SYSTEM REDESIGN HANDBOOK

FOR A HUMANE ERA

Harnessing 12,000 Years of Knowledge to Edit Systems for Human Thriving

Danielle Williamson Richard

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Written by Danielle Williamson Richard in 12,023

Illustration consulting by Maggie Richard

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INTRODUCTION

City Mouse, Country Mouse

One thing I knew for sure growing up in rural north Louisiana is that we were what author and developer Majora Carter would call a "low-status" community in *Reclaiming Your Community*. Although I only recently learned that term, it fits so perfectly with the lived reality of existing in such a rural area with such a small population. Don't get me wrong, there were tons of benefits to being a member of such a small community. And I treasure the positive experiences I had living in a town surrounded by catfish farms and cotton fields. But the drawbacks were always attributed to us "not mattering" very much in the grand scheme of things by those in charge at the state or national level. I never could really place my finger on what did matter to our community. What were we proud of? What was our identity?

In a parish with only around 10,000 people total, we felt almost unpopulated or abandoned at times. Only about half of those residents lived "in town," and of those, we were further split into two different camps of racial identity. Black churches *or* white churches were the only offerings. Our white community wasn't too keen on celebrating our recent history, what with all of the segregation and racial discrimination and all. I got the impression that our main connection to the land as farmers wasn't exactly a high-status occupation. Although providing food and soybeans and cotton for the world should in theory be fairly noble, present-day farming was still plagued by its cringey history, what with slavery and all.

We weren't near anything noteworthy either. And our town seemed to be losing ground. Back in kindergarten, our whole class was able to walk the two blocks to the movie theater and watch the latest Muppets movie while eating pop-

corn and sipping New Coke. But by the time I was in junior high, the movie theater had closed. The closest one was at the Pecanland Mall—a 45-minute drive away in Monroe. Unattainable unless you could afford a car, and even then it meant an extra 1.5 hours to get there and back plus gas, and probably, unless you planned ahead, the cost of a meal while in Monroe. The same went for pretty much any major purchase (cars, furniture, clothing) or doctor's visit (most local pregnant people planned to give birth in Monroe or West Monroe). If you needed a "real" hospital, then you'd better start driving toward Monroe. My uber-prepared mother never kept less than a quarter of a tank of gas in her car—just in case an emergency struck and we needed to get to Monroe immediately.

By my own estimation, the charming and positive aspects of living in a small town had given way to mostly downsides by the time I graduated high school. Buildings along our main street began to sit vacant. The addition of a Walmart meant the subtraction of several mom-and-pop establishments—all owned and operated by people we knew from the community.

There is something incredibly special about being known in a small town like that. Among my classmates were the children of many local establishments' owners, including the only clothing store, office supply store, an optometrist (one of two in town), a doctor, the print shop owners, and grocery store owners. It felt more like a village than a city or urban area. Locals just all seemed to sort themselves into providing whatever goods or services were needed on a day-to-day basis. When I walked into any local business, I assumed that the people working there knew who my parents were, even if they didn't know specifically who I was. My parents weren't unique or different from anyone else—the place just had so few people that it was easy to keep track of everyone (for better and for worse).

The building we all attended elementary school in was also the exact same building and campus where my dad and his siblings had attended school. The community not only knew my family, they had grown up with them too. Which all gave a sense of security and stability, but also an air of inevitability. Like, the way we went about our lives was just "meant" to be that way, no questions asked.

Of course, I knew things had changed a lot since my parents were kids, though. They had attended segregated schools until around 1969, only 10 years before I was born. And my mom described how life-changing it was when in high school the girls were allowed to wear pants to school. Pants! The standard clothing that I wore daily had not been allowed in school for any females—staff or students, black or white. I couldn't imagine the oppression. And by the time I was graduating from high school, I couldn't imagine remaining there any longer than I had to.

It felt like there would be zero opportunity for any kind of "real" job that I wanted to pursue. And how on earth would I ever get to experience what people in books and on TV got to do all the time? There just weren't enough of us to warrant basic things like a coffee shop, any kind of respectable pub, or even a restaurant that served alcohol. In all of Franklin Parish, it was just sort of common knowledge that people were either drunks or teetotalers. There was no in-between that I was aware of, but I had read all kinds of books where people would just have a drink with dinner. Why didn't that happen here? And forget about any kind of shows or music or entertainment. Those things happened in big cities. We didn't matter in such a small and out-of-the-way expanse of land. And, in fact, our people were routinely ridiculed as the butt of jokes. *Redneck* was the label whether we liked it or not, and I left home with a chip on my shoulder about appearing to be dumb or uneducated or a country bumpkin.

Most life choices as presented up to this point had appeared to be strictly binary. City mouse or country mouse. Form or function. Christian or heathen. Black or white. I knew more urban places would come with their own set of drawbacks, but I was determined to experience something—anything—different and that meant finding a place that was more densely populated. In my head, there was no reason to *stay* in this place, and I was surprised to find that not everyone was plotting their escape.

After four years of college in Ruston, I was thrilled to join friends who lived in Dallas to start my full time career search. And I am so thankful for the 3.5 years I lived in Dallas. I went to concerts, museums, professional sports events, nightlife spots with other young singles, the zoo, or restaurants as often as I wanted to. But imagine my surprise at discovering that this city would also demand that I spend an annoying amount of time in my car. However, instead of a 45-minute drive through the country to get to town, Dallas residents were typically faced with a 45-minute drive stuck in gridlock traffic. Ugh. Yes, there were infinite opportunities here, but the day-to-day experience was not objectively better than when I was living in the country.

Luckily, I met and married a Shreveport fellow who had also moved to Dallas right after college. When we began looking to settle down and buy a house, the high prices and high property taxes in Texas prompted us to reconsider. We happily moved back "home" to Louisiana for me and Shreveport for him. Here, most people have a roughly 15-minute commute. And while there were far fewer entertainment opportunities than in Dallas, the pace and price of living were the perfect match for us at that stage in our lives.

It was no longer surprising to find that a medium-sized city *also* came with its own set of drawbacks. The more I studied how things worked in my new commu-

nity of Shreveport, as well as other parts of the world, the more I wished for a way to somehow pick and choose just the good parts of country living and the good parts of city living and combine them all into one place. Binary choices had always made me cringe. Did it have to be so cut-and-dried? Surely I could find a way to do both things, to make the choices more three-dimensional, rather than flattened into a caricature of cartoonish options.

While pondering which major to select when applying to colleges, I struggled with what I thought I "should" study versus what I truly wanted to do. As a nerd, I felt I had some responsibility to enter a profession where I could be of use to society. Something like an engineer or architect seemed right, but I really had zero interest in those professions. Alternately, becoming an artist seemed like the most frivolous profession in the world. Sure, I'd be engaged in art and painting and such, and that was all fine, but I couldn't imagine a world where *all* I did was create decorative art for rich people. What was even the point of that? I was far more interested in creating *useful* things. Where were the jobs for really nerdy artists? It turns out that graphic design is exactly the profession where nerdy artists thrive. Thank goodness for my high school art teacher, Mrs. Ellerman, who suggested this line of study, knowing it would be a great fit for my skill set.

Since then, I've come to think of that as a "pretty practical" solution to a seemingly binary or tricky problem. In all work that I create, I'm always going to pursue the pretty practical, knowing it's a high standard that I'll always be working toward—a North Star of sorts to help guide my creative efforts. When things are able to somehow be both pretty *and* practical, then that's where the real value comes in to play. It's also the nuanced philosophy that attempts to make flattened caricatures more three-dimensional.
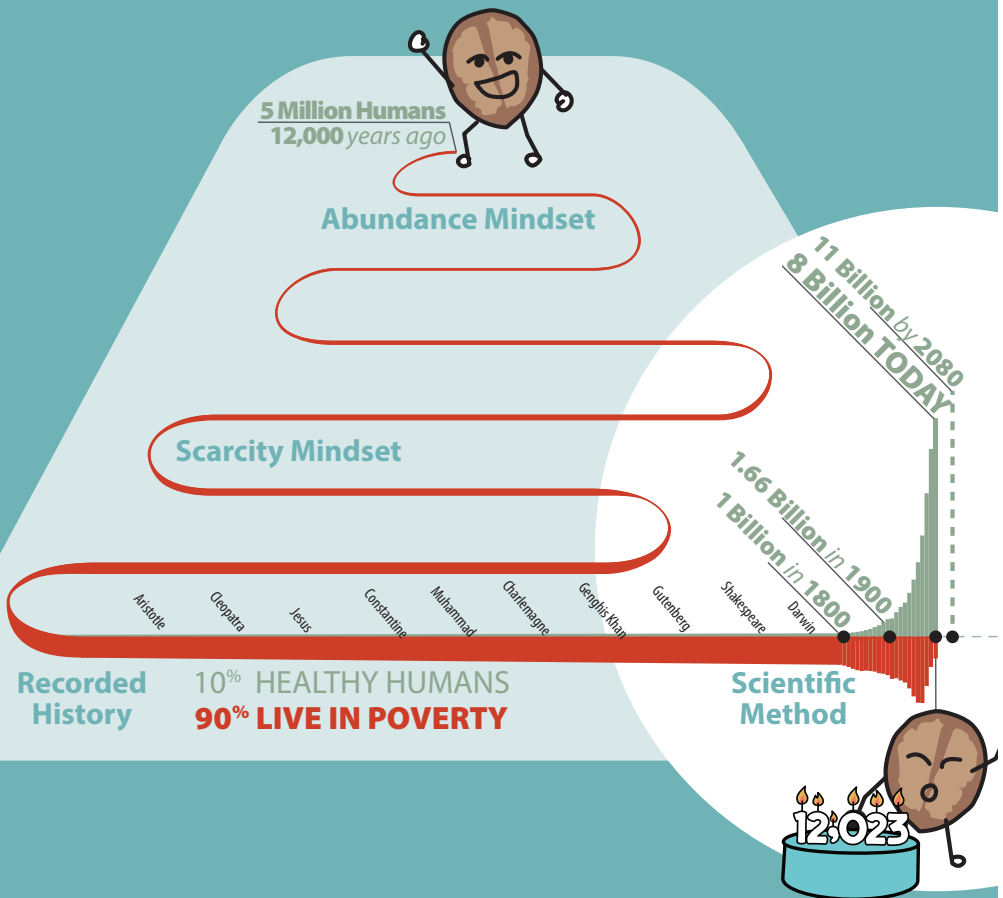
When I think back to how I "thought" the world worked as a child, and consider how I'm disappointed in how things "really" work today, I find that I wish for more nuance everywhere. As a child, my existence was so small and locally connected, and completely protected from the outside world. I had no idea what the rest of the globe looked or acted like. Before I went to school, I only knew a handful of people, like cousins and neighbors, and I had no idea the rest of the world was operating as if men were smarter than women. As I've aged, I've watched some made-up stories trap people (including me) in very unpleasant and unhealthy situations. But that can't be right. Why would we do that? How did I think things "should" be as a child? How do I think things "could" be today? How can we intentionally make things work well for all humans on the planet today, and those to come in the next 10, 50, or even 100 years?

It's with this curiosity that I offer the ideas contained within this book. While it's not meant to be prescriptive, or even "the" answer to everything, I do feel like we would certainly be better off to look at our systems directly. It's the collective illusions that we make up together that need to be examined better. There's no silver bullet. There's no one "right" way to do things. But there are some really easy ways to make our systems work for us and not against us. Within the context of the world we live in right now, how can we honor our hunter-gatherer brain's needs? If we are all on the same page about the need to refine and polish the systems we invent, then we might be a lot better off in the long run. We made all of this up. We have the power to un-make it as much as we want.

The deepest values I intend to bring to this project are: humility, curiosity, and the embracing of complexity.

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THE PROBLEM:

Our Systems

Global population over the past 12,000 years

5 Million Humans
12,000 *years ago*

Abundance Mindset

Scarcity Mindset

Aristotle   Cleopatra   Jesus   Constantine   Muhammad   Charlemagne   Genghis Khan   Gutenberg   Shakespeare   Darwin

11 Billion *by 2080*
8 Billion TODAY

1.66 Billion *in 1900*
1 Billion *in 1800*

Recorded History

10% HEALTHY HUMANS
90% LIVE IN POVERTY

Scientific Method

12.023

SOURCE gapminder.org

Observe. Puzzle. Question. File away those conclusions. Repeat. My entire existence has been a study of people and how they behave. We're such unpredictable, mysterious creatures. My own perspective was formed as a square peg in a rural, southern town that was still feeling the effects of segregation long after my own parents had integrated in school. My older relatives still behaved as the survivors of the Great Depression that they were, and their beliefs seemed engraved in stone and fiercely religious. There were only two kinds of people in Winnsboro: white and black. Among my own white variety, I could also spot a handful of subcategories like Pentecostal or Baptist, farmer or professional (outdoor or indoor worker), etc. Being an extreme nerd in this tiny collection of people was an isolating experience. Although I'm incredibly lucky and privileged to have it as good as I did—steady parents, loving siblings, and more opportunities than most kids I knew—it did give me a unique vantage point from which to watch the world.

I was somewhat surprised to discover that most grownups had zero interest in hearing about what they appeared to be doing wrong and how they might do better. You learn pretty quickly to keep that mess to yourself. Corrections to others were unwelcome close to 100% of the time. You had to have a good relationship with someone to be able to just say whatever you were thinking. But whenever I could, I was always asking "Why?" and trying to figure out how things worked. When I was probably around five or six, I watched my dad struggle with a huge propane tank. It was as tall as he was, and he was sort of hug-dancing it from the storage shed at the back of the yard, towards the BBQ grill on our back porch. About the time he got halfway there, I had to know "Why don't you just lay it down and roll it?" I knew it held flammable stuff, and was thinking that maybe it had to stay upright to be safe or something. I was totally surprised to learn that Dad had *no* reason not to roll it across the back yard. As he laughed at himself and rolled

it away, I was left scratching my head. How bizarre. Why would he put so much effort into such a dumb way to move such a heavy object? People were so hard to figure out.

I asked questions where I could, and kept my mouth shut the rest of the time. And that served me well enough for long enough. I was able to mostly manage to fit in or make things work OK in the larger world. And I was and am successful in a lot of areas. But I never stopped asking questions and never stopped noticing how we spend a large part of our lives doing unfulfilling tasks. Or in service to an organization that was basically spinning its wheels. *What exactly are y'all trying to accomplish again?* But as an adult, with my own two kids to be responsible for, I continue to struggle against some institutions that were purportedly created in order to *serve* us, not give us grief.

In early elementary school, we were doing everything "right" and yet both kids were really not doing all that well. The more questions I asked, and the more I learned, the more I realized that this world in general (and our local public school system specifically) is just not set up for human success at all. I'm extremely comfortable asking for the manager. I'm super experienced with researching solutions and being a good advocate for myself. I know how to go up the chain of command to get the results I'm looking for. So, why was this so hard to do for our kids?

The conventional wisdom in our area was that if your kids were smart, then they could go to public magnet schools, and everything would be great. We had invested in a home within our means in a part of town where the schools were excellent. My husband had a full-time professional job, but I was working as a part-time freelance graphic designer, so I had the time to volunteer at the school. I was able to be a known presence and a support to teachers and staff as much as possible. Both kids had been identified as gifted before kindergarten, a label that

"should" bring some great benefits in the world of public education. We assumed the schools would want them there for their fabulous standardized test scores. We were sure to pull up the school's average, right?

But the longer they progressed in elementary school, the more behavior problems they seemed to have. We were giving it our absolute best effort. We busied ourselves with psychologist and counselor appointments. Medicated both kids for ADHD in the middle of their second-grade year. Poured tons of energy and resources into "fixing" this problem. They both already had an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), so when I learned of the concept of "accommodations" I thought it would be easy to suggest a few I thought would be helpful and add it on to their IEP. Problem solved, right? Teachers would know what needed to be done and the school environment would turn from detrimental to the kids' mental health into a place where they could thrive. But parents who have been through the ringer of the learning disability community will already know—that was nowhere close to what actually happened.

As many books as I read, podcasts listened to, Facebook communities joined, we kept coming up short against various roadblocks within the public school system. To be 100% clear, this was never the fault of any one person or teacher. The humans on the ground who dealt with our kids on a daily basis were all lovely, dedicated, intelligent people, who truly did have the kids' best interests at heart. But every time we approached the school with "Hey this isn't working for him or her," we'd get back "Oh, this is why we do things this way here." OK, great. But I'm telling you *that* isn't working for my child. Can't we do something else? The answer was always no. Or not really. Or we'd need more resources for that. Or that wouldn't be fair to the other kids. And on, and on, and on.

So as I was learning more than I ever cared to know about how "twice-exceptional" (gifted + ADHD = two exceptions to the norm) kids learned and thrived, we kept running into reasons why things could not be that way. Why is it that when we *know* what works best for kids, that we are blocked from implementing those best practices? Where do these people get their rules and orders from? I investigated hard. Parish- (county) level structures were not easy to change. State-level rules and regulations made it even harder to advocate for adjustments. And the way school is structured in the United States in general turned out to be failing differently wired kids all over the place.

If you look at students with learning disabilities as a whole, then they make up one in every five students in schools today. So why were these "great" and "award-winning" schools totally ignoring the needs of these students? I get that their resources are limited, so planning for the 80% of typically wired students does make a little sense. But wholly ignoring the needs of 20% of the students in your care seemed downright neglectful. And the outcomes for differently wired students who weren't labeled gifted, or whose parents weren't able to step in to advocate, were not just short of their potential—they were horribly damaging! Why were students required to attend schools that were actively harming their mental health?

In my deep dive into how humans learn and thrive, I kept trying to get to the "root" of the problem. The lowest common denominator was always my aim to discover. I've seen plenty of temporary or "Band-Aid" solutions put into practice and fail. What would really *work* for students of all kinds?

The truth was that schools weren't interested in working for all students. The way our district's policies were set up, after so many behavior issues like we were experiencing, students were additionally punished by being sent to an "alternative"

school. This was their only recourse in dealing with "bad" kids—just turn them into someone else's problem. This may sound super entitled, but who on earth is the school system set up to benefit if not my two middle-class white kids? My two *gifted* kids at that? Do they seriously think it would be a good idea to send gifted kids to an alternative school? These brilliant little hellions were bored in these award-winning schools because they were ahead of their peers in academics. But they were also "bad" because their ADHD caused them to be way behind their peers in maturity. Their behaviors would have been seen as normal or typical of a child two or three grades younger. We needed a school that catered to super smart, immature kids. How was alternative school going to fix any of this if regular school couldn't be bothered?

Luckily, Covid came along as we got to one of our most frustrated points yet. A couple of months before the March 2020 lockdown of everything, my jaw was left on the floor when a staff member from the school's central office made a super offensive joke about herself being "retarded" at a meeting with the principal and some teachers. We were *begging* for help and this lady wants to joke about being retarded? At a meeting about us needing accommodations? And she's *from* the special education department? Unbelievable!

After we explained our situation in general, an attorney with the state board of education had suggested filing a grievance with the state. But I really couldn't see how holding their feet to the fire, so to speak, would change enough of the bad parts of the system to make any kind of difference at all. If I'm having to put this much effort into making the school acknowledge the (allegedly super unique) needs of my two kids, then I couldn't imagine a world where the school would actually make any changes to accommodate those needs. What we needed was a way to file a grievance with the universe. Not just our local or state school system.

Local school administrators won't be able to change a thing, because the whole world demands that they operate in ways that are just inherently inhumane.

I'll spare you the detailed slog of our efforts at that time, but suffice it to say that it is super baffling to be put into the corner we were in. Kids are required to attend school. That school is not required to make any adjustments whatsoever in order make things work well for those kids. In fact, they could boot them to a punishment school if the kids didn't comply with their rules and standards. These same two kids were, by the school district's own standards, ranked in the upper 98–99th percentile in intelligence. What? The? Heck? When Covid hit, we breathed a sigh of relief, and gladly rejected everything the public schools were dumping on students and parents everywhere. Two years of homeschool did us a world of good.

Today our kids are in eighth and tenth grades, and while the school system hasn't really improved, we've adjusted our expectations and have learned that there is nothing "wrong" with our kids. The systems they are/were captive to were not set up for them to thrive. We don't stress as much when we keep getting messages and warnings about their behavior issues, although just last week I found myself thinking "Please don't be school. Please don't be school," when my phone rang in my pocket. Intellectually, I realize it is totally OK that my seventh-grader was recently expelled/separated from the private school we were trying last year—while making straight As. It doesn't mean they are a failure or that I am a failure for birthing them. That is a hard lesson to keep learning, though, and I know full well it doesn't have to be this way.
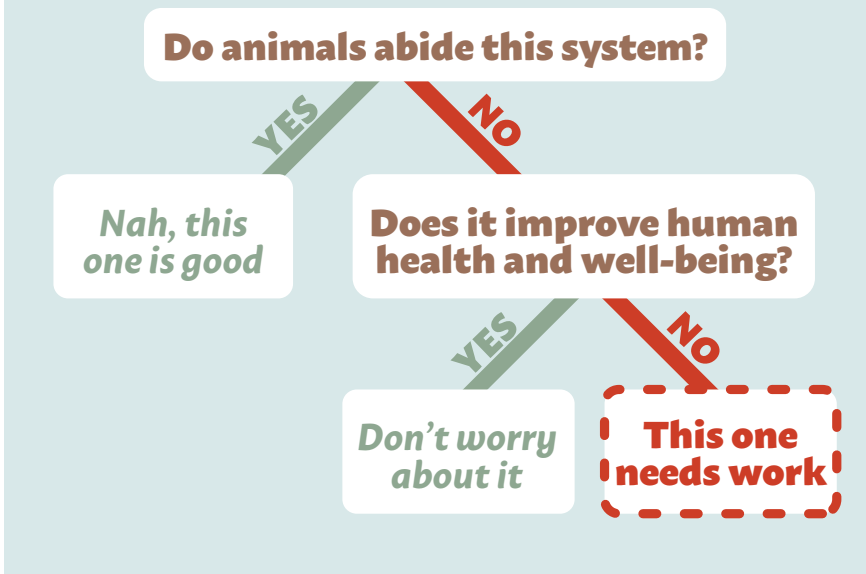
I also know full well that there is not an easy way to enact change on these systems from any standpoint. I've seen and joined the work of disability and advocacy groups and their progress is admirable but achingly slow. The same can be

said of pretty much any other system I've noticed that needs improvement. I could certainly run for office at some level of government, but even then I'd have really limited ability to make changes no matter what position I held. From our health-care systems to our criminal justice systems, there is no method to objectively point out areas of improvement. Leaders don't want to hear it. They think changes will be too costly or burdensome. Their constituents usually do not have the band-width to research and demand better of them. And the system itself by its very nature resists change on purpose. But the truth is that if we plan for the success of the most vulnerable humans, then the rest of us will also benefit. The concept of filling our future with humane systems is what I imagine would work well. This is my imagined system that I wish we'd all acknowledge and put into practice. It is the editing system I wish I could point to and say "Do this" to fix things. It is objective and doesn't care which political party is in charge right now. It focuses on what actually works to provide an environment where everyone can thrive.

We won't be able to force every system to change right away, but if enough of us make public the shortcomings of the systems we're trapped in, then the lack of change will be glaringly obvious. Would you want to run a program or initia-tive that is objectively being inhumane? The public should have a way to demand better. And if we can all adopt the same methods of calling for more humane systems, then this will be a far easier and (dare I say) more enjoyable and fulfilling task.

Should we make this system more humane?

D E C I S I O N   T R E E

Do animals abide this system?

YES   NO

Nah, this one is good

Does it improve human health and well-being?

YES   NO

Don't worry about it

This one needs work

How do we identify systems that need editing? Look to nature.

It had gotten to be mid-December seemingly in record time. Now that I'm an adult, the approaching Christmas holiday no longer brings anticipation and thoughts of excitement. This December brought anxiety about obligations. As I determinedly ran errands on this cold, drizzly day, my mind had taken over and was spiraling into an attempt to troubleshoot a million little struggles. Money was a little tight. That was normal. I was perpetually trying to figure out how to stretch

what we had, in order to fulfill gift-giving obligations without appearing to be stingy or half-hearted. I didn't begrudge this too much, though. Creativity is my strong suit. So while I didn't feel dread from the challenge of the longest list of people I'd ever been responsible for procuring gifts for, I did feel massive dread from the challenge of orchestrating our schedule to accommodate for more events than ever. Time was more than a little tight. And this year seemed doomed to become the first holiday where our absence from an event or two would let down at least one or two expectant relatives. This fact was what my mind was stuck on as I drove around town that day, making stops to buy or return things and gather up any extra items needed to finish up gift buying and wrapping. I was warm and snug in my vehicle, and found myself daydreaming as I splashed into a parking spot. Sigh. I didn't want to be doing this.

With a growing family, and scattered extended family, and a myriad of set-in-stone annual traditions, I could tell that *some*one was going to wind up disappointed. And I felt that deeply. I feared it would be blamed on me. And that was the last thing I wanted to do for anyone. But logistically, we just could not make it to every single appearance that was expected of us. I had been wishing for a way to clone our family of four for a week or two. The calendar and schedules all overlapped impossibly.

As I slowly began to gather up an umbrella and my list and killed the engine, I again thought "I don't want to be doing this." Why is Christmas so stressful? Why do we all wordlessly agree to participate in all of this foolishness? Why isn't anyone asking us what would be best for *us* and our two small kids? Shouldn't the kids now be the focus of all the fun and joy in this holiday? As I stared out the window, trying to muster the energy to complete my shopping mission, my eyes landed on a handful of the most average, scrappy-looking, parking-lot birds as they landed

near a tree in a median. As I watched, I had to laugh at myself as I became aware of my longing to be more like them. I was envious of a bird. A wet, cold, wild animal. Jealous that she had no Christmas holiday obligations to fulfill. Birds didn't even have religion, much less several older generations to be making demands on their time. They were just out there living their best life, oblivious of the impending doom that had trapped me, the human, who supposedly had it better. What did I know? Maybe they had the right idea. It would be years before I discovered the work of therapist and author Nedra Tawwab and learned to gently set boundaries, but something about this laugh did help my feelings a bit at the time.

It's this silly memory that gave me the easy method of determining which systems require our regular editing. When you've lived with them all your life, it can be really hard to take a step back and see just what we've done to ourselves. So many of the systems we live with are just part of the fabric of our existence. We don't really think about whether they're good for us or not. We don't assess them to make sure they're still a good fit for our current situation. We continue along without question and just assume that things are the way they should be.

For everything in this book, I want to specifically focus on the systems that we humans create. Every idea or construct or concept that came out of a human's mind should be fair game for evaluation going forward. There's no need to feel judgment for not having thought to evaluate our systems before. We didn't realize there was a need. Once we learn of a need, then it's time to take action.

So, as you think of your own examples of different systems and ideas as you read this book, just ask yourself, do animals abide by this? If yes, then we can leave it be. But if not, then it qualifies as a human-made system, and we have the responsibility to make sure it is doing more good than harm to people. That's really all this book hopes to accomplish—if I can teach people how to identify systems
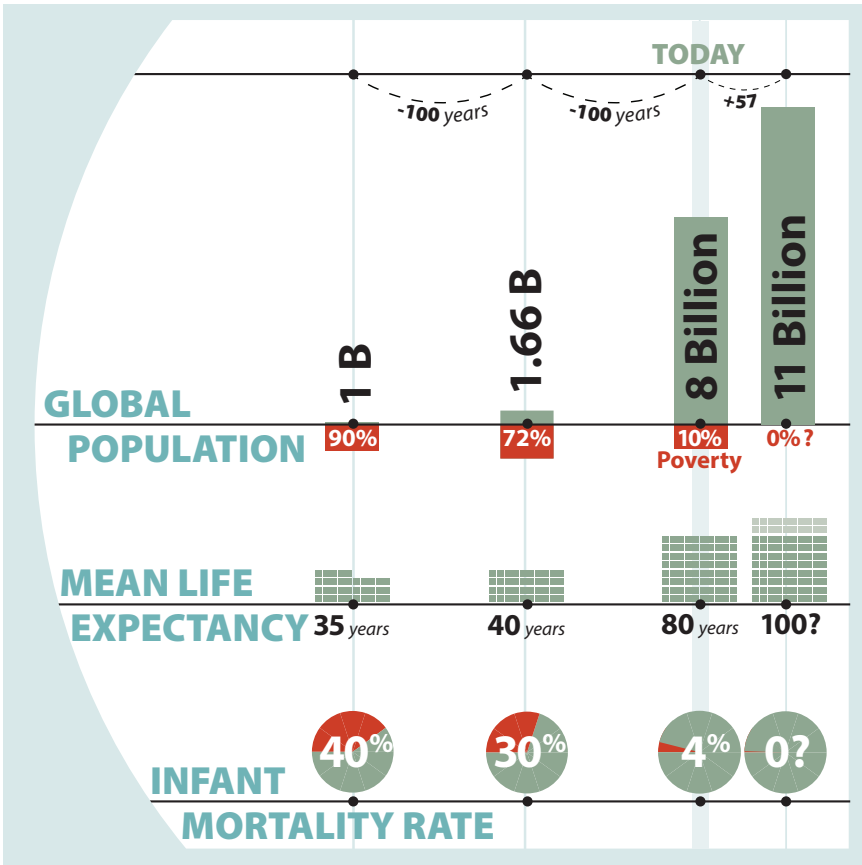
that need adjustment, and how to go about making them simply better for humans than they were before, then I feel like we can all get to a better place as a species on this planet.

For example, would an animal know what *day* and *night* is? Well, yeah, those are just labels we've given to the times that our part of the Earth is either facing the sun or not. Ok, so then would an animal know what a *Monday* or *Tuesday* is? No, of course not. That's why it's so hilarious when we see memes where cats have a case of the Mondays. So a seven-day week is totally a human invention. A 365-day year is fairly natural—it's just counting the number of days it takes to make a full revolution around the sun. But humans invented the seven-day week for themselves, based on the seven wanderers, the most prominent bodies in the sky who were known to move about and not maintain a constant position. Isn't that wild? I was a grown-up with kids before I knew that fact. That's why we have names like Sun-day and Mon-day (moon-day). As I was taught the creation story from the Bible, no one ever mentioned the origins of the seven days of creation. It just was. But just because it was written down in the Bible (roughly 3,000 years ago) doesn't mean it is the best way to live. Although, I would have surely been ostracized for saying that out loud in Sunday school as a kid.

What I wish I would have been taught as a child is that our brains haven't evolved much over the past 12,000 years. We are still walking around with a pretty remarkable, functioning, magical organ in our heads that is just like those of the people who lived here 12,000 years ago. I wish I grew up knowing that the place I lived in and the customs we all operated by were not, in fact, made to be ideal for our own health and well-being. I assumed that because we were made to attend church weekly and school five days a week and learn the subjects we were taught, that someone in the past had determined that this was the right way to be. In the

1980s in rural Louisiana, it was just a given that one "should" live a certain way and accept the teachings of our elders. Everyone seemed to easily surrender to the leadership of a handful of old guys. Because this was such a non-starter, I assumed someone had fact-checked this before declaring it to be the way of the land. As I aged, I learned to be disappointed in the way the world actually worked. And disappointed in the behavior of grown-ups in general.

What I wish grown-ups had been doing and teaching is how to make our world work in our favor. Not just accepting of *This is how it has always been, and how it always should be*. The truth is that the way we live today is *extremely* different from how we lived 12,000 years ago. It looks very little like the world our brains evolved to be best in.

TODAY

~**100** *years* ~**100** *years* +**57**

GLOBAL
POPULATION

1 B 1.66 B 8 Billion 11 Billion

90% 72% 10% 0%?
Poverty

MEAN LIFE
EXPECTANCY 35 *years* 40 *years* 80 *years* 100?

INFANT
MORTALITY RATE

40% 30% 4% 0?

If you take a look backwards at just the most recent centuries, you can see some pretty wild changes and remarkable advancements. For thousands of years the global population was less than 1 billion, and most people lived in poverty. Mean life expectancy was only 35 years, and 40% of all infants died before their fifth birthday.

Today, the planet now has 8 billion people, but only 10% live in poverty. We've also more than doubled our lifespan to about 80 years, and only 4% of infants die before their fifth birthday.

In AD 2080, experts predict our global population will level out at around 11 billion people. Can we shape our systems so that all of us get to live a healthy and fulfilling life?

Let's get to know how we can thrive, given the hunter-gatherer evolved brains we have. If you can picture the two halves of a walnut still joined together, this makes a surprisingly similar model of how our brains are actually shaped. So for the remainder of this book, I'll be referring to our hunter-gatherer evolved brains as Wally or our Walnut Brains.

Wally is operating in such a unique position in the world today that it's not surprising that it doesn't always lead to the best outcomes. Never before have there been so many of us. Never before have we had such a long average lifespan. And never before have we been so interconnected, and yet so polarized at the same time.

After learning all I can about the beliefs of a vast array of political parties, religions, theories, brain science, and crusaders, I'm convinced that we'll never agree on any one, right, objectively good system. The best we can do is to agree that they all have their benefits and drawbacks (and side effects or externalities). We can agree to the need to examine what we invent and believe and work together in order to fine tune it to best suit us. This book is a call to drop the weapons, quit fighting with each other over who is right, and come together to work on fixing our common enemy: the systems we create.

Like the scientific method does for medicine, we can use a standard methodology to continually refine the systems we make to be more humane. We created them. We can certainly modify them to better suit our needs. And if we collectively work to move things in the same direction, we can unlock the potential in all living humans while setting future humans up for success in a healthier world.

We're surprisingly close, but like any big project, the last few details are often the most difficult and hard to complete. It's worth working toward this last 10% of humans, who currently live in poverty, becoming healthy. Imagine the talents and energy we can all enjoy when everyone on Earth gets to live their best life.

THE SOLUTION:

A Humane Era

An era where we collaborate to double-check all our human-made systems to make sure they prioritize for human health & well-being, not profit or any other measure of success

Has an explicitly stated **Purpose** *not ambiguous or assumed*

Makes regular, incremental **Changes** *to adjust for best outcomes*

Humane System

Measures for **Outcomes** *not intentions*
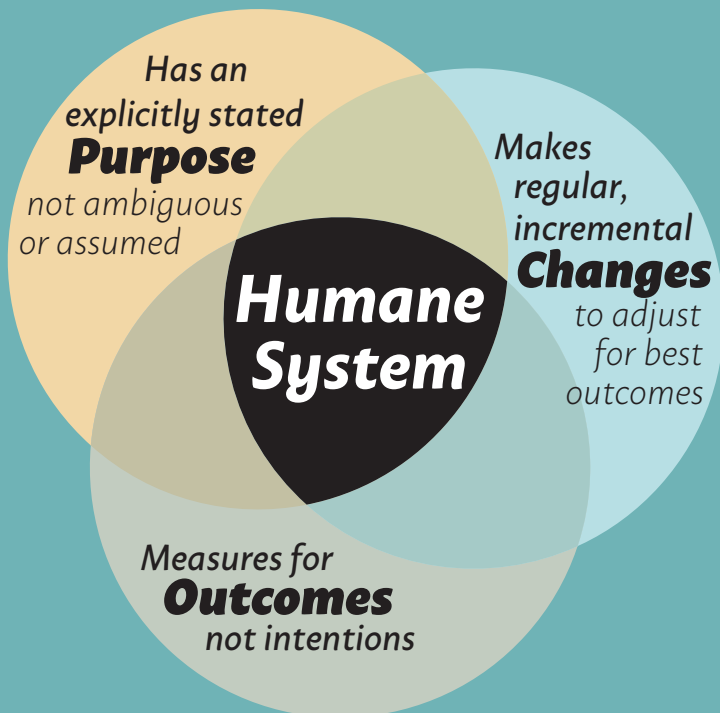
We were evolved for this.

OK, if we've all agreed that our systems deserve scrutiny, then what are we looking for in a good system? What makes one system objectively, measurably better than another? The only thing we should be optimizing and measuring for is human health and well-being. Those that improve human health and well-being deserve to live another day. Those that cause any harm or suffering to people at all deserve to be changed to do better. Perhaps one day we'll develop some advanced method of figuring out which systems are the very best of the best, but to get started with this process, we really only need to sort out which ones are net positive versus which ones are net negative.

As people become healthier and better able to care for themselves, they're also able to care for others better. Just as sickness can spread, healthiness can spread as well. The reason population growth is projected to level out around 2080 is that as people gain access to resources to care for themselves, they automatically have fewer children. According to Swedish physician, academic, and author Hans Rosling in *Factfulness*, this phenomenon is more powerful than any laws or policies governing people's reproductive lives. If we're not looking at exponential growth of the world population, then we can actually plan for a future of around 11 billion people on this one planet. That task is surprisingly manageable.

Every year, people make donations totaling enough to cover the needs of all the 10% of people who are living in poverty. We have the resources. We just don't have the right method of sharing those resources responsibly. That's not the fault of anyone in particular. This is a complex world, and oftentimes it's hard to identify the problem, much less solve it adequately. And what works for one person in one environment might be totally different from what would work for a different
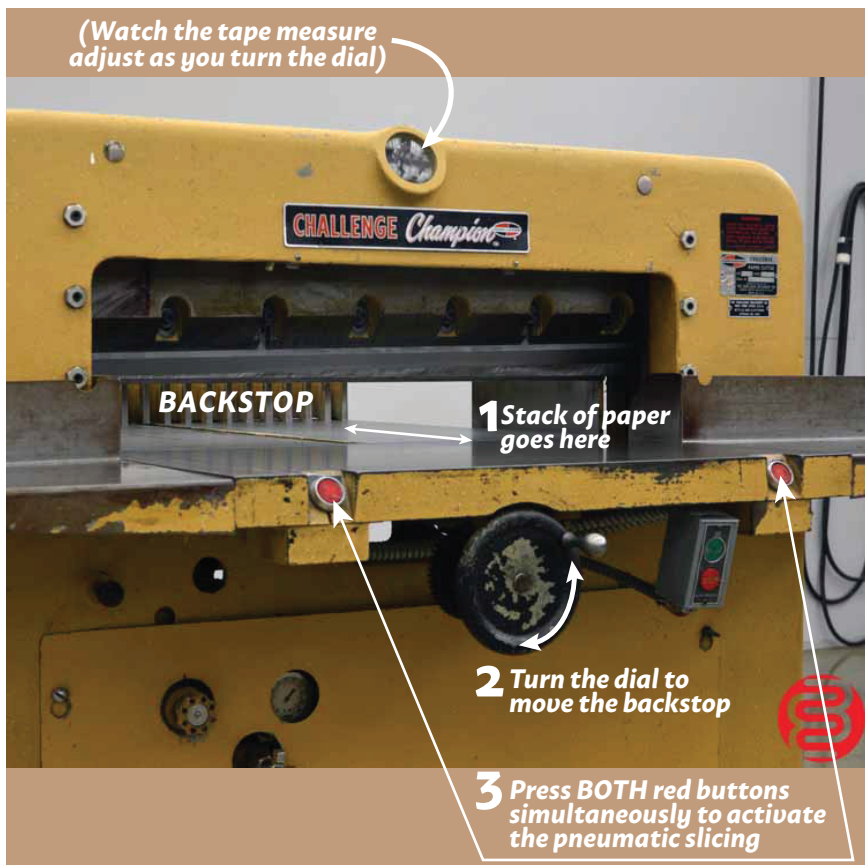
person in those circumstances. Or that same person in different circumstances. But now that we know differently, it is certainly our responsibility to do better.

Right now, we're still operating under the assumption that most of the people on this planet are destined to live in poverty like they did as recently as 100 years ago. Luckily, with the widespread adoption of new systems like the scientific method, we've managed to expand our population while reducing the percentage of those who live in poverty from 90% down to 10%. But this trend isn't a guarantee. Even if it were, it would still allow for quite a lot of human suffering of those who are alive right now. If we want to continue this progress, it would be a great start to begin to document what works best for humans, given our current circumstances. There's no reason we can't catalog the ideal mindset, setting, and practices of people throughout history and today. We are pretty easily able to manage for our weak areas or blind spots, but only if we're training ourselves to look for them and evaluate them. Think of all the processes and checklists put into place for complex tasks like flying, surgery, or even proofreading a published piece.

For example: one of my very favorite pieces of machinery of all time, I learned how to operate while working at a local print shop in high school. The production area was packed with interesting-looking tools and machinery and as dusty and old as some of them looked, they all had an air of quiet potential. Some hummed along daily, while some looked like they hadn't been touched in decades. I was just a part-time high school student worker, but this was a small family-run business, and I managed to at least observe, if not execute on, most everything in that place by the time I finished working there.

Something about the analog nature of producing consistent, professional printing at that place gave me energy. I soaked up all the tricks I could, all while knowing that some aspects of this process had already evolved to use computers

and direct-to-plate technology that would never be economically practical in this shop. It also housed some relics that we'd never use today, but were essential parts of the printing process a generation ago when the owner's parents first started the business. It was the machines that I knew were in it for the long haul that I really wanted to master. And the grandaddy of them all was the industrial paper cutter. This is not your ordinary tabletop slicer like you'd see in any library or school office. It was a standalone hoss of a machine that was as large and intimidating as the front end of an old pickup truck. Place an entire ream of paper in there and it would *wisssssssh ker-CHUNK* it right in half. In one fell swoop you could precisely and cleanly chop 500 sheets of 8.5 × 11-inch paper into 1,000 sheets of 5.5 × 8.5-inch paper. Magical!

(Watch the tape measure adjust as you turn the dial)

CHALLENGE *Champion*

BACKSTOP

1 *Stack of paper goes here*

2 *Turn the dial to move the backstop*

3 *Press BOTH red buttons simultaneously to activate the pneumatic slicing*

I naturally assumed I would not be operating the paper cutter during my time doing bindery work. Even if it was OK for a kid to run it, I was certain my mother would have thrown a fit when she found out that her child had touched it. So I thought the owner was joking when he suggested I tackle a stack of business cards to get them ready for delivery. Do what now? He chuckled and showed me exactly how the thing worked, and I was delighted to see how inherently *safe* it was. As if it was designed knowing a human would be operating it! Brilliant! You'd have to place in the full stack of paper nice and neatly and shove it all the way to the back-stop. Then you'd have to use both hands underneath the work surface to unlock and spin the dial to move the backstop to the depth you wanted to cut at. As the dial rotated, you could look straight ahead into a magnified little window with the detailed measuring tape scrolling past. Lock it into place at 5.5-inches and that's the size of paper you'd end up with. Then—crucially—to activate the pneumatic press and blade to do its worst, you had to press two buttons simultaneously—and those two buttons were on the opposite sides of the machine at hip height. There was no way possible to cheat it and use one hand to chop while using your other hand to hold the paper into place. A hand under the chopper was the worst possible outcome of this thing, and also the most likely mistake a person would make. It was tempting to want to hold things in place for the chopping, but your hand was absolutely not the right tool for that job.

So although hunter-gatherers certainly didn't have any experience with paper cutters, maybe we decide that this machine we're creating is important to have anyway. Then if that's the case, let's make it work as well as possible for human use, safeguarding against the most commonly observed blind spots or areas of our own weakness. If it's human nature to stick your hand in a paper cutter, then let's make

it really hard to do that. We can take the same approach with all the other ideas and systems that we've invented in the past 12,000 years.

This process takes advantage of the strengths of both halves or systems of our Walnut Brains. The left brain is great at jumping to conclusions. It can churn out ideas and creations like nobody's business. It has no idea if they're correct or not, it's just reflexively throwing out theories that sound good. Then it's the right brain's turn to evaluate all of these stories we tell ourselves. If we establish the need to give our right brain the veto power over which ideas get to endure, then it could be a really powerful tool for improving our lives, as well as those of future generations to come. That's why I feel like it's important to give this future filled with systems that are steadily becoming more humane its own name. Let's just declare it to be a Humane Era and empower people everywhere to take charge of the systems that govern so many parts of our lives.

In order to do this methodically, we can give ourselves the tools to all evaluate systems in the same way. So we can compare apples to apples. I'm proposing we define a Humane System like the following chapter, but if anyone has any better ideas, I'm all ears. I just think we should be, at minimum, measuring these things and making a more informed decision about how to move forward. We don't have to get stuck arguing whether Republicans or Democrats have the right idea. We can objectively point to whatever is the most humane idea for solving any problem.

The rest of section one will describe the framework that we'll use together, but it's important to begin with a baseline: the most basic job of any system should be to prioritize human health and well-being above any other measure of success. It doesn't matter how much profit your company generated in any given year if it polluted and wasted precious natural resources along the way. Prioritizing for profit looks like one of the most common pitfalls that we run into, but there are

tons of other ways we can inadvertently make the wrong things a higher priority than our own health.

This could also be super liberating. Imagine a world where we all get to put ourselves first. We get to do this! We've been slowly moving in this direction for the past couple of centuries but if you look at when we work together and take notes—that's when the major improvements come into play. When we invented the scientific method, we managed to double our average lifespans.

And a lot of our systems are surprisingly new when you expand your time horizons and look at the last 12,000 years we've had this Wally brain. We've only had recorded history for the past 3,000–4,000-ish years. The way we number and reference the years in our recorded history as BC and AD was generally accepted several centuries after Jesus' death, so around 1,500 years ago. The Gregorian calendar of months we all follow today was first introduced around 450 years ago. Only 50 years or so before the first enslaved people were brought to America. We've had pencils for even less time than that—only during the past couple hundred years have we been able to write with a pencil, for heaven's sake. You can't tell me that people were "meant" to live like we do in America and around the world in 2023. The things we tend to focus on and stress over are almost all really recent human inventions!

If we want to fill our future with more humane systems, then they'll need to do three very important things:

1. A Humane System has an explicitly stated Purpose

2. A Humane System measures for Outcomes

3. A Humane System performs regular, incremental Changes

The following three chapters will more fully explain this cycle.

Section Two will suggest ten different characteristics that we can use to identify and create systems that will generally result in better outcomes for humans. These levers of change all revolve around the basic question of: ***What works best for our hunter-gatherer Wally brains?*** We'll define what are the best mindsets, best settings or environments, and what are the best practices or ways to use our time. We can work toward refining all of our systems to point in this direction. If we can teach carpenters to measure twice and cut once, we can certainly collaborate to teach ourselves how to best optimize our own mindset, setting, and practices. We know this has historically been ignored or overlooked, so let's be purposeful in making sure we don't overlook it in the future.

Ranking items from best to worst turns out to be an easy and intuitive task for humans. This whole process can be thought of as comparing two options, and sticking with the one that looks more humane to us. If I'm examining one snapshot in hand, then I would grab a second photo and hold it up next to the first to compare them side-by-side. I'll hang on to the one that looks more humane, drop the less-humane one, then pick up a new card to compare side-by-side. Like an eye doctor, we'll ask ourselves "Which looks better, system A or system B?" then discard the bad and keep the good to fine-tune things. This small act, done collectively and repeatedly with all of our human-made systems, can lead to powerful results.

Right now, ALL of our systems need improvement.

In my imagination, as I was wishing for a grievance system for the universe at large, I pictured some easy, short, empirical way to show those in charge just exactly what needed to be changed in order to make their systems more humane.

In this ideal world, organization leaders would welcome this feedback and jump right on making the recommended changes. But I know full well the world doesn't work that way. In many cases, we may need large groups of people to be making the same observations and holding organizations accountable. It always helps to have a huge mass of people paying attention to one thing. It's even more helpful if those people are offering to collaborate to make change. So ultimately, I decided to create a Collaboration Card (see the last two-page spread at the end of this book), because that's what I'm wanting to propose to any organization's decision-makers.
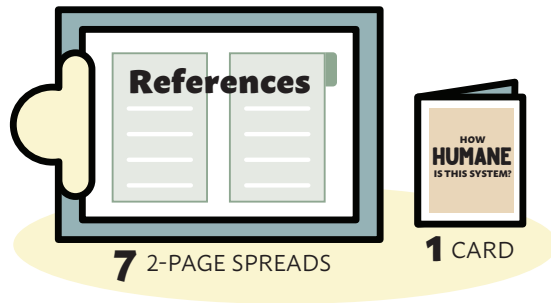
This is more in line with a "calling in" rather than "calling out" of anyone or any system. In the art world, we practice having group critiques as a class in order to get critical, but constructive feedback from our peers. I'm fairly well practiced in this activity, so I'm accustomed to not taking feedback about a project personally. It's not about me or my ideas. It's about the work itself. I want to be explicit in telling those in charge that these are criticisms about the system itself. This is never about any one person, or about their past behavior or decision making.

Most of the systems I'm most critical of were begun long before anyone living today was even born. There's no way that anyone today could have been around for the formation of today's systems. And even if they were involved in what turned out to be bad decisions from years ago, then I still don't hold them at fault. Every-

one is always doing their very best at any given time. I believe that to be true of even the most diabolical-sounding decision-makers of today.

At the same time, though I don't hold anyone at fault, I do insist that current leaders are now on the hook for the responsibility to improve things when they can. Any system that impacts other people should absolutely be open to scrutiny and feedback in order to change it for the better. I'll provide the blank Collaboration Card at the end of this book, along with several pages of resources that you can easily copy to share with others. You too can call in organizations to change for the better. You can also download a free, printable pdf file of these pages and the Collaboration Card at System-Redesign.org.

We'll walk through each panel of it as the rest of the book unfolds. The resources at the end of the book are for those wanting to do a deep dive into any one individual area. As you learn how systems can work for us and not against us, be thinking about ways to make all the things within your own control more humane. And when you run up against a system that is out of your control, plan to connect with others who are suffering under the same system, and use the Collaboration Card to call in the decision-makers in charge of that system. Do what you can in your own life, then if you have the capacity, let's collectively work together to make all systems just a little bit better than when we found them. By the end of this book, you'll be an official System Redesigner, with the power and knowledge to edit any system for human thriving.

A MORE HUMANE SYSTEM
Has an Explicitly Stated Purpose

To everything there is a season,

and a time for every purpose under heaven

~ECCLESIASTES 3, BIBLE

Our systems are wonky.
Let's make them work for us.
To get started, please point
us in the right direction.

In order to practice good systems hygiene, it is going to be essential to at least establish why a system exists in the first place. If there's no need for a system, then eliminating one might make more sense. But for one to exist, the purpose or mission should be transparently established. Don't worry too much about getting it exactly right. The purpose may need to change over time. And we're going to be measuring results and making adjustments regularly anyway. So if our outcomes land far off the mark, then at least we'll know that much. From there, we can decide where to aim the next iteration. **What we shouldn't do is hide the system's purpose from view.**

A good purpose points to a finished state (outcome) and not a set of wanted behaviors or actions. And for a system to be considered humane, it should point to a finished state where people are better off than they were without the system. Even if the purpose you state is aspirational, it will be better to at least aim in that direction, in hopes of landing nearby. It's OK for a purpose to aim high. And it's OK for the results to fall short. If we're doing this right, they almost always will. But we'll be able to improve upon the system for the next iteration or version. And knowing what we're aiming for is the first step in this cycle.

Interestingly, it may be easier to poll people to find out what they think your system's purpose is. If people think it's different from what you state, then the correct answer will always be the consensus of the masses, not the stated purpose at

all. And if you state something off the mark, it will be quickly revealed once your measurements come in.

If you think about this concept in the body, it's the simple act of standing in one place and turning left or right until you're pointed in the direction you intend to travel. Picture yourself in the middle of a large field, a vast pond, or the center of an intersection. Imagine yourself examining each possible direction you could move in 360 degrees. If you could move in any one direction—preferably in the direction of human health and well-being—which way would you need to face in order to take a step in that direction? Orient yourself toward the place you'd like to end up.

According to author and systems expert Donella H. Meadows, "the least obvious part of the system, its function or purpose, is often the most crucial determinant of the system's behavior."

If you stop to think about it, I'm sure you could come up with tons of examples of systems having a hidden or implied purpose, or claiming to have one primary objective, while secretly being set up to achieve a secondary mission. One of the most ubiquitous hidden purposes I've found is in the "rewards" cards you can sign up for at retailers and casinos and such. Naming the thing a "rewards" card is a clever way to suggest that the system is set up only to reward customers or guests. But the true purpose of this system is to collect shopping behavior data from patrons. The rewards one "earns" through these programs are minimal, even if they do feel nice to achieve. The corporation is smart enough and has enough funds to hire the best and brightest team to make sure they're not losing money on the deal in the long run. They are able to make decisions about products and objectives and a whole host of other topics in order to maximize profits by learning how individuals behave with their store or services over time. While they may not

need the user's private information like phone number or address, the data they can glean strictly from knowing what shopper number 123 buys and when is more than enough to justify setting up the rewards system in the first place. The primary purpose of the reward system is to collect customer data. Any rewards given out are only secondary.

There's nothing inherently wrong with having a system with multiple goals or purposes. But using one purpose to hide another is deceptive at best. I can't imagine many people would jump at the opportunity to sign up for a "data collection" card at any establishment. It will be important to thoroughly examine our human-made systems to find all the purposes within and make sure the primary one is to enhance human health and well being.

To use a more specific example, my husband once heard a public speaker ask an audience what the chairs they were sitting on were made for. It seemed like a crazy question. Most people would naturally guess that they were "made to sit on" as they sat on them. But a closer look revealed that those particular chairs were made to *stack* into neat towers of 10 on a cart in order to move them in and out of different meeting spaces. The primary purpose is to stack. The sitting was secondary. And that's totally fine if you need chairs to first stack and then sit. But it becomes problematic when you aren't clear about the purposes and which ones are the most important.

Like in some pool (billiards) leagues, you have to call your shot in advance for it to count. Accidental shots are less impressive, even if they do result in fewer balls on the table. The same can be said of systems. It's less impressive (and far less likely) to create a system that is accidentally humane rather than intentionally humane. And declaring a purpose allows us to measure how close we are able to

move toward that goal. Without an explicit purpose, we're just fumbling around in the dark, hoping for the best.

System Redesigner Suggestions

Within your own life, it can be exhausting, yet empowering to question the *why* behind everything you do. Begin this habit slowly if you'd like. Start with the things that are causing the most friction. Does every part of your daily routine really have a legitimate purpose? Does every meeting, zoom, or appointment have a primary purpose? If not, that may be a good reason to drop habits or expectations. Or it could be an invitation to get clear on what that purpose should be. This is challenging and hard to do, but I've found that it is almost always worth the effort. Just getting started can be the biggest hurdle.

If you have the capacity to redesign systems beyond your own life, then the easiest first step is to start an in-person or online poll to collect feedback. I find it fascinating to see what other people think the purpose of any given system should be. I'll help jump start this process by sharing my Google forms template at System-Redesign.org/downloads. The "How Humane is this System?" Google form contains all of the questions and ranking options from the entire Collaboration Card, but you can easily remove sections you think aren't relevant yet. You can get started making any system more humane by simply helping to put into words the perceived or actual purpose of that system. This is a great way to begin to form a collective group. There are almost always people involved with resisting harmful organizations. Cast your net far and wide to find potential allies and advocates coming at a problem from many different angles.

Others are usually happy to give an opinion about a question like this, and if you can demonstrate to the authorities in charge that a large number of people all agree, you'll have much more leverage than any individual person might.

A MORE HUMANE SYSTEM
Measures for Outcomes
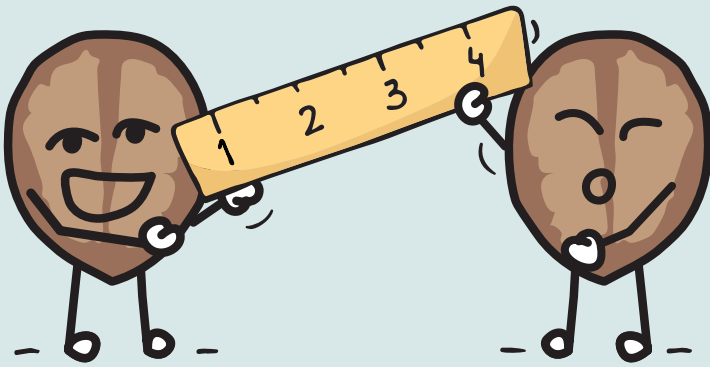
Life is often more complex than the stories we like to tell about it.

~DANIEL KAHNEMAN

Once we know what we're aiming for, how will we know if we hit the mark?

OK, so if we're pointed in the right direction and ready to measure how our system is doing, then it's important to know what to measure. As author and activist Ibram X. Kendi relates it to rules and policies being antiracist, "We should be outcome-centered and victim-centered," because a policy's intention doesn't really matter in the end if the outcomes are jacked up. No matter what we *say* we do, and no matter what we *intend* to happen, the outcomes themselves are the only things that count in this measurement.

We have the responsibility to make sure any well-intended policy actually does what it says it will. So measuring the intent is really useless. We need to measure the outcome in order to double check that it is really doing the thing.

Measuring for outcomes also incentivizes the real thing we're trying to accomplish. It's far too easy to bastardize or stray from the goal if behaviors or actions are the things we're measuring. Recent advancements in AI learning point to these insights, but all it takes is a child to reveal how that might go wrong. Incentivized to help her younger brother use the potty, a girl was found to quickly discover that she could over-hydrate her brother in order to increase his bathroom use frequency, and therefore increase her reward: more M&Ms. The behavior of pottying was rewarded, not the finished state of her brother's empty bladder. (Read *The Alignment Problem: Machine Learning and Human Values* by Brian Christian for more on this.)

This is a silly example, but you can see how the incentives are important to get right. So we need to clearly define what outcome we're looking for. And again,

it should be one where the humans affected by the system are better off for having been put through it. Whole and healthy humans should be the desired end result of any system we inflict upon them. Systems can contribute to all sorts of outcomes as it relates to human thriving. We should be pretty good at documenting and cataloging these if we pay attention.

The embodiment of this concept is to merely look down at the step you've just taken. If you're beginning in the center, and have oriented yourself toward an outcome, then look to see if that one step has moved you in that direction. And if so, how much closer are you now than before? This will inform your next step, so it's important to at least know if you've succeeded in your objective for your first step.

What we focus on matters. And if we focus on avoiding bad things then we're always operating with the threat of bad things at our backs. The city I live in is very much like most places around the country in that our city and parish (county) governments seem to be operating a large game of whack-a-mole when it comes to creating rules and policies. They are not engaged in defining what kind of city we want to live in or what kind of place is best or ideal. They're really engaged in a reactive game of addressing problems as they arise. It's hard to find any proactive efforts in local government where measuring good outcomes is a priority. The news media covers crime stats and how our students are failing and any number of bad or catastrophic events. But no one is focused or reporting on what we *should* be doing or building or what would make for a great place to live for our residents. At a minimum, it would be helpful to know how our residents fare when it comes to mental health, physical health, daily diet and exercise patterns, and overall quality of life. We could publish stats of how many residents earn a living wage. Or how many are able to put away some savings. Or how many are able to own a home. Instead of avoiding all the bad things, let's define and shoot for all the good

outcomes that are possible. We'll have a better grasp of what those are, and how we are or aren't achieving them over time. And if we have a better idea of where we're going and how we're doing thus far, then we'll have a far better chance of adjusting the levers that can actually get us there.

Anytime I'm feeling stuck in a system that seems to be adrift with no clear destination and no clear ways to adjust things for a better outcome, I try to ask "Wait a minute, how does nature handle this kind of thing?" or "How did this happen 12,000 years ago?" Without human intervention at all, how does this normally shake out? We're usually too deep into our ingrained habits and assumptions to clearly see what needs to be done. If we can step out of the thing and look at it as an observer or spectator, then we can usually come away with some sense of what needs to happen.

As it turns out, the exercise of observing your own life as a spectator can be incredibly helpful and healing when dealing with your own personal mental health. Feeling trapped within a situation turns into feeling like you're just feeling the effects of a crappy system. And that's not your fault. You are not to blame for the shitty situations you find yourself in. You can only control how you react to those situations. And observing the whole thing as an outsider can give you clarity and perspective that was impossible to find from within.

Measuring for outcomes as an objective observer works great for systems as well as for your own mental health. Let's all agree to move in that direction for a while to see how it feels. I'm willing to bet we'll all be better off for it.

System Redesigner Suggestions

This is where your *vision* for the future comes into play. In your own life, the systems you want to improve would benefit from you being able to articu-

late exactly what the finished product of the system will look like. Get clear on what a future world would look and feel like if the system works as well as it possibly could. What kind of world would a successful system result in? Can you find photos or snapshots online that fit your vision? Find a way to draw a literal picture if you have to in order to fully communicate the end result with nuance.

Collectively, you can join forces with others who are pursuing the same outcomes. Start an online or in-person survey to find out what others think the final outcome or vision should be for any system. Enlist the help of artists or storytellers to create a narrative that can be easily shared with others. Once your vision is crystal clear, it will be easy to round up others who are drawn to the same end result. You can get started with any of the resources at the end of this book, or available at System-Redesign.org, or simply use them as a jumping off point for creating your own framework for rallying others to collaborate. The outcomes you are pursuing can serve as a motivator and consensus builder across lines of difference. What vision can everyone involved agree upon?

A MORE HUMANE SYSTEM
Performs Regular, Incremental Changes
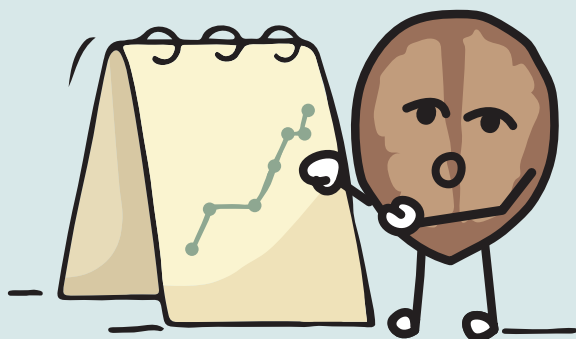
All that you touch
You Change.

All that you Change
Changes you.

The only lasting truth
is Change.

God
is Change.

~OCTAVIA E. BUTLER

"That's how we've always done things" has gotten us the results we see today. Is that really what we want, though?

I t's so very tempting to establish set-in-stone rules. Humans crave stability and order in some ways. And from an early age, we're taught to learn and follow rules obediently. But the world is in constant flux. Our surroundings are always changing. Our knowledge and our perspective change all the time. There's just no way we can create static systems and think they'd have a chance of being humane. Unless systems are set up to change as people and circumstances change, then they're not going to yield good results. And that doesn't even account for needing to change the direction or purpose over time. Every single system invented by humans *should* be ready and able to rethink its purpose and structure in order to continue to be a net positive to humans.

This relieves us of the need to make huge, sweeping changes in order to really get it "right" the first time. Big changes can lead to surprising outcomes. Even little changes could go in a weird direction. Better to take small steps and avoid doing something majorly stupid. Regular, incremental changes are better in the long run. And if all systems get the regular, incremental changes they need, then we'll get amazing results a lot sooner than you might imagine.

It's also important to know which changes are merely Band-Aid fixes. Subsidizing any system will merely prop it up for a while. Subsidies are a symptom of a system that is not working right. If it were working correctly, there would be no need for subsidizing anything.

Another overlooked method of improving a system is to subtract it altogether or to subtract elements of it. People have a tendency to always add: rules, requirements, proof, more steps, etc. But oftentimes we should be making systems simpler instead of more complicated.

As a kid, one system I desperately wanted to eliminate was the ironing of my dad's handkerchiefs. It seems incredibly old-fashioned to think of this now, but at some point it was my job to iron his stack of clean handkerchiefs every week. Today we'd just buy him a box of Kleenex for his work truck. But at the time, a guy working outdoors and away from home or the office all day needed somewhere to blow his nose. And Dad had horrible sinus issues. Plus handkerchiefs were handy for lots of other reasons too. But what I didn't understand was why they needed to be ironed before use. I couldn't tell you the hours I spent in the un-air-conditioned laundry room, spraying and then ironing smooth the clean cotton squares. Once ironed flat, they'd also need to be ironed in half with a sharp crease, then in quarters before folding into even smaller thick squares. I could understand the need to iron a business shirt—people could see that. But a handkerchief was immediately wadded into a back pocket at the very start of the day. And returned home dirty and gross at the end of the day. I confirmed that Dad didn't care if they were ironed, but Mom overruled that and I ironed anyway. I hated wasting unnecessary time and effort on the matter and wished I had a way to opt out of that system altogether.

We should plan for ever-evolving systems to be the healthiest for us, keeping in mind that we'll have to sometimes remove systems that don't serve us. We should plan to ask ourselves "How might we be wrong about this?" at every step of every system's cycle of declaring a purpose, measuring for outcomes, and making

changes before proceeding further. We should never assume our ideas are the way to go. We should plan to adjust systems based on our findings as we go.

The embodiment of this concept is simply to recalibrate after each small step, to determine our next one. After we've oriented ourselves, taken one measured step, then we should look left, then right, to double check to see if we should continue on that same path, or adjust our orientation to accommodate the movement we've made thus far.

System Redesigner Suggestions

Now you're ready to evaluate and rethink systems to make sure they're aligned with our goal of making things work in our favor. You can decide if a system is a human invention or not, and you can usually tell if it is prioritizing human health and well-being or not. In your own life, start noticing systems that you can edit or erase altogether. You have the power.

When it comes to systems that we might not have *any* power over,

COLLABORATION CARD - PANEL 1

start thinking about what purpose, outcome, and incremental changes you would like to see happen. It will be important to know where we want to go before we collectively call for change. If you could wave a magic wand, what would the end

result look like? We'll need to get serious about defining exactly what our purpose and outcomes should be.

Panel 1 of the Collaboration Card gives you space to simply identify the system in question, and jot down all of the decision-makers you can discern. These are the people you'll need to be collaborating with going forward. Adding a date to the card gives us a good starting point for measuring results.

Assessed by System Redesigner:

Who is involved with this system as:

Redesigner's preferred contact information:

PRIORITIES

	NEEDS WORK	(let it ride)
Does it prioritize for **human** health & well-being?	No	Yes
If not, who or what appears to be the priority:		

HISTORY

	NEEDS WORK	(let it ride)
Does this system have a stated primary **purpose**?	No	Yes
Does this system measure for **outcomes**?	No	Yes
Does it make regular, incremental **changes**?	No	Yes
Is it free of using **subsidies** to make any changes?	No	Yes

COLLABORATION CARD - PANEL 2

Panel 2 will give you space to identify yourself (or your organization), and include your preferred contact information for future collaboration. You'll also be able to judge systems on their priorities and history to check how they have performed in the past. One last thing to notice is a system's use of subsidies. That's a no-brainer for identifying a system whose makers already know isn't working right.

Common Characteristics of a Humane System
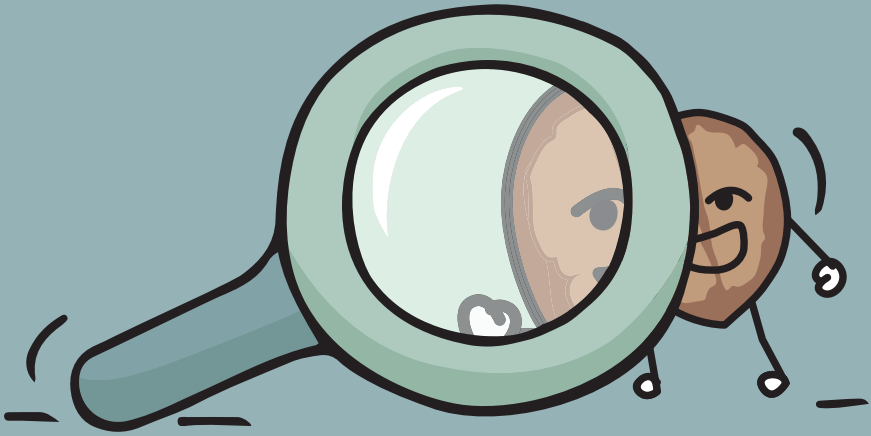
MINDSET:
How we think about systems

SETTING:
Our habitat or surroundings

PRACTICES:
How we spend our time

There is no one ideal system for everything, but there are a few types of systems that work better than others. This collection has been piling up in my head and I can't wait to share it with you.

The following chapters will go in-depth on a few important levers of change that we'll need to use for making our systems more humane. None of these are meant to be prescriptive, but more of a starting point for measuring how any given system is working for us. The more people a system affects, the more responsibility we have to make sure it's working well. We can zoom in with a microscope to modify small pieces within a system. Or we can stand way, way back and need to use a telescope to view the entire thing at a distance. From there we can judge which existing systems might be the best fit overall. We can rank and choose the best one to replace what we have now if we'd like. Or we can make adjustments within a system. Or magically, we can invent entire new systems from scratch. If we can dream it, we can do it. I encourage everyone to invent and imagine the best systems for any given project or problem. The great thing about being human is that we can easily share what we've learned with others so that they can go on to use those hard-won lessons for themselves.

No matter whether we choose to examine systems with a microscope or telescope, we can think of them all as having three general areas of adjustment: **Mindset**, **Setting**, and **Practices**.

Every characteristic we'll unpack can be thought of as contributing to a system in one of these three ways, with plenty of overlap from one to another. I'll argue

that walking is a more humane method of transportation than driving. And that can be thought of as a practice, of course, but it also is important to make our setting conducive to being able to walk everywhere. In the typical US urban city, people are really limited in the places that they *can* walk to, because we've built our cities for automobiles, which makes it dangerous and impractical to walk places. Ideally, all three areas of mindset, setting, and practices would work together to make a world in which we can really thrive.

Our mindset covers what's going on internally, or how we think about things. Even with good intentions, if we have the wrong mindset, it will set us up for failure. The setting of any human can have a huge impact on how healthy they are both physically and mentally. We can optimize our human habitats for better outcomes. We know a lot about what is healthy for us and there have been tons of great studies recently that can more accurately define what works and what doesn't. Our practices, or how we spend our time, can also greatly impact our quality of life. Ask anyone who has to sit in gridlocked traffic on a daily basis and they'll tell you that those minutes of the day do not contribute to overall health or well-being. The ways we spend our time can also be optimized for healthier outcomes. Let's agree to measure these areas of impact and make widely available the results for others to implement alongside us.

While acknowledging our current circumstances, we'll need to look backwards at which set, setting, and practices worked best for our ancestors of 12,000 years ago. In many cases, we can mimic what worked for hunter-gatherers while still taking advantage of modern technology and customs. This doesn't mean we should thoughtlessly revert back to the way people lived at any one period of time. We don't have to choose all of one or all of the other—we can choose whichever methods (modern or historic) that serve us best. Once we figure out what works

best, then it will be important to share that information. That can at least give others the starting point for testing things out with their own populations.

This process of cataloging what works well for us is meant to be like the scientific method for medicine, but instead of **focusing on a problem once it occurs, making our systems more humane focuses on how to prevent problems to begin with**. What's the healthiest way to live in general? How do we set things up to enable people to do the things that will lead to being healthy? We know a lot about how people should eat, sleep, exercise enough, and maintain physical fitness. How do we set things up to enable those practices *and* lead fulfilling lives?

When I think of this as a movement of the body, it is the same for all of the creative endeavors I've ever embarked upon. Before beginning a project, I like to mentally shake off any assumptions or first thoughts or ideas. The goal is to generate tons of ideas and choose the best ones from there. While standing, lean forward and gently shake your hands at the wrist to shake off anything you might have already had in mind. You might also gently shake your head from side to side to clear your mind. Next, inhale deeply while stretching your arms out wide and raising them above your head. This helps us to remember to reach for or consider any and *all* solutions and resources available—even and especially those you didn't think of yourself. Finally, exhale fully while bringing your palms together near your heart and bending your knees to stand in a chair-like pose. This helps focus the energy of this project on those who are least informed or most vulnerable. I want what I design to work for the most hard-to-reach, busy, and distracted person. If I can simplify it to that degree, then it will *also* work for those who know more or are more experienced with the subject matter or who have the bandwidth to take in the information.

What's my ACE score?

Doctors are now beginning to use the newly developed Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) score to better inform how to treat patients who have actual physical issues stemming from trauma experienced early on in life.

Dr. Nadine Burke Harris is the pediatrician and author who first linked ACEs to harmful effects to health later in life. She shares that "Childhood trauma increases the risk for **seven out of ten** of the leading causes of death in the United States. In high doses, it affects brain development, the immune system, hormonal systems, and even the way our DNA is read and transcribed. Folks who are exposed in very high doses have triple the lifetime risk of heart disease and lung cancer and a **20-year difference** in life expectancy." Those are major increases, and can make a bigger difference in health and life expectancy than you'd initially guess. Dr. Burke Harris established the Burke Foundation to "support children and caregivers to help prevent, protect against, and heal from the effects of Adverse Childhood Experiences."

If we know these experiences cause poor health outcomes, then it just makes sense to try to prevent those experiences in the first place. We can use the ACEs scoresheet as a list of things to prevent, or better yet, a prescription for how we *should* be living.

It's customary to simply add up all of the "yes" answers out of the following ten questions to give a medical provider your total ACEs score. Providers do not need to know which specific questions had a yes or no answer. From the screening tool used by the state of California at acesaware.org:

Adverse Childhood Experience Questionnaire for Adults:
Prior to your 18th birthday…

1. Did you feel that you didn't have enough to eat, had to wear dirty clothes, or had no one to protect or take care of you?

2. Did you lose a parent through divorce, abandonment, death, or other reason?

3. Did you live with anyone who was depressed, mentally ill, or attempted suicide?

4. Did you live with anyone who had a problem with drinking or using drugs, including prescription drugs?

5. Did your parents or adults in your home ever hit, punch, beat, or threaten to harm each other?

6. Did you live with anyone who went to jail or prison?

7. Did a parent or adult in your home ever swear at you, insult you, or put you down?

8. Did a parent or adult in your home ever hit, beat, kick, or physically hurt you in any way?

9. Did you feel that no one in your family loved you or thought you were special?

10. Did you experience unwanted sexual contact (such as fondling or oral/anal/vaginal intercourse/penetration)?

If we turn this around into what works *best* for people, then it can be really powerful. Children do best when they're raised in households that are encouraging of them (not insulting), are nurturing (not abusive), have healthy boundaries around bodily autonomy (aren't inappropriate sexually), value each individual child (not neglectful), provide healthy meals and eating habits, where parents

remain a strong, united team, and households where parents model how to treat each other with love and respect, where household members have a healthy relationship with drugs and alcohol, where mental health is properly treated and cared for, and finally, where household members remain a productive part of the family (not sent to prison or removed from the household).

When we spell it out this way, it sounds challenging, but not impossible to accomplish. And even if children *do* experience these setbacks, there are ways to help mitigate the damage that might cause to their physical and mental health. This is just one example of great, solid research that can point us all in the right direction. The mindset, setting, and practices this research recommends can be put into play for humans all over the planet. We can incentivize the healthiest details, while working to prevent the things that we know to cause harm.

I like to think of the ten common characteristics in the next few chapters as ten different ingredients to be called upon to get the flavor just right. If we think of the systems process as a circular stirring of a large soup or gumbo, we can focus on declaring a purpose, measuring for outcomes, then making changes to adjust over and over and over again. The process goes round and round perpetually. The characteristics we try to employ to change the system soup can be added here and there as we stir to make the dish better in some specific way. Interestingly, the stories that indigenous groups tell tend to have a circular format, rather than our present-day beginning-middle-end with a happily-ever-after to wrap things up. I feel like viewing things from the indigenous perspective can almost always add something to whatever objective we're trying to accomplish.

MINDSET
(How we think about systems)
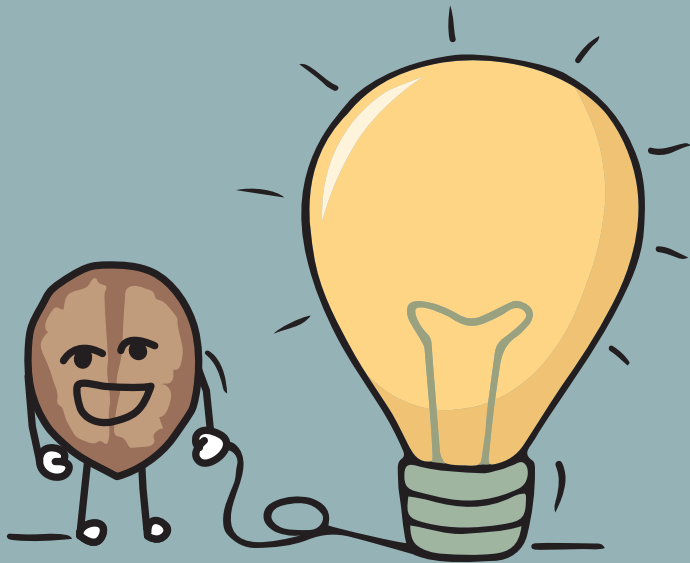
A Humane System is **Distributive** or bottom-up, not top-down.
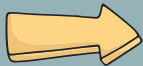
A Humane System **Assumes the Best** of people.

A Humane System **Assumes Abundance**, it's not a zero-sum game.

A Humane System grants people **Personal Autonomy**.

The most basic way to throw time and energy at a failing system is to ignore underlying assumptions.

All things being equal, what are the ideal mindsets of systems with the best outcomes for Wally the Walnut Brain within this particular modern environment? There are so many ways systems can go sideways, but the most basic way to throw time and energy at a failing system is to ignore the underlying assumptions. If a system is set up on the false premise that "plants crave electrolytes" as everyone in the movie *Idiocracy* believed, then no matter how hard you fine-tune that system, you're going to fail to grow healthy plants. There is no healthy dose of sports drinks for plants! The vast fields of not-living plants should have been a clue on that one.

There is no amount of resources that will make up for the fact that the foundation of your system is flawed. Let's prevent people from continuing along within these systems with flawed thinking. The following four characteristics will all serve as a healthy foundation for the systems we decide are needed for the future.

It may not be possible to go back in time 12,000 years to ask our hunter-gatherer ancestors what their mindset was at that time and in that environment. But we do have a ton of information about how indigenous groups tend to live and operate. We can and should learn as much as we can from that research to inform how we shape our systems going forward.

Introducing the
Humane System Rating Scale

Humane O'Meter Key

Least Humane System	Less Humane System	Neutral System	More Humane System	Most Humane System
✖	◆	◻	●	●
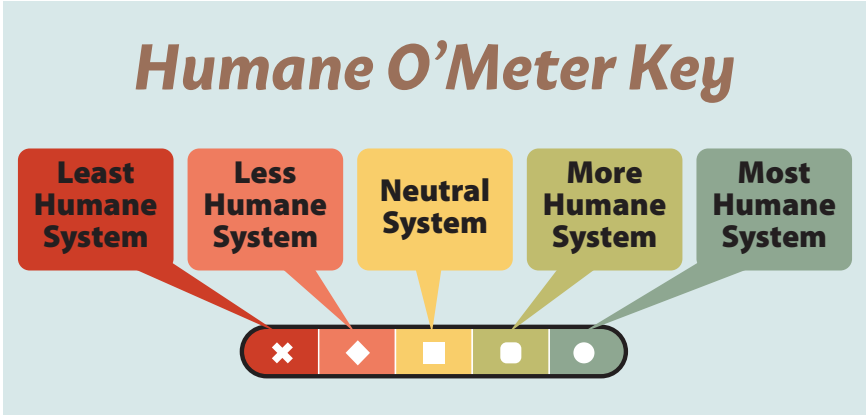
To rank things consistently, I've included examples of systems in each chapter and have ranked them according to my own personal opinion. Which one(s) are most humane? Which ones seem neutral, and which ones seem most humane? These rankings will be far more accurate with the input of other people, however.

So I'll be setting up a voting platform at System-Redesign.org. Join me there to see what others have voted on and contribute your own opinion!

Panel 3 on the Collaboration Card uses this ranking system to gauge whether a system is better or worse than another in accomplishing a general task.

MINDSET *(CIRCLE ONE)*

Does this system have an **abundance mindset**?	✖ ◆ ◻ ● ●
Does this system **assume the best of everyone**?	✖ ◆ ◻ ● ●
Is this system **distributive, or bottom-up**?	✖ ◆ ◻ ● ●
Does it grant people **personal autonomy**?	✖ ◆ ◻ ● ●

SETTING

Does it **plan for the most vulnerable first**?	✖ ◆ ◻ ● ●
Does this system **connect people with nature**?	✖ ◆ ◻ ● ●
Does this system **value diversity**?	✖ ◆ ◻ ● ●

PRACTICES

Does it empower people to **care for each other**?	✖ ◆ ◻ ● ●
Does this system move at a **healthy pace**?	✖ ◆ ◻ ● ●
Is this system **multigenerational**?	✖ ◆ ◻ ● ●

COLLABORATION CARD - PANEL 3

A MORE HUMANE SYSTEM
Is Distributive or Bottom-Up

Barack Obama, Bernie Sanders, Hillary Clinton, George W. Bush, Sir Richard Branson, Steve Jobs, and Mark Zuckerberg have all said that change or growth happen **from the bottom up***.*

~ROB KALL, THE BOTTOM-UP REVOLUTION

A Humane System is distributive or bottom-up, not top-down.

We have an abundance of examples throughout history of different leadership or management styles to learn from. While we in the United States tend to think our system of representative democracy is "best," it's worth examining that assumption to make sure we're not missing out on something better. Yes, we think it's better than being ruled by kings and queens, but is it as good as being ruled by the people themselves? While we do get a vote, the system is definitely more of a top-down approach than one where each vote counts the same amount. We've managed to set up the method for electing our representatives in a way that is super confusing and opaque and mysterious, with tons of money spent to sway the individual voter into backing one person or party over another. Additionally, our system is designed to make us more polarized than ever before. With Democrats pitted against Republicans, we'll spend all our time fighting over who is right, rather than making smart changes to improve the lives of the people they were elected to represent.

In general, top-down methods of rule tend to result in less creativity, less buy-in from those at the bottom, and a disconnect between those who are making decisions and those who must abide those decisions. In contrast, bottom-up management tends to empower everyone to make more informed decisions, gives everyone an actual stake in the game, and opens up creativity to flourish. With bottom-up leadership, we can avoid people working alone in silos, unaware of the problems or potential solutions of others. I think of this as letting the disconnected groups of people work away in their own little worlds, toiling and toiling without

ever really solving any big problems. They are in perpetual work and motion, treading water, but never making any real forward progress.

If we open ourselves to looking for bottom-up systems to implement or create, then we have a surprisingly large range to choose from. In the past, it may have been difficult to imagine this, but we are lucky today to have communication tools available to us that did not exist even 200 years ago. There's no reason we can't get the input or buy-in from every single one of us. It's not harder than ignoring a segment of the population. And we could empower every human and their potential good ideas and creativity to come to light.

Recent movements like #metoo and #blacklivesmatter have truly benefited from a leaderless framework. Without any one person to lionize or crucify, the movement as a whole remains strong. The chances of a top-down leader being truly benevolent are pretty slim. It actually can work out better to pull representatives of a population at random to create what's called a lottocracy. You'll wind up with a greater chance of getting a person who hasn't been corrupted by money, and the average person is actually pretty good at making decisions for themselves and their peers. And they're typically not distracted by their own re-election prospects or campaign donations. This form of rule goes all the way back to ancient Athens, but was called "sortition" at that time according to Wikipedia. Whether randomly pulling one representative or a collective assembly to make decisions, we can use this to our advantage if we want to avoid the binary R. vs. D. choices we're accustomed to today.

One way to bypass or override the pitfalls of representative democracy might be to allow for a referendum at every level. I was surprised to learn that some countries allow for a citizen-led countrywide vote of every citizen to happen. So if some big law manages to take effect nationwide, citizens can at least have a method

to recall it or vote to overrule it. In my home state of Louisiana, "citizens do not have the power to initiate statewide initiatives or referendums" (ballotpedia.org). So no matter how stupid we think state lawmakers are being, we have no way to override their decisions. The same goes for about half of all 50 US states. And the United States as a whole doesn't allow for referendums either. This may have made sense in the days of travel by horse and buggy, but there's no reason we can't use technology to capture the wishes of every resident. We can somehow manage to capture their tax dollars. There's no excuse for not also capturing their vote.

In short, our Wally brains fare better when we are governed by bottom-up or distributive forms of rule. When each person gets to weigh in equally to every other person, the decisions made will automatically come out more humane.

I saw examples of top-down systems all over every aspect of the local public schools. It was a known and repeated pattern for the school board administration to pretend to get input from local parents and school staff, and then roundly dismiss all possibilities that didn't align with their already decided-upon plan. What parents and students and staff were asking for mattered little when stacked up against a mind-numbing series of rules and regulations handed down from the state and federal levels. To a large degree, the people making decisions at the parish level had little to no control over how things were handled. Nevermind the staggering lack of resources allocated to deal with some of the most challenging of populations and situations.

Top-down winds up being the default for almost all decisions that get made regarding our students. In addition, any time a new curriculum or policy or *any*-thing gets handed down to the staff on the ground, it is never handed down with any real input or buy-in from them, or even any resources to implement them. I've repeatedly seen and heard from staff members who go up the chain of command

to say, hey I see what you're trying to do here, but in my particular situation this [fill in the blank] policy won't really work for my students/classroom/needs. The response back from central office is always "Make it work" or something to that effect. Instead of empowering employees to do what's best for the students in their care, the system is actually set up to avoid lawsuits and do everything it can with the least amount of money spent possible. Unless administration happens to find a grant for something—in those cases the system is set up to do anything necessary to attain the grant dollars. The actual, real needs of students wind up being the lowest priority in this complicated system. And the needs of the staff and teachers are only just above students. The needs of the system take top priority, turning this into a well-meaning, overcomplicated machine that only knows how to operate in a top-down manner.

In a world with distributive or bottom-up systems, we could truly center the needs of our students, and make decisions based on their best interests, system needs be damned.

RANKING SYSTEMS THROUGH A **Distributive** MINDSET

Monarchy

Oligarchy

Lottocracy

Military Dictatorship

Representative Democracy
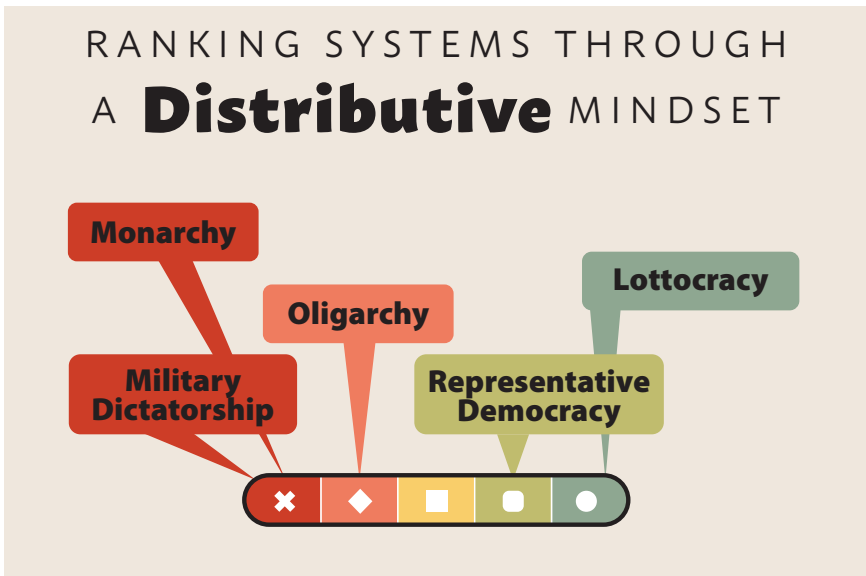
System Redesigner Suggestions

Within our representative democracy, it makes sense to advocate for more distributive systems within such as Ranked Choice Voting (RCV). Some US states have begun to experiment with RCV, and have found that it helps to bring politicians and voters together, rather than reinforcing our current polarization. Changing your own mindset to recognize that our current systems are *not* distributive can at least help explain why they're working so badly. No, you're not crazy, our systems were set up to be polarizing to begin with.

When you find yourself in charge of any local systems, try to work in a distributive way anytime you can. Don't make any major changes or decisions without first running them past the end user. Is this change needed? Will it accomplish what we're hoping for? The person affected by the system is the only one who can answer that. Make sure they have a seat at the table.

A MORE HUMANE SYSTEM

Assumes the Best of People

Finding the good inside can often come from asking ourselves one simple question: ***"What is my most generous interpretation of what just happened?"***

~DR. BECKY KENNEDY

A Humane System assumes the best of everyone, doesn't withhold resources until things are bad, and isn't punitive.

Every human being truly is doing their very best within their particular circumstances. Like with gardening, we don't blame the seeds for not sprouting. We assume we need to make changes to the seed's surroundings and moisture levels, rather than needing to make changes to the seed itself. Crafting humane systems for ourselves must mirror natural systems in that we assume that every human has the capacity to live a great life and be a productive member of society. If they're not achieving that, then there must be something wrong with their surroundings or community or life experiences that led them to do otherwise. This also means that punishment is not a healthy way to shape human behavior. Any system that uses shame or punishment is not acting in a humane way. We will be wasting our time and energy and resources on systems like the US criminal justice system. They may yield temporary results, but in the long run they do more harm than good.

Licensed therapist, relationship expert, and author Nedra Glover Tawwab points out in *Drama Free* that using shame to shape behavior can really backfire. Studies show that people who are shamed for being overweight typically *gain* weight, not lose it.

When we're looking for systems to implement or replace bad ones, we should look for ones that assume that all people have the best intentions, and the best ability to care for themselves. If we look at ways to reduce crime, we can find all sorts of methods humans have used in the past. The USA jails more people than

any other developed country, yet we continue to see crime rates that are very high. Is this really accomplishing what we want it to? Couldn't we spend our time and energy in more productive ways? I'd love for anyone who feels trapped in the madness that is probation or incarceration today to be able to demand better. I want anyone and everyone to be able to easily say:

"This system is making my life worse and not better. While I'm not blaming the people who are in charge of the system, I want to opt myself out of it and I want others to be free of it as well. Our history shows systems based on punishment don't work. Find a better one to accomplish whatever goals you claim to have for this system. Or at the very least, begin the process of making it more humane by establishing a *purpose*, measuring *outcomes*, and *changing* the system over time."

What might happen if we enable everyone to file a grievance like this with every system they're trapped within? Once you identify a system's flaw, you and everyone else you know trapped by it could insist that those who control that system make it more humane. As Dr. Burke and others have established with the ACEs scoring system, it is unhealthy for a child to live in a household where a parent or caregiver goes to prison. That's an inhumane way to treat children, much less the adults who are being imprisoned.

We could easily provide a list of systems that are more humane than others. Instead of spending the billions of dollars it takes to run the American criminal justice system, think of how much money we'd save if we were to switch over to a restorative justice model. We'd actually be solving problems, not just punishing people because we think we should.

In short, there are no bad people. Just good people trapped in bad systems. Don't make decisions based on anyone's perceived value or deservingness. If a human merely exists, then they deserve the most humane treatment possible. As

mathematician and astronomer Adolphe Quetelet noted in the 1800s, "Society prepares the crime and the guilty are only the instrument by which it is executed." Furthermore, as lawyer and Equal Justice Initiative founder Bryan Stevenson points out, "Each of us is more than the worst thing we've ever done." I love this way of thinking and believe fully that each of us has something to contribute to the world, regardless of our past actions (good or bad).

Unfortunately, systems based on false assumptions cannot be fine-tuned into being more humane. We shouldn't try to work within these systems. We should eliminate them altogether. It's bonkers to me how many systems are up and running and being inflicted upon billions of people—without anyone ever having stopped to check to see if it even does the thing it says it does. We have an obligation to bring to light the models and underlying assumptions we have about anything. Whether or not we've been taught to believe it, we can and should expose it to the light of day in order to make sure it's not camouflaging something that was false all along. Double-checking these assumptions can reassure us that we're on the right track, or they can help point us in a better direction. There's no shame for having devoted your time and energy to a bad system in the past, only shame for not doing better once you know better. And if your goal is to treat people in a humane way, there just does not exist a program of punishment or withholding resources that will improve things in any way.

A really transformative way to practice this on a daily basis is to catch yourself anytime you see someone that you might perceive as being "bad" and then challenge yourself to invent a story where that person is the hero. Dr. Becky Kennedy is a clinical psychologist and founder of a global parenting community, *Good Inside*. She says about children, "What is my most generous interpretation of what I'm seeing?" The truth is that all people really are good inside. If they're behaving in

a way that you perceive is bad, then we just don't know enough about their situation to be able to see the good in them. So for example, I encounter people being inconsiderate drivers or parking poorly pretty often. Instead of being mad at them for acting in a way that I see as "self-centered" I try to invent a story where that person is actually the hero. Maybe they've rushed to the store to grab an essential item for a big work presentation, saving the day for the work crowd. Maybe this parent is the hero for delivering the forgotten permission slip that their child *must* have for today's field trip. In that case, I can more easily overlook their parking in the crosswalk and blocking traffic for a minute or two.

If you're always on the lookout for people doing their best and being the heroes of their own stories, then you won't be always on the lookout for predators or bad behavior or frustrations. It forms a habit in your brain of always looking for the best in people, and that is just infinitely more rewarding and healthy than always being suspicious. This has been a surprisingly fun and rewarding habit to adopt in my own life. The world is not without harmful people, but statistically I'm far less likely to run into a situation where I'm being taken advantage of than you'd think. No one wants to be the sucker, but honestly if someone if trying to take advantage of me, that reflects more poorly on them than myself. I'd rather be a loving and assuming-the-best kind of person, than one who is frightened of every little possibility that I can imagine.

When I looked at the systems haunting the local public schools, I saw tons that absolutely did not assume the best of students nor staff members. From regulated, specific punishments handed out for behavior problems, to the convoluted system in which parents have to attend court hearings if their kids are deemed "truant" or miss too many days of school, it seemed like *none* of the systems we created for school assumed the best of people. If anything, the system seemed most

interested in weeding out any problematic students or staff that deviated from the norm. Instead of readily offering accommodations to students who struggle, they manage to pile on paperwork and structure that effectively denies most students help when needed or requested—supposedly—to keep students from "abusing" the system to gain some kind of advantage over the other students. Or at least that's how it looked from our perspective.

When systems assume the worst of people, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy that drives people to behave in the ways outlined in the system's rules and policies. It's a huge waste of time to have people working to spot every minor infraction by students in order to dole out punishments in the name of deterring that behavior in the future.

But some systems do exist that assume the best of people, and we can easily learn from them how to best support people without judgment—assuming that every person is worthy of our support. We were pleasantly surprised at the attitude of our local magnet high school. They only let in students who are above average, and have a relatively small student body. So they set out to treat everyone like they are "good kids" and don't waste much time at all on detention or suspension policies or even dress code violations.

After a terrible experience at a huge middle school that definitely did not have that attitude, we were so relieved to discover this. But at the same time I know this is the rare exception in all of this parish. Many other high schools have a very different student body, atmosphere and attitude altogether. Lots of middle and high schools have to deal with daily fights and infractions around uniform wearing and even random drug checks by police and their trained dogs. All are ways that show that the adults are absolutely not assuming the best of the students within their care.

The most well-known and practiced system I know of that assumes the best of people is what teachers call "PBIS" or Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports (learn more at pbis.org). These evidence-based practices are "for supporting students' behavioral, academic, social, emotional, and mental health. When implemented with fidelity, PBIS improves social emotional competence, academic success, and school climate. It also improves teacher health and wellbeing. It is a way to create positive, predictable, equitable and safe learning environments where everyone thrives.." According to their website, "for every dollar spent implementing PBIS, $105 are saved by reducing school suspension and dropout." In elementary school, our kids had experience with these practices, as well as some punitive systems, such as a color-coded daily report of their behavior ("Did you land on green today?") or the "clipping" system of moving a child's clip down on the big chart at the front of the classroom each time they do something wrong. I can wholeheartedly endorse PBIS practices over punitive ones. Our elementary school even took it a step further and gave out "kindness" awards at the quarterly awards assemblies. Seeking out and recognizing *good* behavior just works so much better than punishing bad behavior. And it saves everyone time and energy from having to constantly monitor and record and report on any bad behavior.

When it comes to adults, practices like restorative justice appear to be inherently more humane than our past methods of locking up people who have committed crimes. My own home state of Louisiana locks up more people than anywhere else in the United States or in other countries. Yet we still have plenty of crimes happening. It clearly isn't working to stop bad things from happening. A shift in focus to restorative justice could lead to some really amazing outcomes. Plus, according to pioneer of restorative justice Howard Zehr, "In many ways,

restorative justice represents a validation of values and practices that were characteristic of many indigenous groups."

It has been said that "People are hard to hate close up. Move in." Author and professor Brené Brown wrote that as an entire chapter title in her bestselling *Braving the Wilderness*, and I feel like we should just assume that as we get closer to literally any person, we'll find it harder to hate them and easier to love them. So let's work from the assumption that everyone is worth love. Everyone is worth knowing. And everyone is always doing their absolute best, given their current knowledge and circumstances. Our systems would be more humane if we extended that grace in the process of creating and editing systems.

RANKING SYSTEMS THROUGH A MINDSET OF **Assuming the Best** OF PEOPLE

Corporal Punishment

Incarceration

Suspension and/or Expulsion

Execution Probation Mediation

PBIS (Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports)

Restorative Justice
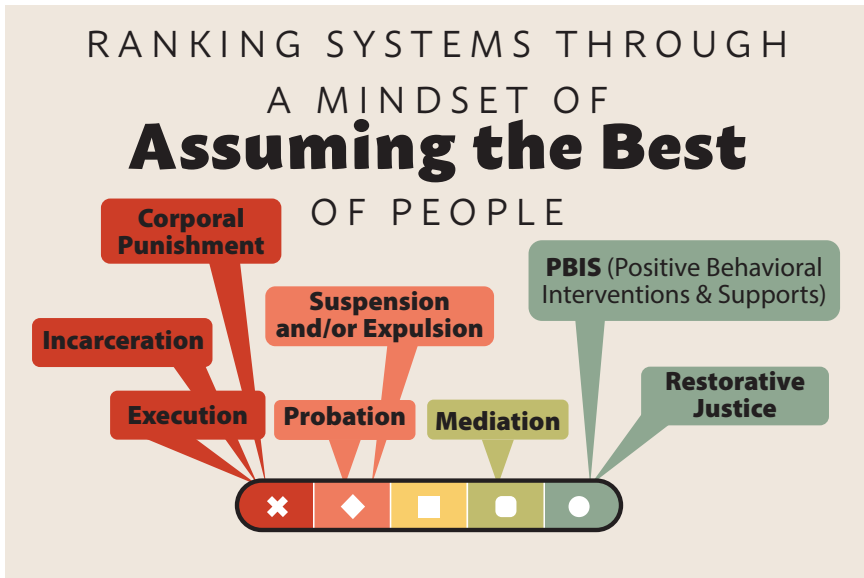
System Redesigner Suggestions

Within your own life, assuming the best of yourself can sometimes be the hardest part. I spent years feeling like I had made bad or wrong choices in life

before I learned to give myself grace. At any given moment, we are all doing our very best. Including myself in that category took the most work and courage. Extending that grace to others turned out to be much easier. I've also been told that those with a past that includes trauma have a much harder time assuming the best of others. They have developed coping mechanisms that leave them on high alert most of the time. Slowly beginning to shift your mindset to be curious about others' intentions can be really empowering, though. If you can simply find *any* way to make a person the hero of the story, rather than the villain, then it can help. You don't have to believe that is exactly what happened, or even be certain that it is plausible in real life.

I also noticed a great way to apply this idea within an existing system when our eighth grader began virtual school. They do not assign standard grading letters to the students' work. Students can only make an A, B, or incomplete. The school assumes that if given more time or resources that all students will make it to a passing grade. No need to demoralize kids with grades of C, D, or F. How refreshing! Now no one gets labeled a failure, yet students are still expected to do the work involved to complete the course of study. And it turns out that the practice of assigning letter grades to students is only around 80 years old. People managed to educate and be educated for thousands of years without assigning letter grades at all. Restoring a world where students are free from the A-F grading system would feel more humane all around.

A MORE HUMANE SYSTEM

Assumes an Abundance Mindset

If you perceive the universe as being a universe of abundance, then it will be. If you think of the universe as one of scarcity, then it will be...

I always thought that there was enough of everything to go around—that there are enough ideas in the universe and enough nourishment.

~MILTON GLASER

A Humane System assumes an abundance mindset.
It's not a zero-sum game.

We have evolved our thinking to land ourselves into a world today where much of what we do appears to be a zero-sum-game. If there is a limited amount of anything, then more for you results in less for me. But we know our hunter-gatherer ancestors existed with an abundance mindset. They didn't own many belongings, and even cities and gathering places were meant to be temporary. We didn't need much. The world provided for us. That isn't to say we lived a carefree life. We had to work for what we ate, but that was really the only required work. We didn't have to work for food *and* work for a boss. We really didn't even have a firm concept of time or the future like we do today. Can you imagine living in a world where you were simply present most of the time? Not worried about the past, or anxious about the future. Just present.

The trend toward a scarcity mindset appears to have come from the move towards farming and agriculture. When we needed to stay in one place and work to produce food (rather than hunt and gather it), it was necessary to start keeping inventory and make sure what you worked for stayed with you. That may serve a farming culture, but very few humans actually grow the food we eat today. We can and should adjust our mindset to one that serves us better.

Objectively, on this planet in 2023, there exists enough resources for the 8 billion of us to live and thrive. As I mentioned earlier, each year enough money is donated by wealthy people to more than cover the needs of the least resourced among us. That's just the donated money—the philanthropy. We also waste a horrifying amount of money on things like political campaigns ($16.7 billion on

the US midterm 2022 elections alone), propping up bad systems with subsidies, funding bad systems outright (D.A.R.E. in classrooms has been proven to not work and remains funded by roughly $750 million per year in the US), and generally funding whatever we "think" will work, while not double-checking our math. This is not meant to be an exhaustive list of all the ways we waste money. This is just the tip of the iceberg. Trust me when I say that the math absolutely works out. This planet has an abundance of resources that we could cultivate in a responsible way in order to care for ourselves and the planet.

We should absolutely cast off the assumption that some people will just always not have enough. Anytime a person is living in poverty, it means we as a society aren't doing our jobs. It's a measurable fact that we have enough resources for *all* of the people living on this planet. Every single living human is worthy of resources. We should be making sure no one is going without the basic necessities everywhere. Unsurprisingly, when people are able to care for themselves, they are also capable of caring for others. When we lift one person out of poverty, they return the favor. And people are inherently more valuable to us alive and well. It's a drain on society to have a bunch of people who are a burden of care and resources. We should invest in their health and well-being early on so that they can go on to contribute to society. There's zero need to withhold the abundance of the planet from anyone. The better their outcome, the better their community's health, and the better the city, state, and world around them.

As Princeton professor of sociology and author Matthew Desmond writes in *Poverty, by America*, the US does "more to subsidize affluence than to alleviate poverty," revealing that we allow over $140 billion of government aid annually to get lost in the system, never making it into the hands of the people it's intended to help.

It makes sense that we would tend to think of the world as one of scarcity in this modern environment, but it doesn't make it correct. The beautiful thing about choosing to have an abundance mindset is that it too is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Instead of competing with each other, we should work together to distribute the world's great abundance to every human. That's a task that feels good to get behind. That's a task that improves the health and well-being of those involved.

In 1980, the average CEO earned
15X as much as the average employee.

Average Joe ▪ x 15 = *Average CEO in 1980*

In 2020, the average CEO earned
400X as much as the average employee.

Average Joe ▪ x 400= *Average CEO in 2020*

SOURCE/PODCAST
Against the Rules with
Michael Lewis
EPISODE
The Hand of Leonardo

Systems like capitalism thrive on people having a scarcity mindset, and prioritize profit over human health and well-being. But is that what we want? Is that working out well for everyone? We invented corporations and the rules and regulations around how they operate. If we were to instead place a stronger preference

on systems like cooperatives or collective ownership, this would be a much more humane way to live. When everyone involved has an equal ownership, decisions can be made to prioritize longevity, affordability, and higher quality goods, rather than simply increasing the short-term profits of a small handful of shareholders.

Even something as major as providing electrical power can be done more humanely. Early on I was familiar with the concept of cooperative ownership thanks to my dad's employer—the Rural Electric Association (REA). The big corporately owned power companies didn't really care to branch out much further than the "city" of the parish seat. It was too expensive and they couldn't charge enough to make much of a profit. Those who lived out of town in rural areas were on their own. So at some point all over the state different areas had joined forces to create the power cooperative system. Our locality fell within the North East Louisiana Power Co-op (NELPCO), so he was on the crew to service all of the surrounding rural areas *not* covered by Entergy.

The employees we knew from the power co-op managed everything from accounting and billing to building and maintaining infrastructure, to getting customers back online after storms or damage, to planning new sub-stations and keeping the right-of-way areas clear and accessible to service. We grew up knowing after the co-op's annual meeting time we'd get a couple of new branded giveaways. Our home was always well-stocked in potholders, jar-openers, keychains, and little calendars with the REA's mascot, Willie Wiredhand.

And in such a rural area, the employees and cooperative owners are able to look out for each other and their customers. I couldn't tell you the number of times Dad would head out with a bucket truck to change out lights at the local football stadium, or to help a church attach a new steeple, or any other number of tasks that the crew was uniquely suited for accomplishing way up high in the air. You could

tell they really enjoyed being a helpful presence in the community where everyone knows one another and can lend a hand when needed.

Willie Wiredhand was created by freelance NRECA artist Andrew McClay Oct. 30, 1950

SOURCE: cooperative.com
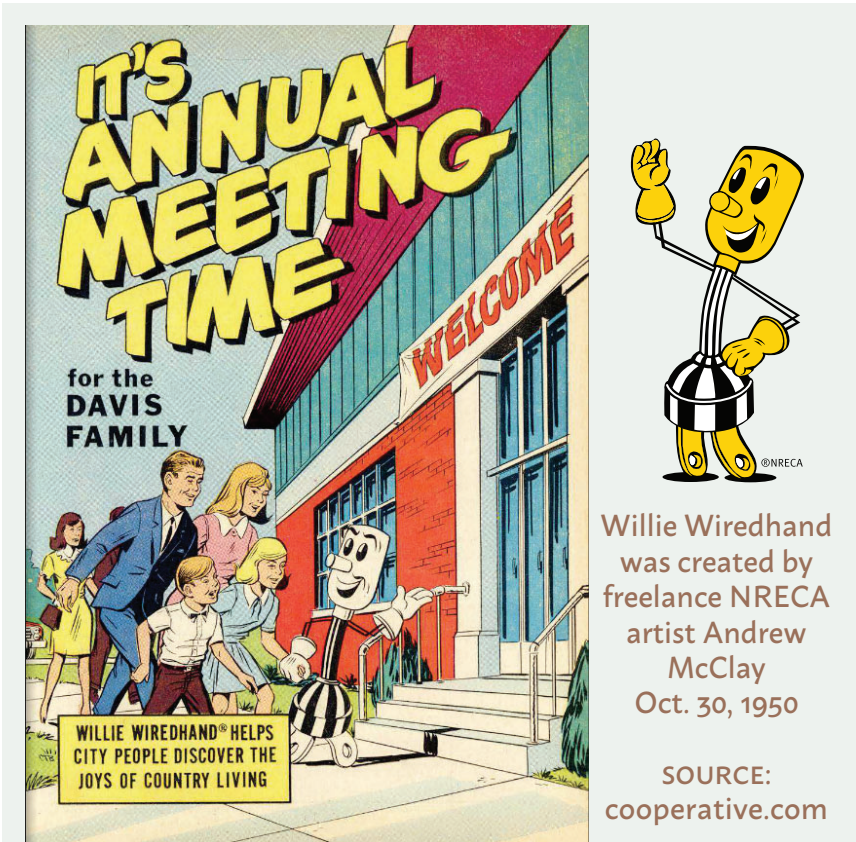
It never dawned on me that a cooperative could be a solution for lots of other areas of life. Today, thanks to working with a local group who is starting a food co-op, I've learned a ton about their benefits. From the allendale.coop website we designed: "A co-op or cooperative is a business voluntarily owned and controlled by the people who use it—its owners. In cooperatives, people work together for their shared economic benefit. Co-ops have become popular in the US and globally because they help boost the local economy by keeping the business profits within the community."

As I learned more about the concept, it began to really hit home. What other needs of a city could be served by cooperative ownership? Apartment buildings tend to do better in the long run when they're resident-owned and operated. Businesses are also really successful if owned by the employees themselves, rather than private ownership or (worse) private equity ownership.

When it comes to a food co-op, it sounds like a more organized way of sharing resources with your neighbors—much like my childhood growing up in a very farming-heavy area of Louisiana. Although we technically lived "in town," if you turned right at the end of our driveway, you'd run into the cotton field at the end of our block, with nothing but land and trees as far as you could see. If you instead turned left, you'd be traveling a few blocks through "town" and all the commercial or retail businesses along the main highway.

All summer long, we would be busy helping family members put up corn or shell peas to put away. My aunt and uncle had a small peach orchard, and we *loved* getting a bushel or two in order to enjoy peach ice cream now, and freeze boxes of peaches to be enjoyed the rest of the year. Jellies like peach and mayhaw and even peach peel (yes, the peels make great jelly!) were a joy to make and eat and share. In the fall, you would be certain to have a ton of pecans to pick up and pick out thanks to the pecan trees at my grandparents' house. At any time of year, our neighbor Mr. Ed was an avid fisher and seemed to always have more than he could use. It felt like extras were always being shared with us or we were sharing with others our own abundance.

If we were to place more emphasis on collective ownership, rather than allowing corporately owned big-box stores to extract wealth from our citizens, I would have to argue that it would be a more humane way to take care of the needs of the community. Operating from a mindset of abundance rather than scarcity

could be a really powerful way to provide for ourselves and our neighbors. But the way incentives are set up today, it's really hard to get past the narrative that corporately owned businesses tend to endorse. Individually, we don't have much power to say "no" to the local-wealth-extracting Walmarts and Dollar Generals of the world. Collectively, we could better stand in resistance to the wealth-extracting practices of corporations.

RANKING SYSTEMS THROUGH AN **Abundance** MINDSET

Private Equity Ownership

Corporate Ownership

Co-Operative or Collective Ownership
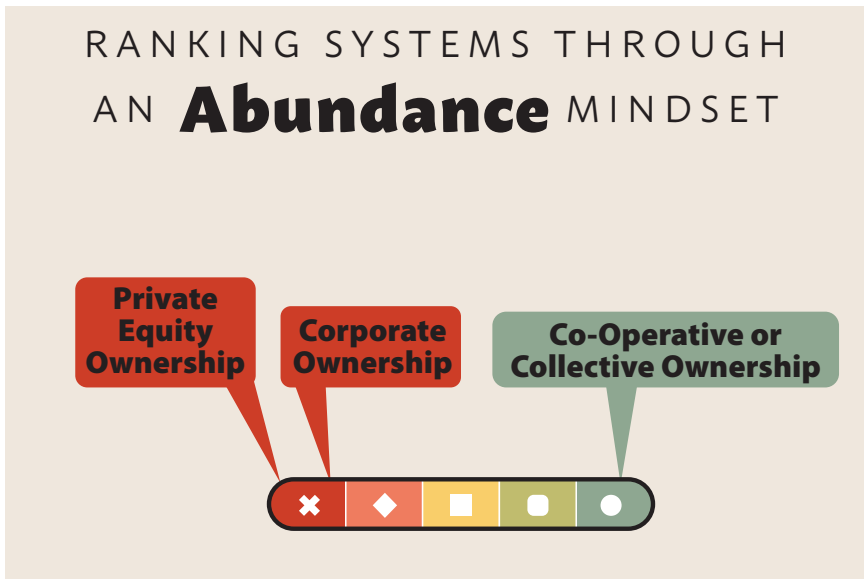
System Redesigner Suggestions

When it comes to love and caring for people, I try always to keep an abundance mindset. Me caring for others or loving others does not diminish the amount of love or energy I have. Love and good will are not scarce. Products and fads like to claim they are scarce in order to drive up demand. But humans don't actually *need* as many items as we currently posses. We existed without whatever that brand is trying to sell you for millions of years. We can also exist blissfully without it today.

Collectively, it may also make sense to join others who are already advocating for collective or employee ownership. I recently learned of an organization named Project Equity, who provides resources and guidance for existing companies who want to become employee-owned. They've found that an employee-owned business model "promotes equitable enterprise, maintains thriving local economies, and creates quality jobs that help workers advance their goals and increase their wealth." What a win-win! It's both profitable *and* assumes that a business doesn't have to be a zero-sum game.

A MORE HUMANE SYSTEM

Grants People Personal Autonomy

Because to take away a man's freedom of choice, even his freedom to make the wrong choice, is to manipulate him as though he were a puppet and not a person.

~MADELEINE L'ENGLE

A Humane System grants people personal autonomy.

Only they can know what's best for them, and people's needs can vary wildly from situation to situation. As science reporter and author Michaeleen Doucleff points out in *Hunt, Gather, Parent*, children (and people in general) do better when they have real, true personal autonomy over their own body and life choices. A lot of mental health issues arise when humans are not able to make choices for themselves. As parents, it works way better to model the behavior we're wanting to see in our children, rather than prescribe and direct verbally how they should act. That's the same perspective we should take in creating systems to benefit people. We should be worried about offering a multitude of *good* options to choose from, not prescribing which option a person should be choosing.

If we approach decisions as if we are always doing our best at any given moment, then we can acknowledge that our approach also applies to how others make decisions. If someone appears to be making a decision that you think is dumb, then it just means you're not informed enough about the entire situation. You're only seeing a part of the equation, not the whole thing. We should trust that they are making the best choice out of the bad options available to them. Only the person themselves can know everything about their particular situation and possible options and make an informed decision. And only they will have to live with the repercussions of that decision. So only they are uniquely suited to weigh those options.

As we set up systems for people, we should keep in mind that we can only make decisions for ourselves. Forcing decisions on others is not the goal. We should be working to collect and identify all the best ways to live and be and

operate. But none of those should be the end-all-be-all of everything. They should only be considered a good starting point for exploration for people. Personal preferences should always take first priority over any other way to decide.

From a young age, our two kids were big on "personal pwefewence" in their own lives. For example, at one point, one couldn't believe the other didn't just love bacon like they did. They were quick to defend their personal preferences when another kid would be surprised or incredulous over their choices. And when you play this through to everyday life, it is a little disappointing to see just how many things in a child's life are dictated by someone else. No wonder they didn't always do well in school settings. I wouldn't choose to spend eight hours a day in a classroom if I didn't have to. And so much of the school environment is prescribed by local, state, and national rules and regulations. From class size to what they can be fed for lunch, to number of minutes of instruction time, they get very little say in what they study, who they study with, and how they spend their time. I kind of hate it.

The fact that children in America are required to attend school of some sort is certainly well-intended, but when school is objectively unhealthy for some kids, shouldn't we have some sort of ability to opt-out? Like with incarceration, I want students all over to be able to say, "This system is not working for me. I demand better of our public tax dollars. Either make this system more humane (purpose/ outcomes/changes) or change it to one we already know is more humane than this one."

In short, the more people a system touches, the more obligation we have to make sure it benefits those people. But we should never require a person to be a part of any particular system. They should be able to choose whether or not to participate. Ideally, that would even apply to where people choose to live. We should

be able to move to land that suits us better, as long as we're not making things worse for the people and plants and animals who are already there. It amazes me that some imaginary lines on a map can dictate where people can and cannot be on this planet. We didn't draw those lines, or make any of these rules. As animals have the right to migrate and move about as needed, we should really allow humans the same courtesy. Data shows that immigrants to the United States (even those who enter "illegally") are a huge benefit to the country. They are almost never a drain on society, and commit crimes much less frequently than people who were born here.

When it comes to aid or assistance to large groups of people, systems like Universal Basic Income appear to have much better results than other, more prescriptive systems like Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly known as the Food Stamp Program) with work requirements. Studies have shown that when a locality receives a small, monthly amount of money, people are actually more likely to work, less likely to abuse drugs and alcohol, and the community as a whole benefits. The ability to use those funds for whatever personal needs you may have seems to make a huge difference in outcomes for those people. They can make smart decisions for themselves when they have enough resources. When philanthropy is doled out with strings attached, it can actually cause more harm than good.

One really hard lesson about the world came around the time I was in middle school. Looking back, I feel silly that it took so long for me to realize this. I was in about sixth grade before I discovered that the world was operating under the assumption that men were smarter than women. Truly. I don't exactly remember how I discovered this. I'm sure it was from a book I was reading at the time. But I distinctly remember ticking back through all of the examples that I knew of

to see if maybe I had missed something along the way. My mom was smarter than my dad. That was obvious, although I knew both of my parents were pretty sharp. Mom had the willpower and follow-through to make hard things happen. So that clearly put her in the winner's seat at home. At school, all of my teachers were women and they were all really smart. Judging by the students in my own grade, the girls far outperformed the boys. The school administration was a mix of men and women, and I never got the impression that one held more power than the other. I knew male and female professionals too—doctors, lawyers, business owners—those didn't seem to have any preference of men over women except that the oldest ones were usually male. But that made a little bit of sense too. I knew that women had not *always* been able to work, or join the army, or even vote. But that was in the past, right? I thought we had fixed this.

I really assumed that people chose their careers according to their own personal preferences. And someone from the family should be tasked with the work of keeping the family fed and household running. That job wasn't paid, of course, but it seemed like a thing people would choose to do, rather than be burdened with. None of my dad's colleagues who worked in the field were women, but I just assumed that women wouldn't want to be that dirty all day. Same for different races—I had no clue that our country's caste system had put some really strict barriers in place to keep certain schools and professions segregated. Again, we fixed this, right? Well, it turned out that people liked to say that things were better now. But "not as bad" as the days of not allowing women or non-whites to vote wasn't all the way fixed like people wanted to believe. We still had a lot of unwritten rules in place to dictate what people could and could not do. And all of that just threw personal autonomy out the window.

While it is tempting to declare one promising idea as the "one size fits all" solution, people and the situations they find themselves in are just too different to benefit from the same thing. There just doesn't exist a "silver bullet" answer for any problem that society may have. It will depend on your location, current knowledge, and outside forces to find the right solution. When something doesn't work for a person or a group of people, we should never blame the humans who are subject to a system's framework. We should instead work on changing the set, setting, and practices available to those people in order to see improvements.

If you look to what works well for our Wally brains, having personal autonomy is key. 12,000 years ago, there was no such thing as work or school or even money. No imaginary borders dictated where people lived, and even children had way more control over their day than kids today do.

RANKING SYSTEMS THROUGH
A **Personal Autonomy**
MINDSET

Food Stamps with Work Requirements

Universal Basic Income

Border Walls

Open Borders
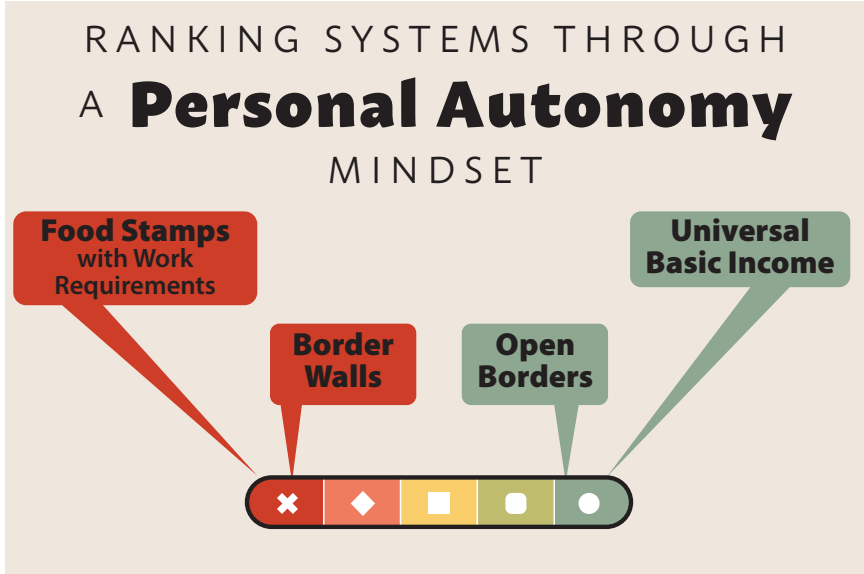
System Redesigner Suggestions

Don't limit yourself or others to any set of options presented to you. Even children deserve to have input into their own studies and daily habits. Think outside the box for maximum choice and flexibility. In the US school system today, students rarely get to choose the subjects they study until they reach college. Even my high school student has a very narrow set of courses that he has to choose each year as he ages through the assembly line march of school. My middle-school student was incensed when the private school we were trying assigned them all "electives" by grading period. By her logic, a class isn't elective at all if you have zero choice over what you get to take. They had a scheduled rotation of first writing, then theatre, a middle-school level "MBA" course, followed by art. She had no choice of any other electives, and no choice in what order to progress through them. Therefore, it seemed like a farce to claim that was your "elective" class period.

Collectively, we should be wary of any system that has no wiggle room for personal autonomy. I realize that offering a plethora of different elective classes is much harder than only offering a handful. It may be more difficult, but I would argue that it will wind up being far more rewarding. We should also be wary of systems that offer surface-level choices. Even children can tell that a choice between milk in a red cup or milk in a blue cup is not really a *true* choice at all if you're still required to drink the milk. What if I didn't want *milk* at all? What if I didn't want a *drink* at all?

Luckily, we have never been involved with a school that requires students to wear a uniform, but that too could be an easy switch for institutions. I know proponents of school uniforms can see benefits in that type of system, but what if we just let kids wear whatever they want? What we if decided that clothing choice just doesn't matter? It seems so shortsighted to declare *any* type of clothing as off-

limits. Who knows what will change and become standard in the future? Things as ubiquitous as *pockets* are only about 500 years old, and then typically only for men. (Read *Pockets: An Intimate History of How We Keep Things Close* written by Hannah Carlson.)

Ultimately, it makes sense for people to be granted as much personal autonomy over their own mindset, setting, and practices, as is possible. Until those choices start to bump up against someone else's freedom to choose, personal autonomy should be the default for all systems.

SETTING
(Our habitat or surroundings)
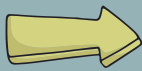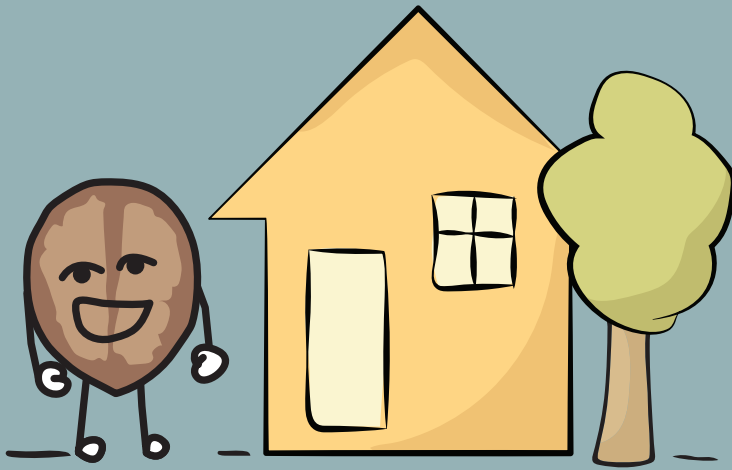
➤ A Humane System builds for success for the **Most Vulnerable** among us first, not just the most powerful or healthiest or most common or status quo.
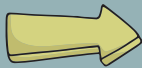
➤ A Humane System **Connects People with Nature**, not synthetic built places 24/7.
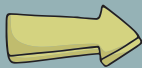
➤ A Humane System **Values Diversity**, not homogeneous environments or commercial monocultures.

How We Build Our Environment to Be a Healthy Habitat for Humans

I have no desire to go back to a world without air conditioning, reading glasses, or the internet. However, it's pretty easy to make some smart changes about where we live in order to make it work better for us. What we create in turn shapes us.

As a designer, I absolutely feel we need to use extra care and knowledge to craft where we spend most of our time to be a positive influence, and not one that contributes to our poor health and well-being. When we spend a lot of time in overly or extremely built places, it can be surprisingly harmful. There are a plethora of studies that confirm this. Everything from the temperature of sweatshops to the air quality near interstates to the hounding quotas imposed upon Amazon fulfillment workers, studies have shown that unnatural or extreme environments cause harm. On the flip side, we also have a ton of studies showing that a little bit of nature goes a long way. For example, hospital patients positioned near windows that show nature experience shorter stays and better outcomes in the long run.

The building codes and standards for everything from residences, to commercial buildings, to city streets are all accepted and taught and reinforced in America without much oversight or double-checking that what we're building is a benefit to us and our communities. The bigger priorities of any big building project are to stay under budget, pass a code inspection, and get completed as quickly as possible. Nowhere in the textbooks and standards do engineers reference what works best for human health and well-being. In this arena, we can also benefit a lot from the ways indigenous people lived, where they chose to live, and how they altered or built their surroundings.

As I heard author and Strong Towns founder Chuck Marohn relate it at a public meeting, we understand that if we were to make a bunch of changes to the way bees build their hives, it would cause all kinds of problems. If we went in and said no, no, no, your hives should be built out of a bunch of *squares* instead of hexagons, the bees would immediately move out. They don't like it. They work best with hexagons. But we don't apply that same logic to how we build our cities today. For thousands of years, we built places where it was assumed that everyone would get around mainly by walking, with only the occasional trip by horse or boat or some other form of transportation. But just in the past hundred years or so, we've built up infrastructure that now dictates how we live. In America, it's pretty much a requirement in most cities for people to own a car. You can't really live any kind of normal life without it. That's a terrible way to design our habitats.

In addition, the buildings we live and work in (the places we're driving to) aren't a whole lot better. We all live in places that look nothing like those of our hunter-gatherer ancestors. No wonder we're not doing so well in terms of mental and physical well-being.

We may not be able to instantly convert shitty prison-like buildings into green-filled utopias, but even some small efforts can go a long way. Changing out harsh lighting, adding potted plants, and improving air circulation can make small gains. People are able to be more productive in environments that aren't too hot or too cold or otherwise too extreme in some way. It might be nice to work through our five senses to make sure everything we touch, see, smell/taste, hear, and feel is a benefit and not a harm to us.

If we purposely try to mimic the surroundings of hunter-gatherers, then we could be working to build in daily exercise, and not require people to pay for a gym membership to stay fit, for example. Locally grown fruits and vegetables seem

to be a much healthier diet than the ultra-processed foods we're all used to con-suming in the United States today. And studies have shown huge harms to both health and cognition when people are forced to live near industrial plants and freeways. The noise and pollution alone lead to really bad outcomes for people. So we know to avoid mixing people's habitat with an industrial or commercial setting.

Studies have also shown that things like bullying and mental illness only start to show up when you have the right conditions. The environment we live in directly contributes to our overall well-being. And the way we used to shape our environment is incredibly different from what we're doing today. As recently as a couple hundred years ago we still lived in walkable places—no matter if they were urban or rural. We made sure we could meet all of our needs within walking distance. That was just a given.

The way we build our cities today isn't the fault of any one person. It's espe-cially not the fault of people who weren't even around when these places were being built. But unfortunately, it will be our responsibility to make things better. If we don't describe our vision for a more humane habitat in detail, then we'll never be able to reach that goal. We have to be super specific about what we *do* want, so that we can incentivize those outcomes, and make it harder for developers to build things that won't serve us well. The three characteristics we'll discuss in the next chapters are my best attempt to get at the root of what is good for us. Let's plan to take notes and share our data with others so that everyone can benefit from the knowledge we'll be creating.

Short-Term Gains =
Long-Term Loss

I've reflected on the setting of my childhood a lot since I left it after high school. There are many details that I think worked really well and I'd love to infuse more of that into my adult existence. But the things I thought would be different or easier or better elsewhere always turned out to be somewhat surprising.

I've found it hard to explain my family's economic or social status as I experienced it growing up. We felt mostly kind of middle class. It was obvious that my parents were smart and hardworking and they seemed to get respect from other grown-ups. But we spent money like poor people always. We were the last family I knew to get a microwave, and the last to get a VCR. My mom still only had antenna television well into the 2010s (four free channels, nothing else). We exclusively bought generic brand food of all varieties.

I've watched my mom cut up a whole chicken in the kitchen sink hundreds of times - to avoid paying more for the kind that was already butchered and ready to cook. I don't remember ever buying clothing unless it was on sale, never full price – even from discount stores like Walmart. Only chumps paid full price for that kind of thing. And we wore the heck out of some hand-me-downs from older cousins. We only ate out at restaurants maybe once a month, tops. And I was stunned when I rode somewhere with the family of one of my sister's friends and the kids strolled inside the gas station and picked out a candy bar *and* they got a fountain drink. In my mind, the stuff inside gas stations was just for other people, I guess, because it seemed ludicrous that the kids would assume their parents would buy them each such an expensive treat—without even asking first! I couldn't even make myself a snack at home without asking.

And yet. We owned our own home. We never lacked for any essentials. We even took a modest vacation or two. But in the hierarchy of class we were at the very bottom of the ladder, or so it appeared, in our spending habits. Although it was made clear to me by my classmates that we were definitely not upper class, we weren't low-status in the ways that a lot of other families were. As I grew up and learned more about how other people and cultures worked, I recognized that we lacked a lot of the hallmarks of what the lowest status families had to deal with. We never once had any utilities cut off from lack of payment. I was always certain that we were not spending money because we were *saving* money. We had savings. We planned for retirement. We took the long view. The exact amount of money we were stockpiling was left to the imagination, however. I wasn't sure if it was $100 or $1,000 or more? I had no concept of what a useful amount of money would even be to keep on hand.

But if there was a way to deny yourself of any and all unnecessary spending, in service of a more honorable future goal, my family would be the champions. We sort of chose to live poor on purpose, in order to have only one working parent, so that we could live a lifestyle that was healthier and less stressful, in a way. I'm incredibly grateful for that experience. The few times my mom would work for a couple of weeks to fill in for someone, we would end up spending our days at the house of a neighbor who babysat. The place was loud and full of annoying kids who wanted to watch dumb stuff on TV, and they served weird, gross food that wasn't at all like what we had. The days dragged horribly, and I knew it didn't have to be that way. Days at home were just fine. Days spent with cousins were great as well. Days at a babysitter's were miserable.

If I had to choose one life lesson that I'm thankful to have learned as a child, it's that long-term planning should always take top priority. Short-term gains were

a mere flash in the pan. They would not be around to save you when you needed help in the future. And it takes dedication and persistence to make that a habit. As a child it looked like adults must have superhuman willpower to say "no" to all the fun, cool stuff that was becoming available in the 1980s and 1990s.

When it comes to the way we build our environments, I've learned that it is also super important to keep the long view in mind. Indigenous author and story-teller Kaitlin Curtice writes that her own Potawatomi Nation culture recommends making decisions by looking backwards seven generations, as well as forward seven generations. How will this decision affect those to come? How does it honor those who came before us?

A MORE HUMANE SYSTEM
Plans for the Most Vulnerable

*Start with
the end in mind.*

~STEPHEN R. COVEY

THE 7 HABITS OF HIGHLY

EFFECTIVE PEOPLE

A Humane System builds for success for the most vulnerable among us first, not just the most powerful or healthiest or most common or status quo.

My own perspective as an able-bodied white girl is nowhere close to that of a person with significant disabilities. Although I would have been certain that having to wear glasses at three years old was a strange disability all its own, I could very easily conduct my daily life with very few considerations given to accommodating my differences. It was a weird place to be as a kindergartner who was the one and only student who had to wear glasses out of all four homerooms of where half of my classmates were black and half were white. It was an easy source for teasing, and I hated it, but not enough to go around without glasses half blind. In some ways I felt incredibly lucky. I couldn't remember a time when I couldn't see well, and my family was stable enough to be able to afford the crazy-expensive spectacles that needed to be replaced at least annually on a growing kid. And honestly I knew that glasses themselves weren't always an invented thing, so it felt kinda neat that I lived in a time where glasses were mostly normal, for grown-ups at least.

Beyond my own marginal difference, though, I was lucky enough to know and love several close family members who did have significant and obvious disabilities. I'm thankful they were just part of the deal in our lives. It was just assumed that they would be loved and cared for, and that as much as they were able, they'd be expected to contribute to the family or community as a whole. Of my cousin Kathryn, I once was famously confused by my mom's response to me asking her

how old she was. As a three-year-old, I was super aware of my own ranking among the cousins by age. There were older cousins, sure, and I had a baby sister and younger cousins as well. Kathryn was as large as the kids who were my age, but since she was born with encephalitis, she could not crawl or walk or talk just yet. I must have been astonished to learn we were born only a month apart, because I insisted "Well, she's not as three as me." Obviously, lady. How do you explain developmental delays to a three-year-old? By the time we were school-aged, she was moving around with the help of a walker and some braces, I think. And her intellectual ability didn't seem to be any further behind than the rest of us, even if she was late to get around to talking.

Living in a super small, rural town also meant she was able to participate in some of the regular activities that typical kids enjoyed. Luckily, I didn't think anything of it. She took dance with me, and although she was much slower than the rest, it was clear she had come a really long way from not being able to walk at all. The adults didn't make a big deal out of it, so neither did us kids. However, at a dance recital a few years later I was horrified by some audience members' reaction to seeing an obviously disabled child try to keep up with her peers. I was no longer interested in taking dance, so I was watching this recital as a spectator. Kathryn's class had a couple of numbers in the recital, and in each one she was always slower and less capable, but got to dress the same and participate like any other kid. Something about her performance actually made these grown-ups *laugh* hysterically at her. At first I wasn't sure what they were laughing at, but it became clear at each step or turn of the one kid with a disability, they howled in response. I was disgusted and saddened that someone could laugh at her that way. And grown-ups no less! They should have known better. They had no idea how much improvement this dance number showed on Kathryn's part. They also had

no fear that they might be sharing an audience with those who knew her. They just thought it was the funniest thing ever to let a disabled kid dance with her same-age peers.

What the hell was Kathryn supposed to do? Take class with the babies who were half her size? Avoid recital where everyone would see her dance? These lessons were a great therapy for her, and fun to boot! Not like some of the physical therapy that was more tedious. This was one time among many that I witnessed adults acting like children and I didn't like it. I knew better than to speak up at the time—I didn't want to take away from her performance or disrupt the recital. But it sure made me vow not to ever be like that as a grown-up, myself.

Today, I'm proud to report that my sister has taken over the dance school from her mentor, Miss Tommie, who was my and Kathryn's teacher at the time. And she accommodates every single student who wants to come to class. All abilities and disabilities are welcomed and given instruction that meets them where they are at, while encouraging them to do their best. In a small town, there is zero opportunity for Special Olympics or adaptive classes for kids with disabilities. If she didn't take these students, their closest opportunity would be at least an hour's drive away. While we were in the thick of having behavioral issues with our own two kids, I was sure wishing there was more of an attitude like that among the adults running things in our larger city of Shreveport. After being called to mitigate the damage after what felt like a million instances of our kids acting like kids and getting in trouble for it, I was beginning to feel that we weren't really welcome in some places. This punitive pattern seemed to be set up to weed out any kids who used more resources than the other kids. It's not the staff's fault that they were incredibly under-resourced. They really didn't have much choice in the matter and couldn't reliably provide the attention that was truly needed. But no matter who

is at fault, it still left us out in the cold, unable to find a good fit for our allegedly super unique kids.

One area of study I latched onto was in the concept of accommodations for school-aged children. I learned all I could about what was possible and what the state laws required of schools. There's a surprising amount of information out there about what works well for kids with various learning or developmental disabilities. But each time I brought suggestions to administration, we were denied. The school system is just not set up for the 20% of kids with learning disabilities. They are set up to work well for the 80% of neurotypical kids who they are charged with teaching. The absurdity of this kinda pissed me off. And if we were having trouble advocating for our two adorable, wicked-smart, funny, well-resourced white kids, I couldn't imagine what minority students and families went through.

The general attitude I gleaned from all of this is that "If we had more resources we would absolutely be able to accommodate your kids." Meaning, hey we're doing the best we can right now, so maybe just find a way to comply or get out of the way of our work here with these regular kids. The non-logic in this was disappointing. It was not just frustrating that we're being left out of the equation, it was also super confusing that administration would dismiss alternative ways of teaching outright. In the majority of cases, what works for disabled people will *also* work for able-bodied people. If we are to construct systems and institutions to serve everyone, I would argue that we should *begin* with the ending in mind. If the end goal is to accommodate every human, then let's start with those who require the most support. Let's see what works for every type of disability and choose the thing that is the lowest common denominator of sorts.

In teaching students to read, what works for dyslexic kids also works for neurotypical kids. There are many states who are now pulling junk reading curric-

ulum from their classrooms after learning that what they've been doing for *years* is not actually very good at teaching any kids to read, much less kids with learning disabilities. (For more on this, listen to the *Sold a Story* podcast series by APM Reports.) In the world of video gaming, developers have found that in creating controllers and games that are easy for blind, deaf, or otherwise disabled people, they are also creating games that work great for the rest of the able-bodied world. Why would you neglect to make your products available for anyone to use? You'd be neglecting a potential customer base. In the world of construction and architecture, it makes far more sense to build an accessible environment first, and then add in any stairs or other such able-bodied features as an afterthought instead of the other way around.

We see this built out in pretty much every city in America when it comes to our transportation systems. In Shreveport, we've built more roads and parking spots than we can maintain, setting ourselves up for failure from the outset. Back in the 1950s, we had a dense, walkable city core, where a trolley system was privately owned and profitable. Most people did not drive every day. If they needed something, they'd just take the trolley downtown to where all the shopping was. Today, only those who are able-bodied and able to afford to buy and maintain a car can get to where they need to be. Our public transportation takes the lowest priority of all things we spend city money on. Our city plans for automobiles first, and humans second. And if we're being honest, they plan for disabled or disadvantaged or low-status humans last of all.

This is a huge missed opportunity, in my view. If we built the city to be a great place to live for everyone, then we'd all enjoy that. People who can't or don't want to drive a car are just totally left out of the equation, and denied a seat at the planning table. But at some point, I myself will likely be too old or too blind to drive on a

regular basis. I'd really like to still be able to live a full life without a car. I know that's totally possible. We did it in the past in this very location. Our ancestors from 12,000 years ago lived without even the concept of a car. We can absolutely do it again, but not without modifying how we've built our cities. We have to place humans and all the ways they travel at the top of the priority list. Cities need to be safe for people to walk, roll, bike, or stroll *first*, before consideration is given to people who drive a car. Not only is this a more humane way to build a city, it is also more cost-effective. Transit is far and away more affordable to build and maintain than streets and parking lots. And they have a much better return on investment.

One of my favorite ways to illustrate this concept is to share the cartoon below, which I saw in a learning disability group on social media. Clearing a path for the wheelchair bound kid *first*, also benefits the able-bodied kids.

CLEARING A PATH
FOR PEOPLE WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

In all things systems-related, I feel like we should be *starting with the most vulnerable among us, in order to better care for all of us*. This means not only doing what we *think* is best for them, but also inviting them to the table at the very earliest stages of planning. They will and do contribute way more than just a specialized perspective. They can also bring wonderfully innovative solutions to the table for all sorts of other challenges.

RANKING SYSTEMS ON HOW THE SETTING PLANS FOR THE
Most Vulnerable

Auto-Centric Environments where driving is required on a daily basis

Walkable Complete Neighborhoods such as Disney World, college campuses, pre-1950s city centers, or Seaside, Florida
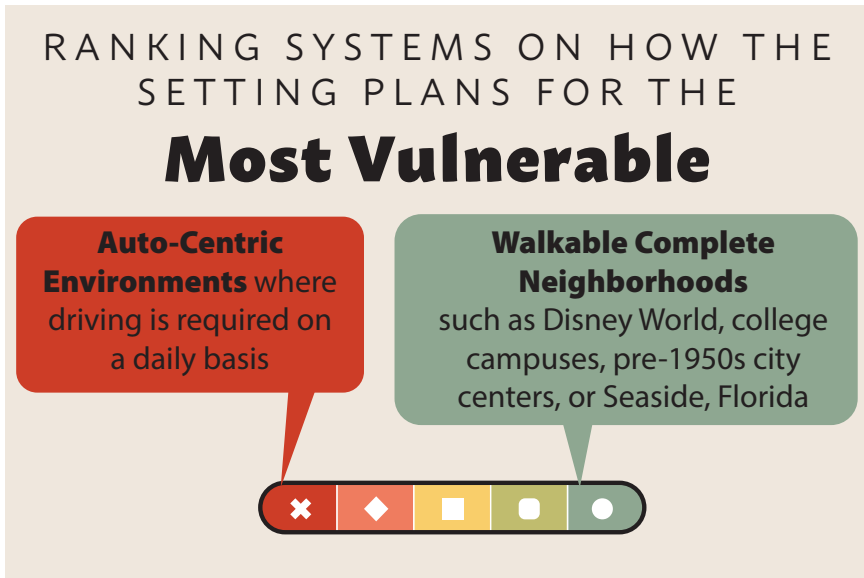
System Redesigner Suggestions

Build walking into your own day and routine whenever possible. Don't automatically default to driving, or to living in an area that is auto-centric. This is somewhat easier with work from home opportunities. But the auto-centric pull is strong and deceptive. You'll need to be ready to resist the conventional wisdom and popularity of the suburbs along with lots of your neighbors.

A MORE HUMANE SYSTEM
Connects People with Nature

The great pull of the universe is a desire to live in harmony with the Creator, which is expressed most effectively in our own lives by living harmoniously with the rest of creation.

~AYANA ELIZABETH JOHNSON

A Humane System connects people with nature, not synthetic built places 24/7.

According to scientificamerican.com, "Life in the city can be taxing. City dwellers often face higher rates of crime, pollution, social isolation and other environmental stressors than those living in rural areas. For years studies have consistently linked the risk of developing schizophrenia to urban environments—but researchers are only beginning to understand why this association exists. Addressing the link is increasingly urgent: According to a recent U.N. report, the proportion of people living in cities will rise from 54 percent of the world's population in 2014 to 66 percent by 2050."

It's true that when people start to live in a large urban environment, that mental health can be negatively affected. But living in major cities can also lead to fantastic gains in creativity and collaborative work. With the right strategy, it may be possible to adjust some parts of our urban environments to better suit our needs as humans. Studies have shown huge differences in outcomes when we have easy access to nature, including parks as well as street trees. Scientists have mapped urban areas for the number of street trees per acre and those with fewer tend to be much hotter than those with more trees. So-called "urban heat island effects" can *double* the temperatures from areas with trees, to those without. Higher temperatures lead to worse health outcomes and they tend to be a collection point for those who cannot afford the nicer, greener areas of town.

In some areas, we've paved over so much of our environment that we wind up living much further apart from one another because of the space that we must now allow for roads, streets, and especially parking. The more we pave, the more

driving and parking is encouraged and invited, and the more we drive, contributing to poor mental health and poor climate outcomes.

At the time of this writing, Paris was undertaking the ambitious goal of planting 170,000 new trees by 2026 to help the city keep cool and fight climate change. Other cities are jumping on that bandwagon as well. Singapore, Seoul, London, and Curitiba in Brazil have all gotten behind the task to grow new trees, plus restore and conserve the trees they do have. Our family of four visited Paris during a heat wave in the summer of 2022, and I can tell you that it was difficult to find a place to stay that included air conditioning. I sure felt deep empathy for those who lived or worked there without access to air conditioning. Even the post office we visited had its windows wide open with fans blowing when we were there. Everyone inside was drenched with sweat by the time they finished their transactions. Employees were remarkably helpful despite the miserable temperatures. Everyone was keenly aware of the need to stay hydrated.

We did manage to find adjoining rooms in a multistory hotel with air conditioning, and it was remarkable to see how many rooftops were growing green things. The bar and restaurant on the hotel's rooftop offered a sweeping 360º view of the city. Everywhere we looked, it seemed Parisians were actively working toward planting in every available square inch. Balconies boasted plants all over town, and we can confirm that the shady parts of town were much more active and commercially viable.

The day we visited the Eiffel Tower, it was almost unbearably hot to stay in the sun for very long. All along the grassy lawn that stretched out beside the tower, you'd see little groups of people venture out super fast, snap a few photos of themselves doing silly things with the tower in the background, then quickly retreating to the shade along the walkways on either side. We were all too familiar with living

in an area where late summer turns to dangerously hot for vulnerable communities. But it was surprising to see chic, urban tourists all suffering like we would have back home. In Louisiana it is actually dangerous to leave a pet or person inside a car for any length of time during the summer. People regularly overheat from working outdoors. My dad's crew at the power co-op always switched to working different hours in the summer than they did in the winter. If they could get an early start, then they could knock off earlier in the afternoon before things got too dangerous to be outdoors.

This is one small aspect of our environment that we could be proactive about cultivating. Native plants *could* be a new trend for cities everywhere. Asphalt *could* fall out of favor as too hot and too expensive. We rallied around the concept of Victory Gardens during World War I and World War II. We could rally today to make sure our cities as well as suburbs are filled with greenery.

We could also expand our thinking and use our five senses to create rules of thumb for building environments that benefit us. What would our hunter-gatherer ancestors have seen, felt, tasted, touched, and smelled? As usual, we can look to the knowledge and practices of native or indigenous people to learn how to best live in harmony with nature. Marine biologist and climate expert Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson reports that "Though Indigenous peoples comprise only about 5 percent of the global population, our lands hold approximately 80 percent of the world's biodiversity and an estimated 40 to 50 percent of the remaining protected places in the world."

It may not be possible to restore our Earth to what it was 12,000 years ago, however we aren't stuck with how we've built our environments today. It doesn't take long for nature to take over again once humans stop maintaining paved

places. But we could certainly make that process easier by avoiding building so much to begin with.

Conservation and preservation *can* be big topics for rural folks I know. They are mainly referring to conserving and preserving natural habitats for animals, though. I get the impression that they are concerned about their ability to hunt wild game, or their ability to go fishing. But wouldn't it be nice to extend that to our own habitats? Let's cultivate what works well for us. It would be much more rewarding work than punching a clock somewhere. Sure, it's not set up to be economically profitable at this moment, but that's our own fault. We're the ones who incentivize commerce over our planet's health and well-being. We can and should figure out ways to do the opposite, for our own benefit.

RANKING SYSTEMS ON HOW THE SETTING CONNECTS PEOPLE WITH Nature

Places filled with concrete, steel, and pollution

Areas filled with natural plants, animals, air and water
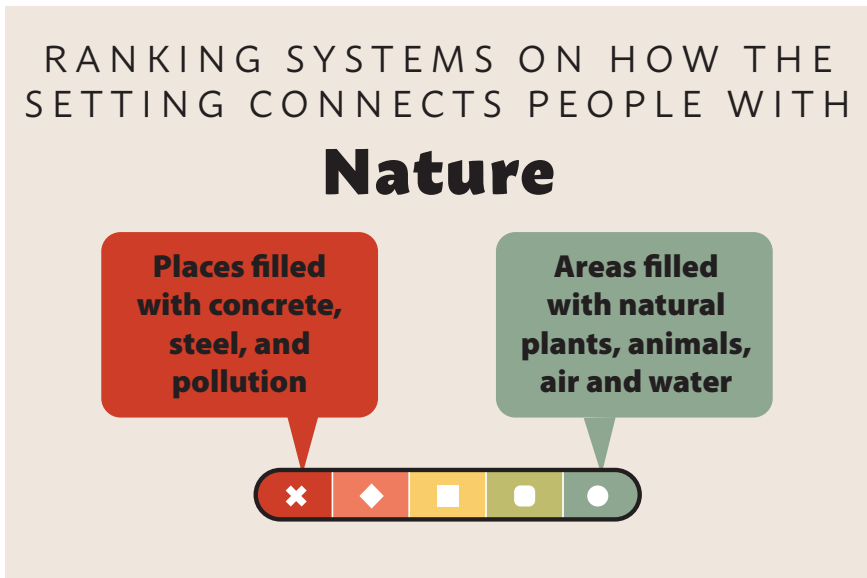
System Redesigner Suggestions

Fill your home and workplace with plants where possible. Garden for fun. Convert your traditional lawn into a native pollinator area. And when possible, advocate with regional and state organizations to incorporate nature into all aspects of school and work. One way I have joined forces with others to achieve this is to work together with other citizens of Shreveport to prevent an inner city connector from being built and destroying the neighborhood and nature along its path. There are so many possible ways to help heal our climate and environment. Find one that speaks to your values and join in.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson's TED talk describes her solution for deciding what type of climate action is right for any given person. You can view the TED talk and *Climate Action Venn Diagram* at ayanaelizabeth.com/climatevenn. When there are unlimited different opportunities, people can get stuck trying to decide which one to commit to. It can be really hard to figure out where to start. Dr. Johnson figures the best way to make a solid decision is to ask yourself three questions, and find any course of action that fits all three of these categories: *1. What brings you joy? 2. What are you good at?* and *3. What work needs doing?*

There will always be plenty of climate work to be done, so find the thing that you can uniquely contribute to with your own talents. And make sure it is not a drain on your own resources. If it brings you joy, then you'll be far more likely to keep up the efforts. It has to be sustainable. Look to sustainable ways to put time and energy into caring for nature to deepen your own connection to the planet.

A MORE HUMANE SYSTEM
Values Diversity

When an organization makes the decision to value the individuality of its employees, it is not only the employees who win—the system wins, too, and wins bigger than ever.

~TODD ROSE

A Humane System values diversity, not homogeneous environments or commercial monocultures.

Systems as different as agriculture and education will all benefit from embracing and celebrating diversity. That is an extra-hard lesson to learn when your whole existence is surrounded by sameness, and adherence to rules and order are strictly enforced. As a child, I felt like everyone from farmers to teachers were on a perpetual quest for sameness. Land was easier to farm if it was flat, consistent, easy to access, and easy to irrigate. Pests were easier to combat if we could focus on one or two varieties and crop-dust the whole field. Children were easier to teach if they all had the same background knowledge and physical fitness, and when they all arrived at school at the same time.

But that is not at all how our ancestors of 12,000 years ago tended to operate. If we look at how indigenous groups grow food, it is more akin to what people today would call "regenerative farming." These types of operations will deliberately grow different varieties of crops together, and use land in a way that actually makes it more productive without the need to apply a ton of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. Studies have also shown that they are much more resilient to disease and drought and other harmful events. When we see vast fields of regularly plowed earth, what we're actually seeing is soil that has been stripped of its nourishing properties. Yes, it's much easier to drive a tractor over. Yes, that makes harvesting less back-breaking and more commercialized. But it does not mean that it is a more productive way of growing food. Regenerative farming or "no-plow" farming has been proven to be *more* productive than commercial farming opera-

tions, not less. But it does require a little more human labor and a willingness for things to appear a bit messier to the eyes of those accustomed to rigidity and order.

When we turn our attention to diversity in human groups, we can also see huge benefits from intentionally cultivating a diverse population of students, or employees, or community members. When it comes to housing, it's important to cultivate diversity among those living in community. When resource-poor people are grouped together, their problems compound. When they're distributed within and surrounded by healthy, resource-rich people, then the resource-poor benefit and are able to climb *out* of poverty altogether. When rich people self-group themselves into gated communities, they become out of touch with the average person and unable to imagine that poor people could ever become healthy and productive like themselves. It's important to build housing and communities so that we can embrace and envelop those who are struggling, not relegate them to the junk parts of town. Many of the nonprofit associations and organizations who claim to be helping low-status groups wind up throwing a lot of effort into Band-Aid fixes that don't ever truly solve the root of the problem. They're more focused on their continued existence than empowering a positive transformation of those who are in need of help.

Another beautiful thing I've learned about diversity is that every single human being on this planet has a completely unique set of strengths and weaknesses. As individuality expert and author Todd Rose says, "Human beings don't line up perfectly. There is no average learner." He explains that people have what he calls a "jagged profile" of skills and deficits. There's just no such thing as an average human in any way. Rose also insists, "if we ignore jaggedness, we end up treating people in one-dimensional terms" and that just doesn't give us very good results at all. We tend to plan school programs for caricatures of kids like the struggling

student, or the good tester. "But if we wanted to really understand who they are as individuals enough to nurture their potential, we can't ignore the jaggedness — it is the essential information for providing them with an optimal environment and matching them with optimal strategies for success."

In any case, it is fairly well proven that different people just learn things differently at different times of their lives. In my opinion, it is inhumane to provide an educational system that plans for only one "type" of student: the average. If we look back just a couple of decades to segregation, we actually attempted to plan for one "race" of students—a made-up construct that had no bearing on whether an individual had any sort of skill or talent at all. It was only reluctantly that the government provided any sort of education for a huge segment of our population. People from low-status communities were dismissed outright as being unworthy of education, and I see the same dismissal playing out in many areas of life today.

Imagine the brilliance we have totally missed out on because we have denied segments of our population from being able to learn and contribute passionately. From a creativity and innovation standpoint, we owe it to ourselves to value the input of everyone, no matter their origin. Scientific teams have been shown to have more papers published when they have very diverse members. We achieve a higher level of innovation and creative output when different people are able to collaborate together—not just academics from the same schooling backgrounds. You never know what information or skills are locked away in someone's brain until you are curious enough to look and make space for that insight to be brought to light. I have always felt, but only recently have found the data to back up the fact, that there is absolutely something useful to be learned from every single human alive today.

As the parent of twice-exceptional children, I began to feel like our kids were being delegated to the "bad children" category over time. We heard more about the school's concerns about their immature behavior than about the talent or potential of their creative, brilliant little minds. Sure, they acted about two years younger than the rest of their classmates when it came to maturity. But they also were able to master concepts faster than you can imagine, and never needed anything repeated if they were motivated enough to listen. One elementary school teacher marveled that the boy-child could (like a bad kid) leave his chair, wiggle, sprawl, and roll around on the floor the entire time a book was being read aloud to the class, but then was able to answer every question and make novel connections with other stories he knew about. Is that really so unique, though? I marveled that she had let the rolling around continue without punishing him—a feat apparently not within the grasp of any of the other educators tasked with his care.

And yet, I harbor no ill-will or judgment toward any of the individuals who have inadvertently made life harder for us within the school system. Everyone is always doing their best, and I always felt like the folks on the ground doing the day-to-day interacting with the kids were no different. They are also trapped within a system that has been at work since long before they were even born. It's not their fault that the school system was set up this way. No one asked them—clearly—or else teachers would certainly be making (at least) a living wage these days.

If we want to set everyone up for success, then we must be willing to see diversity as a benefit, an asset, not an inconvenience. It would behoove us to make that a regular part of the systems under our care. It would be beautiful to see variety and diversity added into diets, educational plans, farming, community building, transportation planning, and generally embraced by the managers at the top of organizations everywhere. We would also do well to apply the celebration of

diversity to the plants and animals within our immediate care. At this point, the Earth is losing its biodiversity at a rate we've never experienced in the last 12,000 years. According to the World Health Organization, "Biodiversity loss also means that we are losing, before discovery, many of nature's chemicals and genes, of the kind that have already provided humankind with enormous health benefits." If we can, while we can, we should love and protect every possible difference in people, plants, and animals before their benefits are lost to us for good.

As professor and complex systems expert Neil Theise points out in *Notes on Complexity*, the complex adaptive systems that we're part of are all dependent on "some low-level randomness or unpredictability" in order for the system to adapt if the environment changes. Sprinkling in diversity in a small, random fashion ensures that these systems get to continue. Too much sameness is bad for systems in the long run. We should delight each time we discover a new person or perspective, and make room for them to contribute to society as the standard.

RANKING SYSTEMS ON HOW THE SETTING
Values Diversity

Commercial Farming

Regenerative Farming
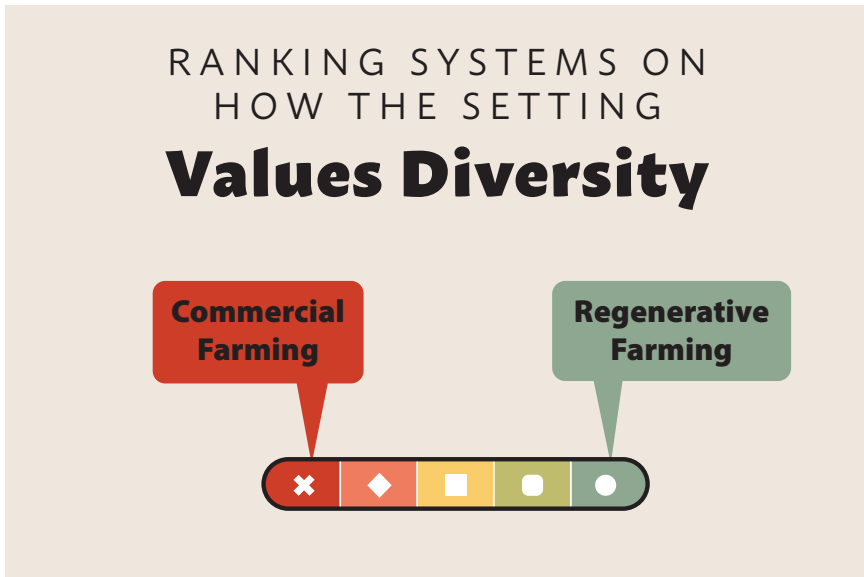
System Redesigner Suggestions

Celebrate and embrace diversity in as many areas of life as is possible. When it comes to people and plants and nature in general, that can look like supporting regenerative farmers or planting your own variety of edible or medicinal living things. Most systems are lacking diversity now, so adding even a little bit where you can will go a long way.

Individually, we can be purposeful in how we cultivate friends and put time and energy into diverse relationships. Collectively, we can check for genuine diversity within any organization that we're involved in. Look for diverse ownership or leadership all the way down to diverse end users or participants. If you have capacity beyond that, work with others to advocate for diversity in society of all kinds. Differences should be valued as what makes us special — not used as an excuse to exclude people in any way.

PRACTICES

(How we spend our time)
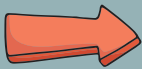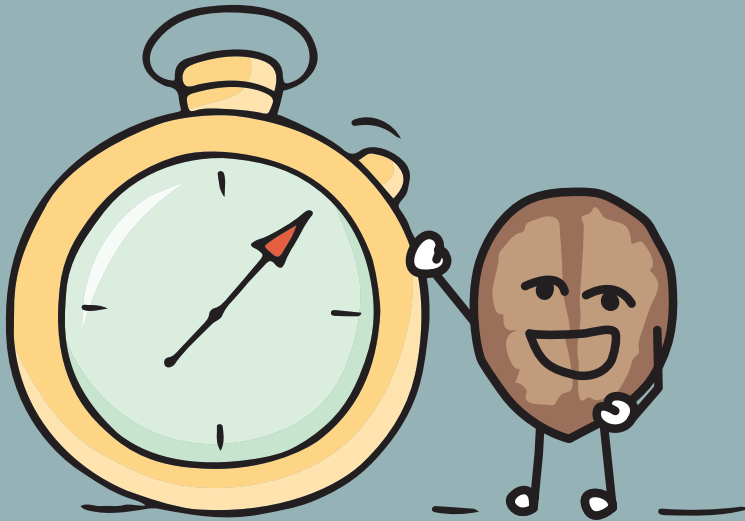
A Humane System empowers us to **Care for Each Other**, not stand as a barrier to care.
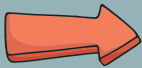
A Humane System **Moves People at a Healthy Pace**, not too fast or slow without protection and safety measures in place.
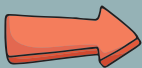
A Humane System groups people in **Multiage and Multigenerational Communities**, not same-age cohorts exclusively.

How we spend our time can be optimized for human health and well-being.

I t's no surprise that people who spend a large part of their day driving or commuting are negatively affected by that. We spend a large portion of our time and attention on things that don't really bring us joy or empower us to live our best lives. We can promote ways to make a healthy diet and exercise a built-in part of our daily experience. When we spend time caring for each other, it actually benefits both parties.

If you look back to how humans spent their days 12,000 years ago, we had a totally different relationship with time itself. Standardized time zones only became a thing on November 18, 1883, or roughly 140 years ago. But we have plenty of literature and documentation on how we did things before that. Each city kind of had its own "noon" so that when you traveled, you had to reset your internal clock by whatever the local noon turned out to be related to your home time. That's crazy to think about today, but it totally worked and was not a problem for thousands of years. As author and cultural critic Anne Elizabeth Moore points out in *Body Horror*, "Just because that is how the world functions now does not mean that other functioning worlds are not possible."

I'd like to apply that logic to basically every human-made system that exists, and our relationship with time seems like a great place to start. Is standardized time necessary? Could it be changed to better suit our needs? What about daylight saving time? That's a contentious topic for people these days, as the United States attempts to halt the twice-annual jump in time for everyone. What type of system would most closely resemble that of our hunter-gatherer ancestors and our

shared Walnut brains? They certainly didn't use alarm clocks. Reporting to work and school at a certain time wasn't important. Those type of habits only began to be commonplace around the 1920s, or roughly 100 years ago. Before that, only a handful of people had mechanical clocks and punching a clock wasn't a necessity for most people.

In general, it appears that indigenous cultures lived in the present much more than we do today. Academics studying the cultures of peoples relatively un-touched by modern technology have found they didn't have much of a language to describe "tomorrow" or "next week" the way we do today. Children are taught how to read a calendar from preschool on now. But 12,000 years ago, we had no concept of months or weeks or anything that specific. We measured time by the phases of the moon or by passing seasons—the natural, observable events that everyone shared.

Hunter-gatherers also seemed to have way more discretionary time to them-selves. The way our culture is set up today, most people are very time poor. They do not have much "spare" time or "free" time to do as they please. Most people are obligated to dedicate 40+ hours a week to work, school, church, or other organiza-tional tasks, as well as all of the preparation and commuting it takes to accomplish those. We don't prioritize time to be spent on things that we enjoy or want to do. As *Happier Hour* author Cassie Holmes writes, "It turns out that Americans are particularly bad at taking vacations. The United States is the only industrialized nation without vacation legally mandated." We don't even work hard to play hard. We just work hard.

We regularly shove to the side any time that could be devoted to restoring our own mental health, physical health, or caring for the health of others. The general consensus is that work, or economic productivity, must come first. All other goals or plans are secondary. But I'd argue that if we're denying ourselves the things that

make us whole and healthy, then we'll be ill equipped to do the essential work of caring for ourselves *and* each other.

Another barrier to care that I have observed actually comes in the form of religious institutions, which will sound very counterintuitive at first. My own personal journey with religion began in one of the biggest Southern Baptist churches in all of Franklin Parish, although it looks very small now compared to what is available for worship in larger cities. But at the time, our rural area was covered in churches, and many of them were tiny. I've since been able to have some much needed distance and perspective on that foundation, and thankfully have learned that I will not, in fact, burn in hell because I don't do things precisely as they instruct. Even as a child, I had to wonder if adults fully believed everything preached at big church. "Love everyone as Jesus loves you" takes on a little different tone when you are fully aware that this particular church is dedicated to welcoming only those people who are white. *Everyone* doesn't really mean everyone at all.

I often wondered what would happen if a black person were to visit. None ever did, so I have no idea what would have actually happened. But I knew enough to know that inviting a black person was a bad idea, although our town and parish was made up of about 50% black people. And I knew that despite the many people (both black and white) living in our own parish who struggled in some way, our church (and so many others) looked past all of those locals to go minister or evangelize in other countries. Mission trips and fundraising for them were commonplace, and they went out of their way to show the children on other continents who would receive the funds and attention of our church members who traveled there. Wouldn't our money go further if we didn't have to pay for travel and such? Or maybe if we wanted to really help, we could just send them money instead of having to go actually see the work being done?

These were all questions I kept to myself. I had assumed once I learned that Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny were not real, that at some point I would also be let in on the God and Jesus lie as well. Surely those guys weren't real as well, right? When no one bothered to question how things were done, I knew my own voice would not be listened to with these crazy questions. The paternalistic instinct in the Baptist church was and is incredibly strong. As I write this, the latest news with Southern Baptists is that they have outlined strict rules about women not being able to become preachers. They are doubling down by insisting: If you don't love God and Jesus like we prescribe, then you aren't worthy of preaching the gospel.

I was taught that if you aren't saved and baptized, and if you don't show up for church every single Sunday, then you are doomed to hell. I tried to puzzle out how people in other parts of the world might fare if they had never even heard of the Bible, much less the rigid teachings of Southern Baptists from that book. I couldn't get on board with a religion that dooms people to hell just because of their ignorance of this one specific ideology.

I've since learned that other religions and even other flavors of Baptists don't practice the same way. There is an enormous variety of religions and those non-Southern Baptists are just as holy and worthy of love and care as anyone. When we look to make changes to systems, we must include the sacred religious institutions as fair game for evaluation and updates. Which ones manage to empower people to care for each other and which ones stand in the way? Our religious practices can make a huge difference in what we focus on and what we put time and energy into. And none of them are literally set in stone.

According to Wikipedia, "there are an estimated 10,000 distinct religions worldwide, though nearly all of them have regionally based, relatively small followings. Four religions—Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism—account

for over 77% of the world's population, and 92% of the world either follows one of those four religions or identifies as nonreligious, meaning that the remaining 9,000+ faiths account for only 8% of the population combined." But these religions did not form until roughly 2,000 to 4,000 years ago. Although most of the population of the world follows some sort of religious practice, they are not as old as our hunter-gatherer Walnut brains. Religion did not evolve with us, although it has changed a lot over time. My hope is that we can agree to change the harmful parts to better serve us, and encourage more of the healthy habits that religions like Buddhism have established. It should not be sacrilegious to question ideology, or to encourage people to modify the rules to benefit us.

A MORE HUMANE SYSTEM
Enables Us to Care for Each Other

It was in that moment that I realized
something about human beings:
We always care.
Even when we don't care, or don't
want to care, or we've been broken
beyond the capability of caring...
We always do.
It's our ultimate infallibility.

~PRESTON NORTON

A Humane System empowers us to care for each other, not stand as a barrier to care.

One big misconception that I had was the assumption that hunter-gatherer humans had really hard lives. And they obviously did have challenges that we do not have today. But their whole existence was not 100% dedicated to surviving. Anthropologist James Suzman writes in *Work* that "we now know that hunter-gatherers like the Ju/'hoansi did not live constantly on the edge of starvation. Rather, they were usually well nourished; lived longer than people in most farming societies; rarely worked more than fifteen hours a week; and spent the bulk of their time at rest and leisure." The bulk of my time is most definitely not spent at rest and leisure, although I have made great strides toward un-learning the habit of always needing to be productive.

But knowing that we were not evolved to dedicate our lives to "work" was a little bit mind-blowing for me. As a perpetually productive person, I once felt pride when someone would say "grass doesn't grow under her feet" about the way I stayed busy. I cringe now to think of that attitude, and how it did not serve me. Today I gladly reserve time for myself every day of the week, and plenty more on the weekends. I say "no" to most requests of my time or expertise unless I'm being paid. And I am incredibly lucky to get to model this type of behavior for my kids to learn from. But even so, I am saddened that I had to learn this the hard way. Why don't we teach this to people from the very beginning? Why have we all just fallen into the habit of a 40-hour work week? That is almost three times as much work as most hunter-gatherers performed. And that still doesn't allow for any domestic work—the essential tasks to keep a household fed and clothed and

relatively healthy. I feel misled by society in some ways when I think about what we tend to value as Americans. There are plenty of people who are not able to work 40 hours a week. Sometimes that's temporary, as in the case of an illness or injury. But some people are not capable of being employed their entire adult lives. I'd argue that we need to provide a system of care for everyone—especially those who are not able to care for themselves.

Right now I've read several news articles about China's aging population. With so many older people to be cared for, experts are worried that there will not be enough young, healthy people to accomplish that monumental task. But of course, they mean there are not enough young, healthy people to both work full time in service of some other economic goal *and* care for the elderly. What if we were to turn our attention to "simply" caring for ourselves? Author and journalist Stephen Dubner ends every episode of his weekly *Freakonomics Radio* podcast with a call to, until next time, "Take care of yourself, and if you can, someone else too." I really love the way he phrases that and it always helps me to reframe how I think about what my brain is always telling me "needs" to be done. It encourages and gives permission to attach your own oxygen mask first, then help others with theirs if needed.

There's no reason we can't shift our priorities as a society, and make sure we are taking care of ourselves first, then others as we are able. Maybe we could place our careers as the lowest priority on this scale. Sure, we may not sell as many widgets as corporate wants. And the profits of any given corporation may fall some if corporations aren't able to produce as many products to sell to people. But I know fully well that we certainly don't "need" as many products and services as we are beholden to today. Just because it's customary now, doesn't mean it's the best way to live. We could get along just fine without the expense of automobiles, lawn

mowers, gym memberships, bourgie makeup brands, and fast fashion for example. People did so for thousands of years very successfully.

This is not meant as a judgment on people who enjoy fun indulgences. So much of the desire and want of material items is absolutely fabricated. Marketing and advertising teams spend millions of dollars a year to make people yearn for the latest and greatest fads, and they've gotten really good at it over the past 100 years. Our brains are not really well suited for an environment that is all about con- sumerism, though. It's no wonder that we're caught in this catch-22 of needing a career to pay for our lifestyles and ignoring the very human needs of ourselves and others. If we are, instead, able to live our best, fullest healthiest lives, in community with other whole and healthy humans, then we won't miss the huge amount of time that we used to dedicate to a job/boss/career, or other people's profits.

The beautiful thing about a renewed focus on caring for each other, is that it is one of the only activities that we do that winds up benefiting *both* parties. When you care for someone, you also benefit. You feel rewarded above and beyond what effort you may have put towards the care. It's almost a magical way to look at time spent in care for others. We add time to the equation and somehow magically are able to get more value out of the bargain than we put into it.

It is also important to consider that we actually evolved to care for each other. That's one of the reasons we are still here on this planet today. Neanderthals are known to have had larger brains than we humans do. So they can be thought of as "smarter" than us. But because they were not as social as we are, their great ideas didn't spread as fast. An innovation didn't benefit many beyond a small handful of Neanderthals. Because we evolved to be as social as we are, we are able to learn and innovate and iterate *far* more quickly, and therefore, we have enjoyed great success as a species on this planet.

Because we evolved to care for each other, we are here today to continue caring for each other. And we were *able* to evolve in the first place because we cared for each other. It's a circular pattern that I love to come back to when feeling overwhelmed. The only reason I am here is to care for myself, and for others. Not to meet a deadline, or to produce things for the economy, or to generate wealth by participating in capitalism. My primary purpose as a human is caring. And that's a life goal that is inherently more rewarding than anything else we could invent as a commercial job.

That's a good thing, too, because human beings also evolved to actually need the help. And a lot of it. Our young especially need a whole village of helping hands to form into a healthy adult. If you factor in all the help needed for the young, old, and otherwise compromised people, then I feel like we're failing a lot of them right now. Besides the regular work of just caring for healthy young and old, we're now entering an age of more frequent and more intense natural disasters. We've made wonderful strides in getting quick care to people impacted by disasters. Today, very few people actually die from things like hurricanes and earthquakes when you compare it to how many would typically die from those same events a couple hundred years ago. But a shift to a full-time effort for anticipating and caring for people after disasters is already needed. That's a task that will take a monumental amount of effort if we want to continue to have such a successful track record.

Just a week ago today as I write this our entire family had to spend four nights at a family member's house nearby because of the worst storm power outage in all of SWEPCO's history as a company. Without warning, while we were sleeping, a storm blew through from the northwest that amounted to a Category 2 hurricane. It knocked out power for half of all of the electric company's customers, and left trees downed and homes destroyed for a huge region across Oklahoma, Texas, and

Louisiana. It's a miracle that no one died in the actual storm, but unfortunately the aftermath wasn't as kind. Without power, and with a heat advisory for days afterwards, we had many residents in this region in dire need of help. Our city had to open cooling centers and distribute ice to those without power. A lineman who had traveled from out of state to work the recovery efforts in Texas lost his life due to a heat-related injury.

The neighborhood outside my window looks like a tornado hit. Except that tornado was miles wide, and took its destruction on a spin for many more miles than that. We will be cleaning up from this for months to come. Maybe even years. Despite the enormity of how that all sounds, we all are fully aware that the next impending disaster will probably arrive before we even finish this job. Actual hurricane season is upon us, and even if we aren't in the direct impact zone, we can get destructive wind and rain up in our neck of the woods. Our south Louisiana friends and family will almost certainly have to evacuate at least one impending storm per season, and we're typically their landing pad when storms threaten.

But that brings me to one essential truth about people that I have witnessed many times over: when faced with another human who is in obvious need of help, we just do it. It's during these disaster times that I've seen people come together across huge lines of difference to simply help one another. When flash flooding happened in Baton Rouge a few years back, an older gentleman related it this way on the news: "The only kind of differences we're worried about right now, is are you wet or are you dry?" I took it to mean that even in the deep south, where things are definitely not in perfect harmony, we're here to help those we can because we can. Furthermore, we should be grateful that we're on the helping end and not needing help. So jumping in to help a stranger who is helpless is the only thing we can do. It happens every time. When called upon, we always do care for each other. We

can't help it. Any system that may stand as a barrier to people being able to care for each other should be evaluated critically. We can and should do better for our own sakes.
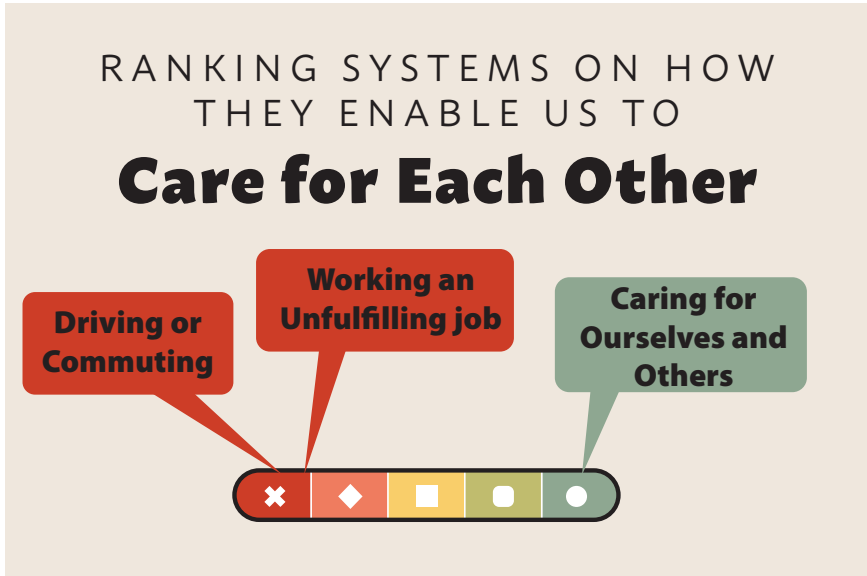
System Redesigner Suggestions

As much as possible, turn your focus to caring for yourself first, then caring for others. One small (and perhaps a little silly) way I've found to do this in my own life is to give myself to-do lists with *people's* names rather than a *project's* name. When I jot down all the things I need to do on a work day or week, it's so much more fulfilling to think of myself as helping Crystal, Sharon, Pat, and Emily with whatever it is that they are trying to accomplish within their organization. I tend to lose energy when thinking of myself as tackling a website update, flyer, brochure, or other project-specific task. So I'll list out first names, followed by whatever project they need help with to keep myself in order.

A MORE HUMANE SYSTEM
Moves People at a Healthy Pace

"God made us walking animals—pedestrians. As a fish needs to swim, a bird to fly, a deer to run, we need to walk, not in order to survive, but to be happy."

That thought is beautiful, perfectly obvious, and probably impossible to prove.

~JEFF SPECK

A Humane System moves people at a healthy pace, not too fast or slow without protection and safety measures in place.

Pace, tempo, rhythm, the rate of everything we do matters. When we look internally, our heart rate and breathing can be signs of distress or health. We can increase or decrease our breathing rate to optimize our ability to heal and regenerate. Humans are also one of the few animals who can *control* their breathing. Actors have learned that if you alter your breathing to match the emotion of what you're playing, then it does a lot of the work for you. You can *lead* your emotions with the way you control your breathing! Magical.

When we look externally, the way we move about can be healthy or hazardous depending on our speed. Workers for Amazon have reported huge health issues with the constant pressure to fulfill orders quickly. Their quota system and long working hours have negative consequences. According to businessinsider.com, "Data collected in workplace inspections indicates that Amazon's pace of work wildly increases the risk of injury for its more than 750,000 US warehouse workers. The risk of debilitating muscle and joint injuries is off the charts, workplace regulators have said."

While that may make a lot of money for Amazon and its shareholders, it certainly does not improve the health and well-being of those it employs. Should we not have protections in place for ourselves? Any pacing that is harmful should be noted and avoided, no matter how efficient or profitable it may be.

I saw another example of rushed pacing when my son was in sixth grade. The middle school he attended had alloted only two minutes between class periods to

get to his next class. They were so proud of this fact! This was made possible by removing all of the lockers and forcing the kids to carry all of their books with them at all times. So as soon as one class was over, the whole mass of around 1,200 kids had to speed walk in a hurried fashion in order to make it to the next class without being late. And the campus was crazy spread out! And they gave no thought whatsoever about making sure a child's classes didn't have them zig-zag-ging from one end of campus to the other all throughout the day. I really hated it for those kids.

I'm sure some did OK with it, but it was a dumb thing to be stressed about. They had no control whatsoever over where they went and couldn't even travel there at a regular pace. And my sixth-grader's backpack wound up being far too heavy for him to carry around all day. When we raised concerns about it being a bit much for a child that size, they just looked at us like we were crazy. How else would he carry his books around? Right. But does he have to carry so many around all day every day? Educational minutes had clearly been prioritized over the kids' health and well-being. As if more educational minutes themselves could solve everything.

If we look back at how our Wally brains moved about 12,000 years ago, we certainly didn't create weird schedules where we'd sit perfectly still for a hour, then speedwalk carrying 1/3 of our own body weight for two minutes, then repeat. We also did not drive or fly ourselves around ever. We were limited to the speed of travel of our own two feet, or later on perhaps those of a horse. Occasionally we traveled with the speed of water or wind when traveling by water. But the speed limits we set for streets and roads in our urban environments are entirely new. It wasn't until the 1950s and 60s that owning an automobile and driving became super common. Until then, literally everyone traveled by foot, bike, animal, or

occasionally by train or boat. So over the last 100 years, we've dramatically changed how the average person gets around their environment.

Popularity of cars and trucks has obviously led to a lot of opportunity for people, but it is not without its drawbacks. Each year, around 40,000 people are killed in automobile accidents. That's a really heartwrenching number when you think of all the families impacted by a loss like that. If not for cars, we'd be 40,000 people richer in human capacity. Think of all they could contribute over the coming years. We'll miss out on all of that. The rise in popularity of electric vehicles, while probably good in the long run, does nothing to eliminate these "accidental" deaths. Electric vehicles can kill just as many people as gas-powered ones. And we're choosing to continue along this course by doubling down on more roads and driving infrastructure in the United States.

When you dig into the data on car crashes, it is immediately obvious that the faster a person drives, the higher the risk they take. They also inflict a higher risk onto other drivers and pedestrians who they interact with. The risk of a pedestrian vs. car fatality is only about 5% when a car is traveling 20 miles per hour. Increase the speed to 50 miles per hour and the risk of fatality in hitting a pedestrian explodes to a full 100%. Is that how we want to live? In a world where, through no fault of your own, you can be "accidentally" taken out by a person driving an automobile? I personally don't like those odds at all. And the way we've built our cities has pretty much dictated that everyone who lives here must travel by automobile.

In the typical American city, we don't live near any of the things we need anymore. In the 1950s, most people who lived in cities walked to where they needed to go, except if they had to jump on a bus or trolley to head downtown for specialty shopping or socializing. Today, the speed and space we've given over to cars prevents us from being able to walk or bike anywhere safely. Interestingly, we could

reduce auto speeds by narrowing the lanes we build for driving. In a transportation safety report shared with me, a study by automotive designer Karim Habib in 2015 notes that "wider lanes are associated with 33% higher impact speeds and higher crash rates" and that "pedestrian volumes decline as lanes widen" because people don't feel safe alongside the faster-moving vehicles.

It turns out that the way we build our streets in turn shapes the way we live in our cities. We could easily modify the street design to prioritize slow, safe speeds, rather than top speeds and capacity. That's not the fault of pedestrians or car drivers. The blame for the harm caused by driving relies on the system we've put into place that governs how things get built. Planners and engineers are required to follow the *Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices* which places the priority on the *number* of cars we want to move through any given street. Human safety takes a back seat to speed and capacity. But it doesn't have to be that way.

As municipal engineer Chuck Marohn writes, "It is possible to build a transportation system that makes you, your family, and your community safer and more prosperous." And as I've discovered in my own city of Shreveport, we used to live with a transportation system that did just that. Before roughly the 1950s or so, our cities were built by default knowing that people would be walking most everywhere. We could easily restore the oldest parts of town to that built environment. But most modern cities do not allow for construction of infrastructure or residences or commercial buildings like we had in the 1950s. We have rules and obligations on the books with parking minimums and street designs that have bumped up automobiles to the top of the priority list. The humans who drive them are secondary. The humans who aren't able to afford a car come in a distant third in this race. They're left to depend on transit options that have been denied investments over the last 70 years or so, favoring auto-centric investments instead.

What if we instead prioritized walkability and moving at one to three miles per hour? Studies have shown that walkable places with plenty of foot traffic enjoy huge benefits economically. We could make our cities stronger and more profitable while *also* making them safer for people. Then beyond the three mile per hour speed, we could set a speed limit of 15 miles per hour for most of the streets we use in town. It's important to note that simply changing signage doesn't work at all. We really should only use road signs to help us find *where* to drive. They should not be telling us *how* to drive, including speeds. The design of the street itself does all the work to inform how fast we drive on streets.

Unfortunately, most cities have inadvertently filled themselves with what Marohn has termed "stroads"—a street/road hybrid that does neither job well. Streets should be considered the in-town, slow-speed things we get around on. Roads connect two far-away places and can have faster speeds. Stroads, instead, try to mash up both fast speeds and places for people to be and stop and shop. When we try to cram high speeds into the middle of town, we just wind up making driving *and* walking more dangerous.

We can learn from what makes our built environments work well, and incentivize and prioritize the good. It will take a good bit of unraveling of the local, state and federal building codes. But we invented those too. We can and should be in the habit of revising them to fit updated data and cultural needs. Building cities to place walking, rolling, biking, e-biking, strolling, and all other forms of transportation *before* driving would go a long way to improving everyone's quality of life.

It's important to remember, however, that although I'm advocating for finding the "best" pace for any one activity, it will still be up to the individual to decide what pace is right for them. Like most things in life, pace is a personal preference, and having the autonomy to choose what pace—within a reasonable, healthy

range—is best for you will lead to better results than having any one pace forced upon you.
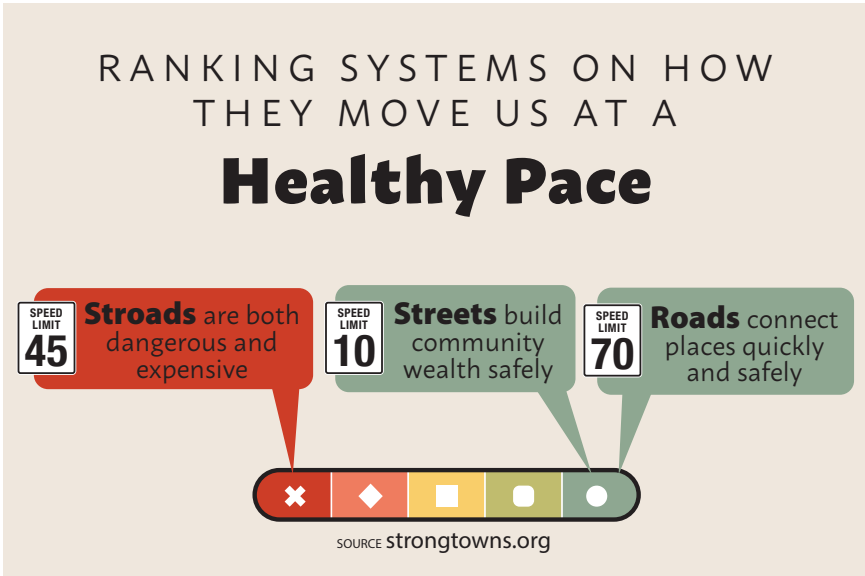
System Redesigner Suggestions

Individually, give yourself and others space to find the pace that is right for any particular situation. Rushing through anything will lead to less-than-ideal results. Finding the right pace can preserve and enhance well-being. Just because a school or business is setting targets, does not mean those targets have been checked for how humane they are for those under their control. I'm a naturally impatient person, so it has taken me a lot of time to come to a place where I don't feel rushed throughout the day. This self-imposed striving for maximum productivity did not serve me well. It sounds a little ambiguous, but projects or tasks just take the time that they take. We don't get to dictate what that amount of time is. We can only be along for the ride. Notice each time you feel under pressure to get something done

more quickly. Is this pressure warranted? Is it helpful? Or would it be better for everyone to take a deep breath and abide the natural timescale of the task at hand? Don't let external forces place stress on your systems with pacing that isn't healthy.

Collectively, it helps to join a community of people already involved in advocating for a healthier pace. Follow social media accounts like instagram.com/strong_towns, youtube.com/notjustbikes, or instagram.com/mrbarricade to find tons of examples of communities all focused on making changes that center the needs of people over automobiles.

A MORE HUMANE SYSTEM

Has Multigenerational Communities

*It takes a village
to raise a child.*

~ IGBO & YORUBA PROVERB

A Humane System groups people in multiage and multigenerational communities, not same-age cohorts exclusively.

Although I personally attended schools that were grouped by same-age grades, this particular concept only became popular in the United States in the late 1800s. So in the grand scheme of things, this is a super recent invention. According to Wikipedia, both European countries and the colonial United States tended to teach students of various ages in one classroom by one teacher. I was super familiar with this concept thanks to the *Little House on the Prairie* series, which I read repeatedly and watched on TV after school religiously. But by the time I was attending school, these practices seemed to have been dismissed outright for decades. My own father and his siblings had attended the same schools in the same buildings as kids just one generation ago—sometimes accompanied by the same humans who had taught that previous extended family. This was assumed to be a non-negotiable, and we were to believe a clear advantage to grouping kids by any other way.

The more I looked into the history of education and practices surrounding what works well for children, the more evidence I found that flagged the same-age grouping concept as not optimal. In a lot of cases, it's downright detrimental to the kids' mental health who spend time in those same-age environments. For example, incidents of bullying appear far more frequently in same-age grouping. And this makes a lot of sense when you think about how hunter-gatherers lived their lives. When kids are hanging out in groups with a huge range of ages, you aren't able to get away with a whole lot of aggressiveness if there's always an older kid

around to keep the younger ones in line. If anything, the younger ones are watched out for by the older ones, rather than picked on to gain power. Little ones actually learn really well from older kids, as they're way more interested in what kids are doing than what adults are doing.

I learned this myself firsthand when my oldest was about seven or eight months old. Hank and I met up with my mom and sister and her little girl, who was two years older, for a day of shopping and visiting. As we settled the kids into high chairs for a meal, my sister offered some little puffy snack or cheerios or something for Hank, but I had to say no thanks. He wasn't really feeding himself yet. He'd smack at whatever was on his tray, but wasn't adept at picking up a thing and making it to his mouth. She sprinkled him a few anyway just to be nice, since his cousin was enjoying them. Lo and behold, after a few minutes of being fascinated by his older cousin's snacking, and some practice, Hank was reliably reaching for food and getting it into his mouth. A miracle! It turns out this type of learning happens all the time with kids when they're able to spend time together in mixed-up age groups.

Additionally, kids grow and mature at totally different rates from each other. So two kids who are both nine years of age may act totally different and arrive at a classroom with really wide ranges of prior knowledge in their brains. And if that weren't hard enough to plan for, an individual child's rate of learning and maturing will vary wildly over time. Looking at an individual kid's rate of growing will reveal slow times, explosive growth times, and plenty of medium speeds in between. It is not a linear, steady progression over time. There will never be a way to group children cleanly into similar cohorts, and history shows us that is actually not the most beneficial way to do things.

When children are able to spend time with other kids and adults across the entire community, they get a better grasp of what it takes to make a community run. And people are better able to use their own unique strengths to the benefit of the community. And they are also better able to have their weaknesses covered by other members of that community. The diversity of ages is an asset. Right now in the United States, we have set up all manner of organizations in the exact opposite way. Everything from daycares and nurseries, to schools and nursing homes, people are almost always grouped by age. And that has more widespread consequences than just being a bad environment for schooling to take place.

Scientist Michaeleen Doucleff spent a lot of time living with and studying various hunter-gatherer groups to document how they parent, hoping to inform how she herself parented her spirited three-year-old. As she writes in the resulting book, *Hunt, Gather, Parent,* "Many psychologists whom I spoke with think the erosion of the extended family is a root cause for the high rates of postpartum depression in the U.S., as well as the rising epidemic of anxiety and depression among children and teenagers. Moms, dads, and kids are simply lonely." When we group people together in more diverse age groups it's good for both the kids *and* the adults. There's a reason that the African proverb "It takes a village to raise a child" is such a time-honored piece of wisdom.

One example of shared responsibility in her book actually made me feel incredibly ripped off and disappointed in how new mothers typically experience the postpartum segment of life today. It turns out that when someone has a baby in hunter-gatherer times, "other women come over to her house and form a baby SWAT team, ready to respond to every whimper and cry the baby has. They hold, snuggle, rock, and even feed the newborn." Anthropologist Mel Konner sums it up as, "Dealing with a fussing baby is a group effort." Doucleff reports that "In the first

few weeks of a new baby's life, an infant will move from one caregiver to the next, on average, every fifteen minutes" and by the time the child is two, they spend more time with other community members than their own mother. As a parent who spent a solitary six weeks by myself with my newborn, I can attest that experience was nothing like what she described. After my mom came over for the first few days, Hank and I were on our own for the whole day. Every day. For weeks. I felt unable to even care for myself, much less keep this infant pacified. My husband came home from work in the evenings and could help some, but even the most helpful co-parent pales in comparison to a village of parents around and ready to step in at any moment.

At the time, I was feeling confused and disappointed. We were super lucky compared to other new parents we knew. I was able to take a full six weeks off of work (only two of those paid) and James was able to stay home an entire week—unheard-of for fathers at that time in the United States. But even so, this was much harder and more exhausting than we had been led to believe. Even after reading all the right books and attending all the right labor and delivery classes, existing as a new parent was disorienting, to put it mildly. Knowing a day of paid work would be way less effort than a day of staying home with an infant, I was relieved and also terrified to go back to work. How on earth was I supposed to function on such little sleep? But I knew the challenges involved with being at work all day, and knew I was more than capable. The stress of it all landed me in the ER on my first day back at work. I learned that "pleurisy" or feeling like your lungs are on fire and unable to take in oxygen, can be the result of stress and anxiety. They prescribed pain medication that I could not pass along to Hank in breastmilk and sent me home the same day. So I pumped and dumped for a week while I recovered.

Reading about the standard community of help surrounding new hunter-gatherer mothers, I was downright jealous. That would have made things *way* easier. But again, all blame and fury is directed at the system, and not the people I know and love who are also trapped in this same reality. All of my family lived two and a half hours away and either worked or went to school full time. Our modern way of living has dictated all of this. But it is not inevitable nor is it unchangeable. I longed for a community of support, and a society where people aren't required to work for someone else so much. Couldn't we find a way to care for each other more efficiently? Do we *all* have to be employed for the waking hours of our day?

I lasted a few months back at work, all the while wishing I could work slightly less and parent a little more with the hours available in my day. However, part-time jobs for professional graphic designers were not available locally at the time, and remote work had not taken off yet. So I quit to freelance and stay home with my one-year-old a week before his first birthday. We weren't at all sure that we could make the finances work, but I was desperate to give it a try.

When it comes to American public schools, age segregation is the gold standard pretty much everywhere today. I certainly didn't question it when our kids started attending Mother's Day Out and preschool. The public school board publishes very specific birthday cutoff dates to shuffle everyone through the system in an identical manner. But it doesn't *have* to be that way at all. It may be a little messier and harder to plan for, but the benefits of age-mixing in school would be profound. Boston College research professor of psychology Peter Gray, Ph.D. so clearly summarizes on psychologytoday.com…

> An age-mixed environment:
> 1. allows younger children to engage collaboratively in activities that they could not do just with age-mates;

2. promotes non-competitive, creative forms of play that are ideal for acquiring new skills;

3. allows those who are ahead of or behind their age-mates in certain realms to find others who are at their level;

4. permits younger children to be inspired by the activities of older ones, and vice versa;

5. allows younger children to receive help and advice without giving up their own autonomy;

6. allows older children to learn through teaching; and

7. allows older children to practice caring for younger ones and to develop a sense of responsibility and maturity.

When we segregate children by age, in schools and in other settings, we deprive them of all of this. We rob them of the opportunity to use fully their natural and joyful ways of learning from one another.

His observations come from a type of school that I had no idea even existed before my deep dive into how differently-wired kids learn. I've now seen Sudbury Valley Schools given as examples in several places where people are re-thinking what education can and should be. This model, founded by Daniel Greenberg, is described on Wikipedia as "a type of school, usually for the K-12 age range, where students have complete responsibility for their own education, and the school is run by a direct democracy in which students and staff are equal citizens. Students use their time however they wish, and learn as a by-product of ordinary experience rather than through coursework."

There are only about eight examples of this type of school in the United States today, so it was no surprise that the closest one to us is sadly in Houston, Texas (about four hours away by car). Although this sounded heavenly, it wasn't an available option for us. But I was glad to learn about it and glean some knowledge from those who have experienced it or studied the school itself. It turns out that they allow all students ages 4–18 to interact with one another, as they please, at any time of day. This more closely mimics the way hunter-gatherer groups would

gather to play during the day, and according to Dr. Gray, it "produces play that is less competitive, more creative, and more conducive to practicing new skills than is same-age play."

Sign me up. Except, of course, no one near our location has established any schools that are remotely similar. Montessori schools do mix age groups a little bit, which is encouraging and a step in the right direction. But for the most part, it seems like school administrators and elected officials have a set-in-stone mentality when it comes to today's K-12 age-segregated schools. As I've already made clear, I'd love to see a school setting where rules are less rigid and people are more open to being flexible. I know my own two kids would benefit, but so would all of the other little humans that we're tasked with shepherding into adulthood like the unique, creative, worthy beings that they are.

RANKING SYSTEMS ON HOW
Multigenerational
THEY ARE

Assembly Line
style for conventional US schools keeps age groups strictly segregated

Free Age Mixing
style for Sudbury Valley Schools mimics how hunter-gatherer children self-educated outside of any school setting at all
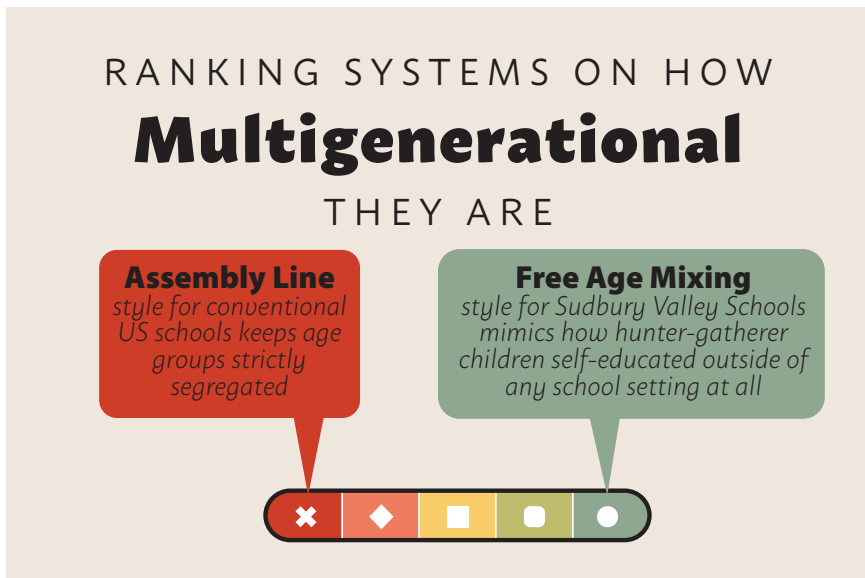
System Redesigner Suggestions

A great method of connecting different age groups in a traditional school setting is to establish "houses" for students. Assign students to a handful of different named houses, and children of different ages are able to make bonds with each other. Mixing things up keeps the age-segregated grades from becoming isolated in their own silos. It's also fairly easy as an individual to put effort into making friendships and connections with people from all different generations. You just shouldn't expect our conventional systems to do that for you.

Creative Humane Ideas
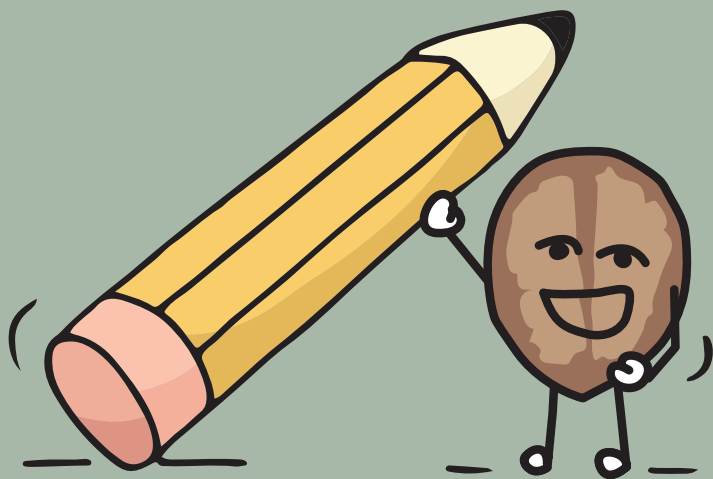
The world is only as free as it allows its artists to be.

~RICK RUBIN

Moon Shot Ideas

I f we take all of these principles and play them through to think about what the future could hold, I've imagined three big ideas that wouldn't take a lot of effort, but could yield a big impact. To be 100% clear, none of these are my own ideas. At all. I've merely combined other people's unique concepts into a synthesized hybrid of sorts. Where possible, I've made sure to credit whoever I learned the information from, but there are plenty of brilliant ideas out there that have been around for centuries. That's kind of the point—the oldest ways of living can be the best fit for us if we're willing to adapt them to our present circumstances. It turns out that other people have even named and claimed that process: *sankofa*. This African/Ghanaian concept advocates that we should retrieve things of value from our knowledge of the past. According to a masterclass.com article,

> "The word Sankofa literally means "to retrieve" in the Akan Twi language, but the meaning of Sankofa is more broadly expanded upon in this Akan proverb: "Se wo were fi na wosankofa a yenkyi" (translated from the Akan language to mean "it is not taboo to go back and fetch what you forgot"). The power of Sankofa centers around this: to know history and your heritage is to know your current self, the world around you, and how to better both."

It is with a mindset rooted in "Sankofa" that these next three chapters have come into focus. Growing up in rural North Louisiana, I often felt like our people had no culture at all. We didn't really have many celebrations or ways to connect with our history or culture. My own white people didn't really want to bring up how we had enslaved our black neighbors decades before we were born. Black residents obviously had no connection to their original cultures and practices. Although most every white person I knew was Baptist or at least Christian, those

practices didn't really feel like they were "ours" but something dictated to us from ancient old people who had created this religion and its rules. We knew people in South Louisiana had Mardi Gras and all sorts of cool traditions. Our own traditions just seemed the most basic and boring non-traditions possible. I've since learned that there are small pockets of native culture and tradition celebrated in our area. But nothing of the sort that I thought would really unite us and tie us to our history and the land. So I personally had no trouble imagining new ideas and practices, but I realize that most people have a really hard time imagining how things could be different.

Oftentimes, the key to creating something new is to refrain from the instinct to go with your very first idea. Your *first* idea is almost never your *best* idea. So generating as many ideas as possible first can lead to a much better outcome in the long run. It's important to brainstorm all the possibilities before evaluating or judging which ones to try out.

My process for creating these possible visions of the future is the same as my typical graphic design process. First, shake off as many assumptions and patterns as I possibly can. Next, reach and stretch and search to collect any and all possibilities and resources. Finally, center my solutions around the most vulnerable and least informed user that might present themselves. The idea of committing to a purpose, measuring for outcomes, and recalibrating before the next iteration feels like it is always in motion. Much like stirring a pot of soup, you want to keep those three main features of a Humane System in mind and moving slowly and steadily in perpetual motion. Then when you're ready, you can add into the mix a little bit of the characteristics of humane systems to improve upon the overall flavor of the soup or system at hand.

If we're aiming for making sure every human alive gets to live a life where they are cared for and thriving, then we'll wind up with way more people even being *capable* of being creative than we've ever known as a planet. If our primary purpose on this planet is to care for ourselves and each other, then what do we do with the rest of our days? My answer is to create. I'd be willing to go as far as to declare that the meaning of life itself is to care for each other. Beyond that, creating things is the superpower that we unlock when everyone is able to participate.

When I looked back at what our hunter-gatherer brains were up to around 12,000 years ago, I found that the need to create is deeply human. Because we moved around a lot, we never had as many possessions as we have today. So we had more time and energy to care for ourselves and be creative. And historians have long theorized that cultures who engaged in creative practices were much healthier and happier than those who were forced to focus on their own survival. From our very earliest ancestors, we have evidence of humans being creative in lots of different ways. And of course plenty of their creations have been lost to time. But even if we only look at what has survived, it's still pretty awe-inspiring. From cave paintings, to intricate beads and jewelry, to the burial rituals of people, we've been creating beautiful and meaningful things for as long as we've been alive.

So imagine a best-case scenario future with me. One where we prioritize human health and well-being, in order to empower all of us to create as much as we'd like. We may not be able to slow down climate change at this point, but if we are serious about caring for every person alive, we can at least minimize the suffering of those who have done the least to cause climate change. That will also minimize our own suffering. And at least we'll know we tried our hardest to care for everyone as the world itself is changing beneath us. That's about the best we can ask for in the long run.

MAJOR NOTE: Although the following ideas all seem like perfectly good systems to implement on paper, I still want to make sure we double check their effectiveness. For all of these, we should absolutely be declaring a purpose, measuring for outcomes, and performing incremental changes over time. The last thing I would want is to start something big that continues after my death in a way that does not improve the lives of the humans it touches. Please, for the love of Pete, make changes to keep things a net positive. Do not declare any system to be the one and only solution.

Test, trial, iterate until you know for certain that the system is going well before you spread it far and wide. Coming back again and again to the purpose of a system lends itself to a more circular shaped story—much like indigenous storytelling tends to be. Instead of a "happily ever after" for the end of every story we tell ourselves, it seems to be more humane to tell stories that have a more circular pattern or shape to them. If we always come back to the beginning to check out how things have gone, then we'll be more likely to measure for outcomes and make changes to things before moving along to the next thing.

12,023 Year Numbering
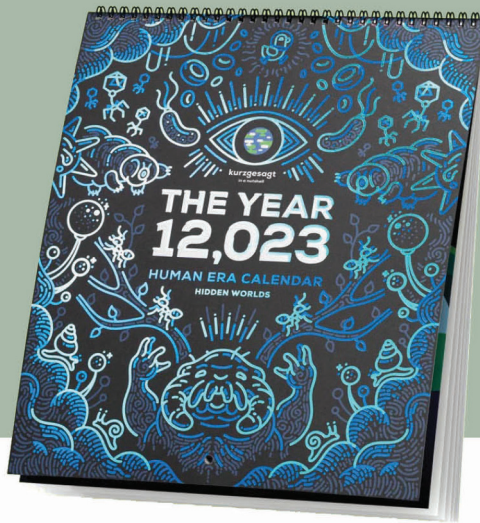
A new year Zero for our history could re-frame how we think of ourselves.

~KURZGESAGT

Re-number our years to a human-scale format: 12,023 for 2023.

All we have to do is just start doing it. Luckily, others have already started to make it happen. I learned of this human-scale numbering system from a YouTube video from one of our family's favorite channels, Kurzgesagt. This channel is surprisingly well-researched and transparent about their information gathering. And they don't shy away from the really big concepts to explain "in a nutshell" a.k.a. the Kurzgesagt way.

It turns out that around 800 generations ago, behaviorally modern humans began a process that would change our lifestyles forever. We moved from being hunter-gatherers like we had been for generations before, into a people who began to manipulate plants and animals into a farming or agricultural system. We began to stay put longer and eat domesticated food. What we now call the "Agricultural Revolution" began gradually, but then expanded almost completely to include everyone into a "Human Era" where we lived in cities rather than small groups like before. Although disease began to spread drastically, our numbers still skyrocketed because villages and towns could support more people, and farmers needed the labor.

To celebrate the achievements of our ancestors over the last 12,000 years and to look with hope towards the next 12,000, Kurzgesagt produced what they call the Human Era Calendar. This wall-hanging has been printed and sold for 7 years now, and the limited editions sell out each time. For the unique calendar they created for 12,021 (2021), each beautifully designed page takes us through our history over the last 12,000 years, leading into the revolution in agriculture, to ancient

high civilizations and the beginning of modern times, illustrating a hopeful vision for our future. Other years have explored the hidden worlds of the microcosm, space exploration, or other typically unseen marvels of our universe.

I can't wait to see what theme the 12,024 (2024) calendar will explore, and am encouraged that people have already seen the need to place our starting point not at the arbitrary "zero" of BC/AD numbering, but with the generally accepted time of great change for our species around 12,000 years ago.
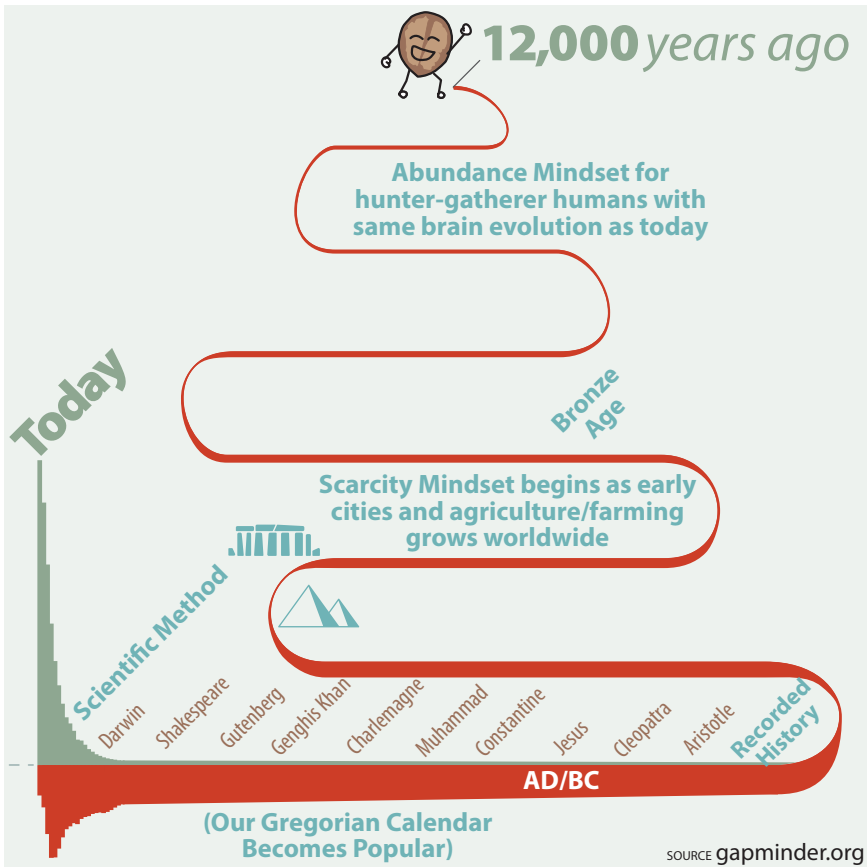
According to Kurzgesagt, numbering our years in the BC/AD way "distorts our view of our own history, makes it harder to understand who we are as a spe-

cies, and how far we've come in a relatively short amount of time." Re-setting our zero to 12,000 years ago puts it when we began building our own world (permanent settlements) on top of the old one. This concept was originally proposed by Italian-American scientist Cesare Emiliani to mark this distinct time in history. He suggested that we switch to what he called the Holocene calendar by simply adding 10,000 years to our current Gregorian calendar. Days and months and religious calendars could all stay the same. We'd just need to add a "one" to the front of the way we number our years and add a comma to make it easy to read at a glance.

As Kurzgesagt suggests, a new year Zero for our history could reframe how we think of ourselves. I'd like to take that one step further, by suggesting that as we adopt this more relevant year numbering, we also acknowledge the need to rethink and proofread all of our human-made systems (and constructs and creations and ideas) from the past 12,000 years. Human-Era numbering can signify a *Humane*-Era of questioning our systems. We shouldn't be beholden to what our ancestors declared to be law long before we even existed. Our circumstances have changed tremendously within the last few decades. Dead people's ideas should not get an automatic pass for continuation. But current people's ideas are not all good either. We need to evaluate them all to make sure they're serving us as best they can today.

Can you imagine a future where everyone agrees to check our systems for more humane outcomes? We could be collaborating as a species to re-discover what works well for humans everywhere. Which mindsets, settings, and practices have humans benefited from over the past 12,000 years? How can we implement more of those and less of the ones that are harmful?

PURPOSE: The primary purpose of numbering our years this way is to expand everyone's perspective on time to calibrate our systems for human health

and well-being. A secondary purpose is to remind people of the need to review all human-made systems to make sure they are a net positive and not harmful to humans in the long-run.

OUTCOMES TO MEASURE FOR: Are we setting our systems up for success for humans? Let's review outcomes from both existing and new systems created once this numbering method starts to become popular. The World Health Organization already publishes annual reports on tons of health markers such as global and regional poverty rates, infant mortality rates, and average lifespans. As regions adopt this numbering system, how does the average health data react?

ANTICIPATED CHANGES: There is no telling what we may learn about our ancestors over time as technology and science advances. As our information changes, we may need to expand our time horizons even further, or include more species of animals and plants in the outcomes we measure for.

Global Universal Basic Income

gofundme™
plus
GiveDirectly

> *Money is the most universal and most efficient system of mutual trust ever devised.*
>
> ~YUVAL NOAH HARARI

Crowd-sourced Global Universal Basic Income

This concept can best be described as a global GoFundMe for GiveDirectly. And the idea began to percolate with me when I discovered that we have more than enough spare cash globally to completely eliminate poverty everywhere. If we could sort of shift how we collect and distribute donations, we could efficiently cover every person in the world. What if everyone had a stable source of income that would provide a floor for how low they could sink into poverty? What if everyone everywhere could reliably eat a healthy diet every single day? They could in turn care for others, and those care for others, to infinity.

Universal Basic Income (UBI) is not a new concept at all. Recently it was championed by presidential candidate Andrew Yang, a self-proclaimed nerd and problem-solver. Although it remains unpopular with conservatives, studies have shown that people who receive UBI actually work more than they did before, and they typically spend less money on drugs and alcohol. The data is piling up to prove that UBI can be life-changing and beautifully efficient at the same time. "A recent global study of seven million people in 37 countries found that giving cash directly to poor people led to fewer deaths among women and children," as one *New York Times* article points out. Providing for the most vulnerable among us first is always a good strategy, in my humble opinion.

"Each year the US population spends more money on diets than the amount needed to feed all the hungry people in the rest of the world" according to bestselling author and historian Yuval Noah Harari in his book *Sapiens*. We spend billions of dollars every year on things that do not improve the lives of our poorest citizens. The criminal justice system is fairly well known to cause more harm than

good, as it displaces people and traumatizes their family in the process. That's just one small example, though. We spend *public* money on subsidies and programs of all varieties that could be put to better use. We are not short on the resources. We are short on the willpower to do the hard work of distributing it more evenly and equitably.

According to with Michael Faye with GiveDirectly, the poverty gap has been falling over the last 40 years or so. We would need around $80 billion today to provide for the world's poorest people. At the same time, foreign aid sent out to poor places has been increasing and sits at around $150 billion today—almost twice what we need to empower the poorest people to live well. The math works out. We're just not very efficient at the distribution side of things.

In addition to what we waste and what we distribute messily, the world has more billionaires now than ever before. What if we declared it inhumane to amass any more than $999 million per person? The excess cash of one Elon Musk or Bill Gates or Jeff Bezos could easily seed an endowment fund where we use only the interest to distribute to the world's poorest. Regular people and other nonprofits could contribute to this fund as well. Ideally, we'd begin with the poorest 10% of the world, by geographic area. Then as the fund grows, we could spread out to encompass every human on the planet.

One interesting way that might make UBI even more humane would be to distribute payments once a week, rather than once a month. Studies have shown that people are able to bypass the cognitive load of being poor when they receive the exact *same amount of money* simply divided into four weekly payments instead of one large monthly payment. Their worry and stress levels throughout the month do not fluctuate like they would with payments that come less frequently. Studies have shown that the same farmers who work all year to get one big lump sum pay-

ment after harvest test very differently in cognitive evaluations from before and after the harvest. They test more intelligently and are better able to solve problems once the cash hits. They show signs of cognitive decline in the months leading up to harvest when money is tightest. Spreading out payments on a weekly basis would be a more humane way to shift cash to those who need it.

Another way that might super-charge our relationship with money would be to automatically distribute all deposits to a set of five sub-accounts for each person. Author Mike Michalowicz with *Profit First* for businesses and Dave Ramsey with *Financial Peace* for individuals taps into the way the human brain works to think about money. We're not really set up to keep track of lots of different drafts and deposits and we easily miscalculate how much we have and how much we need. In *Profit First*, people are urged to deposit everything in to one catch-all account, and then once or twice a month, divide up the total in that account to around five sub-accounts that are designated for different purposes (rent, utilities, health-care for individuals; payroll, taxes, profit, etc. for businesses). They've shown that people who put these systems into place for their banking are way more likely to be living "in the black" rather than overspending. Their savings goes up. Their debts decrease over time. And the business or family unit benefits immensely from being able to easily live within their means. If this is the case, then why don't we automatically set up *all* bank accounts this way?

Another area where we would benefit from a global UBI would certainly be in the disaster relief world. We've gotten remarkably good at preventing a lot of deaths from natural disasters, but at a cost to individuals and nonprofits that is steadily rising. A global system already engaged in sending money regularly to most people around the world would also be super helpful when an emergency or disaster strikes. As climate change continues to ramp up the kinds and fre-

quencies of disasters, this should absolutely become a practice we prioritize. As a recent *New York Times* article explains, "experiments suggest that sums as low as $50 can help the world's poorest protect themselves and their property in ways they couldn't otherwise." These experiments have tried out sending cash to people *before* disaster strikes. "Anticipatory cash relief" as it is known, can be transformative for equipping locals to properly prepare for and deal with these ever-increasing disasters. Both sudden and slow disasters displace people and destroy their ability to support themselves. Cash relief can humanely mitigate some of the worst outcomes from group traumas like these.

In a state like Louisiana, we are more than accustomed to dealing with major storms and disruptions. As a child, I was familiar with the occasional ice storm that would shut down power for our small town for a short time. My dad also regularly traveled to south Louisiana to help restore power in the wake of a hurricane. These tended to arrive every three to five years or so back then, but today we sort of assume there will be at least one major disruption to power and water supplies per year. Even way north of the gulf, most people of means in our area are now planning to buy a generator of some description—a small investment could at least save the expense of replacing the entire contents of a refrigerator. Over 15 years ago, the monumental destruction caused by Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans rippled far and wide and was absolutely felt all the way up to the tippy top of the state here in Shreveport.

Yuval Harari points out that "in order to change an existing imagined order, we must first believe in an alternative imagined order." Imagine with me a world where everyone in the line of a storm's path got an extra $50 three days before a hurricane's projected landfall. Not only would they be able to actually leave town if they wanted, but they would also be able to better prepare if they decided to

stay. So many of New Orleans' most vulnerable population were left to ride it out because they had zero means of mobilizing ahead of the storm. They had nowhere to go and no money to get there and even less money to spend on food and supplies to tide them over until home became habitable again.

Advancing a region's population a small cash stipend of sorts could actually save money in the long run. Disasters are increasingly expensive to clean up and communities are hard put to make things right after the entire region is clobbered. Those who are wealthy enough to pay their own way will also benefit from the extra cash. They can choose to spend it on themselves or kick it back to benefit someone else. And they will know they can focus on their own families if those less fortunate are also being cared for by our global funds. Those of us in nearby cities will be better able to provide for refugees, knowing we don't have to shoulder 100% of the expense of housing and feeding everyone.

We always see a huge outpouring of help and love and kindness during disasters. Examples of mutual aid abound in the aftermath of extreme hardships. But wouldn't it be kinder to actually plan for and fund these types of endeavors? Cash is just the most flexible and versatile type of aid anyone could invent. Why wouldn't we choose to use it to our advantage in order to make the lives of our neighbors less crappy? Cash doesn't become a burden like the truckloads of donated clothing and stuffed animals might—well-meaning as they are. Cash doesn't melt and disappear like the truckloads of ice sent to nearby warehouses post-Katrina. Cash doesn't become a toxic, uncomfortable, eventually unlivable and hard-to-move mess like the thousands of FEMA trailers quickly scattered across New Orleans in haste. Cash allows for the personal autonomy that would make any system more humane. Harari also points out that "Money is the most universal and most efficient system of mutual trust ever devised."

PURPOSE: The primary purpose of this system is to eliminate global poverty.

OUTCOMES TO MEASURE FOR: The health and well-being of those impacted by the income, as well as those who live nearby. What's the maternal mortality rate? How many children are able to get an education? Those measurements should show steady, constant improvement in the areas receiving UBI.

ANTICIPATED CHANGES: Expansion of distribution from small geographic areas, to the entire human population of the planet over time. May need to adjust frequency or amount of payments, depending on how areas respond over time.

Coastal Cities

Icons developed for freeway-fighters.org

*We can have a city that is very friendly to **cars**, or a city that is very friendly to **people**.*

We cannot have both.

~ENRIQUE PEÑALOSA

Max 15 mph in town for all vehicles: travel slow and steady to arrive quicker and safer.

40,000 people per year. In the United States, every year 40,000 people are killed on our roads in automobile crashes. That's just a staggeringly large number of people. For a country with 330 million people, those deaths touch the lives of a lot of us. My own father-in-law was killed in an accident in 2006 when a tanker truck driver lost control while reaching for a cell phone. It hits differently when the person they name in a news story is someone you knew and loved. Urban planning consultant Charles Montgomery points out in *Happy City* that the number of people killed amounts to "a third more people than are killed by guns. It's more than ten times the number of people killed in the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001." Whew. That doesn't feel very humane at all.

I've always wished we could make our streets safer. The thing that really blew my mind wide open and made me rethink what was even possible was the fact that the way we drive through cities today is *not* faster than the way we used to move around town. This paragraph by Chuck Marohn in *Confessions of a Recovering Engineer* set into motion a brainstorm of what city life *might* look like if we had different priorities:

"Here is the maddening part: If traffic could flow freely at neighborhood speeds with no traffic signals and red lights to impede it, if people could navigate along city streets at 10 to 15 miles per hour – speeds that might result in a fender bender but rarely a fatality or serious injury – most people would arrive at their

destination quicker." How maddening indeed! But let me check this math really quickly. How can that even be possible?

I pulled out Google Maps on my phone and started looking at the numbers. It is 2.5 miles from our home to my son's public high school. In the mornings with traffic, it generally takes around 10 minutes to drive him there. For easy math, I figured that traveling 15 miles per hour works out to take 4 minutes per mile. If a kid were to bike to school, they could go about 15 miles per hour and let's say they didn't have to stop at all—they could just bike the whole time through every intersection at 15 miles per hour. At that rate without any stopping, they would arrive in 10 minutes. It takes the same amount of time! Car trips with stopping takes the same time as bike trips without stopping. Why don't we know this? Why don't we plan for this? Take a look at your regular morning commute. If it's all within the same city, how many miles does it cover total? Multiply that by 4 to see how much faster or slower *your* commute would be if you could coast on through without stopping.

Now imagine a city where it is totally safe to send your kids out to a friend's house or their ball practice on a bike, or e-bike, or scooter, or golf cart, or gator, or one-wheel, or wheelbarrow for that matter! How much time would you get back in your day from the chauffeuring of children to obligations? How many older citizens could move about more freely on motorized vehicles? How much human life would we save over the course of a year from lack of collisions at high speed? How many families' trauma could we prevent?

The part that makes me hopeful that we can begin shifting priorities in how we plan for transportation is that we used to build our cities for walking, biking, or public transit exclusively. Before cars were more prevalent, most American cities were built for people to move about without the use of an automobile at all!

We have the historic photos and archives to remind us. It wasn't until around the 1950s that most American cities began to show their dedication to automobiles by building highways and extra lanes and parking spaces for cars in the heart of the city. We could easily use those historic images as a reference or aspirational picture of how we could still live today. We aren't required to prioritize cars over humans. And we lived that way before.

In addition to cars not being available to children, they are also the most deadly to children. Marohn points out that "After perinatal conditions, which are problems that occur near or in the immediate months after childbirth, the leading cause of death amongst children ages 0 to 19 is auto accidents. For accidental causes of mortality, there is no close second." That's not a very humane way to treat children at all.

In addition to children, there are plenty of other people who can't (or just don't want to) drive. When you total all of those groups, it comes out to about 30% of the population. We've built today's private car road system that only serves 70% of the population at all. That's also pretty inhumane to people who aren't capable of driving—possibly one of the most vulnerable groups of people that we should absolutely be *helping* not hurting.

In *Happy City*, Charles Montgomery shares the outlook of former Bogotá Mayor Enrique Peñalosa. "In Bogotá, our goal was to make a city for all the children. The measure of a good city is one where a child on a tricycle or bicycle can safely go anywhere. If a city is good for children, it will be good for everybody else. Over the last 80 years we have been making cities much more for cars' mobility than for children's happiness." Bogotá turns out to be a great example of a city which has shifted its priorities to being a great place for everyone to live, not just a great place to drive.

Montgomery uses "happiness" as a proxy to measure for a community's health and well-being. It's hard and nuanced to build a great place for people to live, so planning for happiness will almost always result in healthier outcomes as a sort of byproduct. And the sprawling cities we've built since the 1950s do not make for happier or healthier individuals who live there. We have the data for that, too. He says, "living in low-density sprawl puts residents at greater risk of arthritis, chronic lung disease, digestive problems, headaches, and urinary tract infections." Older style historic districts, or at least those cities not changed much since the 1950s, turn out to be healthier for us than the suburbs! And they're much healthier for us than gated communities just outside of town. "Aside from the financial burden, people who endure long drives tend to experience higher blood pressure and more headaches than those with short commutes. They get frustrated more easily and tend to be grumpier when they get to their destination."

It seems obvious for us to use the concept of sankofa to go back and retrieve the built environment of our pre-1950s neighborhoods. We could more easily put back old and historic neighborhoods than we could build new places. And it turns out that infill and incremental development is precisely what is needed for the average American city that has been stretched thin by sprawl. We can't afford to simply maintain the roads and streets and stroads that we've already built. The data compiled by municipal economic analysis group Urban 3 for Shreveport recently shows that one in five properties are vacant within city limits. But the numbers are more like three out of five vacancies when you look at the oldest and most redlined parts of town that have been here since before 1950.

What might happen if we adjusted our priorities for how our streets work for us? According to Marohn, "An engineer designing a street or road prioritizes the world in this way, no matter how they are instructed: Traffic speed, Traffic volume,

Safety, Cost. The rest of the world generally would prioritize things differently, as follows: Safety, Cost, Traffic volume, Traffic speed. In other words, the engineer first assumes that all traffic must travel at speed. Given that speed, all roads and streets are then designed to handle a projected volume. Once those parameters are set, only then does an engineer look at mitigating for safety and, finally, how to reduce the overall cost (which at that point is nearly always ridiculously expensive)." We could absolutely change the priority in how we build streets. There's no reason we can't rewrite the rules to better serve us.

What if we did eliminate all traffic signals inside city limits? About a quarter of the 40,000 deaths per year happen *at* intersections. It turns out that round-abouts or traffic circles (not the bigger multi-laned traffic rotarys) are way cheaper than traffic signals, they don't use electricity so they're easier to maintain, and they also work exceptionally well during a power outage. In Shreveport when we had widespread power outages recently, most of the main intersections in town did not have power for several days. So most of those intersections became defacto four-way-stops. While the speed of cars traveling through was way slower, the wait time for all of us to cautiously get through the intersection was soooo slow.

What if we adopted traffic circles in town instead of lights everywhere? The town of Carmel, Indiana, has been working hard to do just that since around 1996. On a *Freakonomics Radio* episode titled "Should Traffic Lights Be Abolished?" the mayor of Carmel shares that since 1996, their population has quadrupled, and they have also built more roundabouts than any other city in the United States. They're up to 133 today, and the traditional traffic signals are down to just a handful at 15 of their intersections. So if you look at the data, roundabouts produce only around 1 in 1000 fatal crashes. Most collisions at roundabouts are slow fender-benders, not high-speed crashes. Traditional four-way stops or intersections with traffic

signals produce *four* times that at 4 deaths per 1000 crashes. If we know that traditional intersections are more expensive *and* more deadly, then why are we continuing to build them so much?

The typical American city produces 12 traffic deaths per year per 100,000 people. But Carmel, Indiana, with more roundabouts than traffic signals, produces only two. They've cut their traffic fatalities from 12 to 2 with a more sustainable and humane solution to managing traffic.

If we made all of our intersections slower, that's exactly the type of place where even kids and old people can head out on foot or on 10–15 mph wheels. What if we declared that all older parts of cities would be 15 miles per hour maximum? I like the sound of a "coastal" city since you could think of it as coasting on through town. It may be a little awkward to think about at first, but most people have visited places where getting around on foot or by bike is totally normal. Think of RV parks or camp grounds. Both giant RVs and campers are able to slowly drive into place, and at the same time, kids and adults on bikes and scooters and on foot can freely walk around the whole park without being afraid of being hit by a speeding car. The place is *built* for slow traffic and for pedestrians.

What if car manufacturers mostly made cars that go 15 mph max? Perhaps one family or small group of people could share the "highway car" that does have the ability to get up to 70 mph or so. We'd all be able to live and exist for most days without ever traveling over 15 mph. Without ever putting ourselves or our neighbors at risk. We'd also be able to exist and live without the expense of an automobile. What if you only had to buy or rent a golf cart for each family member? Think of all the benefits for air quality and fossil fuel usage as well. It would be the healthiest for ourselves *and* the planet.

What if the highway car also had a way to make sure the driver is 100% engaged in the task of driving? New technology is being developed daily to attempt to make driving safer. What if you had to keep both hands on the steering wheel or else the car would automatically slow down? Every elliptical exercise machine has a heart rate sensor on the handles. Why couldn't an automobile as well? We could also equip the special highway cars with a flashing light type of alert system for other cars. Anytime the car goes over 15 mph, the lights would alert other drivers, as well as the driver who forgot or got distracted. At the very least, everyone around them would be aware that they are moving at more deadly speeds.

I recently learned that electric vehicles have to actually broadcast a *sound* as they travel. If you've ever been around golf carts, you'll notice that you don't usually hear the engine running. The sounds you hear of a golf cart approaching tend to be non-engine noises—clubs rattling around in the back or voices talking or laughing. Pedestrians and other drivers are not used to a heavy, deathly automobile being as stealthily silent as a golf cart. So manufacturers have added in an audible sound to the operating while vehicles are in motion. What if we worked together to decide which sounds meant 20 mph speeds, which ones signify 40 mph, and which ones indicate the vehicle is traveling 60 mph? The sounds themselves could also serve as an indicator or warning to others about a vehicle driving at an unsafe speed.

At the same time, we should also be wary of relying on technology alone to fix this problem. If you take a step back and look at what actually works to keep people safe, then one other major improvement could happen in how we think of responsibility when it comes to driving. The responsibility should rest at the engineer or designer who decides how the road will be built. It has been shown time and again that signage on roads does not work to make people drive at the

posted speed limit. We shouldn't have speed limit signs posted anywhere, really. The built environment is what ultimately tells people how they should drive. If we feel the need to put a sign up to limit speed, then we should automatically stop and go back to revise the street design itself. Signage shouldn't tell you *how* to drive, only *where* to drive.

In short, if I had a magic wand, I'd declare all in-town driving to be maxed out at 15 mph. We'd get to redesign the roads to honor the way we built our city before the 1950s, and we'd get to demand that car manufacturers prioritize human safety (for humans both inside and outside of the vehicle) over all other measures. Imagine the boost to happiness of a city's population if they no longer had to pay for a car! In a place like Shreveport where 40% of the population is either below or scarily close to the poverty line, it could be a *huge* boost to people's quality of life. Imagine a place where everyone, regardless of background or ability, can move about the city safely and efficiently. Home values would also benefit. In June of 2023 the National Association of Realtors released survey data showing that buyers of all generations are generally willing to pay more to live in walk-able neighborhoods. Let's go back to a mindset where the infrastructure we build serves the community, not the other way around.

PURPOSE: The primary purpose of this system is to eliminate injuries and deaths due to automobile travel.

OUTCOMES TO MEASURE FOR: Ideally we'd have zero traffic fatalities as a country and as a planet. The US Department of Transportation releases an annual report of traffic crash data. Those numbers should decline for coastal cities.

ANTICIPATED CHANGES: Over time, we may need to adjust how much of a city's footprint we dedicate to a coastal zone, as well as how we use technology to aid in the design of streets, public transit, and vehicles of all kinds.

Acknowledgments

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References

You don't have to take my word for it.

~LEVAR BURTON

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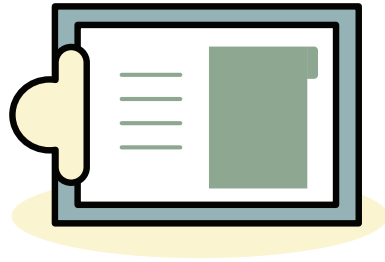
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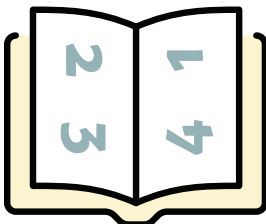
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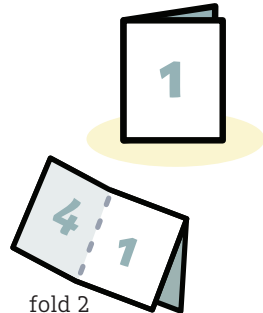
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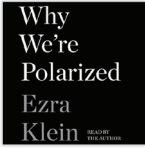
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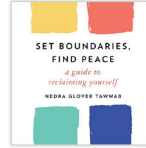
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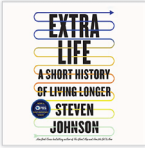
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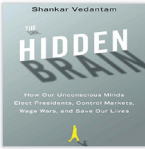
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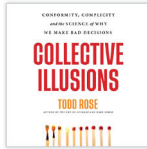
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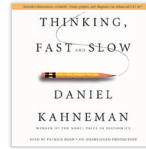
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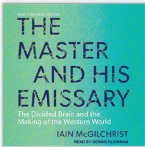
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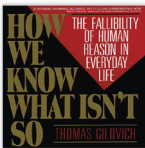
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TODAY

-100 *years*   -100 *years*   +57

GLOBAL POPULATION
1 B — 90%
1.66 B — 72%
8 Billion — 10% Poverty
11 Billion — 0%?

MEAN LIFE EXPECTANCY
35 *years*   40 *years*   80 *years*   100?

INFANT MORTALITY RATE
40%   30%   4%   0?

The Problem:

OUR SYSTEMS

Global population over the past 12,000 years

5 Million Humans 12,000 *years ago*

Abundance Mindset

Scarcity Mindset

11 Billion *by 2080*
8 Billion TODAY

1.66 Billion *in 1900*
1 Billion *in 1800*

Aristotle · Cleopatra · Jesus · Constantine · Muhammad · Charlemagne · Genghis Khan · Gutenberg · Shakespeare · Darwin

Recorded History

10% HEALTHY HUMANS
90% LIVE IN POVERTY

Scientific Method

SOURCE gapminder.org

12,023

The Solution:

A HUMANE ERA

An era where we collaborate to double-check all our human-made systems to make sure they prioritize for human health & well-being, not profit or any other measure of success

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HUMANE SYSTEMS

COMMON CHARACTERISTICS

CREATIVE HUMANE IDEAS

COLLABORATION CARD

Purpose
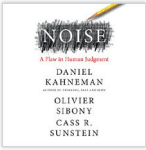
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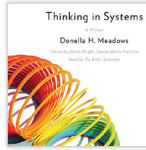
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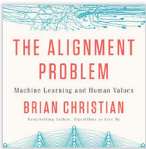
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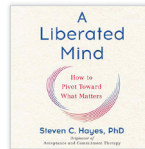
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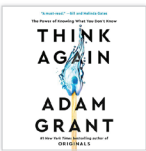
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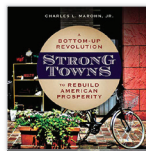
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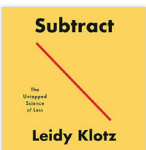
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Should we edit any
SYSTEM?

— D E C I S I O N   T R E E —

Do animals abide this system?

YES → *Nah, this one is good*

NO → **Does it improve human health and well-being?**

YES → *Don't worry about it*

NO → **This one needs work**

What makes a system
HUMANE?

Has an explicitly stated **Purpose** *not ambiguous or assumed*

Makes regular, incremental **Changes** *to adjust for best outcomes*

Humane System

Measures for **Outcomes** *not intentions*

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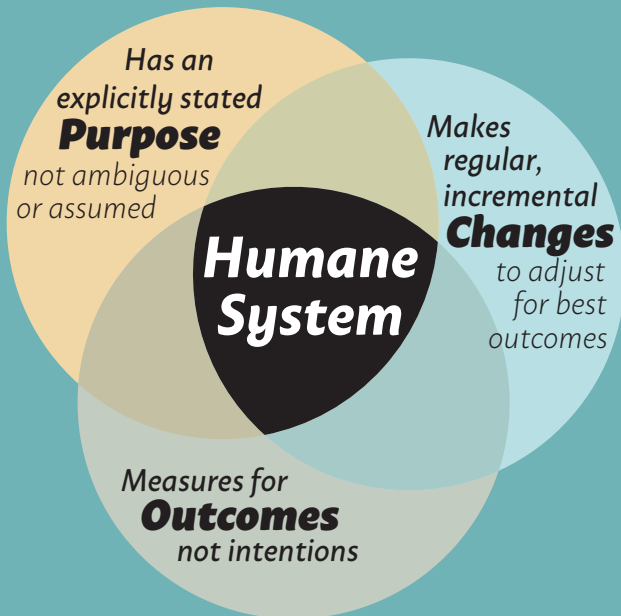
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Assumes the Best of People
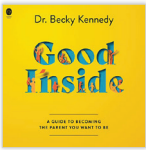
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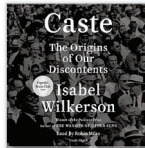
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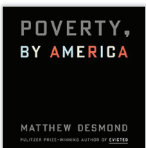
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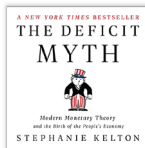
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(How we think about systems)
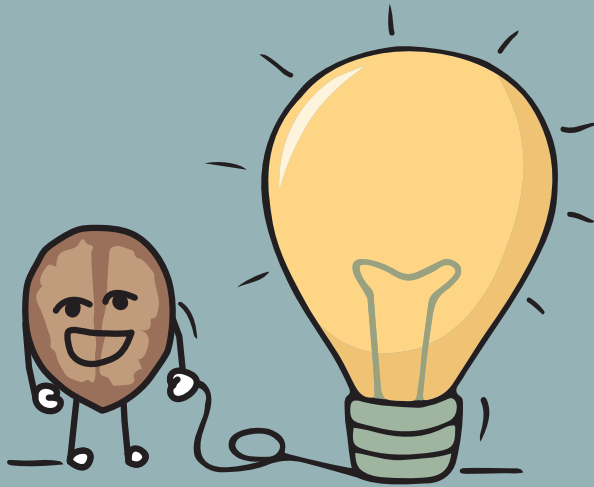
➤ A Humane System is **Distributive** or bottom-up, not top-down.

➤ A Humane System **Assumes the Best** of people.

➤ A Humane System **Assumes Abundance**, it's not a zero-sum game.

➤ A Humane System grants people **Personal Autonomy**.

Least	Less	Neutral	More	Most
✖	◆	◻	▫	●
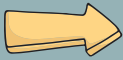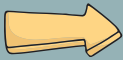
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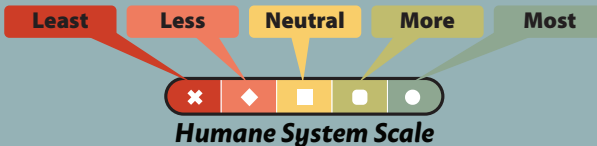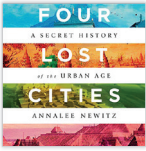
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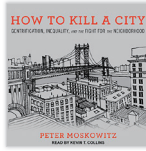
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Plans for the Most Vulnerable First

Walkable City: *How Downtown Can Save America, One Step at a Time* – Written by Jeff Speck
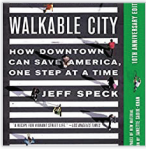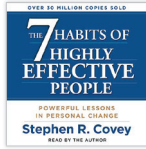
The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: *Powerful Lessons in Personal Change* – Written by Stephen R. Covey

Connects People with Nature
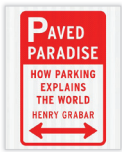
Paved Paradise: *How Parking Explains the World* – Written by Henry Grabar
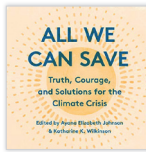
All We Can Save: *Truth, Courage, and Solutions for the Climate Crisis* – Edited by Ayana Elizabeth Johnson & Katharine K. Wilkinson

Values Diversity
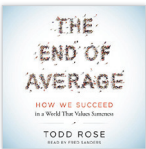
The End of Average: *How We Succeed in a World That Values Sameness* – Written by Todd Rose
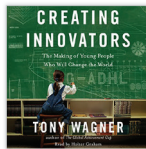
Creating Innovators: *The Making of Young People Who Will Change the World* – Written by Tony Wagner
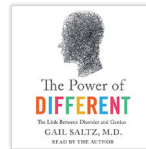
The Power of Different: *The Link Between Disorder and Genius* – Written by Gail Saltz, M.D.
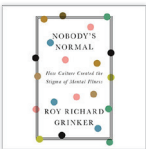
Nobody's Normal: *How Culture Created the Stigma of Mental Illness* – Written by Roy Richard Grinker
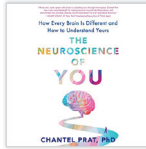
The Neuroscience of You: *How Every Brain is Different and How to Understand Yours* – Written by Chantel Prat, PhD
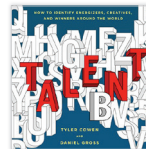
Talent: *How to Identify Energizers, Creatives, and Winners Around the World* – Written by Tyler Cowen and Daniel Gross
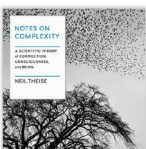
Notes on Complexity: *A Scientific Theory of Connection, Consciousness, and Being* – Written by Neil Theise

SETTING
(Our habitat or surroundings)
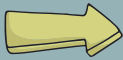
➤ A Humane System builds for success for the **Most Vulnerable** among us first, not just the most powerful or healthiest or most common or status quo.
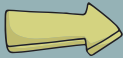
➤ A Humane System **Connects People with Nature**, not synthetic built places 24/7.

➤ A Humane System **Values Diversity**, not homogeneous environments or commercial monocultures.
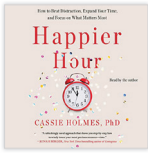
Happier Hour: *How to Beat Distraction, Expand Your Time, and Focus on What Matters Most* – Written by Cassie Holmes, PhD
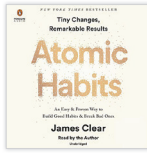
Atomic Habits: *Tiny Changes, Remarkable Results* – Written by James Clear

Enables People to Care for Each Other

People, Power, and Profits: *Progressive Capitalism for an Age of Discontent* – Written by Joseph E. Stiglitz
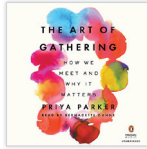
The Art of Gathering: *How We Meet and Why It Matters* – Written by Priya Parker
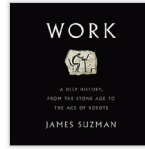
Work: *A Deep History, From the Stone Age to the Age of Robots* – Written by James Suzman

Moves People at a Healthy Pace

Walk: *Slow Down, Wake Up, and Connect at 1-3 Miles per Hour* – Written by Jonathon Stalls
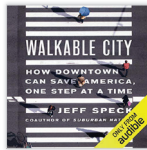
Walkable City: *How Downtown Can Save America, One Step at a Time* - Written by Jeff Speck
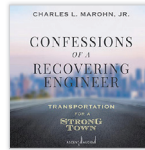
Confessions of a Recovering Engineer: *Transportation for a Strong Town* – Written by Charles L. Marohn, Jr.

Mixes Generations

Hunt, Gather, Parent: *What Ancient Cultures Can Teach Us About the Lose Art of Raising Happy, Helpful Little Humans* – Written by Michaeleen Doucleff, PhD
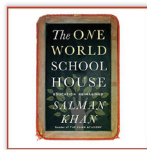
The One World School House: *Education Reimagined* – Written by Salman Khan
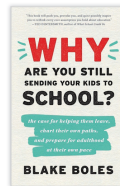
Why Are You Still Sending Your Kids to School: *The Case for Helping Them Leave, Chart Their Own Paths, and Prepare for Adulthood at Their Own Pace* – Written by Blake Boles

PRACTICES

(How we spend our time)
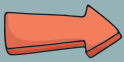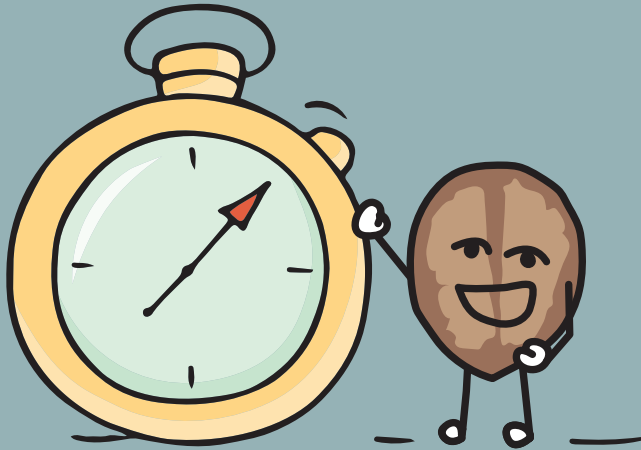
➡ A Humane System empowers us to **Care for Each Other**, not stand as a barrier to care.
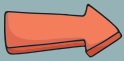
➡ A Humane System **Moves People at a Healthy Pace**, not too fast or slow without protection and safety measures in place.
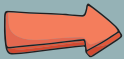
➡ A Humane System groups people in **Multiage and Multigenerational Communities**, not same-age cohorts exclusively.

The Creative Act: *A Way of Being* – Written by Rick Rubin

The Human Side of Innovation: *The Power of People in Love with People* – Written by Mauro Porcini
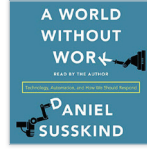
A World Without Work: *Technology, Automation, and How We Should Respond* – Written by Daniel Susskind

Human Scale Year Numbering

A New History for Humanity: *The Human Era* – Kurzgesagt - In a Nutshell (https://youtu.be/czgOWmtGVGs)

When Time Became History: *The Human Era* – Kurzgesagt - In a Nutshell (https://youtu.be/CWu29PRCUvQ)

Global, Crowdfunded UBI

Widespread Poverty is Solvable: *Podcast by Pushkin* – (https://omny.fm/shows/solvable/widespread-poverty-is-solvable)
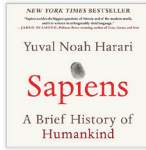
Sapiens: *A Brief History of Humankind* – Written by Yuval Noah Harari
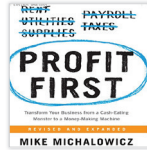
Profit First: *Transform Your Business from a Cash-Eating Monster to a Money-Making Machine* – Written by Mike Michalowicz

A New Kind of Disaster Aid: *Pay People Cash, Before Disaster Strikes* – Written by Somini Sengupta– (https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/03/climate/cash-disaster-relief.html)

Coastal Cities
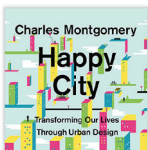
Happy City: *Transforming Our Lives Through Urban Design* – Written by Charles Montgomery
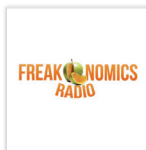
Freakonomics Radio: *Should Traffic Lights Be Abolished?* – episode 454

Creative Humane Ideas
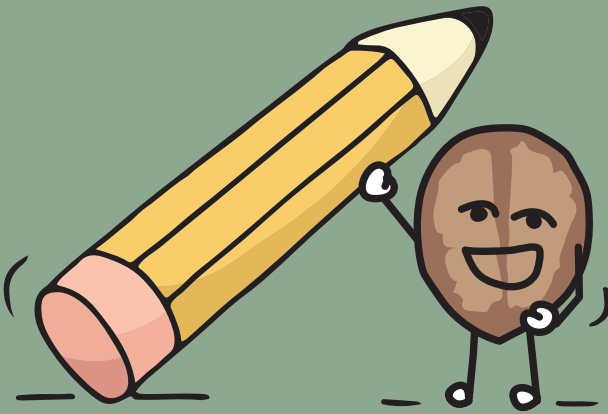
The world is only as free as it allows its artists to be.

~RICK RUBIN

HOW **HUMANE** IS THIS SYSTEM?

System Name

Today's Date

Local, Regional, and National Authorities in charge of this system
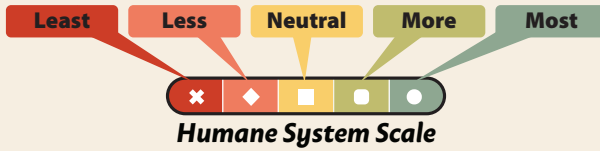

Assessed by System Redesigner:

Who is involved with this system as:

Redesigner's preferred contact information:

		NEEDS WORK	(let it ride)
PRIORITIES	Does it prioritize for **human** health & well-being?	No	Yes
	If not, who or what appears to be the priority:		
HISTORY	Does this system have a stated primary **purpose**?	No	Yes
	Does this system measure for **outcomes**?	No	Yes
	Does it make regular, incremental **changes**?	No	Yes
	Is it free of using **subsidies** to make any changes?	No	Yes

Least	Less	Neutral	More	Most

Humane System Scale

(CIRCLE ONE)

Does this system have an **abundance mindset**?	✖ ◆ ▢ ● ●
Does this system **assume the best of everyone**?	✖ ◆ ▢ ● ●
Is this system **distributive, or bottom-up**?	✖ ◆ ▢ ● ●
Does it grant people **personal autonomy**?	✖ ◆ ▢ ● ●

MINDSET

Does it **plan for the most vulnerable first**?	✖ ◆ ▢ ● ●
Does this system **connect people with nature**?	✖ ◆ ▢ ● ●
Does this system **value diversity**?	✖ ◆ ▢ ● ●

SETTING

Does it empower people to **care for each other**?	✖ ◆ ▢ ● ●
Does this system move at a **healthy pace**?	✖ ◆ ▢ ● ●
Is this system **multi-generational**?	✖ ◆ ▢ ● ●

PRACTICES

HOW TO FIX IT

Collaborate with the System Redesigner(s) who sent you this evaluation. Together, you can edit this system to prioritize for human health and well-being to improve outcomes.

Download free resources, purchase the System Redesign Handbook, or learn more at **System-Redesign.org**

SYSTEM REDESIGN HANDBOOK FOR A HUMANE ERA
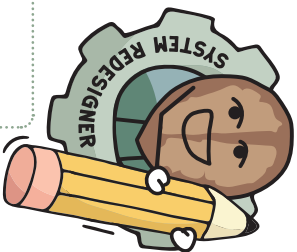
Harnessing 12,000 Years of Knowledge to Edit Systems for Human Thriving

Danielle Williamson Richard

Assessed by System Redesigner:

Who is involved with this system as:

Redesigner's preferred contact information:

SYSTEM REDESIGNER

PRIORITIES

	NEEDS WORK *(let it ride)*	
Does it prioritize for **human** health & well-being?	No	Yes

If not, who or what appears to be the priority:

HISTORY

	NEEDS WORK *(let it ride)*	
Does this system have a stated primary **purpose**?	No	Yes
Does this system measure for **outcomes**?	No	Yes
Does it make regular, incremental **changes**?	No	Yes
Is it free of using **subsidies** to make any changes?	No	Yes

MINDSET

(CIRCLE ONE)

Does this system have an **abundance mindset**?	✖ ◆ ◼ ◼ ●
Does this system **assume the best of everyone**?	✖ ◆ ◼ ◼ ●
Is this system **distributive, or bottom-up**?	✖ ◆ ◼ ◼ ●
Does it grant people **personal autonomy**?	✖ ◆ ◼ ◼ ●

SETTING

Does it **plan for the most vulnerable first**?	✖ ◆ ◼ ◼ ●
Does this system **connect people with nature**?	✖ ◆ ◼ ◼ ●
Does this system **value diversity**?	✖ ◆ ◼ ◼ ●

PRACTICES

Does it empower people to **care for each other**?	✖ ◆ ◼ ◼ ●
Does this system move at a **healthy pace**?	✖ ◆ ◼ ◼ ●
Is this system **multigenerational**?	✖ ◆ ◼ ◼ ●

HOW **HUMANE** IS THIS SYSTEM?

Least | Less | Neutral | More | Most

Humane System Scale

System Name

Today's Date

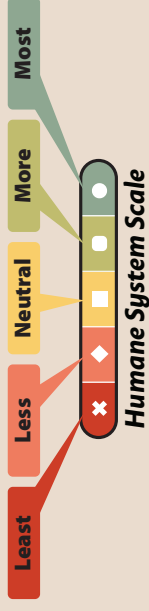Local, Regional, and National Authorities in charge of this system

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HOW TO FIX IT

Collaborate with the System Redesigner(s) who sent you this evaluation. Together, you can edit this system to prioritize for human health and well-being to improve outcomes.

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SYSTEM REDESIGN HANDBOOK

FOR A HUMANE ERA

Harnessing 12,000 Years of Knowledge to Edit Systems for Human Thriving

Danielle Williamson Richard

About the Author

Born and raised in rural northeast Louisiana, Danielle settled in the nearby, medium-sized city of Shreveport with her husband and Shreveport native, James. Together they own and operate Richard Creative, a graphic design and marketing agency serving organizations in the area for over 15 years. Never content to settle for conventional wisdom, Danielle has spent a lifetime studying humans, how they behave, and imagining how we could change things to work better for everyone.
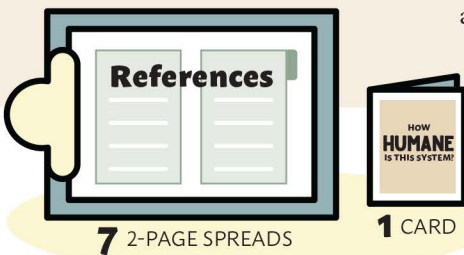
System REDESIGNER

Q: What is a Humane Era?

A: *An era where we collaborate to double-check all our human-made systems to make sure they prioritize for human health & well-being, not profit or any other measure of success*

Become a System Redesigner!

If you've ever been frustrated by the systems that govern our lives, then you've picked up the right book. Danielle Richard is a mother, small business owner and engaged American citizen whose research into why we do things the way we do led her to the conclusion that many of our broken systems can and should be reimagined into systems that directly and effectively benefit the health and well-being of the people they serve. Join Danielle as she takes on public education, democratic government, the justice system and even daily traffic to determine how we as a human community can take action together to stop supporting harmful systems and start ushering in the Humane Era.

References

HOW **HUMANE** IS THIS SYSTEM?

7 2-PAGE SPREADS   **1** CARD

PLUS Download References as FREE Printable PDFs at System-Redesign.org

Includes Reference section to be copied and shared with other system redesigners. Illustrations and definitions explain the Humane Era concept, and a source list provides a jumping off point to learn more. A Collaboration Card is also provided so that you and other community members can start the process of making any system more humane.