

Altruism in Man and Beast

By Dennis Payton Knight

Altruism is defined simply as the practice of concern for the welfare of others. It is not a very complicated ideal at all, but the word has acquired the connotation of being moralistic and high minded and so we run from it. It seems audacious for common folk to claim it when mostly we go through life in the salt mines just trading our energies for the low minded selfishness of making a living.

As models for the human race, Jesus and the Buddha were altruists in the most unfettered form. So were Mary and Joseph. In contemporary generations Mother Theresa of Calcutta and Father Flanagan of Boy's Town come to mind, as do Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi.

As long as one is concerned for the good of others, a person can even be altruistic and still make a living at it. Teachers, nurses, doctors, librarians and lawyers fit that bill. Soldiers, sailors, marines, firemen and policemen put their lives on the line every day for the welfare of others. How many search and rescue operations are carried out every year in Colorado by altruists of the highest degree?

Newspapers and television outlets are not often motivated to send investigative journalists reporters out to find evidence of altruism, but once in a while you will catch an account of it. Yesterday's news, for instance, showed amidst reports of crime and mayhem, footage of a young man, a passing stranger diving into the Louisiana flood to pull a middle-aged lady from a car swallowed in the rising waters. Then, at her frantic request, he dove back and saved her dog.

Animals are also known to be altruistic, so perhaps the selflessness and empathy that defines the virtue is part of nature. Dolphins are known to support sick or injured animals, even humans, by swimming and churning under them to create turbulence, bubbles and buoyancy lifting them to the surface so they can breathe. Walruses adopt orphans left by parents deceased. Mongooses selflessly bring sustenance to their own elderly or sick brethren. Monkeys sound alarms to warn their fellows of the presence of danger, at the death risk of drawing attention to themselves.

Altruism is such an unrecognized tenet of living that mothers and fathers routinely make sacrifices every day for their children, or for each other, without a thought. Children, grandchildren, grandparents, brothers and sisters, friends and neighbors can all be charged with unselfish acts of altruism. Merely opening doors and other kindnesses to strangers are seen as acts of chivalry, but it is really altruism by another Knight, and it is not extinct.

And so, the notion of altruism is not so lofty after all, and the chances are you, too are guilty. Remember when you dug down to pay too much for cookies just to keep the Girl Scouts in business? Congratulations. You made the rank of Altruist, and that tasty Thin Mint cookie is your merit badge.