

The Sacrificial Instinct

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Think we don't care about others? Think again. *the Star* examines the compassionate side of human nature.

Here is a question for the season of festivals. Where do the miseries of the outer world and the celebrations of your personal life connect? Where do you fit in?

The initial reaction is to treat such questions as fruitless sentiments. But then the sky goes dark, and the street lights and the house lights in the villages and the cities pop on, and you are faced with yourself. Bertrand Russell wrote an essay about all that, a short but intriguing essay called "Three Passions I Have Lived For." Here are Russell's three: The longing for love; the search for knowledge; and what he called "the unbearable pity for the suffering of mankind."

The first two require no external reminders. It is the third passion, the overwhelming sympathy for the suffering of others that seems to call for frequent updating.

Compassion leading to altruism?

Feeling compassion is one thing; acting on it is another. Does compassion promote altruistic behaviour? In his research, social psychologist Daniel Batson, makes the case that it does. According to Batson, when we encounter people in need or distress, we often imagine what their experience is like. To take the perspective of another is not only one of the most human of capacities; it is one of the most important aspects of our ability to fulfil the social contract. When we take the other's perspective, we feel an empathic state of concern and are motivated to address that person's needs and enhance that person's welfare, sometimes even at our own expense. If our minds draw an association between a victim and ourselves — even a relatively trivial one — the compassion we feel for his or her suffering is amplified greatly. And