

Sermon, November 21, 2010, *The Battle Within Our Brains*

David Driver

Have you heard the one about the two Unitarian Universalists who one day after Sunday service decided to paint the church's exterior because it was getting a bit shabby. They went to the local hardware store and bought all the paint they could with the money they had, then started in on the job. They hadn't gone very far before they realized that there wasn't enough paint to cover the whole church. So one of them said, "Let's thin this paint down so it will go further." They did that and went on painting but before long realized again that they would soon run out of paint. So they thinned the paint some more and continued painting. Well, they had to do this several times before they could look back at their now completed paint job and take satisfaction in their work. But just about then it began to rain, and the rain came on hard. It didn't take long before most of the new paint just ran down the sides of the church. Suddenly, the clouds parted and some blue sky appeared. Imagine their surprise when they heard a booming voice come from the heavens above: "Repaint, Repaint and thin no more!"

This little joke illustrates the mocking tone that UU's often take when they refer to traditional Christianity's and Judaism's concept of a supernatural deity, whose pronouncements in the Old Testament might have been characterized by the stern and angry slogan, "Repent and sin no more". But what is going on here? I have a lot of questions this morning. Why can you come to church here and possibly never hear the word "god" in the course of a Sunday service? What happened to that old god of the Israelites who often spoke in anger at their misdeeds? How did that god get transformed into a caring and loving god? Were the Ten Commandments supposed to apply only to the people led out of Egypt by Moses, or did the Jews believe they should be applied universally? When did the circle of tolerance get extended beyond a certain tribe or nation-state? How did half the human race evolve from believing in multiple gods to believing in the one all-purpose monotheistic God of the Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam? And for that matter, why did the other half of humanity, mostly situated east of the Fertile Crescent, in India and the rest of

Asia, develop religions without a Creator god with the humanlike emotions of anger and love, among others? Why did the three great western religions posit Man as separate from God, in need of clergy to administer their relationship and enforce Man's allegiance to God? And how was it that a contradictory strain of allegiance to Man developed in western thought, a humanistic strain that began with the Greeks and Romans in antiquity and continued in the native mythologies of Europe, notably Celtic and Germanic, according to the great modern philosopher, Joseph Campbell?

These are some of the questions that have been bedeviling me in recent years. I don't have the answers, but I have gained a greater understanding of these issues of belief and unbelief through reading two excellent books, *The Evolution of God*, by Robert Wright and *My Stroke of Insight* by Jill Bolte Taylor. I believe – no, I think – that as human wisdom has grown since prehistoric times, and grown probably almost exponentially, thanks to the discoveries of science brought about by the human brain, the concept of God has simply had to adapt. I further think that religion evolved through the forces of human cultural evolution, and the environment for that evolution was the human brain. This means that I believe – no, think – that the idea of God that has come down to us through the ages arose within the brain. In other words, Man came first, then came God. I realize that not everyone in this congregation may subscribe to this belief or thought, let alone everyone who worships in the several traditional churches in this town, and certainly not those who worship in the evangelical churches that are scattered on the outskirts of Chester. I ask your indulgence to hear me out this morning, and I thank you for permitting me to express my views in the very important free pulpit.

Each one of the questions I posed could become the subject of a sermon! But today I would like to focus briefly on how the concept of God has been affected by the human brain. Robert Wright, in his book, *The Evolution of God*, traces for us how early man, the hunter-gatherers of pre-history, tried to make sense of things, how they tried to explain why bad things happen and how to make things better. The earliest form of religion was probably animism, in which supernatural powers were assigned to inanimate objects like the wind, the sun,

rocks and trees. When the moon went into eclipse it was because the moon god was angry with the tribe of hunter-gatherers. Of course, eventually some people noticed that eclipses of the moon happened on a fairly predictable schedule and therefore were not related to some misbehavior of some tribesman. Robert Wright says this would have been an early example of religion being challenged by science and having to adapt to the new scientific reality. And of course religions have had to adapt, ever since ancient times, to an ever evolving reality based on scientific truth. There's nothing wrong with that, he says. Science itself has had to adapt and change as new discoveries about the world around us were being made.

Those wise people who figured out how to predict eclipses and other natural events were called shamans, the first religious leaders. And when they exercised this knowledge to transform a people's beliefs, that was an early example of a religion adapting to the power of the human brain. These shamans helped their tribe conceive of gods and spirits as the instruments behind otherwise unexplainable events.

As the form of social organization grew in size and agriculture was discovered about twelve thousand years ago, religious leaders acquired political powers as well. The leader of a chiefdom or an ancient state was usually vested with religious power to the point that he was often regarded as being a deity himself or at least having a special relationship with a deity so that he could transmit a god's commands to the leader's subjects.

Most ancient religions were polytheistic in nature, but it was the Israelites who over the centuries wrestled with the idea of multiple gods within their own society and most definitely without. It was the Israelites who invented the concept of one God, with a capital G in our language. Those who championed the god they called Yahweh (among other names) eventually won out through internal strife or by conquest. The book of Isaiah says, in verse 45, *"There is no other god besides me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is no one besides me. Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other. By myself I have sworn, from my mouth has gone forth in righteousness a*

word that shall not return: 'To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear.'

Yahweh, or Jehovah, was also the God of Jesus, then of Christians and then of Muslims. Jehovah was originally a god of vengeance. Only later on in human history did God become a morally modern god, a God of universal compassion.

Robert Wright summarizes the cultural evolution that underlays this transformation by saying, "As villages merged to form chiefdoms, tribes merged to form states, states merged into empires, religion reacted adaptively, helping to keep the web of societies intact...As the scope of social organization grows, God tends to catch up, drawing a larger expanse of humanity under his protection – or at least a larger expanse of humanity under his toleration." He goes on to say, "Today, the social system, an incipiently global social system, is again threatened by chaos. But now religion seems to be the problem, not the solution."

Remember the two different types of *We Gather Together* we sang this morning? The old Dutch version contained phrases such as "he forgets not his own" and "thou still our defender wilt be". He is our God, not anybody else's; he will defend us against our enemies. In the UU version, we sang "of community now in the making in every far continent, region and land" and "we pledge ourselves in covenant to stand with those of all races and all times..." How things have changed since 1626! Here's an example closer to home. Thursday night at choir practice, Ginny Freeman reminded us all that when she sang in the choir around 1940, they entered this sanctuary by processing down the aisle singing *Onward Christian Soldiers*, marching as to war! Gosh, this cultural evolution stuff is happening awfully fast these days! Think how many of us of a certain age can remember when we sang that hymn quite often, and yet here we are attending a church that has moved light years away from such martial, parochial thinking. I think that has happened because the human brain inside all of us has rapidly evolved to expand the circle of tolerance to peoples of other cultural traditions, even to those whose culture has not evolved the way ours has. That has a ring of superiority to it that I don't like. I certainly don't

consider ourselves superior to Catholics or Episcopalians or to Muslims. For one thing, these other traditions might have been ahead of us when it comes to social justice. UU's in general are catching up fast and may even be leading the way now. But what can compare to the Liberation Theology that Catholic priests and nuns employed on behalf of exploited peasant classes in Latin America in the '60s and '70s, often at the cost of their lives?

I think what has happened to us progressives is that we have gradually become more right-minded in a literal sense; that is, for some reason we have allowed ourselves to more comfortably be guided by the right hemisphere of our brains, to feel more *at one* with the world around us, and to be marginally less concerned with always protecting the ego, which is what our left brains do so well. I used the word 'marginally' because I do not think that our brains' thought processes are radically different from anyone else's. Perhaps a tipping point may have been reached, sending us in a slightly different direction. People who are dominated by the right hemisphere of the brain were probably born that way, but do you think that people of both brain orientations, left and right and all degrees in between, can be nudged by the social environment around them toward more cooperative contact between themselves? Isn't this the direction that humankind has moved since the dawn of time? Hasn't the ascent of Man which Darwin described in biological terms occurred also in cultural terms? The story of human history seems to me to be one of forward progress of extending that circle of acceptance and tolerance beyond one's family, one's tribe, one's country, one's religion. Sure there are many steps backward along the way, political wars, religious wars, the Holocaust of Nazi Germany, the rise of Muslim jihad marching to war. The tide flows in and the tide flows out, and humans are subject to a similar pull and tug on their thoughts and emotions. But we have something that natural forces like the tides do not have. We possess a powerful thinking machine within our brains.

Jill Bolte Taylor discovered through her stroke experience the tremendous power of the right hemisphere of the brain to draw us out of our solitary single self and to impel us to connect with the world around us, not just for our own good but for the good of humanity as a whole. At times, her exhortations at the

end of her book sound like the psychobabble that we read in the self-help books that seem to proliferate in the bookstores, “We can harness the power within ourselves”, etc. But in her case this advice is coming from a person who experienced the euphoria that the right brain can connect us to, the feeling of being one with the universe, and for this reason I find her advice to be worthwhile, coming as it does from a scientist, a researcher in the anatomy of the brain, originally a left-brain person like myself. Jill Taylor wants to tell us how to access that right-brain power to connect us to the universe in a feeling way, without having to go through the agony of a stroke to get there. Her “journey into the depths of the brain” from which she recovered “physically, cognitively, emotionally and spiritually” gave her the insight that we can choose to be the kind of person we want to be.

Her message is: Everyone can find this. She says, “Imagine a world filled with compassionate loving people, if people can *step to the right* of their left hemispheres and find this peace.” This was her Stroke of Insight.

She continues, “We have the power in the moment to choose who we want to be. We can be one with everything in a place where ‘I am the life power of the universe’. OR, we can choose to continue being ruled by our left hemispheres, being a single individual, separate from ‘you’, separate from the ‘flow’. Which would you choose?, she asks.

The more time we choose to spend in our right hemisphere, where we run the deep inner peace circuits, the more peace we will project into the world, and the more peaceful the world, the happier our world will be.

We are the life force power of the universe!

We discovered an interesting statement the other day at the Rotary auction to benefit Andy Ladd’s scholarship fund at the Stone Hearth Inn. We all know that artists tend to be right-brain people. Well, we ran into Robert Sarly, a good friend of this church who lives in Andover and is a painter by hobby. Robert and his business associate, Abby Raeder, have ambitious plans to establish the new

Vermont Institute of Contemporary Arts right here in Chester. I saw an amazing quotation in the Vision section of his prospectus for the Institute which will open in a year or two. Amazing because it fits right into what Jill Taylor has been saying. Here are some of the things Robert says: “Art is life’s essence. Art distills the noise, clutter and fragmented contradictions of every day. Art invites us out of the parochial silos of our private lives into an altered state of consciousness, of both ourselves and of our world. Art converts the here and now of existence into an eternal and universal present, and it records the struggle to convert hidden meaning in ordinary experience through the power of creative imagination. Art is calling each of us.”

One final citation from Jill Taylor’s book: “Brain research conducted by two doctors using single photon emission computed tomography (SPECT) identified the neuro-anatomy underlying our ability to have a religious or spiritual (mystical) experience. They wanted to understand which regions of the brain were involved in our capacity to undergo a shift in consciousness – away from being an individual to feeling that we are *at one* with the universe (God, Nirvana, euphoria).

“Tibetan mediators and Franciscan nuns were invited to meditate or pray inside the SPECT machine. They were instructed to tug on a cotton twine when they reached either their meditative climax or felt united with God. These experiments identified shifts in neurological activity in very specific regions in the brain. First there was a decrease in the activity in the left hemisphere language centers resulting in a silencing of their brain chatter. Second, there was a decrease in activity in the orientation association area [also in the left hemisphere]. This region of the brain helps us identify our personal physical boundaries. When this area is inhibited or displays decreased input from our sensory systems, we lose sight of where we begin and where we end relative to the space around us.”

Is the right hemisphere of our brains where God exists? I don’t know the answer, but I think I am going to do some of my own ‘research’ by cultivating the right side of my brain. How about you?

