

2019 International Essay Contest for Young People

[Youth Category – Honorable Mention]

## **A Kind Earth**

(Original)

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A small hand is outstretched, looking for comfort and reassurance. In the background there is the sound of bombs exploding. At every blast the small hand shudders. It belongs to a child, and the child is frightened. The outstretched hand is soon taken into another, an older hand. This action immediately brings reassurance and after a few moments of gentle pressure, the child begins to settle. Bombs continue to thunder to the ground every few minutes, sometimes appearing further away than before, sometimes closer. Each time the child stirs but is soon calmed by the touch of its guardian. "You are not alone", this gesture of kindness says. Eventually the sounds of war become more and more distant, the child and elder detach, and daily life resumes.

This scene could sadly be representative of many parts of the world today. From Syria to Yemen, there are all too many instances of children being exposed to war and suffering. However, the situation described here is slightly different. Different in that the child and guardian in this instance are not related. They are not even the same species. The scene described here is inspired by the 2014 documentary 'Virunga', where the character of the guardian is a park ranger and the character of the child is an orphaned mountain gorilla. Despite being instructed to evacuate the park at a time of conflict the ranger stays put. He will not abandon the gorillas at their most vulnerable. Instead, he stays and offers comfort.

For me this illustrates the very best of humankind, the selfless act of remaining to comfort the vulnerable, juxtaposed against the worst of humankind, the act of war. Such acts of altruism are what make humans wonderful. This ranger risking his life to protect another species flies in the face of selfish gene theory. In fact, since 1996 more than 130 rangers have died whilst protecting Virunga National Park in the Democratic Republic of Congo from war and exploitation. They died whilst protecting something that could not protect itself. While obviously a very extreme form of kindness, the lessons that can be taken from these rangers on how to build a kinder society are many. Here I will focus on three.

The first is in putting yourself out there to help others even when it does not directly benefit you. This could be as simple an act as waiting a few moments extra to hold the door for someone or as much as volunteering your time at a community club. The second is connecting with the natural world around us. As we become more disconnected from our natural environments, our sense of community disintegrates and leads to problems such as the epidemic of loneliness' seen in many urban areas today. It is no coincidence that areas devoid of natural spaces have a higher occurrence of both mental and physical health problems. We are intrinsically interconnected with nature and being kind to it is being kind to ourselves.

The third lesson is at the core of building a kind society, which is caring for and supporting those most vulnerable within it. We must rebuild and restructure our societies to do so and now could be a critical moment. In a world where many countries are turning inwards and strict borders are being erected, floods are eradicating communities and war is forcing people to search for new places to live. This is when we need to show compassion and kindness. Kindness towards those who have lost their homes. Kindness towards a natural world that is under threat due to our actions. Kindness towards those who are struggling. The benefits of living in such a society are countless. Imagine a place where no one is left behind because of where they were born. A place where all living things can flourish, from the cherry blossom tree to the Asian black bear and down to the humble cricket. That is the society I want to live in. That ranger from Virunga demonstrates the capacity we have for empathy and the kindness we can show one another. Let's start today.