

The Good Life

A man whose cervical spine was severed, leaving him in a wheelchair for life. A woman born in what she calls a God-struck, beer-soaked Dublin slum, orphaned and then gang-raped in a public park. A boy who escaped to the roof of his ghetto home after his family was slaughtered by Nazis, and then spent two years herding cows for a Nazi sympathizer who never guessed that this twelve-year-old stable hand was Jewish.

Hard lives — but sublime lives, too. Each of these individuals refused to let their fate unravel them, and instead chose to place the act of giving at the center of their world. The man, psychologist Daniel Gottlieb, counseled a suicidal nurse while lying paralyzed in his hospital bed, and experienced a kind of epiphany: he could still offer others what he'd always offered — a deep, warm listening. The woman, Christina Noble, traveled at age 40 to Vietnam and started a foundation that has helped more than 200,000 destitute orphans. The boy, Samuel Oliner, became a psychologist and (with his wife) coauthored an in-depth look at more than 700 Holocaust rescuers, those

the accidents of fate or the hearts of others, but you can nourish your own health and happiness through acts of generosity.

It was a message I needed. When I met Stephen in 2003, I was in the midst of my own singular hell. Three years earlier I'd been bitten by a tick, and I've struggled mightily ever since with what is informally known as Lyme disease, an endless tedium marked by pain and exhaustion. Chronic illness shuts your world and whittles away at your whimsy, rapture, faith, and most of all, your own innate goodness. I needed to find a way back to myself.

What I found stunning was that evolution had so clearly hardwired help-

When Dan quietly suggested, "The most generous question you can ever ask someone is simply, 'What is it like to live inside your skin?'" Ask that question, and you've given another person a gift," — I began to think less about my own debility and wonder if, even on a difficult day, I couldn't turn to another and listen with my heart. And when Sam confessed, "I've seen my family murdered. Through the rescuers of the Holocaust, I rediscovered moral courage, empathy, and love," I thought, if Sam can lose his whole family and say that, why can't I?

One day last June that lesson truly came home. I was weaving my way through the Union Square flower market on the way to my doctor's. Flowers spilled everywhere like Rapunzel's golden hair. Even though I felt sick, I was happy. I bought myself an orchid and when I walked into my doctor's office, I saw another patient I'd become friendly with, someone who owned a house with a garden. Moved by a sudden impulse borne of two years of thinking and writing about giving, I held out the orchid and said,

What I found was this: young or old, sick or well, married or single, giving shines an amazingly beneficent, protective light on the giver.

good people who risked everything to hide, house, feed, and save Jews.

I spent hours on the phone with these three while writing *Why Good Things Happen to Good People* with Stephen Post, Ph.D., a bioethicist at Case Western Reserve School of Medicine in Cleveland and head of Institute for Unlimited Love. We were exploring the Institute's central scientific finding: that giving is surprisingly good for you. Giving protects your physical and mental well-being — even more so than receiving. You can't change

fulness into our genetic legacy. Young or old, sick or well, married or single, giving shines an amazingly beneficent, protective light on the giver. But science, no matter how impeccable, doesn't necessarily stir the heart. It was the real stories from real lives that breathed hope back into me. When Christina said, in her smoky Irish brogue, "People told me that what I wanted to achieve was impossible 'You are only one person,' they said. But when I was a child, I needed only one person," — I listened.

"This is for you." He actually got teary-eyed. He repeated several times that I'd made his day. The next time he saw me, he told me how well my orchid was doing in his garden. And, strange to say, that flower's absence has remained with me, revealing a deeper presence.

Jill Neimark is a science journalist, novelist, and poet. Her new book, with bioethicist Stephen Post, Ph.D., is *Why Good Things Happen to Good People* (Random House, 2007). For more information, go to whygoodthingshappen.com.