



GOOD IDEA:

CHEER UP: WE'RE BUILT TO CARE

When someone says that humans are programmed to harm—rather than care for—one another, most Americans nod in agreement. After all, it's easy to extrapolate from the headlines that people are hardwired for violence (terrorists in Mumbai), greed (AIG executives), or both.

Yet Bay Area academics are disproving this cynical assumption with hard science. **Dacher Keltner**, a psychologist who codirects UC Berkeley's **Greater Good Science Center**, says that although negative emotions like anger get the bulk of scientific attention, a growing body of research proves that generosity, not monstrosity, carries the most neurological benefits. At a lab in Zurich, for example, researchers gave volunteers a nasal spray juiced up with the naturally occurring neuropeptide oxytocin, which is associated with pleasure, and then had them do money-sharing experiments. "The results showed the highest rate of profound generosity ever observed in the human species," Keltner recently told an audience in Berkeley. "Half of the subjects give away their money: 'Here, I'll never see you again, I love you!'" At his center, Keltner's research focuses on the neurological basis for such qualities as love, gratitude, compassion, and awe.

Stanford neurosurgeon **Jim Doty** also interprets this emerging science as a repudiation of the prevailing dark view of human nature. The **Dalai Lama**—who has a long-standing interest in how meditation alters the brain—donated \$150,000 to help Doty form Stanford's new **Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education**. Youthful San Francisco philanthropist **Lee Hwang** has ponied up as well, giving Keltner's center half a million dollars to market a message once spread by religious institutions. In our secular age, he says, goodness needs scientific cachet. The stakes are high, Keltner says: If society doesn't recognize that we're happier giving and sacrificing, rather than buying stuff and becoming socially isolated, then "we're in dire trouble." ■ **JOCELYN WIENER**

The manifold horrors of the world notwithstanding, scientists have discovered that human beings are genetically predisposed to care about and help one another—a message, they say, that society needs to acknowledge if it wants to save itself.