

The 467th Convocation

Address: "Altruism Examined"

By Jeanne C. Marsh

December 7, 2001

It is my great pleasure to welcome you to the 467th convocation of the University of Chicago. It is a privilege to offer the graduates a few final words—one last lecture—before you depart the University. In doing so, I take to heart the view of former Governor Mario Cuomo. He said that convocation speakers should remember they are like the body at an old-fashioned wake. They need you to have the party, but nobody really expects you to say very much.

First, a few words about you, the graduates of the 467th convocation. You are like all previous graduates of this institution in that each of you has elected to experience the rigorous and demanding form of education for which the institution is well-known. You take seriously the life of the mind. You have made a commitment to rigorous thought and independent judgment. At the same time you are different— as a cohort—from previous graduates of this institution: you are the first to convene here since the September 11 attacks on the United States. By virtue of this experience, you have some shared insights that your predecessors did not.

Much has been said about the transient and lasting effects of September 11 on individuals and nations. We have read countless articles, obituaries, and op-ed pieces. We have seen numerous video clips. The images are indelible; they have soaked permanently into our collective experience. Let me ask you to recall for a moment the images you hold in your mind's eye since September 11. I am sure in your collection, as in mine, you find the following:

You see firefighters and police officers, each carrying eighty to one-hundred pounds of lifesaving equipment, surging up darkened stairwells as uncertain workers make their way down. Many of these firefighters and police officers will never be seen again.

You see coworkers struggling to carry a wheelchair-bound colleague down smoky flights of stairs, as the people around them make way and offer words of encouragement.

You see blood donors across the country lining up around city blocks, insisting on being given the chance to “do something,” to give something of themselves to the victims.

You see schoolchildren organizing penny drives and bake sales; musicians and entertainers giving impromptu concerts; journalists organizing relief funds—all collecting hundreds of millions of dollars to aid victims and their families.

You see harried bureaucrats in New York’s vast social service system working with unexpected calm and compassion to distribute information and relief to victims and their families.

As we flip through these images, we have to be startled by the intensity and the enormity of the desire to help. We have to be stunned by the immediacy, the clarity, and the certainty of the altruistic response. We have to ask: What is this? Where does this come from? What do we know and what can we learn about the altruistic impulse? It is the purpose of my remarks to reflect on these questions.

As educated women and men thinking about altruism, we are apt to come rather quickly to the conclusion that genuine altruism is impossible. Indeed, when I told my well-educated daughter the topic of today’s remarks, she said, “You know, there really is no such thing as altruism.” Tom Wilson captures our skepticism when he asks, “If people are put on earth to help others, what are the others here for?” We learn very early that much of what happens around us can be explained by self-interest. The market mentality has seeped deeply into our thinking. Further, these ideas receive strong support from social science theory. As social work scholar Jerome Wakefield has shown, the vast majority of social science theories explain altruistic behavior primarily in nonaltruistic terms. These theoretical explanations describe how apparently altruistic behaviors are not really altruistic at their core. In his review of these theories, Wakefield identifies many types of would-be altruists in social science theory: the “hedonistic” altruist, the “operationally conditioned” altruist, the “discharging instinctual impulse” altruist, the “rational economic calculator” altruist, and the “optimizing reproductive fitness” altruist.

These prevailing perspectives of altruism are disconcerting to all of us in the face of our response to the events of September 11. How can we explain the immediate and selfless responses to the tragedy? This dilemma is familiar to social workers and social work scholars. On the one hand, the altruistic impulse—the desire to “do good”—is fundamental to social work. It is a defining feature of the social work profession. On the other hand, social workers adhere to and, on a daily basis, use the very theoretical frameworks that dismiss the possibility of altruism. So unless they can find alternatives to the prevailing explanation of altruism, social workers are left to justify their work and social services more generally in terms of enlightened self-interest. Without alternative explanations, social workers—and, indeed, those inclined to be helpful—are vulnerable to being dismissed cynically either as “do-gooders” serving narcissistic self-interest or as “agents of social control” serving the interests of others.

In his book entitled *The Professional Altruist*, Roy Lubove describes how social workers come to understand the meaning of altruism. He describes the social work profession as one that exists to perform certain altruistic societal functions that can be accomplished more effectively by professionals than by individual citizens. In his title, Lubove captures the fundamental tension that confronts social workers. If a professional is one who receives remuneration for applying expert knowledge, and if an altruist is one who responds out of unrestrained generosity, how is it possible to have a *professional altruist*? As Lubove’s book explains, human motivation is complex: it is possible to do “good works” and to be rewarded. Social psychologists have shown us that it may be a little more difficult to experience the internal rewards of altruistic acts when external rewards such as money are attached, but it is not impossible. Indeed, practicing social workers report that, given the modest size of their external rewards, it is the internal rewards that keep them going.

Increasingly, studies in social work, as well as in evolutionary biology, developmental psychology, social psychology and sociology are documenting the source and functioning of the altruistic response. A key insight in this research is that it is possible for humans to have more than one motive at the same time and to use our powers of language and thinking to make choices to act on some motives and not on others. Thus, we recognize that one of the reasons we act with kindness and generosity is that we want to help—we care about others. We also know

that we feel better when we can reduce another person's distress. This motive is the self-interested one: to feel better by reducing another person's distress. What we fail to consider is that we can have more than one set of desires at the same time. And, we can use language and thinking to regulate these desires. We want to help others and we want to feel good about doing it, all at the same time. For example, the schoolchildren feel better knowing their pennies will reduce the hardship for victims of September 11, but this knowledge is distinct from their basic desire to help, "to do something." As Wakefield notes, it is possible to understand altruism by drawing a distinction between a first-order desire for another's welfare and a second-order desire that may be self-interested. Thus, our basic puzzle about altruism results from confusing two different desires as one.

Teddy Roosevelt's view of altruism was that "the only quality worse than hardness of heart is softness of head." In these views Roosevelt was in complete agreement with Edith Abbott, founding mother of the School of Social Service Administration at the University of Chicago. Abbott brought the school into the University in 1920 in order to make "service scientific." She complained that "our public charitable institutions have been left to policies of drift, chance, and fate instead of being placed under competent management. . . . Too often benevolence is still considered a matter for the heart rather than the head." In founding the school, she brought to the study of social service, of altruistic behavior, and of altruistic institutions the same respect for ideas, for rigorous analysis, and for critical judgment that characterizes the University of Chicago as a whole. She advocated benevolence as a matter for the head as well as the heart.

Today I leave you with a similar message as you march through the chapel doors. By virtue of our shared experience on September 11, we have learned the depth of our desire to help, to respond with generosity to those around us. By virtue of your time at the University, you have learned the depth of your commitment to ideas and to free and independent thought. I hope that you leave the chapel never doubting the certainty of your altruistic impulse, confident that you are well prepared to continue your work with the combined virtues of a critical and inquiring mind and a generous and open heart.

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