Is Giving Genetic?

By Cassandra Clifford
Friday, March 19 10:59 pm EST
I stumbled across this piece on IRIN, Is humanitarianism genetic?, looking at various creatures like ants or bees, who will give their individual lives in sacrifice of that of the rest of the ‘colony’, challenge Darwin’s theory of the survival of the fittest. The article was written in response to a recent paper, Altruism, Spite, and Greenbeards, which looked at the genetic factors behind altruism.

IRIN asked, “Is the altruism of humanitarians a genetically programmed function to preserve our global hive?”

“By asking if humanitarianism is genetic, you assume aid work is attached to altruism, which I do not believe to be the case for all aid workers by any stretch,” commented one aid worker, who has been in the field for a decade, and asked to remain anonymous.

Personally I am going to have to agree from my no scientific, but personal and professional experiences as both a volunteer and director of a 100% volunteer led organization. While I do believe some people are just born that way, others learn by example, and many others use volunteerism simply as a step-up and a resume builder.

Genetics cannot explain all behaviours, Stuart West, co-author of the report told IRIN.

“There does seem to be some evidence that genes directly influence the level of helping in humans. However, this is relatively negligible when compared to other factors such as environmental conditions [and] learnt behaviours.”

It does seem to be true that children of humanitarian driven families are more altruistic and looking back at my own family tree, it seems selfless giving has always been an ingrained behavior that may well be inherited. However the example set may have been just as powerful as the bloodlines draw to ‘do good’. Therefore give your children the example of altruism to inherit and pass down across the generations.

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Bill Hewitt on 22/03/2010 in 12:58
I don’t know about “genetic” but Francis Hutcheson, one of the seminal thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment, regarded human goodness as “innate.” This is, of course, also a core Buddhist teaching.

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