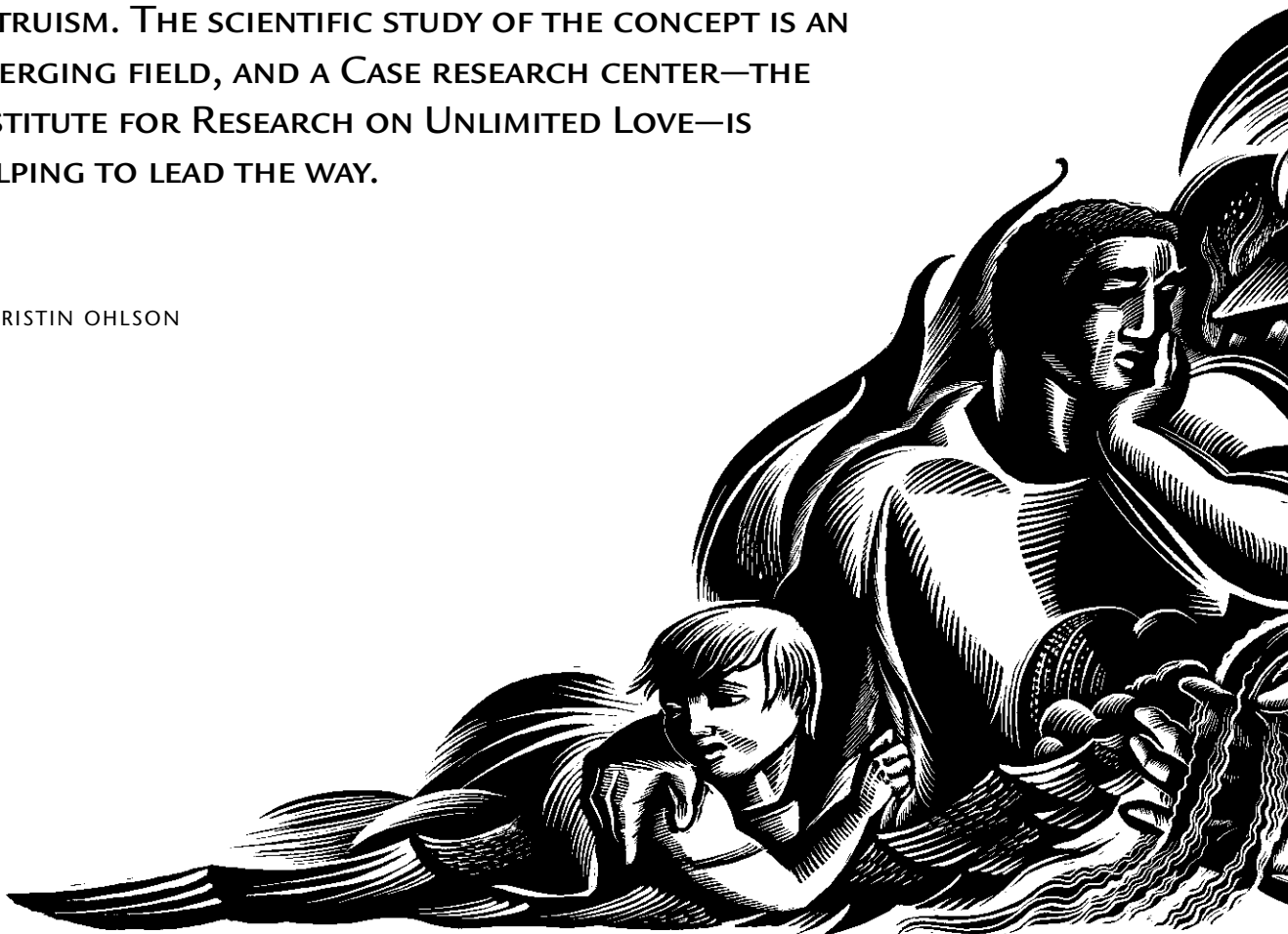


# It's Good to Be Good

ALTRUISM. THE SCIENTIFIC STUDY OF THE CONCEPT IS AN EMERGING FIELD, AND A CASE RESEARCH CENTER—THE INSTITUTE FOR RESEARCH ON UNLIMITED LOVE—IS HELPING TO LEAD THE WAY.

BY KRISTIN OHLSON







*“With generous behavior, people have fuller lives, deeper self-esteem, and a more creative engagement of their capacities.” –Stephen Post*

Stephen Post’s office doesn’t look like the headquarters of an international movement aiming to debunk modern cynicism.

It looks like an ordinary office. It doesn’t even have a lake-view window to enhance visionary contemplation. Still, if you ask the Case Western Reserve University bioethicist if the Institute for Research on Unlimited Love (IRUL) has an actual physical location, he nods cheerfully.

“It’s here,” he says, swiveling in his chair to gesture at his filing cabinet, the piles of paper and books on his desk, the cardboard boxes on the floor, the clippings on his wall, and the shopping bags loaded with brochures. “This is the place.”

Despite these humble appearances, Prof. Post—a professor of bioethics in the Case School of Medicine with secondary appointments in religion, philosophy, and family

medicine—and his intriguingly named institute have gained much national attention since he founded it in 2001 with a start-up grant from the Templeton Foundation.

From headlines in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* (“Solving the Puzzle of Love”) to the *Christian Science Monitor* (“Scientists Put Love Under the Microscope”), the national media, glutted on stories of murder and mayhem, has raised a collective eyebrow at IRUL’s mission to create a new dialogue on the nature of love.

Not just any kind of love, mind you. Not giddy romantic love, not love of country, certainly not love of chocolate or designer shoes. Beginning with an initial set of twenty-six projects funded in 2002, IRUL has enlisted top scientists from more than fifteen disciplines to explore the source, dimensions, and impact of altruism—love extended to others without exception and without expectation of personal gain. The kind of love enshrined in the golden rule,

the kind championed for centuries by the world's great moral and spiritual traditions, East and West.

Prof. Post intends for IRUL to create a grand new dialogue about altruism and human nature, not just among theologians and philosophers—it's been their meat and potatoes for years—but among others: neuroscientists, epidemiologists, business theorists, healthcare managers, biographers, educators.

In short, everyone.

### THE SCIENCE OF SELFLESSNESS

In 1999, Stephen Post co-chaired a pathbreaking conference called "Empathy, Altruism and Agape: Perspectives on Love in Science and Religion." Sponsored by the Templeton Foundation and the Fetzer Institute, the conference pulled together leading thinkers from science, philosophy, and religion to discuss the evolutionary, developmental, psychological, social, cultural, and religious aspects of altruistic behavior.

The following year, Prof. Post was approached by the Templeton Foundation to launch an institute that would

fund scientists across the nation to explore altruism through a variety of high-quality, peer-reviewed studies.

He gathered an international advisory board that includes such people as Rosalyn Carter; Dame Cicely Saunders, founder of St. Christopher's Hospice in London; and Millard Fuller, founder and president of Habitat for Humanity International.

The newly formed IRUL sent out 60,000 requests for proposals to universities around the country and

received 320 proposals. These were reviewed by a panel of experts.

Then, 20 percent of those who submitted were invited to submit full proposals, each of which was rigorously reviewed again—a review process modeled after that of the National Institutes of Health.

The twenty-six funded researchers will discuss the progress of their work in a conference this May, in Washington D.C. The results, of course, are not preordained: Prof. Post acknowledges that some researchers may discover there are limits to the human capacity for goodness.

"Science is science and it will do what it does," Prof. Post says. "What I hope for is an integrated image of human nature. Given the kind of science that's emerged with the last decade and the previous work of some of these researchers, I expect we'll be able to present a very positive view of the human potential for goodness."

In one project, psychologist Alan Fogel of the University of Utah is studying mothers and their young children. The director of the Fogel Infant Lab defines maternal love as the total acceptance of a young child, in which all the child's emotions—happy, sad, or mad enough to throw a bowl of oatmeal across the room—are accepted with respect and caring.

### MODEL MOTHERS

For his IRUL grant, Dr. Fogel is looking at how the quality of maternal love affects the development of empathy among children. He's also tracking whether the mothers who are open to their children's and others' emotions have some sort of spiritual foundation in their lives.

Dr. Fogel and his team are videotaping interactions among mothers and children. Two-year-olds and their mothers are given "emotion" dolls to play with—ones with faces that are happy, sad, scared, and so on. Some mothers are quick to model empathy for their children. For instance, they hug the sad dolls and show how to offer comfort.

The researchers watch to see if their children mimic this act of empathy. When the children are five years old, Dr. Fogel and his team will interview both mothers and children. He hypothesizes that the five-year-olds whose mothers had earlier been able to model an empathic reaction to the doll will have matured to be more sensitive to the emotions of others than those with mothers who did not model such empathy.

The researcher explains that IRUL's invitation to explore positive human emotions and spiritual connections is novel in the world of research funding.

"This effort to fund high-quality studies of love is certainly new," Dr. Fogel says. "In developmental psychology, we've been studying the mother-child relationship for one hundred fifty years, but we use words like 'attachment' and 'maternal sensitivity.'"

"After I got this grant," he continues, "I told my department chair that, after doing this work for the last thirty years, I could finally say I was studying love and still be scientifically credible."

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– psychologist Alan Fogel,  
University of Utah

## POST PRIMER

Stephen Post began thinking about these ideas back in high school, where the famed African-American theologian John W. Walker was a teacher, and discussions often arose about theology, ethics, and social activism.

As an undergraduate, Prof. Post veered toward science—especially evolutionary biology, which he thought might someday be able to explain people like Mother Teresa and others who showed generosity and kindness that crossed kinship and other lines. He went on to work as a research assistant in endocrinology at Cornell University's medical school after he graduated with a degree in biology and marine science.

Then he turned west to the University of Chicago to get a doctoral degree in ethics and society, writing his dissertation on the history of the concept of altruism in Western thought.

When he came to Case in 1988, he began working with Alzheimer's patients and their caregivers. In his book, *The Moral Challenge of Alzheimer Disease: Ethical Issues from Diagnosis to Dying* (the Johns Hopkins University Press), published in 1995 and updated in 2000, he discusses the moral basis for humane and dignified care for people with dementia even though society tends to dismiss the cognitively impaired.

Prof. Post is also editor in chief of the third edition of *The Encyclopedia of Bioethics* (Macmillan Reference, 2004), the definitive five-volume reference in the field.

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## GENUINE GENEROSITY

Another IRUL researcher is tracking altruistic behavior from an entirely different perspective.

Anthropologist Christopher Boehm of the University of Southern California, director of the Jane Goodall Research Center, is compiling and assessing a database of Paleolithic-type hunter-gatherer societies, looking for instances where these people practiced generosity outside of family ties

and extended themselves to unrelated strangers without expectation of reciprocation.

This kind of generosity would help refute the assumptions of evolutionary biologists who claim that true altruism takes place only within families.

"The majority of biologists today are committed to a scientific approach that assumes evolution involves competition among individuals—therefore, human nature has to be entirely selfish," says Dr. Boehm, who witnessed many instances of non-kin generosity among chimpanzees during six years of work with Jane Goodall.

"I will be looking at hundreds of books on these people to find such instances. Then I'll be using some new and controversial biological models to explain why genuine generosity should be possible in a species that, today, biologists tell us must be entirely selfish."

## "AN OVERWHELMING LOVE"

A third Institute for Research on Unlimited Love researcher, Courtney Cowart, is using the extraordinary human lab that sprang into existence after the planes hit the World Trade Center to gauge the source and impact of altruistic behavior.

Dr. Cowart, who teaches at the Center for Christian Spirituality at New York's General Theological Seminary, was on the street a block south of the north tower when it collapsed. She was one of the first people to return to nearby St. Paul's Chapel to try to help.

St. Paul's soon became the center of a vast relief effort involving 5,000 volunteers, who tended to workers during the nine months of recovering bodies and clearing away the destroyed buildings. The helping began spontaneously, with people showing up to cook hot dogs and hamburgers for recovery workers, and the church opening its doors to anyone who needed to rest and turn their eyes away from the horror.

For the entire nine months, starting September 15, volunteers were in the chapel around the clock to provide food, fresh clothing, and anything else the recovery workers might need. Massage therapists set up tables, musicians played for the crowd, podiatrists tended to the feet of recovery workers whose boots had started to melt in the hot rubble—these and thousands of other people gave up their ordinary lives to help others.

Dr. Cowart began to interview volunteers and recovery workers by the end of 2001 and continued to interview them toward the end of the recovery and clean-up effort.

"My challenge has been to develop a framework for the data," she says. "I needed to develop categories that would be understood both by social scientists who study human behavior and theologians who are interested in speaking about how God works through people in the world."

And what have the interviews told her thus far? One of the great surprises is that the interviewees most frequently used the word "love" to describe their experience, even though Dr. Cowart carefully did not mention IRUL's name in her interviews for fear of prejudicing the direction of their remarks.

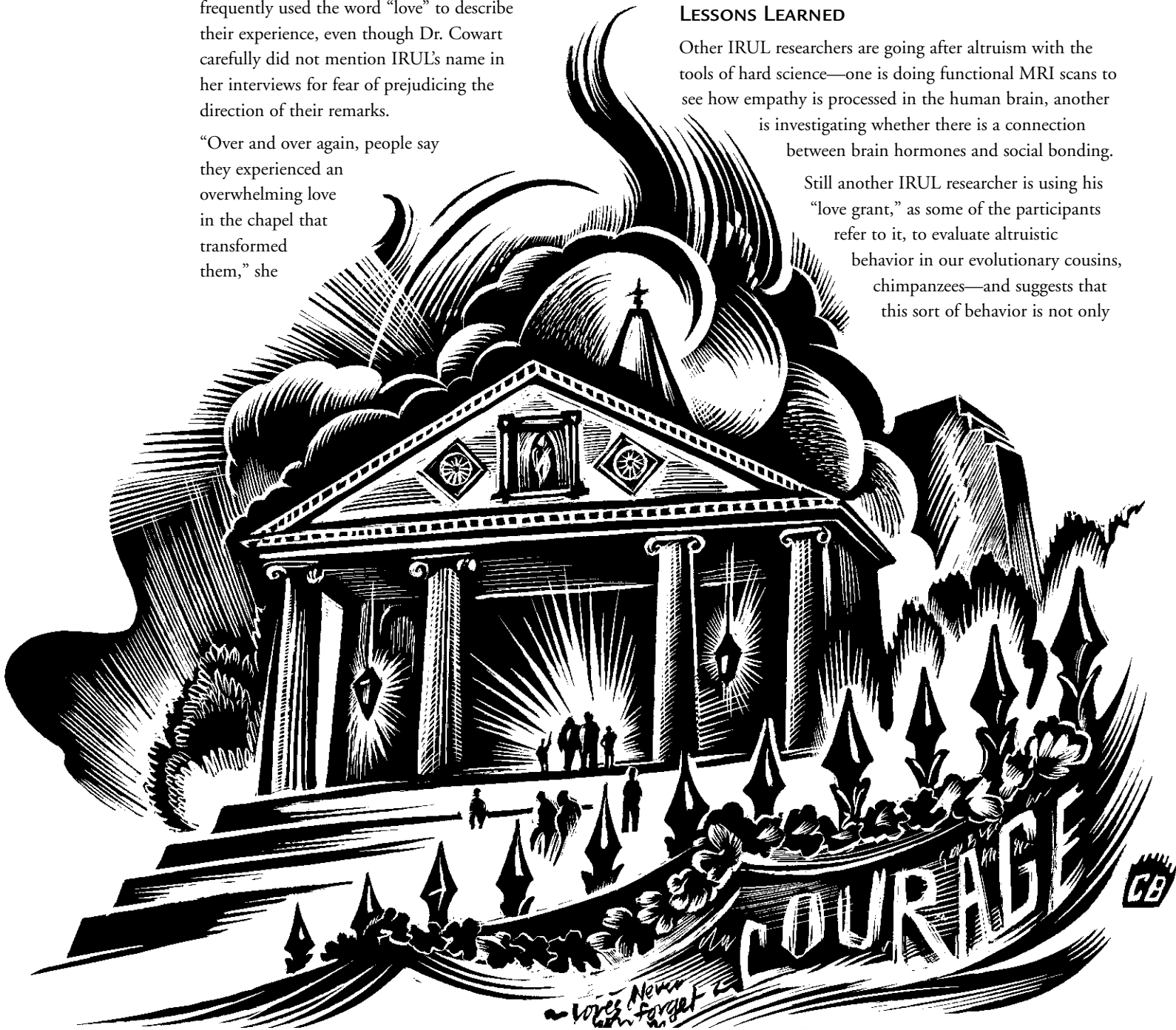
"Over and over again, people say they experienced an overwhelming love in the chapel that transformed them," she

says. "The vast majority describe this experience as something beyond anything they've ever experienced before or since, and they reach for spiritual or religious language to try to describe it. Even I, as a theologian, am just overwhelmed by the language coming out of these interviews."

### LESSONS LEARNED

Other IRUL researchers are going after altruism with the tools of hard science—one is doing functional MRI scans to see how empathy is processed in the human brain, another is investigating whether there is a connection between brain hormones and social bonding.

Still another IRUL researcher is using his "love grant," as some of the participants refer to it, to evaluate altruistic behavior in our evolutionary cousins, chimpanzees—and suggests that this sort of behavior is not only



natural to humans, but that it flows through our evolutionary tree.

The preliminary discussion of the IRUL grantees' work in May will cap a recent spate of other discoveries about the

sunny side of human nature. For instance, in one five-year study of 423 elderly couples, researchers found that people who reported helping others were only about half as likely to die in the five years as those who did not.

## A CENTURY OF BAD NEWS

Stephen Post believes there's urgency to this dialogue.

"This is a time of incredible fragmentation in the world," Prof. Post says. "There's a tremendous clash of religions, cultures, and political systems, and the stakes are very high because of developments in technology. There's an urgency for discovering what allows us to rise above all these tensions and affirm a common humanity."

According to the professor, the idea of human goodness took an unprecedented drubbing in the last century. While people have debated humanity's relative goodness and badness for centuries, most saw human nature as a balance between positive and negative motivations, between altruism and egoism.

But certain influential twentieth-century thinkers upset this balance, Prof. Post contends. Sigmund Freud argued that human nature can be boiled down to two fundamental tendencies: Eros, a desire to have that is grasping and selfish, and Thanatos, a fascination with conflict and death.

Among the many blows Sigmund Freud dealt to the concept of human nature, he asserted that even a parent's love of a child was narcissistic: Parents see their own images in their child,

so when they love the child, they are really only loving themselves.

"Freud missed the whole trajectory of unconditional love," Prof. Post says. "To him, human nature was nothing but a seething, boiling caldron of self-interest. He saw civilization as just a thin veneer over this caldron."

Jean-Paul Sartre parsed the existentialist view that, at some level, people are always out to manipulate each other—for him, too, human kindness, if displayed, was just window dressing for an ulterior, selfish motive. "It's difficult to overstate the negative influence of secular existentialism on the culture of the Western world for the last sixty years," Prof. Post says. "It's a view of deep pessimism and cynicism about human kindness."

According to Prof. Post, two more influential scientists distorted the twentieth-century view of human nature. One was behavioral psychologist B. F. Skinner. Based on experiments with rats, Skinner concluded that all animal behavior—including human behavior—springs from either the desire to experience pleasure or to avoid pain.

The other was Harvard evolutionary biologist Edward Wilson, who spent decades studying ants. He concluded that, while it was possible for people to have generous, un-Freudlike love for

those who share our innermost pool of genes, our behavior to anyone outside our kin is strictly tit-for-tat, pure self-interest. Dr. Wilson claimed that Mother Teresa toiled among India's poor only for reputational gain.

Many of these ideas began to lose cachet toward the end of the century, in part because University of Wisconsin psychologist Harry Harlow and others suggested that science was overly absorbed in its study of negative human behavior and emotions. One researcher pointed out that, over 40 years, there were 100,000 reviewed studies of depression and only seven on happiness.

Dr. Harlow began looking at rhesus monkeys for models of behavior that more closely resembled that of humans. While it's hard to see gratitude or delight or generosity in a rat, Dr. Harlow and a new generation of researchers began to examine positive emotions in primates.

"How many of our perceptions of human nature have been skewed by rat studies?" says Prof. Post. "So many of these viewpoints were based on bad science and jaded pedagogical speculation, but they created a tremendous burden of proof for anyone who wanted to say otherwise."

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A study of 2,000 Presbyterians showed that mental-health improvements were more closely linked to giving help than receiving it. In a ten-year study of nuns, neurologists reviewing essays the nuns had written back in the 1930s found that the nuns whose essays expressed positive emotions outlived the others by an average of ten years and were slightly less likely to develop dementia.

Another study found that volunteerism reduces the risk of depression in young people, and that those who volunteer do better in school and get into better colleges.

The lesson from all these studies? “It’s good to be good,” Prof. Post says. “With generous behavior, people have fuller lives, deeper self-esteem, and a more creative engagement of their capacities.”

### THE KINDNESS OF STRANGERS

Despite this upsurge of good news, Stephen Post believes that another fifteen years of solid studies on positive

behavior are needed to arrive at a full understanding of human nature. And he believes human health depends on it—that while many scientists believe today’s research must be slanted toward disease and debility in order to develop cures, it’s quite possible that a more profound understanding of altruism may prevent such conditions in the first place.

Prof. Post, whose 2003 book *Unlimited Love: Altruism, Compassion, and Service* (Templeton Foundation Press) summarized IRUL’s work to date, hopes the institute’s

efforts and similar studies will help in two ways.

The wisdom of the studies could be deployed programmatically—for instance, by creating more volunteer opportunities for elders, or by encouraging children to study models of altruism from Martin Luther King Jr. to people in their neighborhood.

Second, as more and more headlines trumpet the benefits of caring and sharing, people may realize that they have a spring of goodness inside them, despite several decades of being told by scientists that they’re genetically doomed to selfishness. They may be encouraged to allow it to flow more freely.

“I think all this shows that when you live for others as much as for yourself, you’re going with the grain of human nature,

*“Even I, as a theologian, am just overwhelmed by the language coming out of these interviews.”*

*—Courtney Cowart,  
New York’s General  
Theological Seminary*

### A GRAND NEW DIALOGUE

Other IRUL researchers are:

- Investigating how much the expectation of gratitude affects organ donors and how much the ability to express gratitude affects the health of patients post-transplant;
- Examining whether partners of breast-cancer patients who practice a daily “compassionate, loving-intention practice”—similar to Buddhist tonglen practice—are able to boost the patient’s emotional and physical health;
- Studying whether veterans who have loving, supportive relationships are less likely to develop post-traumatic stress disorder than those who do not;
- Creating a national database that examines the extent of altruism in the sample and tracks which factors—level of education, gender, religion, etc.—might contribute to greater levels of altruism;
- Examining the different factors that influence middle-class African American youth in becoming more involved in their religious and civic communities;
- Studying how the brain processes the emotions of others using brain scans—for instance, people will be scanned while watching a video of hospital patients describing distressing aspects of their disease or treatment.

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even the grain of the universe,” says Prof. Post. “It’s all paradoxical: In the giving of self lies the unsought discovery of self.” ☒

*Cleveland-area writer Kristin Ohlson published a memoir, Stalking the Divine (Hyperion), last year. She has written articles and essays for such publications as the New York Times, Salon.com, and Discover.*

ILLUSTRATIONS BY CATHIE BLECK

*For more information, check IRUL’s website at [www.unlimitedloveinstitute.org](http://www.unlimitedloveinstitute.org), where you can sign up for IRUL’s e-newsletter.*