

Stroke of Insight

Rev. Don Garrett, delivered January 22, 2012
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My father was an engineer who believed in testing his assumptions against reliable evidence, and he taught me the scientific method before I went to kindergarten. He would ask me questions about what I saw and then ask questions about my answers. He would carefully show me how things worked and explain why.

I can remember him explaining orbital dynamics, electrical resistance, and waveform propagation. I wound wire around an oatmeal box to make a radio using a germanium diode. I learned to use a soldering iron before I learned to write.

I didn't think there was anything unusual in this – it was just what my father told me. It was years before I realized I had learned to analyze data and test evidence. The first time this became clear to me was when I was 13 and studied the catechism with my Lutheran minister in order to learn what I needed to believe in order to become a full adult member of the church.

After two years of classes, I told my minister that, although I knew the material and could answer his questions, I couldn't swear that I believed it was true because it didn't meet my standards of evidence. Everything was hearsay; its claims weren't derived from empirical experience and there was no way to test them for reliability or accuracy. I refused confirmation and left the church.

Although I rejected the answers, I had become passionately interested in the questions religion had raised. How should I live? What is the purpose of life? Why are people cruel? Is it possible to be loving and happy? What is spirit? Is there a peace that is beyond understanding?

I decided that, if religion had ever had the answers to these questions, they had lost the meaning behind the words. So I decided to seek the answers in disciplines whose language I could understand, or at least learn to understand. I read psychology – Freud, Jung, Adler and others, trying to make sense of the experience of having a human mind. Excursions into philosophy sometimes seemed to provide deeper understandings, but often failed to meet the standards of evidence I craved.

When I discovered Zen Buddhism I was delighted to find a religion that claimed to give me the tools to test its claims. It wasn't about what one needed to believe; it was based on experiment and observation. Concepts of God and authority were beside the point. I could do certain practices and evaluate their outcomes in my own experience.

And my experience validated many of religion's claims. Experiences of peace, compassion, joy and tranquility could be carefully sought and nurtured. But there was always the risk of self-delusion in this. How did I know that my experience was real? Could I be imagining the whole thing? Was I wasting my time? It seemed real, but the data was suspect because I couldn't verify my conclusions. It was those standards of evidence again.

But then I met a friend who was a biofeedback technician. She knew me to be an experienced meditator, so when she got brain wave equipment she asked me to help her try it out. I quickly learned that I could, indeed, control my brain waves to a great extent. I could change from beta waves to alpha and back at will. It was tremendously affirming to have evidence that meditation wasn't delusional. I really had been cultivating measurable mental abilities.

I've always been on the lookout for scientific validation of religious claims, so I was especially interested when, at the 1999 conference of Neuroscience in New Orleans, a paper was presented describing the experimental electrical stimulation of the temporal lobe of the brain which resulted in what appeared to be a religious experience in the subject. Not only did they report feelings of awe, interconnectedness and love, but subsequently felt moved to change their lives as a result. They didn't necessarily become traditionally religious, but became more moral, compassionate human beings.

There have been so many studies in recent decades that have established a physiological basis of spirituality that the issue is no longer in doubt, although there is much more to learn.

One of the most revealing reports of neurology and spirituality wasn't the result of a study, though. It was the direct experience of the brain scientist, Jill Bolte Taylor, who suffered a massive stroke that essentially shut down one hemisphere of her brain. She wrote about this in her book, *My Stroke of Insight*, from which I'm going to quote freely.

She reports that, one morning, she woke up to the sensation of a stabbing pain behind her left eye, and described feeling “a powerful and unusual sense of dissociation roll over me. . . Feeling detached from normal reality, I seemed to be witnessing my activity as opposed to feeling like the active participant. . . I felt bizarre, as if my conscious mind was suspended somewhere between my normal reality and some esoteric space. . . I felt as if I was trapped inside the perception of a meditation that I could neither stop nor escape.

“As my brain chatter began to disintegrate, I felt an odd sense of isolation. Confused, I searched the memory banks of both my body and brain, questioning and analyzing anything I could remember having experienced in the past that was remotely similar to this situation. *What is going on?* I wondered. *Have I ever experienced anything like this before? Have I ever felt like this before? This feels like a migraine. What is happening to my brain?*

“The harder I tried to concentrate,” Taylor continues “the more fleeting my ideas seemed to be. Instead of finding answers and information, I met a growing sense of peace. In place of that constant chatter that had attached me to the details of my life, I felt enfolded by a blanket of tranquil euphoria. . . As the language centers in my left hemisphere grew increasingly silent and I became detached from the memories of my life, I was comforted by an expanding sense of grace. In this void of higher cognition and details pertaining to my normal life, my consciousness soared into an all-knowingness, a “being at *one*” with the universe, if you will.”

Taylor was experiencing a stroke in her left hemisphere, the side of the brain responsible for language, for pattern recognition, and the sense of time. The left hemisphere defines and keeps track of the boundaries of our self, our likes and dislikes, of good and bad. It is the left hemisphere that understands what letters are and how they fit together to create sounds and words with specific meanings attached to them.

A scientist to her very core, Taylor’s recalls her response this way: “Oh my gosh, I’m having a stroke! I’m having a stroke! Wow, this is so cool! How many scientists have the opportunity to study their own brain function and mental deterioration from the inside out?” And finally, “Okay, well, I’m having a stroke. Remember, please remember everything you are experiencing! Let this be my stroke of insight into the disintegration of my own cognitive mind.”

Taylor compared her experience to the way her mind usually worked. “My information processing for normal access to my brain’s information,” she wrote, “prior to this morning’s episode, went something like this: I visualize myself sitting in the middle of my brain, which is completely lined with filing cabinets. When I am looking for a thought or an idea or a memory, I scan the cabinets and identify the correct drawer. Once I find the appropriate file, I then have access to all of the information in that file. If I don’t immediately find what I’m looking for, then I put my brain back on scan and eventually I access the right data.

“But this morning, my information processing was completely aberrant. Even though my brain remained lined with filing cabinets, it was as if all the drawers had been slammed shut and the cabinets pushed just beyond my reach. I was aware that I knew all this stuff, that my brain held a wealth of information. But where was it? If the information was still there, I could no longer retrieve it. I wondered if I would ever reconnect with linguistic thought or retrieve the mental images of my life. I was saddened that perhaps those portions of my mind were now lost forever.

“As the hemorrhaging blood interrupted the normal functioning of my left mind,” she continues, “my perception was released from its attachment to categorization and detail. As the dominating fibers of my left hemisphere shut down, they no longer inhibited my right hemisphere, and my perception was free to shift such that my consciousness could embody the tranquility of my right mind. Swathed in an enfolding sense of liberation and transformation, the essence of my consciousness shifted in to a state familiar to me from dreaming. I’m no authority, but I think the Buddhists would say I entered the mode of existence they call Nirvana.

“In the absence of my left hemisphere’s analytical judgment, I was completely entranced by the feelings of tranquility, safety, blessedness, euphoria, and omniscience.”

Taylor goes on to describe the details of her rescue and hospitalization, recalling that she remembers “that first day of the stroke with terrific bitter-sweetness. In the absence of the normal functioning of my left orientation association area, my perception of my physical boundaries was no longer limited to where my skin met air. I felt like a genie liberated from its bottle. The energy of my spirit seemed to flow like a great whale gliding through a sea of silent euphoria. Finer than the finest of pleasures we can experience as physical beings, this absence of physical boundary was one of glorious

bliss. As my consciousness dwelled in a flow of sweet tranquility, it was obvious to me that I would never be able to squeeze the enormity of my spirit back inside this tiny cellular matrix.”

Recalling what had been lost, Taylor reflects that, “I had forgotten about my parents and their divorce. I had forgotten about my job and all the things in my life that brought me stress – and with this obliteration of memories, I felt both relief and joy. I had spent a lifetime of 37 years being enthusiastically committed to ‘do-do-doing’ lots of stuff at a very fast pace. On this special day, I learned the meaning of simply ‘being.’

“My entire self-concept shifted as I no longer perceived myself as a single, a solid, an entity with boundaries that separated me from the entities around me. I understood that at the most elementary level, I am a fluid. Of course I am a fluid! Everything around us, about us, among us, within us, and between us is made up of atoms and molecules vibrating in space. Although the ego center of our language center prefers defining our *self* as individual and solid, most of us are aware that we are made up of trillions of cells, gallons of water, and ultimately everything about us exists in a constant and dynamic state of activity. My left hemisphere had been trained to perceive myself as a solid, separate from others. Now, released from that restrictive circuitry, my right hemisphere relished in its attachment to the eternal flow. I was no longer isolated and alone. My soul was as big as the universe and frolicked with glee in a boundless sea.”

Aware of how odd this might seem, Taylor observes, “You may be wondering how it is that I still remember everything that happened. I remind you that although I was mentally disabled, I was not unconscious. Our consciousness is created by numerous programs that are running at the same time. Each program adds a new dimension to our ability to perceive things in the three-dimensional world. Although I had lost my left hemisphere consciousness containing my ego center and ability to see my *self* as a single and solid entity separate from you, I retained both the consciousness of my right mind and the consciousness of the cells making up my body. Although one set of programs was no longer functioning – the one that reminded me moment by moment of who I was and where I lived, etc., the other parts of me remained alert and continued processing instantaneous information. In the absence of my traditional left hemispheric domination over my right mind, other parts of my brain emerged. Programs that had been inhibited were now free to run and I was no longer fettered to my previous

interpretation of perception. With this shift away from my left hemisphere consciousness and the character I had been, my right hemisphere character emerged with new insight.”

Much of the rest of the book focuses on Taylor’s treatment and recovery, a long painstaking process that took, by her measure, eight years of hard work. She shares with us a list of “40 Things I Needed the Most” to help us understand the needs and perspective of stroke victims. I’ve included that list as an insert in today’s order of service and invite you to take it home, read it, and save it. It is a roadmap for compassionate understanding that we might use some day, or hope others will use if we suffer a stroke ourselves. The first one is powerful, as are the others: “I am not stupid. I am wounded. Please respect me.” We need to remember to respect others, especially when they seem impaired or different.

Finally, and from the perspective of eight years of neurological recovery and health, Taylor shares what she learned from her stroke:

“This stroke of insight has given me the priceless gift of knowing that deep inner peace is just a thought (or) feeling away. To experience peace does not mean that your life is always blissful. It means that you are capable of tapping into a blissful state of mind amidst the normal chaos of a hectic life. I realize that for many of us, the distance between our thinking mind and our compassionate heart sometimes feels miles apart. Some of us traverse this distance on command. Others of us are so committed to our hopelessness, anger, and misery that the mere concept of a peaceful heart feels foreign and unsafe.

“Based upon my experience with losing my left mind, I whole-heartedly believe that the feeling of deep inner peace is neurological circuitry located in our right brain. This circuitry is constantly running and always available for us to hook into. The feeling of peace is something that happens in the present moment. It’s not something that we bring with us from the past or project into the future. Step one to experience inner peace is the willingness to be present in the right here, right now.”

Summing up, Taylor says, “If I had to pick one action word for my right mind, I would have to choose compassion. . . If I had to choose one word to describe the feeling I feel at the core of my right mind, I would have to say joy. My right mind is thrilled to be alive. I experience a feeling of awe when I consider that I am simultaneously capable of

being at one with the universe, while having an individual identity whereby I move into the world and manifest positive change.”

And finally, she says, “I think Gandhi was right when he said, ‘We must be the change we want to see in the world.’ I find that my right hemisphere consciousness is eager for us to take that next giant leap for mankind and step to the right so we can evolve this planet into the peaceful and loving place we yearn for it to be.”

I invite you to join me and Jill Bolte Taylor in making that step together. Learning to accept our right hemisphere consciousness may seem as difficult as recovering from a stroke, but it is only a matter of coming to understand the radically different way of being in the world that has always been our birthright.

As the Hindus would say, “sat chit ananda.” The fundamental reality underlying the nature of the mind is bliss. May we all realize our bliss and join together with Taylor in evolving our planet into the peaceful and loving place we yearn for it to be.

May it be so.