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ELEVATION AND THE POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY OF MORALITY

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The power of positive moral emotions to uplift and transform people has long been known, but not by psychologists. In 1771, Thomas Jefferson's friend Robert Skipwith wrote to him asking for advice on what books to buy for his library, and for his own education. Jefferson sent back a long list of titles in history, philosophy, and natural science. But in addition to these obviously educational works, Jefferson advised the inclusion of some works of fiction. Jefferson justified this advice by pointing to the beneficial emotional effects of great fiction:

Every thing is useful which contributes to fix us in the principles and practice of virtue. When any . . . act of charity or of gratitude, for instance, is presented either to our sight or imagination, we are deeply impressed with its beauty and feel a strong desire in ourselves of doing charitable and grateful acts also. On the contrary when we see or read of any atrocious deed, we are disgusted with its deformity and conceive an abhorrence of vice. Now every emotion of this kind is an exercise of our virtuous dispositions; and dispositions of the mind, like limbs of the body, acquire strength by exercise. (Jefferson, 1771/1975, pp. 349–350)

Jefferson goes on to say that the physical feelings and motivational effects caused by a good novel are as powerful as those caused by real episodes:

[I ask whether] the fidelity of Nelson, and generosity of Blandford in Marmontel do not dilate [the reader's] breast, and elevate his sentiments

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as much as any similar incident which real history can furnish? Does he not in fact feel himself a better man while reading them, and privately covenant to copy the fair example? (1771/1975, p. 350)

I have quoted this passage at length because it serves as an abstract for this chapter. Jefferson identified, more than 200 years ago, the major features of an emotion that I have begun to call “elevation” (Haidt, 2000). Elevation is elicited by acts of virtue or moral beauty; it causes warm, open feelings (“dilation”?) in the chest; and it motivates people to behave more virtuously themselves (to “covenant to copy the fair example”). Elevation therefore seems to fit easily into modern appraisal theories of emotion (e.g., Frijda, 1986; Lazarus, 1991). Yet elevation, and some related positive moral emotions¹ (e.g., awe, gratitude, admiration), have received almost no attention from emotion researchers. I suggest that attention to such emotions is crucial for a full understanding of human morality, and I think that a major contribution of positive psychology will be to explore and publicize these positive moral emotions.

To explain how elevation works, and why no modern researcher has studied it, I must first discuss the three dimensions of social cognition: solidarity, hierarchy, and elevation. But to explain these three dimensions I must first take a detour to Flatland.

THE THIRD DIMENSION OF SOCIAL COGNITION

Flatland is a mythical two-dimensional world created by Edwin Abbott, an English mathematician and novelist (Abbott, 1884/1952). The inhabitants of Flatland are two-dimensional geometric figures, including the protagonist of the novel, a square. One day the square is visited by a stranger from a three-dimensional country called Spaceland. The visitor is a sphere, but when a sphere comes to Flatland, all that is visible is the transection of the sphere as it passes through the plane of Flatland—in other words, a circle. The square is amazed by the way this circle is able to grow or shrink at will (by rising or sinking into the plane of Flatland) and even to disappear and reappear in a different place. The sphere tries to explain the concept of the third dimension to the two-dimensional square, but the square is

¹The moral emotions can be defined as “those emotions that are linked to the interests or welfare either of society as a whole or at least of persons other than the judge or agent” (Haidt, in press). Positive moral emotions are emotions that are triggered by the good or admirable deeds of others and that motivate people to do good or admirable deeds themselves.

mystified. The sphere presents analogies and geometrical demonstrations, but in every case the square fails to grasp that his "side" is not his front, back, left, or right.

The square's difficulty in understanding the third dimension of physical space illustrates the difficulty that I believe many Westerners have in understanding a third dimension of social space. Many social theorists have talked about two dimensions of social space (Brown & Gilman, 1960; Hamilton & Sanders, 1981; Kemper, 1990; Sahlins, 1965). The first is a horizontal dimension of solidarity, referring to the fact that some people are closer to the self, others are farther, both in terms of affection and mutual obligation. The second dimension that is commonly discussed is a vertical dimension of hierarchy, power, or status. In classic social psychology, people were well-aware of both of these dimensions. Brown and Gilman (1960) showed how forms of address vary along exactly these two dimensions, even in languages such as English that do not have pronouns like *tu* versus *vous* to mark them explicitly. These two dimensions appear to be universals of human social cognition. All cultures behave and feel differently toward kin and friends than they do toward strangers. And even among groups that despise hierarchy, such as egalitarian hunter-gatherers (Boehm, 1999) or American liberals (Lakoff, 1996), people notice hierarchy, and their social interactions are strongly influenced (in culturally variable ways) by the relative standings of the interactants.

Yet there is a third dimension along which people can vary, which appears to be nearly as ubiquitous as solidarity and hierarchy. This third dimension might be called "purity versus pollution," or as will be explained shortly, "elevation versus degradation." Social practices, emotions, and the underlying logic of purity and pollution are somewhat similar across widely disparate cultures, religions, and eras. The basic logic seems to be that people vary in their level of spiritual purity as a trait (some are high, such as priests and saints; others are low, such as prostitutes or those who work in "dirty" jobs) and as a state (one is high after bathing and meditating; one is low after defecating or when in a state of anger). Purity and pollution practices seem designed to ensure that people interact with each other, and with sacred objects and spaces, in ways that keep the impure (low) from contaminating the pure (high). In this way God and those closest to God are protected from desecration and defilement.

For example, the Old Testament is full of prescriptions and proscriptions for handling spiritual pollution and for protecting sacred objects and spaces from pollution. According to the book of Leviticus (12:4), when a woman gives birth she is highly polluted and must undergo purification rites. "She shall continue in the blood of purification three and thirty days; she shall touch no hallowed thing, nor come into the sanctuary, until the

days of her purification be fulfilled."² Similar concerns about purity and pollution are common in the Muslim world (see Abu-Lughod, 1986) and in ancient Greece (Parker, 1983).

PURITY AND POLLUTION IN INDIA

Arguably the world's experts on purity and pollution, the culture with the longest tradition of practice and scholarship on the subject is Hindu India. Written in the 2nd century BCE, *The Laws of Manu* (Doneger & Smith, 1991) is a guide for high-caste Hindus, telling them how to live and worship properly. The *Laws* include many rules about purity and pollution. For example, Brahmins are urged to "not even think about" reciting the Vedas in the following situations, all of which would be incompatible with the purity and sacredness of the holy scriptures:

while expelling urine or excrement, when food is still left on his mouth and hands. . . . or when (the planet) Rahu causes a lunar or solar eclipse . . . [or] when one has eaten flesh or the food of a woman who has just given birth, when there is fog, when arrows are whizzing by, at either of the twilights. . . . He should not recite in a cremation ground, a village, or a cowpen; nor while wearing a garment that he has worn in sexual union, nor while accepting anything at a ceremony for the dead. . . . Nor in the midst of an army or a battle; nor when one has just eaten or has not digested (his food) or has vomited or belched; nor without the permission of one's guest; nor when the wind blows strongly; nor when blood flows from one's limbs or when one has been wounded by weapons. (pp. 121–122)

It must be noted that not all of these concerns involve purity and pollution. Some involve concerns about auspiciousness or astrology. But the basic point is that the words of the holy scriptures must be protected from contamination or degradation by a diverse set of threats, many of which involve the human body and its biological processes. One must not even have holy words in mind while engaged in polluting activities.

These rules about purity and pollution have been modified in some ways over the past 2200 years, but the basic logic is still very much in place in traditional Hindu culture. In 1993, I interviewed 20 priests and monks in the Eastern Indian state of Orissa about their concepts of purity and pollution and about why it is important morally and spiritually to regulate one's bodily processes. Their responses revealed that the concept of purity

²It is interesting to note that if a woman gives birth to a girl, the waiting period is doubled to 66 days, presumably because for the ancient Hebrews, as for many traditional societies, girls and women are seen as more polluting than boys and men.

(*shuddha*) reflects concerns both about biological processes and about socio-moral behavior. As one holy man (*sanyasi*) put it: "Before I was a [religious devotee], I had this instinct of violence, and I was involved in many evil activities. They are impure [*ashuddha*]. To do evil things with girls, or to eat fish and meat, or to kill an animal, these are impure things." In other words, one can become polluted by food, sex, or violence. Purity covers a broad domain of biological and social behaviors.

Why do Hindu Indians combine bodily and social actions and see both as potentially polluting? The answer seems to be that Hinduism very explicitly places all creatures onto a vertical dimension, running from the gods above to the demons below. People rise and fall on this vertical dimension based on the degree to which they behave like gods or demons in this life. The life one is reborn into depends on the karma one accumulated in the previous round of life on earth. As one of my most eloquent informants put it, while explicating the concept of purity:

We ourselves can be gods or demons. It depends on karma, if a person behaves like a demon, for example he kills someone, then that person is truly a demon. . . . a person who behaves in a divine manner, because a person has divinity in him, he is like a god. . . . What is wrong with being like a demon? What is going on nowadays, it is demonic. Divine behavior means not cheating people, not killing people. Complete character. You have divinity, you are a god.

So one behaves in a pure and godlike way by treating people well, as well as by being careful about one's eating habits, sexual practices, and other bodily transactions. One behaves like a demon, or (more mildly) like an animal, when one fails to heed rules of conduct and ethics.

This vertical dimension of purity versus pollution is critical for understanding Hindu ethics. Swami Vivekananda, an Indian spiritual leader in the late nineteenth century, even made this dimension into a kind of Hindu categorical imperative, which can be used to guide all action:

To give an objective definition of duty is entirely impossible. Yet there is duty from the subjective side. Any action that makes us go Godward is a good action and is our duty; any action that makes us go downward is evil and is not our duty. (quoted by Yatiswarananda, 1979, p. 74)

Note that evil actions are explicitly said to draw us "down," away from God on a vertical dimension.

THE THIRD DIMENSION IN THE UNITED STATES

I have taken the time to discuss Hindu ethics because it illustrates so clearly a vertical dimension of social cognition that is operating, I believe, in most or all human cultures. Once we know what to look for, we can find

evidence of this dimension in modern Western cultures as well. Issues of elevation and purity appear unexpectedly in our otherwise two-dimensional social world, just as the three dimensional sphere appeared in the two dimensional world of Flatland. Knowing about this third dimension can help us explain phenomena that otherwise would be mysterious.

For example, why do Americans moralize drugs and sexuality? Given their strong endorsement of personal autonomy and liberty, one might expect a national consensus that individuals have the right to engage in whatever activities they choose, as long as those activities are harmless, consensual, and private. Yet there is no such consensus (Haidt & Hersh, 2001).

In earlier times, Americans felt quite comfortable condemning sexuality and drug use in a language of purity and pollution. For example, in 1904 Dr. Sylvanus Stall, in a best-selling book of advice for young men, wrote, "God has made no mistake in giving man a strong sexual nature, but any young man makes a fatal mistake if he allows the sexual to dominate, to degrade, and to destroy that which is highest and noblest in his nature" (p. 35). Even in the hard sciences, a vertical-moral dimension was assumed. A chemistry textbook from 1867 (Steele, p. 191), after describing the chemical structure of ethyl alcohol, adds that alcohol has the effect of "dulling the intellectual operations and moral instincts; seeming to pervert and destroy all that is pure and holy in man, while it robs him of his highest attribute—reason."

To modern ears such evocations of purity and all that is highest and holy in human beings sound old-fashioned. Secular Americans do not talk that way anymore. Yet my research into moral judgment shows that secular Americans still *feel* that way—they just cannot talk about it in a language of purity and pollution. They therefore resort to a makeshift language of fabricated health concerns and far-fetched potential harms. When I interviewed Americans and Brazilians about harmless violations of food, sex, and drug traditions (e.g., eating one's already dead pet; consensual sibling incest using birth control; or private use of nonaddictive drugs) I repeatedly found that many people condemned the actions immediately, and then struggled to find supporting reasons (Haidt, 2001; Haidt & Hersh, 2001; Haidt, Koller, & Dias, 1993). Many of these supporting reasons were patently absurd (e.g., that eating fully cooked dog meat will make a person sick). When cross-examined, participants often dropped these post-hoc reasons, yet did not change their minds. Instead they became "morally dumbfounded"—that is, they had strong moral intuitions that an action was wrong, and they were shocked to find that they could not find reasons to support their intuitions.

Moral dumbfounding in these cases is readily explained by the intrusion of intuitions about purity and pollution into a subculture that has lost the language of purity and pollution. Feelings of disgust toward certain behaviors

inform people that someone else is moving “down” on the third dimension. In fact, research on the emotion of disgust shows it to be the paradigmatic emotion of spiritual pollution. Rozin, Haidt, and McCauley (2000) have found that there are nine classes of disgust elicitors: food, animals, body products, sexuality, body envelope violations (including gore and bleeding), death, hygiene, interpersonal contamination, and social disgust. It is quite striking that the list of prohibitions from the *Laws of Manu* (quoted earlier) includes six of the first seven elicitors (all but animals), and in interviews I conducted in Orissa I found that all of the other categories (animals, interpersonal contamination, and social disgust) are frequent causes of pollution as well. Rozin et al. (2000) argued that disgust is best understood as a complex emotion that protects the body and the soul from degradation. The word “soul” is not meant to imply anything supernatural; it is meant to capture the fact that people sometimes experience disgust as a kind of degradation, debasement, or bringing down of a nonphysical, moral component of their selves. Our minds, hearts, and stomachs are sensitive to the third dimension of social cognition, even though our mouths can no longer explain these feelings.

THE POSITIVE HALF OF THE THIRD DIMENSION

If disgust is the emotional reaction that we feel when we see people move down on the third dimension, then is there a corresponding emotion we feel when we see people move up? I believe that there is. One of the basic themes of positive psychology is that psychology has focused too much on what is negative in human nature and has often missed the brighter and more beautiful side. My own research on disgust illustrates this point. It was not until I had studied disgust for eight years that it even occurred to me to ask about the opposite of disgust, an emotion triggered by people behaving in a virtuous, pure, or superhuman way. I have called this emotion “elevation” (Haidt, 2000), because seeing other people rise on the third dimension seems to make people feel higher on it themselves. Once I began looking for elevation I found it easily. I found that most people recognize descriptions of it, that the popular press and Oprah Winfrey talk about it (as being touched, moved, or inspired), and that research psychologists had almost nothing to say about it. Here are some of the things I have learned in my first three years of research on elevation.

The Basic Features of Elevation

To begin, my students and I did a simple recall study: We asked college students to recall and write about times when they had been in one of four

positive emotion-arousing situations (Haidt, Algoe, Meijer, & Tam, 2002). The prompt for elevation was to “think of a specific time when you saw a manifestation of humanity’s ‘higher’ or ‘better’ nature.” Control conditions included instructions to “think of a specific time when you were making good progress towards a goal,” which is the appraisal condition described by Lazarus (1991) as the elicitor of happiness. In a second study we induced elevation in the lab by showing participants 10-minute video clips, one of which was about the life of Mother Teresa. (Control conditions included an emotionally neutral but interesting documentary and a comedy sequence from the television show “America’s Funniest Home Videos”). In both studies we found that participants in the elevation conditions reported different patterns of physical feelings and motivations when compared to participants in the happiness and other control conditions. Elevated participants were more likely to report physical feelings in their chests, especially warm, pleasant, or “tingling” feelings, and they were more likely to report wanting to help others, to become better people themselves, and to affiliate with others. In both studies happiness energized people to engage in private or self-interested pursuits, whereas elevation seemed to open people up and turn their attention outward, toward other people. Elevation therefore fits well with Fredrickson’s (1998) “broaden and build” model of the positive emotions, in which positive emotions are said to motivate people to cultivate skills and relationships that will help them in the long run.

Elevation Reports From India and Japan

Elevation does not appear to be a uniquely Western emotion. In 1997, I conducted eight interviews in a small village in Orissa, India. I asked informants to discuss six potentially emotional situations they had experienced, one of which was “a time when you saw someone do something wonderful, a very good deed, to someone else, but not to you.” Six of the informants described clear cases of witnessing a good deed, and in all six cases at least some of the hallmarks of elevation were present (i.e., warm or tingly feelings, positive affect, and a motivation to help others). One such case came from the 36-year-old principal of a primary school. He described a time when a teacher was wrongly accused of having stolen some books, because they had disappeared under his care. But the people around him knew he was honest, and one of them stepped forward to buy replacement books and to talk to the district supervisor to plead the man’s case. When asked to describe his own feelings on witnessing this event, the principal said, “It created a kind of emotion for the person who helped the teacher. Seeing his quality of kindness towards others, seeing such acts of

doing good things to others, a feeling of joy [*ananda*] was generated." When asked if this event included any feelings in his body, he replied, "A kind of tingling sensation in the body. I mean, another person is doing something for someone, and I wish I could do that. He is doing a good thing, and I feel like this: If I had done this, how much more joy I would have felt!"

In 1998 Yuki Amano, a Japanese American student working with me, conducted similar interviews with 15 people from varied backgrounds in Japan. She found that informants were emotionally responsive to the good deeds of others in ways that resembled the responses of Americans and Indians. Many of the interviews revolved around Japanese words for heart (*kimochi*, *kokoro*) and for times when the heart is moved (*kandou*). Informants described a variety of situations that moved their hearts, such as seeing a gang member giving up his seat on the train to an elderly person, seeing news about Mother Teresa, and watching the band in the movie *Titanic* playing on courageously as the ship sank. For example, when interviewing a 46-year-old housewife, the following exchange took place:

Q: Have you ever had positive feelings due to something others did?

A: Yes I have. For example, when there is a natural disaster in another country, those who actually go there and help people as volunteers. Also those who do things within [their limits], such as collecting money and food and clothes for those who are suffering from disaster.

Q: You feel positive feelings when you hear stories about those people?

A: Yes.

Q: Can you explain the feelings in detail?

A: I wonder if there is anything that I can do with my own strength. For example, donating money, giving clothes, and I have done that before myself. . . . I think how I could join those people even though what I have done is not much compared to what they do.

Q: When you have these feelings, do you have any physical feeling?

A: When I see news of a disaster, I feel pain in my chest, and tears actually come out when I read the newspaper. Then after that, seeing volunteers and finding out that there are helping people out there, the pain goes away, the heart brightens up [*akarui*] and I feel glad [*yokatta*], relieved [*anshin*], admiration [*sugoi*], and respect [*sonkei*]. When I see volunteers, the heart heavy from sad news becomes lighter.

In these Japanese interviews, as in the Indian interviews, the same elements are conjoined: The perception of compassionate or courageous behavior by others causes a pleasurable physical feeling in the chest of movement, warmth, or opening, coupled with a desire to engage in virtuous action oneself.

JEFFERSON AND THE EMOTIONAL RESPONSE TO MORAL BEAUTY

It is a basic fact about human beings that we sometimes help others, even strangers, at some cost or risk to ourselves. Psychology has a lot to say about this basic fact, as altruism has been a major area of research for the past thirty years. It is also a basic fact about human beings that we are easily and strongly moved by the altruism of others. Psychology has almost nothing to say about this fact, and this is an oversight that positive psychology must correct. We cannot have a full understanding of human morality until we can explain why and how human beings are so powerfully affected by the sight of a stranger helping another stranger.

The usual impulse of experimental psychologists is to strive for parsimony, to explain away any apparently virtuous aspect of human nature as a covert manifestation of selfishness, libido, or "mood management" (e.g., Cialdini et al., 1987). But I would like to suggest that the overzealous application of Occam's razor—the principle that entities should not be multiplied needlessly—has grossly disfigured the field of psychology, blinding us to the times when new entities are truly needed. I would like to propose that Thomas Jefferson was right and that we must posit a built-in emotional responsiveness to moral beauty.

If we return to the quotation at the start of this chapter, we see that Jefferson's letter is not just poetic musings: It contains a surprisingly precise and modern description of an emotion. Most current emotion theories attempt to break each emotion down into a set of components, or slots in a script, such as an eliciting condition, a physiological response, a motivational tendency, and an affective phenomenology (e.g., Frijda, 1986; Lazarus, 1991; Shweder & Haidt, 2000). Based on my preliminary research on elevation, it appears that Jefferson got the major components exactly right. He described the eliciting condition for elevation as the presentation to our "sight or imagination" of any "act of charity or of gratitude." He described the motivational tendency as "a strong desire in ourselves of doing charitable and grateful acts also." He described the affective phenomenology (what it feels like) as feeling "elevated sentiments," and a feeling of moral improvement (feeling oneself to be a "better man"). Jefferson located the physiological response in the chest cavity, and he described it as a sort of "dilation." We still do not know exactly what happens in the chest when one experiences elevation, but it seems likely that the vagus nerve is at work, causing a variety of changes in the heart, lungs, and throat (Porges, 1995), which are qualitatively different from the more well-known effects of sympathetic arousal.

Jefferson even proposed, 230 years ago, that elevation is the opposite of social disgust (which he called the emotional reaction to seeing or reading

about “any atrocious deed”). Table 12.1 shows the ways in which elevation and social disgust appear to be opposites of each other, including the fact that elevated people, such as saints, are sources of positive contamination (i.e., people want to touch or own things that have touched the saint), whereas socially disgusting people, such as Hitler, are sources of negative contamination (i.e., most people do not want to come into physical contact with anything that touched a murderer; see Rozin, Millman, & Nemeroff, 1986). I would even go so far as to suggest that saints are found in so many cultures because elevation is found in so many cultures. People whose actions cause widespread elevation are likely to be canonized.

CONCLUSION

One of the goals of positive psychology is to bring about a balanced reappraisal of human nature and human potential. We can grant that people are capable of perpetrating great cruelty on one another, but we must also grant, and study, the ways in which people are good, kind, and compassionate toward one another. How can positive psychology bring about this reappraisal? I offer four suggestions.

1. *Begin with the positive emotions.* Psychology already knows a lot about the negative moral emotions (anger, shame, guilt) and about reactions to suffering (sympathy–empathy). But the positive moral emotions are a new frontier, one with vast potential to improve the lives of individuals and the functioning of society. Only in the past few years has work begun to appear on gratitude (McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, & Larson, 2001) and elevation (Haidt, 2000). In the next few years work will begin to appear on awe and admiration as well (Keltner & Haidt, in press). Guided by new theoretical perspectives on positive emotions (Fredrickson, 1998), positive psychologists

Table 12.1
Diametrically Opposed Features of Elevation and Social Disgust

Component	Elevation	Social disgust
Elicitor	People moving up, blurring human–god divide	People moving down, blurring human–animal divide
Motivation tendency	Merge, open up, help others	Separate, close off
Affective phenomenology	Feel lifted up, optimistic about humanity	Feel dragged down, cynical about humanity
Physical changes	Chest (warm glow)	Gut (nausea)
Contamination	Positive	Negative

can balance out what is known about the emotions that make us care about the actions of others (see Haidt, 2002, for a review of the moral emotions).

2. *Look to other cultures and eras for guidance.* It is a dictum of cultural psychology that different cultures are “experts” in different areas of human potential (Shweder, 1990). There is clearly not just one kind of flourishing, one kind of “good life,” and one kind of coherent morality. Positive psychologists should look to other cultures and other historical eras for ideas and perspectives on virtue and the good life. For example, classical Hindu ideas of purity and pollution have helped me to understand the moral life of Americans. Classical Greek ideas of well-being (*eudamonia*) have informed modern research on happiness (Ryff, 1989; Waterman, 1990), including Seligman and Czikszentmihalyi’s (1999) thinking about positive psychology. In particular, the world’s religions offer highly developed and articulated visions of virtues, practices, and feelings, some of which may even be useful in a modern secular society (e.g., agape love, forgiveness, and meditation).

3. *Apply what is learned for the common good.* It is sometimes said that there is nothing as practical as a good theory, but I think there is nothing as practical as a good demonstration project. If positive psychologists can create moral or character education programs that work, or moral growth experiences for adults that can touch and enrich their lives, the world will beat a path to their doors. Given the widespread current interest in service learning and volunteerism, there is clearly a large market hungry for programs that will make a difference in the lives of adolescents. Moral education programs that focus on building strengths and triggering the positive moral emotions may be more effective than the more traditional reasoning-oriented interventions (e.g., Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989).

4. *Examine peak experiences and moral transformations.* Moral development is generally thought of as a slow and lifelong process. Yet many people have experienced moments of profound emotional power that left them changed forever. Maslow (1964) studied the changes that peak experiences can bring about in people’s identities and in their spiritual lives; but since then there has been little empirical research on such issues. I believe that powerful experiences of elevation can be peak experiences. Powerful moments of elevation sometimes seem to push a mental “reset button,” wiping out feelings of cynicism and replacing them with feelings of hope, love, and optimism and a sense of moral inspiration. This thought is for the moment an unproven hypothesis (one I refer to as the “inspire and rewire” hypothesis).

A clear description of such a case was recently sent to me. Several years ago, a Unitarian church in Massachusetts asked each of its members to write his or her own “spiritual autobiography”—that is, an account of how they came to be the spiritual people they are now. One member, David Whitford, sent me a section of his autobiography in which he puzzled over why he is so often moved to tears during the course of church services. He

noticed that there were two kinds of tears. The first he calls "tears of compassion," such as those he shed during a sermon on Mothers' Day, on the subject of children who are growing up abandoned or neglected. These cases felt to him like "being pricked in the soul," after which "love pours out" for those who are suffering. But the second kind of tear is very different. He calls them "tears of celebration," but he could just as well have called them "tears of elevation." I will end this chapter with his words, which give a more eloquent description of elevation than anything I could write:

There's another kind of tear. This one's less about giving love and more about the joy of receiving love, or maybe just detecting love (whether it's directed at me or at someone else). It's the kind of tear that flows in response to expressions of courage, or compassion, or kindness by others.

A few weeks after Mother's Day, we met here in the sanctuary after the service and considered whether to become a Welcoming Congregation [a congregation that welcomes gay people]. When John stood in support of the resolution, and spoke of how, as far as he knew, he was the first gay man to come out at First Parish, in the early 1970s, I cried for his courage. Later, when all hands went up and the resolution passed unanimously, I cried for the love expressed by our congregation in that act. That was a tear of celebration, a tear of receptiveness to what is good in the world, a tear that says it's okay, relax, let down your guard, there are good people in the world, there is good in people, love is real, it's in our nature. That kind of tear is also like being pricked, only now the love pours in.

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