

from the editors

WHEN WE HEAR THE TERM “INSPIRATION,” we often think of Jackson Pollock or Albert Einstein in a creative frenzy, filling canvasses or notebooks with a perpetual flow of ideas. We get inspired by the big and the bold, and believe inspiration emanates from the individual minds of true visionaries.

But there’s a social side to inspiration, too, and that’s the subject of the symposium in this issue of *Greater Good*. A great deal of recent scientific research—much of it highlighted in the pages of this magazine—has suggested that humans have a real and deep-seated propensity for compassion, and that there are ways to teach people to be kinder and more empathetic. In making the case for a more benevolent conception of human nature, a key piece of evidence is our ability to be inspired by the courage and kindness of others. The English language doesn’t really have a specific and simple term for this type of inspiration, but here we call it “moral inspiration.” As this issue’s contributors make clear, moral inspiration demonstrates people’s profound attraction to the better side of humanity, and it seems to move us to practice altruism as well.

The essays in this issue map out the science of moral inspiration, and examine its role in contributing to the greater good. Jonathan Haidt explains his groundbreaking research into the psychological effects of moral inspiration. His work was so unprecedented that it led him to “discover” a new emotion, which he calls “elevation.” Haidt defines elevation as the warm, uplifting feeling we get from witnessing unexpected acts of human goodness. It’s similar to our sense of awe when we’re in the presence of a giant building or beautiful landscape or great work of art. But not only is elevation characterized by a distinct physiological response, Haidt has found that it actually makes people want to act better themselves. His research has pointed to the seemingly instinctive appeal, and vast social benefits, of altruistic behavior.

In the next essay, noted psychologist Howard Gardner and co-author Wendy Fischman present very practical applications of this type of research. Their essay draws from years spent researching the roots of “good work”—work that is of high quality, done ethically, and contributes positively to society. As anyone who’s been following the latest corporate accounting scandals might suspect, the authors have found that good work is in short supply—especially among young profes-

sionals, who seem to lack a well-developed sense of ethics or a commitment to anything beyond their own self-interest. But there may be an antidote. Fischman and Gardner have observed the importance of “inspirational mentors,” veterans who demonstrate to the younger generation how work can be both personally meaningful and socially responsible. Their research suggests that today’s rapidly changing professional landscape need not degenerate professional morals and values. Instead, they’ve identified ways for individuals and their employers to inspire the next generation of workers to answer the highest callings of their professions.

And the effects of moral inspiration extend well beyond our work lives. The PeaceJam program is an especially compelling example of this. Jes Ward, a onetime PeaceJam participant who now helps to run the program, describes in her essay how PeaceJam has brought hundreds of thousands of youth face-to-face with Nobel Peace Prize Laureates, who inspire with their remarkable stories, stirring presence, and the interest they show in each program participant. The result is a multiplier effect of altruism, with the Nobel Peace Prize winners influencing young people to become more peaceful, active citizens in communities across the country and around the world.

What each of these essays reveals is the human inclination, perhaps even the need, to draw inspiration from other people’s good deeds. With this inspiration comes a deep sense of interconnectedness as we recognize that we share a great capacity for goodness with those around us. And these feelings aren’t valuable just because they make us feel good: They can also infect entire communities with an enduring sense of compassion and a desire to act kindly toward others.

Like a great piece of art, then, altruistic acts not only spring from inspiration, they have the power to inspire. Even in times of war and cultural upheaval, the contributors to this issue of *Greater Good* show that we can put stock in the transformative power of everyday acts of kindness and compassion. As we continue to search for the origins of human goodness, we must recognize that a key source is the example we set for one another.

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Greater Good (ISBN #1553-3239) collects, synthesizes, and interprets groundbreaking scientific research into the roots of compassion, altruism, and peaceful human relationships. It fuses this cutting edge science with inspiring stories, promoting dialogue between social scientists and parents, teachers, community leaders, and policy makers.

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