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 Arlington Street Church
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Hardwired for Kindness
With thanks, as always, to Daniel Goleman

I am obsessed with everyday heroism. The more “ordinary” the hero, the better. I collect their stories.

David Baron was finishing his daily walk in a West Palm Beach mall when three-year-old Morgan Scott grabbed the rubber railing of the escalator from the outside and was carried twenty feet above the floor. Horrified bystanders froze; David Baron bounded up the escalator two stairs at a time, grabbed the child’s wrist, and hauled her over the side to safety.

This everyday hero has two artificial hips and a pacemaker. He is almost 90 years old. “Age doesn’t stop you from doing things,” says David Baron. “You don’t think; you just do.... I had to put on my cape and act.”¹

Harvard University’s developmental psychologist Jerome Kagan writes, “Although humans inherit a biological bias that permits [us] to feel anger, jealousy, selfishness, and envy, and to be rude, aggressive, or violent, [we] inherit an even stronger biological bias for kindness, compassion, cooperation, love, and nurture - especially toward those in need.... The sum total of goodness vastly outweighs that of meanness.”²

I am tremendously uplifted by the news that an “inbuilt ethical sense ... ‘is a biological feature of our species.’” And it turns out that hearing about this natural altruism is a key to inspiring it in others. Here is some of the research, and some of the stories.

Charles Darwin’s scholarly work on emotions is still highly regarded. In 1872, he wrote about empathy as a survival factor. So given that “the human

¹ *People* magazine, 4/28/08, p. 112

² Daniel Goleman, *Hardwired for Altruism*, in Melvin McLeod, ed., *The Best Buddhist Writing*, 2007, p. 163

brain contains a system designed to attune us to someone else's distress and prepare us to act to help, why don't we always help?"

It's hard to wade through the conclusions of the zillions of social psychology experiments to make any kind of meaningful conclusions. But author Daniel Goleman says this: "...The simplest answer may be that modern life militates against it: we largely relate to those in need at a distance. That separation means we experience 'cognitive' empathy, rather than the immediacy of direct, emotional contagion. Or worse, we have mere sympathy, where we feel sorry for the person, but do not taste their distress in the least. This more removed relationship weakens the innate impulse to help."³

Scientists Stephanie Preston and Frans de Waal⁴ write, "In today's era of e-mail communication, frequent moves, and bedroom communities, the scales are increasingly tipped against the automatic and accurate perception of others' emotional state, without which empathy is impossible." Daniel Goleman adds, "Modern-day social and virtual distances have created an anomaly in human living ... [that] we now take to be the norm. This separation mutes empathy, [in the absence of which] altruism fails."⁵

Here's a sorry story: At Princeton Theological Seminary, forty students are waiting together. Every fifteen minutes, one of them is called to go to another building, where they will give a short sermon on which they will be graded. Half of the students have been assigned random biblical topics. The other half have been assigned the parable of *The Good Samaritan*.

None of the students knows that they are actually the subject of an experiment on altruism.

The route to the place where they'll deliver their sermon passes a doorway in which a man is slumped, groaning in pain. Of the forty students, twenty-four zip past. Those who are about to preach on the good Samaritan are no more likely to stop than the others.

³ *op cit*, p. 162

⁴ "Preston has pioneered ... methods of social neuroscience to study empathy in humans, and de Waal has ... drawn lessons for human behavior" from primate observation. (Goleman, *op cit*, p. 158)

⁵ *op cit*, p. 163

Here are the conclusions: Interestingly, time matters a lot. Among ten students who thought they were late, only one stopped. Among ten who thought they had extra time, six offered help.

In order to help, we need time. And in order to build an empathic connection, we need to pay attention. *Urban trance* is the name given to the self-absorbed state in which many of us walk our city streets; it's how we navigate the overstimulation. And what jars us out of that trance? We can do it for each other.

Daniel Goleman was headed into the Times Square Station in New York's rush hour when, about halfway down, he saw a man sprawled across the concrete stairs. No one seemed to notice; people were literally stepping over his body.

Daniel Goleman stopped to see what was wrong. And then something remarkable happened: immediately, other people stopped, too. "Messengers of mercy fanned out - one man went to a hot dog stand to get him some food; a woman scurried to get him a bottle of water; another summoned a subway patrol officer, who ... radioed for help. And "within minutes, the man was revived, eating happily, and waiting for an ambulance.... He had fainted from hunger, there on the subway steps.

"What made the difference? Just noticing." When Daniel Goleman stopped, other passersby were snapped out of their urban trance. As they gave their attention to the fallen man's plight, they were moved to help⁶.

We all have a "shift-away" reflex. It's how we manage our anxiety about seeing yet another person in distress in a city full of distressed persons. But if just one of us can bring ourselves to pay attention, the tide will turn. "Just hearing about someone lending a helping hand can ... [induce] a warm sense of uplift," what psychologists call *elevation*. It doesn't have to be on the Mother Teresa scale; in a study in Japan, for example, people recounted incidents of what they call "*kandou*, times when the heart is ... moved," such as "seeing a tough-looking gang member give up his seat on [the] train to an elderly [gentleman]. *Elevation ... is catching.*"⁷

⁶ *op cit*, p. 150

⁷ *op cit*, p. 151

Because I spent time wandering through countries in which I did not speak the language, and might be wandering, still, if kind souls hadn't stopped to turn my map right side up and point me home, I make a spiritual practice of walking up to tourists who have stopped to try to get their bearings. In less than a minute, each of us can be ambassadors for this great city, and change a visitor's experience in a deeply rewarding interaction.

I read about a woman whose car was wrecked in a head-on collision. She was pinned in the wreckage with a broken leg. As emergency personnel worked to free her, a passerby whose name she never learned came over to her and knelt by her side. He held her hand, and reassured her. It made a huge difference; because of him, she was not alone with her pain, helplessness, and fear. "He was," she said, "my angel."⁸

I experienced *elevation - kandou* - in hearing this story. This is a way any of us could make ourselves useful - indispensable, even - at the scene of an accident. Time, attention, and empathy: perhaps that's all it takes to be an angel.

My spiritual companions, once again, we are called, as people of spirit, to be *counter-cultural*; we are called to bound up the escalator stairs after the toddler in distress, artificial hips and all; called to a spiritual practice of spaciousness that will yield the time and attention necessary to break out of our urban trance and break in on others' suffering; called to model an end to the "shift-away" response and a beginning to *elevation* or *kandou*, that contagious sense of being uplifted by ordinary altruism. With a moment's notice, we could put on our cape and, with a moment's kindness, we could change absolutely everything ... starting with ourselves. How about this; let's really shake things up!

Let's be everyday heros.

Let's be angels!

⁸ *op cit*, p. 156-157