Humility is the Key to Altruism, Georgetown Psychologist Says

When she was 19 years old, Abigail Marsh swerved her car to avoid a dog and ended up in a car wreck that almost claimed her life. She was saved by a stranger, a man she recalls looked vaguely like the actor Idris Elba.

The man ran across four lanes of freeway traffic to save her. She never saw him again.

The ordeal left Marsh with gnawing questions: *Why did he do it? What makes people do things for strangers with little regard for their own well-being? Why are some people more altruistic than others?*

When the questions would not go away, Marsh eventually decided to pursue answers in her academic research.

More than 20 years later, Marsh, today an associate professor of psychology at Georgetown University, believes she has an answer, which she shared in a recent Ted Talk.

After studying altruism for many years, Marsh discovered that altruistic people appear to have brains that are different in fundamental ways, a discovery that began through studying the brains of psychopaths.

She and her colleagues at the National Institute of Mental Health conducted some of the first brain imaging research ever conducted on psychopathic adolescents. They found that psychopaths are poor at recognizing others' fears and have amygdalas—the area of the brain that detects fear in others—significantly smaller (about 18 percent) than a typical person.

Marsh, observing that altruism is essentially the opposite of psychopathy, wondered if brains of altruistic people would show the opposite. Would the brains of altruistic people have *larger* amygdalas and would they be *better* at recognizing fear and discomfort in others?

Marsh decided to test the hypothesis. The theory turned out to be correct. Altruistic people do have larger amygdalas than an average person (about 8 percent bigger) and are better at detecting fear and distress in others.

This suggests there is a sort of "caring continuum" that exists across humanity, with altruists on one side and psychopaths on the other.

But why? Why do some people have the capacity to help total strangers the way they would a brother or dear friend, even when an action poses considerable risk?

Marsh decided to ask her subjects what they thought made them different. Their answers were telling. *Nothing*, they tended to say. *I'm no different than anyone else.*

What Marsh found in the altruists she studied was an extraordinary lack of self-centeredness. "It's not about me," one woman answered, when asked why she gave her kidney to a stranger.

Another person said this: "I'm not different. I'm not unique. Your study here is going to find out that I'm just the same as you."

Marsh said the common trait found in altruists is best described in a single word: *humility*.

Marsh's observation is fascinating. It brings to mind something St. Augustine once said about humility, a word that comes from the Latin term *humilitas*, which means "grounded" or literally "from the earth."

"*Humilitas homines sanctis angelis similes facit*," Augustine wrote, "*et superbia ex angelis demones facit*." (English translation: "It was pride that changed angels into devils; it is humility that makes men as angels.")

Augustine, like Marsh, found that humility is the key to the

better angels of man's nature. It's a point rooted in the Biblical tradition.

According to Christian teaching, there is one thing we know for certain that Satan cannot do: serve. *Non serviam* ("I will not serve") is the phrase attributed to Lucifer when he rejected God and his place in Heaven. This is of course in stark contrast to Jesus of Nazareth, who throughout Christian scriptures is described and depicted as a servant.

Considering the importance of humility, one cannot help but observe a disconcerting truth: it appears to be in short supply today. In fact, some prominent voices have already declared its death.

One wonders if this is perhaps because, as some have argued, humility might be a uniquely religious virtue.

As Thomas Aquinas pointed out, humility is not an idea one will find in Plato or Aristotle. Enlightenment thinkers like Spinoza saw no need for it. Postmodernists, such as Nietzsche, viewed it with cynicism. Ayn Rand openly scorned it, calling humility "a rejection of morality."

If humility is a uniquely religious idea, then it stands to reason that a society that becomes less religious will have less need of or desire for it. I do not mean to suggest that only religious people are humble or that humility will vanish entirely, only that humility may slowly disappear as people forget why it's important in the first place.

Cultural observations aside, Marsh's research does make a compelling point on which many people can likely agree: humility *is* a virtue, one that bears real fruit.