

A school in Tibet: Altruism remains a mysterious force

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On an ordinary day some ten years ago, when I was in the midst of a long-forgotten project, a call came from preschool: “You need to pick up Andy. The nurse found head lice.” So began my first encounter with the horror, the shame, the benightedness—I had no idea then how common and manageable it could be—of this medieval infestation. I rushed over, and a solemn-faced nurse relinquished our child from his quarantine, along with an instruction sheet calculated to provoke alarm. Every article in the house was to be cleaned and deloused, every teddy bear, every curtain, every cushion, every sock. Andy’s head was to be scoured with a toxic shampoo whose perils to skin, eye and nervous system, advertised by many lines of small print, made me cringe. My husband was in California, leaving me to face all this alone. Rescue came quickly, however, in the form of Andy’s godmother, who held Andy over the basement sink while I shampooed him, and our friend Eileen, who vacuumed away the imaginary hordes of lice, did several laundries, and drove back the invasion by the sheer force of her altruistic competence.

Ten years later, Eileen has embarked with her family on another mission of mercy, this time in a remote Tibetan village. A word of explanation: Eileen’s husband, Dechen, was born to nomadic pastoralists in the Ser Valley of eastern Tibet. When he was five, Dechen joined two brothers at a nearby monastery headed by their cousin, a revered lama in the Nyingma tradition. There he received a classical Tibetan Buddhist education, with the expectation of spending the rest of his days as a monk. In 1957, however, with the destruction of the monastery looming, Dechen, the lama and their extended family fled through the Himalayas disguised as beggars, concealing their numbers by walking in one another’s footprints and hiding in the hills of western Tibet until it became possible to cross the border into Sikkim.

The journey took four months. Some stayed in Sikkim and others emigrated to Switzerland, but Dechen, after a sojourn in India and Taiwan, came to New England. Here he met and married Eileen, and together they made a living cleaning houses,

raised a son and daughter and helped to establish a Nyingma Buddhist temple in the Berkshire hills.

Forty-three years later, after surmounting endless bureaucratic hurdles, Dechen returned to Tibet for the first time, witnessed the reconsecration of his monastery, and saw firsthand how his people have been marginalized in their own land. This remote eastern Tibetan region has the highest rate of illiteracy and poverty in China; it is without electricity, safe water supply and adequate schools. For want of education, the villagers are practically shut out from future economic development. The long-awaited rebuilding of the monastery, though encouraging, is not sufficient to revitalize their culture.

Dechen and Eileen resolved to return and, provided the villagers welcomed their idea, start a school that would give children and adults basic literacy and math skills. Without resources other than their retirement savings and the donations of a few friends, they embarked—just when a comfortable retirement was beginning to beckon—into uncharted territory. I watched with admiration as Eileen collected used clothes, games, puzzles and makeshift school supplies, drew up curriculum plans and prepared to cope with the high altitude and rough living conditions she would face. In 2004, Dechen and Eileen and their children formed the Tashi Nyima Foundation and opened their first one-room schoolhouse. Little by little they have been expanding their scope to include nutrition, sanitation, health care, early child development and scholarships for higher education.

Little by little, they seem to be making a difference. Dechen's monastic credentials and kinship ties inspire trust, and the villagers can see the essential goodness and warmth of his family, the gentle nonintrusive way in which they offer their services and the utter lack of egotism in the whole venture. Dechen and Eileen want nothing more than to turn the school over to the local families; only thus can it be hoped that the young people, once educated, will remain attached to their own community.

What accounts for this kind of altruism? For Eileen and her family, it's a matter of simple compassion. From a Buddhist perspective, it makes perfect sense: to transfer the merit of compassionate deeds to the account of others is a more central Buddhist observance than sitting in serene meditation. Loving service counts for more than private self-realization; tradition and family count for more than innovation and autonomy. Perhaps that's why I feel a sense of gratitude in the presence of my friends' home shrine, however our religious paths diverge.

Altruism is, as E. O. Wilson put it long ago, the “enduring, unsolved paradox” of evolutionary biology. What makes one teenager instantly spring up to offer a bus seat to his elder, while his friend remains in an iPod trance? Social conditioning and do-gooder satisfaction are strong factors, yet not strong enough to assure every graying matron a seat on the bus. Altruism remains a mysterious third force—as mysterious as enlightenment, as mysterious as grace.