

SCRATCHPAD

Niceness is natural

By ERICK BENGEL
COAST WEEKEND

If natural selection, the driving force of evolution, really depends on whatever set of traits makes an organism more or less likely to reproduce and pass on genes, where does altruism come in? Why does anyone work to benefit others at his or her own expense?

Chris Breitmeyer, the president of Clatsop Community College who has

a background in biology, tackled these questions last week at the college's first Ales & Ideas lecture of the 2017-18 season. The event, held in the Fort George Lovell Showroom and titled "Why Being Nice Matters (Because Evolution Says So)," was standing room only.

Breitmeyer led the beer-laden audience through the main theories of altruism. Is it all about kin selection (because our relatives share our genes)?

Is it simply based on expectations of reciprocity? Or did we evolve to help our larger community?

There is evidence for all three. "The fact that you have those kinds of feelings is natural and normal. It's the norm," Breitmeyer said — though, he admitted, we're in a time when it feels like it is *not* the norm.

Many educators will make a logical leap from describing the useful things people evolved to do to prescribing, morally, why

people should do it.

But Breitmeyer didn't say we should be nice merely because we're hardwired to be nice. (Remember: We're hardwired to do a lot of things we probably shouldn't do in civilized society.) Instead, he set up a conditional: If we want to feel good, make others feel good and enjoy a cooperative community — like, say, Astoria, Oregon — one way to do that is to act on the altruistic impulse.

In his writings and interviews, the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins has talked about why we help people we are unlikely to meet again, when there is


no kin/self/group benefit.

He says that, when we mostly lived in small-ish groups, we developed an instinctual urge to help people in need — an urge, for many, as basic and powerful as lust. Both urges, for different reasons, boosted our evolutionary fitness.

Lust, Dawkins says, is actually a useful analogy: We continue to feel lust, a trait that aided us in reproduction, even though our species uses birth control, and we continue to be altruistic, even though we no longer live in tribes composed only of kin and cohorts. These urges — lust

and altruism — are detached from the prehistoric social environment that selected for them. But that doesn't make them irrelevant in today's world.

As primates, we carry the mental imprint of many millennia spent surviving in tribes — an evolutionary journey evident in both our tribalism and our capacity for kindness.

This journey is also evident when we do something else our ancestors did: gather, learn and hold discourse. And if they could have done it with a finely fermented stout in hand, you know they would have. 

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INSIDE THIS ISSUE

arts & entertainment

4 THE ARTS

Water Music Festival 2017

Classic jazz meets classical music

10 FEATURE

'BloodyVox'

Liberty Theatre presents Halloween-themed show



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14 DINING

Mouth of the Columbia

Just killer pizza at Seaside's Avenue Q

23 ARTIST PROFILE

'Junk, Elevated'

Bonny Gorsuch salvages objects for exhibition

FURTHER ENJOYMENT

MUSIC CALENDAR.....	5
SEE + DO	12, 13
CROSSWORD	20
CW MARKETPLACE	18
GRAB BAG	21



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