

Neurotheology: The Brain and Religious Experience

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I often joke with folks that the only fact that I can remember learning from my undergraduate days is that “the eyes are an extension of the brain.” I remember being amazed when I learned, that in our embryonic development our eyes begin as little buds on the brain and then slowly migrate forward into their sockets. There other cells are waiting to connect with them, so they can be in position to negotiate their environment. Thus, I deduced, when we look into one another’s eyes we are seeing each other’s brains. Fascinating. It provides an interesting juxtaposition to the eyes being the mirror of the soul. Or does it?

This is a sermon about learning.

My undergraduate studies of the brain provided a new light in my own house of learning. Virginia Wolf once said, “I like going from one lighted room to the other, such is my brain to me; lighted rooms.”

Ironically, it was not until my seminary studies that I was afforded my first chance to witness an actual human brain dissection. (My undergrad only provided brain models such as the Wizard of UUZ shared today). As part of my hospital chaplaincy training we were offered the opportunity to view an autopsy. I wasn’t sure how I was going to feel about experiencing an autopsy; with death being so sheltered in our society, I have not been immune from the rather sickly neurosis that has resulted regarding our abilities to deal with death and dying...and perhaps, life and living.

So yes, I was nervous that morning of the autopsy and voiced this to my fellow seminarians who seemed rather more enthusiastic than me. Yet, we ended up with a pathologist who approached his work with a sense of intrigue and honor. And within time, I felt nothing less than a sense of awe and humility.

Experiencing simultaneously the beautiful miracle of life as well as its fragility. Pausing and reflecting during the autopsy, I remember experiencing a profound moment, when I found it unfathomable that we humans do harm and violence to one another. That afternoon, I was only one of two students who returned for the tissue dissection; and later that day we were able to explore a brain. Each millimeter of its tissue held secrets about who we are and how we are.

This is a sermon about learning, AND it is a sermon about how learning effects the development of each of our personal theologies. Awhile back, I received a message from a UU friend of mine, John Woods, who said: *Mary Ann, You may not know this about me, but I have long been a student of brain function, and it has served as the foundation of my personal theology, such as it is. For more than 20 years I have been fascinated by an organ that has the capacity to know itself. One thing I like to say is that “every theory of reality is really the brain explaining itself using the metaphors of its experience.”* In essence our explanation of reality is our brain projecting itself out into the world.

When I was in seminary, I was often known to raise my hand during theological discussions and challenge, “How can we discuss theology without first discussing epistemology?!” In other words, how can we talk about what we know about “God” until we explore “how we know what we know.”

In the context of learning about our own personal theologies as Unitarian Universalists, let me share with you part of my seminary learning. In terms of theological and religious knowledge, I was taught that there are typically four sources which create the authoritative foundation of a religion or theology: **Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and Experience.** A few comments about each.

Scripture: The holy and inspired writings of a faith. In some cases, such as the Protestant Bible or Islam’s Koran, scripture can play a central role of authority.

This authoritative role is intensified in some religious communities when scriptural inerrancy is professed. As for Unitarian Universalists, as we heard earlier, we draw from the many scriptural sources of the world's religion and other profound writings of women and men.

Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience

Tradition: Consider Catholicism and the role tradition plays in its authority (from confessionals to the pope); while these traditions do not have a clearly denoted scriptural base, they clearly inform Catholicism. Indigenous cultures often reflect a religious way of being, which has rich traditions in earth-centered rituals and paradigms. As Unitarian Universalists, our Unitarian heritage offers us the tradition of oneness and critical thinking. Our Universalist tradition speaks to us of the togetherness of humanity; as Unitarian Universalist minister Rev. Forrest Church concisely states, it is “to see our tears in another’s eyes”.

Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience

Reason: Indeed, it is Rev. Forrest Church, Minister of All Souls Church in New York City, who defines religion as our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die, and provides a challenging description of reason in our Unitarian Universalist faith tradition:

Reason and rationality are entirely different things. Drawing from experience reason dares us to imagine beyond what mere rationality excludes.... In a principled flight from irrationality, rationalists betray reason by losing sight of the transrational realm, where rationalism is not rejected but transcended. This is the realm of myth, parable, poetry and paradox. (UU World Magazine, November December 2001, Vol XV, No 5, *A Theology for the 21st Century* by Forrest Church).

One of my favorite quotes which encompasses this very transrational realm is, “Life is a paradox....and then again its not.”

Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience

Experience How do our experiences inform our faith? What constitutes a religious experience? . In the book *The Natural Mind* (1972, new preface 1998, Houghton Mifflin Co, NY) author Andrew Weil M.D., argues that we humans have an innate, natural drive to periodically alter our consciousness. He also notes that

...most of the world's highest religious and philosophic thought originated in altered states of consciousness in individuals (Buddha, Paul, Mohammed, etc)...and that creative genius has long been observed to correlate with (altered states of consciousness) and that intuitive genius is often associated with daydreaming, meditation, dreaming, and other non ordinary modes of consciousness. (Weil, pg 36)

It has been my observation that experiencing meditation, music, the creative process, nature, and simply caring often creates a transcendent experience of reality for many of us. Myself included. Thus, I find it rather ironic that one of my most "significant" mystical experiences occurred, no not on the top of a mountain or in a worship setting, but in the women's dressing room of the YMCA. I had just finished about 45 minutes of swimming laps, returned to an empty dressing room and was walking across the carpeted floor to my locker. I was rather absent-mindedly looking down at the carpet when suddenly everything opened...I mean opened. It was as if for the first time I was experiencing reality in all its truth. I was awake. Fear did not exist. (I'm talking Toto we're not in Kansas anymore). It is often said that mystical experiences are ineffable. I've found this to be true.

The most pragmatic description I've found of an experience such as I had at the YMCA comes, oddly enough, from a neurologist, Dr James Austin. In the

May 2001 Newsweek article entitled, “Religion and the Brain: Neurotheology Seeks the Biological Basis of Spirituality: Is God All in our Heads”, Dr. Austin’s describes an experience which occurred some 19 years ago while he was waiting for a train in London; he felt a sudden sense of enlightenment unlike anything he had experienced before. It is described as follows:

His sense of individual existence, of separateness from the physical world around him, evaporated like the morning mist in a bright dawn. ..The sense of “I, me and mine disappeared. Time was not present,” he goes on, “I had a sense of eternity. My old yearnings, loathings, fear of death and insinuations of self-hood vanished. I had been graced by a comprehension of the ultimate things.” (Newsweek, pg 53, 2001)

For me this constitutes a mystical experience. For Dr. Austin this experience is simply “proof of the existence of the brain”, and it prompted him to begin to study the biological basis of mystical and spiritual experiences. In 1998, MIT Press published 844 pages of Austin’s thoughts in this new field of neuro-theology. A number of scientists (and a few ministers) have heeded the call to this new area of study since that time.

And what does any of this means to us Unitarian Universalists, sitting here on a Sunday morning? Is this pondering the brain simply neuro-navel gazing? I absolutely say “no”! Understanding our theologies and ourselves informs us about how we are in this world. How we treat and view others and ourselves. How we encounter questions such as, “Are there evil people or are there evil acts done by people.” ? Does every person have inherent worth? . We only need look at the newspaper headlines from this past week. And the truth is, it is not only we adults who are engaging these questions, but now our children and young people are too. They are looking to us to know when to take a stand. They are looking to us as teachers. They are looking to us to learn. We are called to learn.

This is a sermon about learning.

Scripture. Tradition. Reason. Experience.

What informs your theology? What informs who you are and how you are in this world? Do you see your tears in the eyes of another? Or do you simply see a reflection of your own self? Your own brain?

Let me conclude by saying that I do not spend my life chasing one mystical experience after another. Certainly, periodic glimpses ground me in a deeper, relational and connected universe; Part of my evolving theology is about being in relation with each moment, in all of its awkwardness and mistakes, yet allowing for integrity of mind, compassion of body and spirit. This I have learned from all of you, and those before you, whom I have shared with and served in this ministry.

Lastly, I finally understand that much learning does not come from books, language or the superior functioning of the brain. As many of you know, my Mom was in a state of on-going neurological decline during my five years in Madison, WI. She dealt with small strokes, which resulted in Alzheimer's and Parkinsonian like conditions. Her speech was often non-existent and her movement became very limited. When together, we sometimes looked at pictures or watched Animal Planet; I told her about my ministry while washing her face, doing her hair or painting her nails. Sometimes I shared ornery jokes and we both laughed. But most often we sat together with no words. And I would feel her hand pat mine or touch my cheek. My Mom was a teacher; she was still teaching me. The lessons were not always easy. But it was from her that I continued to learn...about compassion, patience, letting go, grace....The sacredness of simply being together. And I would name many of the moments we shared as....religious experience.

And I learned this. *Love makes a bridge from heart to heart from hand to hand. Love gives us wings to slip the bars of every cage.* Now there's a theology. Thank god, my brain is still learning. Thank brain, my god is still learning.

May we all share in these lessons together.

Let us dare the lessons of life and love.

Let us learn to see our tears in another's eyes.

Amen