We've all seen how one rotten apple can spoil the barrel. But can one person acting nobly spread goodness in the world?

Absolutely, suggests research by Jonathan Haidt, PhD, an associate professor of psychology at the University of Virginia. Haidt coined the term elevation to describe the emotion we feel when we encounter evidence of what he calls moral beauty. Seeing—or even just reading about—others’ courage, compassion, or generosity can not only make us better people but increase the likelihood we’ll do good works of our own.

“Elevation seems to have a ripple effect, triggering cognitive, emotional, and behavioral changes,” Haidt says. “It makes people more open, more loving, grateful, compassionate, and forgiving.”

Goodness is catching, in other words. And it doesn't take extraordinary heroics to trigger it. Simple human kindness—a teen stopping to shovel an elderly woman’s walk; someone helping a blind person cross the street; a community rallying behind a family in need—can be enough to open our hearts and inspire us to help others.

“There are many kinds of moral beauty,” Haidt points out. “Mother Teresa exemplifies compassion. The firefighters and rescue workers on 9/11 embody courage and heroism. There’s also loyalty, kindness, integrity—somebody staying true to their values despite tremendous pressure and threats.” Nelson Mandela is an especially powerful trigger, Haidt says, “because he exemplifies forgiveness and vision. To have spent most of his life in prison, then his first words before his release are about working together—I get chills just remembering how I felt when I first heard that.”

Chills—and for some people, tears—are hallmarks of eleva-
"When we speak about feelings in our heart, it's not just a metaphor," Haidt says. "Something really is happening."

Haidt's interest in elevation began with research on its opposite, disgust—a common response to behaviors like hypocrisy, racism, and betrayal. Then, five years ago, Haidt had what he calls a positive psychology awakening. He started wondering what emotion we felt when we looked up rather than down the moral scale, at people behaving in virtuous or superhuman ways. Haidt and his colleagues asked students to recall times that they had seen humanity's better nature at work. Most described acts of unexpected kindness or generosity, one stranger helping another. A follow-up study found that people who watched a documentary on Mother Teresa felt more loving afterward and were more likely to volunteer for charitable work than a group that saw clips from America's Funniest Home Videos.

“All of us have a built-in responsiveness to good or evil,” Haidt says. “When we see moral exemplars—moral saints—it affects us emotionally. And that effect is to elevate us, too. Exposure to goodness pulls all of us up a little bit.”

Haidt is quick to point out he didn't “discover” elevation—philosophers and theologians have long noted the effects of contemplating virtue. But he is the first to look at the subject empirically. For his research, Haidt received the $100,000 John Templeton Positive Psychology Prize, awarded by the American Psychological Association. The award encourages scientific study of humanity's nobler qualities, such as optimism, courage, compassion, and generosity.

So how can we cultivate more elevation in our lives and pass it on to others? “By seeking out stories of moral beauty and, when you encounter them, noticing any skeptical or cynical reactions you have and challenging them,” Haidt suggests. “Notice how people so often go out of their way to help others.”

And be a role model yourself. “Recognize that your own actions often have a ripple effect that you don't realize,” Haidt says. “Anytime you make an effort to do something good, you may benefit not just the person you help but also those who witness your act. We don't feel elevation from thinking about charity,” he emphasizes. “We feel it from seeing someone do something charitable.”