

# Reflections on Sam Oliner and the Altruistic Behavior Institute

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**T**HIS YEAR MARKS THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY of the *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations*, founded by Dr. Samuel P. Oliner. Sam joined the Sociology faculty in 1971. While he retired formally from his position in 2000, he remained an active Professor Emeritus through 2010, mentoring new students and faculty and involving many with his never ending commitment to the study of altruism.

As a Holocaust survivor, Sam chose to focus on understanding people like those who had helped him escape. To that end, with his wife Dr. Pearl Oliner, in 1982 he founded The Altruistic Personality and Prosocial Behavior Institute. The Institute celebrated its 40th Anniversary in 2022. Now known as the Altruistic Behavior Institute, it began as the home for Sam and Pearl's pioneering research on characteristics of people who rescued Jews and other persecuted people during the Holocaust. They published their findings in *The Altruistic Personality: Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe* (1988). Social science related to altruism saw a resurgence soon thereafter.

Sam, Pearl, and the Institute went on to explore phenomena that continue to shape everyday life, including forgiveness and apology, love and compassion, and heroism and moral exemplars. That research informed the books *Do Unto Others: Extraordinary Acts of Ordinary People* (2003) and *The Nature of Good and Evil* (2011). Sam's account of his formative years and the lived experiences that brought him to the field of study to which he dedicated his life can be found in academic and popular publications, such as *Restless Memories: Recollections of the Holocaust Years* (1979). Sam's life and work have even been featured in a children's magazine (Lynn 2018).

In 2021, I spent time with Sam Oliner about a month before his passing. He was eager to find ways to get the word out about his latest book, *What Kind of Future Will Our Children Inherit?* (2021). On the back cover of this edited volume that had been a focus for a decade, he wrote:

[My previous books] concerned altruism, kindness, empathy, and moral responsibility for diverse others. In this book we concentrate on the areas of greatest concern regarding our future as a species... My own work indicates that goodness, defined as concern for others and for making the world a better place, is on the rise.

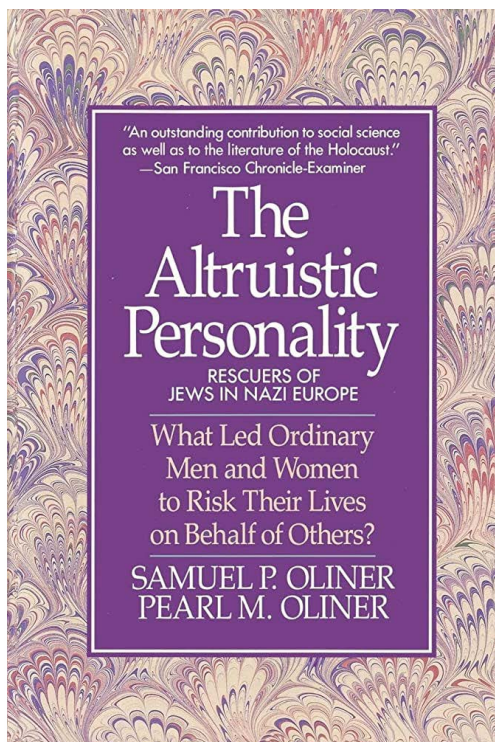
Sam's commitment to research and action did not waiver across a professional career that lasted over six decades. By the end of our meal, Sam was talking about his next book.

Sam and Pearl moved away from the physical home of the *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations* and the Altruistic Behavior Institute in 2010. That year, Sam asked me to lead the institute in a new direction he envisioned. He wanted it to shift from altruism-related research into altruism-related projects. Now, it is not like he saw these as discrete areas: see, for example, *Toward a Caring Society: Ideas Into Action* (1995). But he wanted the Institute to be more involved in practice. This started with a community-driven effort focused on serving people dealing with homelessness. The work has gone on to include projects aiming to raise awareness about the persistent threat of nuclear weapons, improving outcomes for people who engage in panhandling, training for providers on opi-

oid overdose prevention and intervention, and a podcast about parents caring for young children during the early months of the COVID-19 public health emergency.

This year, the Altruistic Behavior Institute continued a four-year federal grant to strengthen integration of primary health care and behavioral health care. Thanks to support from the Cal Poly Humboldt Sponsored Programs Foundation, we launched an Oliner Altruism Research Archive. This major initiative will make Sam and Pearl Oliner's original research, including audio recordings with Holocaust rescuers and survivors, freely available to researchers, practitioners, and broader communities around the world.

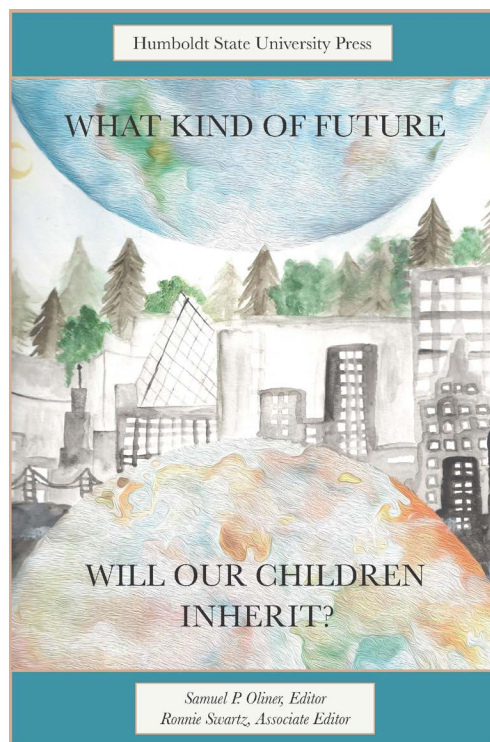
I came to know Sam in the last decades of his life. His warmth toward me, identification of my skills, clarity that there are specific things I should be doing with my time, and confidence that I could be successful continue to shape my personal and professional life. Sam was a strong supporter of the projects I have initiated on behalf of the institute. He saw the ideas he promulgated as being operationalized through the recent work of the Altruistic Behavior Institute.



Sam and Pearl's groundbreaking 1988 book that led the resurgence of altruism in the social sciences.

## References

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Edited in association with Ronnie Swartz, Sam's final book explores the legacy of his field and the work yet to be done.