

Changing Our Minds
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Reading:

Buddha's Brain -
the practical neuroscience of happiness, love and wisdom by Dr. Rick
Hanson, PhD with Dr. Richard Mendius, MD 2009

“The Evolving Brain

- Life builds on preexisting capabilities. Life's progression can be seen inside our own brain, in terms of what Paul MacLean (1990) referred to as the reptilian, paleomammalian, and neomammalian levels of development...[which includes the smaller most recently developed prefrontal cortex. For our purposes today we will call these alligator, fox, monkey brain and owl.]
- Cortical tissues that are relatively recent, complex and conceptualizing, slow and motivationally diffuse sit atop *subcortical* and *brain-stem* structures that are ancient, simplistic, concrete, fast and motivationally intense. The subcortical region lies in the center of your brain, beneath your cortex and on top of the brain stem: the brain stem roughly corresponds to the reptilian [alligator] brain. As you go through your day there is a kind of [alligator- fox-] monkey brain in your head shaping your reactions from BOTTOM UP.
- Nonetheless, the modern cortex [monkey and owl brain] has great influence over the rest of the brain, and it's been shaped by evolutionary pressures to develop ever-improving abilities to parent, bond, communicate, cooperate, and love (Dunbar and Shultz 2007).

[Also] over hundreds of millions of years of evolution, our ancestors developed three fundamental strategies for survival:

- 1) Creating separations – in order to form boundaries between themselves and the world and between one mental state and another
- 2) Maintaining stability – in order to keep physical and mental systems in healthy balance.
- 3) Approaching opportunities and avoiding threats – in order to gain things that promote offspring, and escape or resist things that don't.

[To reinforce these strategies,] ... our neural networks evolved to create pain and distress when separations break down, stability is shaken, opportunities disappoint, and threats loom. Unfortunately, these conditions happen all the time because

- Everything is connected
- Everything keeps changing
- Opportunities routinely remain unfulfilled or lose their luster, and many threats are inescapable (e.g., aging and death)”

BB pgs 24-26

Sermon:

I come to you this morning with a song in my heart. I bring you good news!

Well yes, nationally we have a big problem with bullying and many of us have direct experience with it perhaps even here. NYT letters to editor Monday talked about bullying in assisted living for the elderly. Schools including here in Greater Hartford are addressing it. Our own USH RE program is working on helping kids deal with bullying in healthy - ays as Rayla’s banana story today shows - More on that next week.

And “Yes” we have a big problem with our brains hard wired for suspicious rapid firing that is mismatched with our need for thoughtful cooperation to sustain life in today’s world. We are like snappy, opportunist alligators but we wish to be like playful, curious monkeys and wise owls.

At times we experience this mismatch in our families. At times it happens in our various USH meetings, especially when we have two values that seem at odds with each other like style of worship we prefer or protecting the endowment and protecting the environment. We have all said things “in the heat of the moment” as we say, things we later regretted, wishing we had paused and given more thought to what we said and how it would affect others. When this happens we feel we failed our UU principles and our best selves.

This is why the USH Board has supported The Healthy Relations Team at USH in raising our awareness of how to deal with this brain mismatch and to create ways to maintain respect and emotional safety. That’s why we are here today.

So where is the good news?

The good news is “we can change our minds”.

When I first read Buddha’s Brain I was struck with hopefulness. For I gained an understanding of the primary neural paths of our responses that were naturally negative and ensured our ancestors survived to produce all of us.

But I also learned how human brains evolved further to have slower positive capacities that I believe are essential to our future survival.

Furthermore many behavioral practices are known to slow down the negative responses and increase the positive ones that are aligned with our UU Principles that I aspire to live by. This is the good news! I can **change** my mind!!

To use the analogy Rayla introduced us to a few weeks ago, We CAN feed the kind wolf of love and NOT feed the mean wolf of hate. And it is easier to change with others than alone - In fact maybe necessary. And we can change more easily if we practice when our reflexive alligator and clannish fox are not much activated. Given the chance -- monkey and owl are the best students. As a UU congregation, this is also good news.

Let me briefly relate this to two recent sermons here – when Rev. Heather talked about Alzheimer’s I realized my husband’s deterioration went slowly from the front owl and monkey part of his brain so he could no longer solve problems nor learn new info, to his older fox brain with its focus on relationships so he still kissed the ladies’ hands. In his last days his alligator brain controlling breathing and heartbeat was almost all that was left.

Two weeks ago in Rev. Cathy’s sermon on Selma to Ferguson we could see the mismatch between racist clannish fox and reactive alligator behavior supported in our white racist society contrasted with more positive behaviors of those people in the marches. The marchers used their monkey and owl brains - thought of the future, saw all humanity as one, sought strategies to overcome barriers so we would have civil rights for all – together they supported values we UUs share even when the older parts of their brains were afraid.

“Love is the spirit of this church and service is our law. This is our great covenant - to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love and to help one another.” Sounds like the right place to “Change our Minds” to me. And so I come with good news to share. We can **change** our minds.

Now I don’t want this sermon to turn totally into a lecture about the brain as much as I love learning about it. My intention is to inspire you to inquire further about these tools and practices I’ll describe

to enhance the positive capacities of our brains
to benefit the common good
and to make own our heart glad.

I want us to have an easy language we can use to help ourselves and each other have healthier relations – in our families, at work and here at USH. Many of these practices are already familiar to you. I will share six practices from Buddha’s

Brain which we might explore to change our minds. All six ways are supported one way or another here at USH. That is also the good news.

1) Know yourself –To do this, we pay attention to what we are feeling and saying to ourselves. We know what triggers our past negative experiences and reactions. We practice this in our Small Group Ministries, meditation and Tai Chi and many USH classes. Exploring ourselves intentionally creates some discomfort [remember the discomfort evolved to maintain inner boundaries] but the self-knowledge gives us the opportunity for self compassion, the foundations for empathy, and the time to make better wiser choices. We can change our minds

2) Mindfulness – defined in Buddha’s Brain as “***simply... having good control over your attention: you can place your attention wherever you want and it stays there; when you want to shift it to something else you can.***”

This means intentionally managing monkey mind, which is curious but also likes to mindlessly swing from branch to branch to branch. We slow down. Our USH Board has slowed its down decision-making process for this very reason. To practice we can focus on taking a few deep breaths at regular intervals such as when we drink water, stop for a traffic light, wait in line. We do one thing at a time whenever possible; reduce multi tasking. Meditation guidebooks and CDs and apps as well as our USH meditation group can help us learn and practice mindfulness. We can change our minds.

3) Listen more: in order to create more kindness we need to listen more carefully and non-judgmentally to others. We practice this in Small Group Ministry, Race Conversations and Non Violent Communications groups here at USH as well as through our covenants for how we will treat each other repeated on Sunday mornings and before every Board meeting. These covenants and practices are resources open to all of us to build skills so we “can change our minds.”

4) Avoiding the “second dart” of self inflicted mental pain. Here’s how that looks: First dart is when someone hurts us. We couldn’t control what they said or did. It happened. It is now in the past.

The second dart is one we send to ourselves by our self-talk. We start telling ourselves stories about the first dart. Some of mine are: “He doesn’t call because I’m not a good mom.” “I always get in the wrong line!” “Now that I’m old, no ones pays me any attention.” “ Oh, I know what I should have said that would have fixed him!” AA calls it “stinking thinking”. We say she is “beating herself up” or “he’s getting himself all riled up”.

These negative messages flood our bodies with the same stress inducing chemicals that the first dart did, unnecessary negativity.

You know it when you see it in others. The trick is to catch it when we are doing it to ourselves.

When we need help to manage these patterns, we can find a wise friend, counselor or support group. I was caught in this cycle just the other day. While Kayla silently listened to me rant about a frustrating business transaction, I worked from my angry suspicious lower brain to my grateful big picture higher brain. I soon began to feel so much better as my inner message shifted. Here at USH we can remind one another to be kind to ourselves. We can **change** our minds.

5) Collect happiness: Velcro vs Teflon. The evolutionary bias of our minds is to stick to unpleasant experiences like we were Velcro and release pleasant ones like we were Teflon.

We can counter act that natural negative bias by collecting our pleasant experiences and not only storing them, but getting them out and recalling them regularly. Every time we do this, we flood our bodies again with feel good, calm inducing chemicals, which by the way are better for healthy immune systems.

So look for good news and happy times. Here at USH it is important to celebrate the happy moments as we did for the 50th birthday of our building and at the Semi Annual meeting with our star burst of High lights. Do something every day that makes you happy – play a song you love, look at your photos, keep at least one corner in your home beautiful at all times perhaps even the kitchen sink. For some of us, participating in our USH activities like Artist Way, choir and movie nights help us collect happiness. Recall and stay with the sensations of these experiences like letting the sun soak into you on the beach so it warms you down to your bones. We can **change** our minds.

6) Name it: When we **think** we hear someone speaking disrespectfully to another, creating unpleasant experiences for another, we need to name our impression and ask the other to check it out. An “I” message is always appropriate. It might sound like this:

“When I heard how you spoke to him, I felt confused. What I heard didn’t sound respectful. Could you help me understand what was going on for you?”

“To me, you seem upset by the last round of conversation, is that true? Is there something you need to express and we need to understand?”

This may be the most challenging part of changing our minds. We UUs value the individual to such an extent that we may ignore actively keeping our community a respectful safe place.

We forget we have to stop feeding the mean wolf. The one in others is the same one in us. We don't need to judge it; it is natural but not healthy in our world.

Out of compassion and empathy for ourselves and others, we name disrespect, question it, and offer support for shifting to kindness.
We can **change** our minds.

To wrap up, remember that in Rachael's bullying scenario eventually, she stopped sending herself second darts and began collecting positive experiences with others. Savor her success. Feel the happiness of finding a way out of her painful situation.

Theater Works current show is Dancing Lessons; go see it. In it an autistic professor responds to a student's question about whether people can really change. He says "Change causes discomfort but there is a formula for change. Change equals courage."

With courage feed the kind wolf in yourself and others:

know yourself,
be mindful,
listen more,
avoid second darts,
collect happiness,
question disrespect.

There is good news, blessings be.

Benediction:

#694

May the Love which overcomes all differences,
which heals all wounds,
which puts to flight all fears,
which reconciles all who are separated,
be in us and among us
now and always.

Frederick E. Gillis
