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Why Our Hero Leapt Onto the Tracks and We Might Not

By [CARA BUCKLEY](#)

MAYBE some people are more hard-wired for heroism than others. Like, for example, Wesley Autrey, the man behind a stunning rescue last week in a Manhattan subway station.

People wondered, because they had asked themselves, “Could I have done what he did?” and very often the answer was no. Mr. Autrey, 50, a construction worker and Navy veteran, leapt in front of a train to rescue a stranger who had suffered a seizure and fallen onto the tracks. He covered the stranger’s body with his own as the train passed overhead. Both men lived.

Mr. Autrey, who left two young daughters on the platform when he jumped, later chalked up his actions to a simple compulsion to help another in distress.

But is there something in Mr. Autrey that the rest of us lack? Probably not, experts say. Except for sociopaths, humans are built to feel and act out of empathy, said Stephen G. Post, a professor of bioethics at Case Western Reserve University’s medical school and co-author of “Why Good Things Happen to Good People,” scheduled to be published in May. Social support has always been important to survival, and people with strong social networks thrive more than those who are isolated.

New science also suggests that people have “mirror neurons,” which make them feel what someone else is experiencing, be it joy or distress.

When Mr. Autrey saw the stranger, Cameron Hollopeter, 20, tumble onto the tracks, his brain reacted just as anyone else’s would. His thalamus, which absorbs sensory information, registered the fall, and sent the information to other parts of the brain for processing, said Gregory L. Fricchione, an associate professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School. Mr. Autrey’s amygdala, the part of the brain that mediates fear responses, was activated and sent sensory information to the motor cortex, which sent it down for emotional processing. His anterior cingulate, a sort of brain within the brain that helps people make choices, kicked in, helping trigger his decision about how to act, Dr. Fricchione said.

But what happened next is harder to explain.

“Propensities to help others are not necessarily based on rational calculations; in fact, they often cannot be, because rational calculations would have been too slow in this particular case,” David Sloan Wilson, an evolutionary biologist at the State University of New York at Binghamton, wrote in an e-mail message. “Instead, they become impulses that are followed spontaneously, either by virtue of genetic disposition or childhood/cultural training.” Still, Dr. Wilson said Mr. Autrey exhibited an extraordinarily high degree of “other-oriented” behavior. “He’s a rarity,” Dr. Wilson said.

That Mr. Autrey served in the Navy most likely played a role, too — he had been trained to act quickly in adverse situations. Acts like jumping in front of trains to rescue strangers are easier for people who are prepared, said Michael McCullough, a psychology professor at the [University of Miami](#).

One of the curious aspects about Mr. Autrey's deed is that he jumped even though his daughters, ages 4 and 6, were at his side. Normally, experts say, the power of the parent-child dynamic would overwhelm any tendency to put yourself in harm's way to rescue a stranger. Then again, suggested Dr. Fricchione, people who already feel attachment, like the kind toward their children, may be predisposed to act more altruistically to others. Mr. Autrey was also one of three people who helped Mr. Hollopeter when he first collapsed, convulsing, before tripping into the tracks. An empathetic connection was most likely forged then, too.

Considering that people tend to act more altruistically toward those who fall within their perceived group, Dr. Post said, it was notable that differences in race — Mr. Autrey is black, Mr. Hollopeter is white — didn't enter the picture.

“Not only is he going beyond the narrow interest that we all seem to have toward our children, but he is reaching out toward a shared common humanity. And he's doing it across a racial line,” Dr. Post said. “And I think that's really impressive.”

No single factor explains heroism, said Samuel P. Oliner, a sociology professor at Humboldt State University in Arcata, Calif. Yet in interviewing Holocaust rescuers and 911 responders, he found that people who acted heroically often came from more nurturing families and were imbued with an ethic of caring, empathy and compassion.

“The other people, the bystanders, are not bad people,” Dr. Oliner said.

“But they have been cut from a slightly different cloth.”