

**Podcast #23 REVISED – ARE WE INHERENTLY GOOD OR
BAD?**

People have debated human nature for a long time. Questions about whether people are basically good or evil, whether they are basically aggressive or kind, or whether they are fundamentally selfish or cooperative have been the stuff of debates in religion, philosophy, psychology, and biology for decades and even centuries. There is certainly a long and deeply rooted tradition in our society to understand people as essentially motivated by greed and self-interest. After all, isn't the ethos of a market driven capitalist economy one in which the collective good is supposed to result from everyone pursuing his or her own selfish aims? Adam Smith, himself, put it this way: *"It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest."*

And certainly there are so many examples all around us of people cheating others in order to get ahead, that such behavior seems almost natural. This view of human nature as basically destructive is found in my own field of psychoanalysis where Freud 's influence has been strongly felt. Freud believed

that people shared with other animals certain fundamental instincts that were basically narcissistic, aggressive and hedonistic. And, finally, various religious traditions, particularly the more fundamentalist variations, are inclined to view people as sinners at heart and in need of redemption.

So I think that it's fair to say that many if not most of us have a grim view of what makes people—what makes *us* – tick, and, frankly, it's not very flattering. If we are basically bad, basically selfish, then it follows that any vision we might have of a cooperative and caring society, or of a utopian future based on love, charity, and mutuality is a naïve pipe dream. Those of us who believe in such a possible future will forever be ridiculed and told to be “realistic.”

Fortunately, this bleak view of our nature is wrong. The fact that people act in ways that are self-centered, competitive, and aggressive is undeniable, but the reasons they do so have little to do with their innate temperament or nature. Instead, such dark drives arise from a combination of childhood trauma and destructive social norms. At the heart of our being, we are hardwired to be empathic, cooperative, and altruistic. These instincts are often invisible to ourselves and others because we

have learned that they aren't "normal," except under very circumscribed conditions.

The developmental research on the appearance and development of empathy and altruistic behavior (researchers call this "pro-social" behavior) couldn't be clearer. As Zahn-Waxler and others have found, children just a little past the first year of life begin to comfort others in distress. The appearance of this early capacity for concern and caretaking is a developmental milestone and strongly suggests that altruism is a biological fact, "wired" in and ready for expression given sufficient development and an environment that facilitates it. If the child's caretaking environment lacks empathy and models coldness or detachment, the child's innate propensity for altruism is nipped in the bud.

Interestingly, we also see the breakthrough of our capacity and need for cooperation and altruism in the aftermath of a natural disaster. Rebecca Solnit has written extensively about this phenomenon in her book *A Paradise Built In Hell*. She describes the aftermath of the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, the Halifax Explosion, the Mexico City earthquake, the World Trade Center attack, and Hurricane Katrina. In each case, she chronicles the spontaneous

outpouring of connectedness and mutual assistance. People became their brothers' keepers. Solnit puts it this way: "*At these moments in which the old order no longer exists, people improvise rescues, shelters and communities.*" Strangers become friends, money plays little role, and goods and services are shared freely. I experienced this frequently and directly after the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake in the San Francisco Bay Area. People checked in on neighbors they had previously barely said hello to. For many, life was lived mostly out of doors in public. Old divides melted away. For example, since all power was out in my neighborhood, traffic lights weren't working and chaos at busy intersections seemed likely. Twice, I saw a homeless person stride to the middle of these intersections and start to direct traffic. Drivers were thankful, and in the new world in which we were living, this almost seemed normal.

The new normal that appeared after these catastrophes didn't last. The reasons often had more to do with the imposition of external police authority than because people couldn't manage on their own. To some people at the top, these amazing communities that sprung up seemed like chaos that needed to be contained. But to most people on the ground

within them, it seemed like something they'd always longed for and believed in. Again, Solnit says it well: *These remarkable societies suggest that, just as many machines reset themselves to their original settings after a power outage, so human beings reset themselves to something altruist, communitarian, resourceful and imaginative after a disaster, that we revert to something we already know how to do. The possibility of paradise is already within us as default setting.*

I would say, in addition, that when social structures and role relationships and expectations all break down, it becomes safe to express our innate, but buried inclinations to feel and show empathy and to help – and allow ourselves to be helped by—others.

I think we grow up in families and live in a society in which dependency is frowned on and caretaking is legitimate only in families and usually only between parents and children. Altruism is considered normal in our relationships to our children, but not outside the family. It's embarrassing to reveal our longings for caretaking and it's thought to be intrusive or patronizing to be too helpful to others. But under certain conditions, these perfectly normal and innate longings to give and receive help are freed up. It happens in wartime among

soldiers. It happens among people who are poor and victimized. It happens in 12 step groups and in some religious communities. It happens during moments of political upheaval and protest.

I think that Solnit is right that these feelings and instincts are innate in all of us. Some people would argue that selfishness is adaptive and altruism is self-defeating in our dog-eat-dog world. My response is that we need to change that world so that people can choose altruism. If we can create environments in which altruism can be safely expressed, then given the choice, in the long run altruism is rewarded. Well known evolutionary biologist David Sloan Wilson put it this way: *“While selfishness may beat altruism within a group, altruist groups beat selfish groups. All the rest is commentary.”*