

OUR HIDDEN MYSTICAL MIND

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At the age of 37, Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor was in the prime of her life. She was at the Harvard Medical School conducting research and teaching young professionals about the human brain. Her research was devoted to understanding the biochemical foundations of mental illness, which was a topic of intense personal interest to her because of her brother's diagnosis of schizophrenia. Her personal and professional interests had recently converged when she was elected to the national board of directors of the National Alliance on Mental Illness.

And then one morning, her life took a dramatic turn. In her own words. "In one fell swoop, the rosiness of my life and promising future evaporated. I woke up on December 10, 1996, to discover that I had a brain disorder of my own. I was having a stroke. Within four brief hours, I watched my mind completely deteriorate in its ability to process all stimulation coming in through my senses. This rare form of hemorrhage rendered me completely disabled whereby I could not walk, talk, read, write, or recall any aspects of my life." [Jill Bolte Taylor, *My Stroke of Insight*, p. 7] She had entered a twilight zone of awareness that would change her outlook on life dramatically. She would later learn that she had suffered a massive disabling of her left hemisphere. Over the next eight years, Dr. Taylor gradually recovered the left-hemisphere functions she had lost during her stroke, but she was also determined to communicate the profound insights into the human mind and its relationship to the world that her experience bestowed. She describes her life-changing stroke experience and her inspiring recovery in a book titled *My Stroke of Insight*.

"When I lost my left hemisphere and its language centers," she writes, "I also lost the clock that would break my moments into consecutive brief instances. Instead of having my moments prematurely stunted, they became open-ended, and I felt no rush to do anything. Like walking along the beach, or just hanging out in the beauty of nature, I shifted from the **doing**-consciousness of my left brain to the **being**-consciousness of my right brain. I morphed from

feeling small and isolated to feeling enormous and expansive. . . . I understood that at the most elementary level, I am a fluid. . . . 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. . . . The now offline intellectual mind of my left hemisphere no longer inhibited my innate awareness that I was the miraculous power of life. I knew I was different now—but never once did my right mind indicate that I was ‘less than’ what I had been before. I was simply a being of light radiating life into the world. . . . In the absence of my left hemisphere’s negative judgment, I perceived myself as perfect, whole, and beautiful just the way I was. ” [pp. 70-74]

Jill Taylor’s stroke experience carries many of the hallmarks of **mystical** experience: the loss of a sense of individual separateness and a corresponding sense of profound unity with all of reality, a deep sense of inner peace and harmony, and an awareness that our “normal” waking consciousness is only one limited form of consciousness surrounded by an enormous field of energy. Mystics and poets throughout the ages have attempted to describe this form of awareness. The Swiss author Hermann Hesse writes:

Sometimes, when a bird cries out, or the wind sweeps through a tree,
 Or a dog howls in a far-off farm, I hold still and listen a long time.
 My world turns and goes back to the place where, a thousand forgotten years ago,
 The bird and the blowing wind were like me, and were by brothers.
 My soul turns into a tree, and an animal, and a cloud bank.
 Then changed and odd it comes home and asks me questions.
 What should I reply?

[in Elizabeth Roberts & Elias Amidon (eds.), *Earth Prayers*, p. 7]

Psychologists have been fascinated with studying mystical states of consciousness. More than a hundred years ago, William James wrote, “There is about mystical utterances an eternal unanimity which ought to make critics stop and think, and which brings it about that the mystical classics have . . . neither birthday nor native land.” [*Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 324] Unfortunately, this interest in studying mystical consciousness languished under the influence of

behaviorism, which insisted that subjective experiences could not be studied scientifically. With the recent advent of sophisticated techniques for measuring brain activity, neuroscientists have been able to study the mystical mind directly. One of the pioneers in this new field called **neurotheology** is Andrew Newberg, a researcher with appointments in both the Department of Radiology and the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Pennsylvania. In his laboratory, Newberg has used brain imaging technology to study the minds of a wide range of religious practitioners: Tibetan Buddhist monks, Franciscan nuns, Pentacostals, and Sikhs.

What he discovered is a remarkable similarity in brain activity **regardless** of the particular religious tradition to which his subjects belonged. It doesn't matter how this unitary state is attained—through meditation or prayer or rhythmic music—the resulting brain state is the same. An area of the parietal lobe called the orientation area is deprived of neural input. The intensity of those unitary states depends on the degree of neural blockage, which Dr. Newberg calls the **unitary continuum**. “The arc of this continuum links the most profound experiences of the mystics with the smaller transcendent moments most of us experience every day. . . . We might be moved to a state of mild unitary absorption by art, or music, or walks in the autumn woods. We may reach deeper unitary states during periods of intense concentration or through the transforming intoxication of romantic love. These activities, and the transcendent states they produce, are not religious in any formal sense, but in neurological terms they are similar to many unitary experiences produced by religious activity. These religious experiences exist along the same neurological continuum, and like all nonspiritual unitary states, their intensity is determined by the degree to which the orientation area is blocked from neural flow.” [Andrew Newberg et al., *Why God Won't Go Away*, pp. 115-16]

What does this tell us about the existence of God? Andy Newberg is diplomatic about the implications of his research. He says, “When a *religious person* looks at our brain scans, they say, ‘Ah, that’s where God has an interaction with me.’ An *atheist* looks at the data and says, ‘There it is. It’s nothing more than what’s in your brain.’ Even if I do a brain scan of somebody who tells me that they’ve seen God, that scan only tells me what their brain was doing when they had that experience, and it doesn’t tell me whether or not they actually did see God.” [quoted by Barbara Bradley Hagerty, *Fingerprints of God*, p. 170] Perhaps there is a different

way to think about this issue. Instead of using this research to prove or disprove the existence of a God who is **out there** somewhere, perhaps we should focus on how we can deepen and expand our relationship to the vast universe of experience that exists both within us **and** beyond us. If we take seriously the experimental findings of Dr. Newberg as well as the dramatic personal experiences of people like Dr. Taylor, then **all** of us are capable of having mystical experiences in varying degrees. **All of us are endowed with a mystical mind.**

Our challenge is to discover ways to tap into this deep well of mystical awareness. Jill Bolte Taylor says it very clearly: “My stroke of insight would be: *Peace is only a thought away, and all we have to do to access it is silence the voice of our dominating left mind.*” [p. 116] She offers some helpful advice for “taking a step to the right.” She says, “The portion of my left mind that I chose **not** to recover was the part of my left hemisphere that had the potential to be mean, worry incessantly, or be verbally abusive to either myself or others.” [p. 152] In contrast, “My right mind is all about the richness of this present moment. It is filled with gratitude for my life and everyone and everything in it. It is content, compassionate, nurturing, and eternally optimistic. . . . To my right mind, we are all equal members of the human family. My right mind does not perceive or give heed to territories or artificial boundaries like race or religion. . . . My right mind character is adventurous, celebrative of abundance, and socially adept. It is sensitive to nonverbal communication, empathic, and accurately decodes emotion. My right mind is open to the eternal flow whereby I exist at *one* with the universe. It is the seat of my divine mind, the knower, the wise woman, and the observer.” [pp. 146-47]

I don’t know about you, but that sounds pretty appealing to me! And we don’t need to have a stroke in order to discover it. We just need to learn how and when to quiet the chatter of our left hemisphere, with its constant criticism of self and others. She has found that “when I am least expecting it—feeling either physically tired or emotionally vulnerable—those negative circuits have a tendency to raise their hurtful heads. The more aware I remain about what my brain is saying and how those thoughts feel inside my body, the more I own my power in choosing what I want to spend my time thinking about and how I want to feel. If I want to retain my inner peace, I must be willing to consistently and persistently *tend the garden of my mind* moment by moment, and be willing to make the decision a thousand times a day.” [p. 162] In

the words of Rabindranath Tagore, “I feel my limbs are made glorious by the touch of this world of life. And my pride is from the life-throb of ages dancing in my blood this moment.”

DISCUSSION

HYMN # 352 “Find a Stillness”

CLOSING WORDS #456 [led by Lay Leader]