

UNLIMITED LOVE

Making the World Go Round

The Institute for Research on Unlimited Love

The Institute for Research on Unlimited Love is a nonprofit organization funded by the Foundation and located at the School of Medicine at Case Western Reserve University. The Institute seeks to improve understanding of the human capacities for participation in unlimited love through high-level scientific research, conferences, seminars and publications. It awards grants to projects in a variety of academic fields and seriously engages the intersection of science and spirituality. Today, institute-funded researchers at more than 30 leading universities are publishing in journals, presenting at professional meetings and teaching new courses.

Folks will say that if you scratch an altruist, you'll watch an egoist bleed, but my hypothesis is that if you scratch an egoist, you'll watch an altruist bleed," says Stephen G. Post, a professor at the Center for Biomedical Ethics at Case Western Reserve University and president of the Cleveland-based Institute for Research on Unlimited Love.

Post's hypothesis is but one of many being explored by the Institute that he leads, as researchers are identifying key questions about love and then looking for ways to answer them. Just a few decades ago, however, love was a topic completely outside science. Today, research in this area requires breaking new ground. Scientists must address such basic questions as: How do you even approach the study of love? Can love be learned? Can we learn to love our neighbor, even when this neighbor can offer back nothing in return? What if that "neighbor" is a historic enemy? Can centuries-old hatreds be healed by love? What can we learn from the lives of truly generous individuals? Can we learn how to work together in our growing struggle against violence and assaults against human well-being? In the end, is it really better to give than to receive?

With scientific answers to these and similar questions, The Institute for Research on Unlimited Love believes we can make a better future. Stephanie Brown, a psychologist from the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research has found an association between giving help and longevity. Robert Emmons, a psychology professor at the University of California, Davis, has found that when people are grateful, they are more likely to be altruistic. Julie Juola Exline, an assistant professor of psychology at Case Western Reserve University, is working on a "conduit model of love" that might be able to help us act kindly to strangers and enemies. This year, for the first time, the General Social Survey, funded by the National Science Foundation and conducted by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago, will gather nationally representative data on altruism and unlimited love.

Since 2001, the Institute for Research on Unlimited Love has funded high-quality scientific research projects that advance our understanding of altruism and disseminated true stories of those who have devoted their lives to serving others—all to find out what can be learned about unlimited love. Only two years old, its national and international achievement is already remarkable. Stories about the Institute have appeared in international newspapers such as The Boston Globe, Toronto Star, and The Christian Science Monitor, and it has been featured on National Public Radio, Radio America, Radio Australia and BBC World News. Around the world, the Institute for Research on Unlimited Love is recognized as the pioneering organization for the scientific study of altruism and compassionate service.

Unlimited love, explains Post, is more than just being nice. "We're talking about generosity and profound kindness that is inclusive. It is love for all humanity, without exception, and it is ultimately not just universal altruism, but it is a participation in divine love. People from almost every tradition report the experience of profound affirmation, oneness. People have a perception that there is a love in the universe that is higher than our own, the participation in which elevates us to serve all humanity rather than some small fraction of humanity. This participation inclines people to be concerned not just with the nearest and dearest, but with the neediest and imperiled," he says.

Divine love was once considered the exclusive province of theology, but the Institute for Research on Unlimited Love has labored hard to promote the study of love as an empirical and scientific endeavor, as well.

“It never occurred to me to really study love at the interface of theology, science and practice. Bringing science in was something that had not come to mind until I had the good fortune of encountering the Foundation,” says Post.

In 2002, after a competitive review process, the Institute awarded funds for science research grants to projects studying human development, neuroscience, the evolution of altruism and faith-based helping behaviors. Several researchers are showing that a kindly, charitable interest in others has health benefits for the agent, such as lower depression rates in adolescents and longer, healthier lives for older people. “It is important to understand the extent to which love is not just good for those who are loved but for those who do the loving. All religions teach that in the giving of self lies the discovery of self,” Post says.

In June 2003, more than 450 people from 33 countries attended the *Works of Love: Scientific and Religious Perspective on Altruism*, a major international, interfaith, interdisciplinary conference co-hosted by the Institute for Research on Unlimited Love and the Metanexus Institute on Science and Religion.

Currently, there are more than 20 books on kindness and a common humanity being written by authors the Institute sponsors. The Institute has already produced *Altruism and Altruistic Love: Science, Philosophy; Religion in Dialogue; Unlimited Love – Altruism, Compassion and Service; and Research on Altruism & Love* (an annotated bibliography), and was responsible for the republication of Pitirim Sorokin’s *The Ways and Power of Love*.

The Ways and Power of Love was originally published in 1954 when Sorokin, a Russian Orthodox sociologist, was leading the Harvard Research Center for Creative Altruism. While Sorokin pioneered the scientific analysis of love, Erik Erikson, a Protestant who studied moral development, advanced the field with his belief that the highest level of human development involved generativity, a kind of moral creativity in those who are older toward those who are younger.

Post has had a long-standing focus on agape love, altruism and compassion in the context of scientific research, philosophy, religion and ethics. He spent his boyhood days at St. Paul’s School in New Hampshire. Since the age of 16, he was interested in unlimited love as an “impossible possibility”—“The ultimate ideal of goodness but one that was not typically arrived at.” Years later in 1983, to complete his doctorate in philosophy and religious ethics at the University of Chicago Divinity School’s Ethics and Society program, he would write his dissertation on the topic of self-denial in relation to other-regarding agape love.

Since then, he has been an active lay leader in the Episcopal Church and has published widely on love, both theologically and in the context of people with cognitive disabilities, and on the moral challenges of Alzheimer’s disease. He now writes the Institute’s free electronic monthly newsletter, which reaches more than 5,500 subscribers with news of scientific studies, announcements and publications on unlimited love. The idea, he explains, is to advance the dialogue between science, theology and then “the amazing practitioners of love who are both inspired and inspiring.”

With the scientific study of love still in its infancy, there is a range of topics that warrant further investigation. Scientists need to find the tools that can help us raise caring children and sustain benevolence in marriage. More research needs to be done on how young people and the elderly can find purpose in caring for each other. More attention needs to be paid to rescuers who put their lives on the line for strangers. With group conflicts threatening our future, we need to know how to elicit compassionate behaviors from catastrophic events, like September 11, 2001. At a time when hatred and war lead us to doubt the potential of unlimited love, those who know how important these issues are need to step up and push the field of unlimited love forward.

“Unlimited love transcends all the fragmentation that plagues the world. I think that by strongly asserting that God is love, and studying the degree to which the nature of human beings can participate in that love, we

basically get to what all particular religious, spiritual and moral traditions aim for,” Post says. “I think that love is our ultimate fulfillment, so there’s no dualism in my mind between a deep and abiding love of others and the happiness of the self. There is a correlation between unlimited love and true human happiness.”