principles of your novel? It's what I've been searching for all my life."

My answer to him was this: We ALL have to make a difference. It doesn't matter what job we do. We can't have people saying, "Oh I just flip burgers, so I can't make a difference." "Oh I just drive a cab, so I can't make a difference." "Oh I just sell insurance, so I can't make a difference." "Oh I'm just an auto mechanic, so I can't make a difference." "Oh I'm just an accountant, so I can't make a difference." Concentrate on doing what you do best, because THAT'S where you'll have the most influence on the future of the world.

You know, I'll bet almost all of you were idealists when you were young---or were considered idealists by friends and teachers. If you were an idealistic youngster, please raise your hand. Good. Now---how many of you as youngsters had the experience of being told by a parent or teacher, "Who do you think you are? YOU can't change the world."

Believe me, nothing's changed since you were young. This comes to me from a tenth-grader in Philadelphia: "I just finished *Ishmael*, and I want to thank you because you have successfully written down in complete form what I and so many people have thought about only in fragments. But when I try to talk to people about these things, being only fourteen, they tell me I'm foolish and 'trying to be a hippie.'"

This is from the same design student who thought she'd have to go into politics in order to make a difference: "My advisor says I'm *young* and *enthusiastic*, in a kind of condescending way when I told him about wanting to go into environmental policy and change people's perceptions and the way things are done. I want to prove him wrong. . . "

But I'm not bringing this up to caution you against discouraging young people's idealism and enthusiasm. I'm sure you don't do that---or you wouldn't be in this audience at all. What I'm trying to do is deepen your understanding of what's happening when oldsters tell youngsters, YOU can't change the world.

"I want to prove him WRONG," the design student said. Wrong about what? She IS young and enthusiastic, so she can't prove him wrong about that. What are the two of them really talking about? What her advisor is hearing from her is something like this: "I'm not going to end up like YOU. You never made any difference in your whole life. Well, I'm not going to be like you. I'm going to make a difference." And of course he's defending himself the only way he knows how. He can't say, "Look, kiddo, you may not believe it, but student advisors make PLENTY of difference." He probably doesn't even believe it

himself! Why would he? He's been told from childhood that only big shots make a difference. Since he can't say this, he says instead, "Believe me, you WILL end up like me. What YOU have aren't ideals, they're just illusions. Nothing you do will make any difference, and life is going to prove me RIGHT." He actually has a vested interest in discouraging students, in preparing them for extinction. Their failure will be his vindication! The vein of pessimism runs deep in our culture and is broadcast like a virus in all our communications---including all our communications directed to those of you who belong to the nations of the First People. Three years ago a young Navajo student at Dartmouth managed to track down my unlisted phone number. He told me that over the years he'd drifted away from his cultural roots. Then he read *Ishmael*. He was calling because he wanted to give me his reaction personally, and this was his reaction: "You've given me back my religion." I asked him to explain why he felt this way, because of course there's nothing in my book about Navajo religion in particular. He said, "When I was growing up among my own people, I was taught to think of humans as a blessing on the world. Living among your people, I've been taught to think of humans as a curse on the world. I didn't notice it happening until I read your book, and that's how you've given me back my religion."

This brings me back to where I started, with the assessment of the waste disposal engineer who was asked how we can stop poisoning the world. Here it is again.

He said, "We'd have to remove EVERYBODY from the face of the earth, because humans GENERATE toxic waste, whether it be pathogenic organisms that we excrete from our bodies or whatever. We are toxic to the face of the earth."

I'd like to take a few minutes explore this strange mythology, so central to our culture, and its impact on our children and their vision of the future.

To begin with, is it mythology? Oh, most certainly it is mythology. Humans no more "generate toxic waste" than elephants or grasshoppers do. And the organisms we excrete from our bodies are no more pathogenic than those excreted from the bodies of sparrows or salmon. This engineer was speaking pure mythology, because the biological truth is that humans lived on this planet for three million years without being any more poisonous than our primate ancestors.

It has been the work of my life to pin down and demolish the lie that is at the root of this mythology in our culture. It's to be found in the way we tell the human story itself in our culture. You can see it perpetuated in textbook after textbook, and if you keep your eyes open, you'll see it repeated weekly somewhere---in a newspaper or magazine article, in a television documentary. Here it is, the human story as it's told in our culture, day in and day out, stripped to its essentials. "Humans appeared in the living community about three million years ago. When they appeared, they were foragers, just like their primate ancestors. Over the millennia, these foragers added hunting to their repertoire and so became hunter-gatherers. Humans lived as hunter-

gatherers until about ten thousand years ago, when they abandoned this life for the agricultural life, settling down into villages and beginning to build the civilization that encircles the world today." That's the story as our children learn it, and it has just this one little problem, that it didn't happen that way at all. Ten thousand years ago, it was not HUMANITY that traded in the foraging life for the agricultural life and began to build civilization, it was a single culture. One culture out of ten thousand cultures did this, and the other nine thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine went on exactly as before. Over the millennia that followed, this one culture, born in the middle east, overran neighboring cultures in all directions, finally arriving in the New World about five hundred years ago. At which point it began to overrun the native cultures of THIS part of the world as well. It is a truism that the conqueror gets to write the history books, and the history our children learn is history as WE tell it. And the central lie of this history is that HUMANITY ITSELF did what WE did.

Well, even if this is so, why does it matter? It matters because everything the waste disposal engineer said was false about HUMANITY, but absolutely true of *this one conquering culture*. HUMANS don't generate toxic wastes---but *our culture* certainly does. HUMANS aren't toxic to the face of the earth---but *our culture* certainly is.

It's vitally important for our children to know that the curse that needs to be lifted from the earth is not humanity. It's important for them to know that we may be a doomed *culture*, but we are not a doomed *species*. It's important for them to understand that it's not being HUMAN that is destroying the world. It's living THIS WAY that is destroying the world. It's important for them to know that humans HAVE lived other ways, because it's important for them to know that it's POSSIBLE for humans to live other ways. Otherwise they can only repeat the falsehood spoken by that waste disposal engineer: That the only way to stop poisoning the world is to get rid of humanity.

Here's what a college student in Arkansas wrote to me: "Standing riverside with my geology class in the Grand Canyon, viewing one and a half billion year-old basement rocks, humankind's history was a vertical mile away in the dust of the South Rim. Strangely, my classmates struggled with the concept and acceptance of geologic time. I felt the overburden of reality. Since that time, the extinction of Homo Sapiens has often appeared to me to be the ONLY solution for the vast spread, dominance, consumption, and destruction inflicted on the world by this species."

This is from a ninth grader in Eugene Oregon: "Since reading your book a second time recently, I've talked with some of my friends about their theories about life, the universe, and so on. Some thought we should just kill off all the humans (which I'll admit would be one way of dealing with things)."

This is from a graduate student at the University of Oregon: "I was at an aquarium with my daughter shortly after re-reading *Ishmael*, and I happened to spend some time looking at the jellyfish tank. I wondered if the world would be better off if evolution had stopped with these spineless, brainless, majestic

entities. . . . Despite our best efforts to resuscitate the cancer known as humanity, we are in fact on our way out, and indeed that may be for the better."

These students, as you hear, are all thoroughly reconciled to the disappearance of human life.

We absolutely must stop sending our children out to save the world, first arming them with the undermining belief that humans are inherently toxic. Because if they truly believe this, then they will truly be prepared for extinction. We must be on vigilant guard against teaching our children---even by indirection--- that the very best thing that can happen to the world is the extinction of the human race.

I know very well that I have set myself up for at least one hard question with this talk, and I'd like to address at least this one hard question before I invite your questions.

I have said---not only here but in a thousand letters and a dozen other speeches like this one---that there is no one who is without resources to change the world. I believe this is a message we must give our children. We don't just need caring environmental engineers. We need caring attorneys, caring physicians, caring fry cooks, caring salespeople, caring real estate developers, caring industrialists, caring journalists, caring entrepreneurs, caring veterinarians, caring stock brokers, and caring carpenters. We even need good people in bad places. In fact we *especially* need good people in bad places. For example, whether you know it or not, the film industry is tremendously pollutive and tremendously wasteful. Does this mean caring people should avoid it? Hardly! Just the opposite! We mustn't leave pollutive and wasteful industries entirely in the hands of people who don't give a damn about the world. This is why I say and say again that there is no place where no good can be done. And this is why I say to young people, "Don't think about going into noble lines of work, think only of doing what you do best. Because that's where you're going to make the most difference in the world."

People often ask me if I practice what I preach, and what I say to them is, "Look, I'm doing exactly what I preach. What I preach is, **USE YOUR BEST RESOURCES TO DO WHAT YOU CAN DO.** And that's what I'm doing. Doing what I do best, I'm reaching hundreds of thousands of people all over the world in the cause of saving the world."

I say to them, "Do you think I should have been an environmental engineer instead? I would've been a **LOUSY** environmental engineer!"

And then people typically say to me, "Well, that's great for **YOU**, but what am I supposed to do? I'm just a dressmaker, just a bricklayer, just a fiddle player, just a massage therapist, just a choir director, just an asphalt spreader---fill in the blank.

I hope you see that I'm talking about an EDUCATIONAL problem here. We have honest to god GOT to stop teaching our children that only OTHER people count. I think we need to make it a top-priority goal for us to teach our children that it isn't just people with special jobs who are going to save the world. If the world is saved, it will be because all six billion of us stopped waiting for someone ELSE to do it. If the world is saved, it will be because the people of the world finally woke up to the fact that saving the world isn't the work of specialists. It's work we all CAN do---and all MUST do.

Thanks for listening.