

**We got to get ourselves back to garden:
Our brains, our faith and our practice
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As the graphic on the Order of Service indicates, this sermon is about “Human Nature.” In some ways this could be understood as the normal ground I have covered in my previous sermons, if one understands this term to mean the “nature,” or environment, that humans have created and dwell in.

But today my emphasis is going to be on the normal meaning of this term, the “nature,” or essence of humans. In particular, I will be talking about current research on the development and state of the human brain and what this tells us about our faith and practice. Yet, as you will see, and can certainly guess from title of this sermon, I will talk a bit about the environment, but not about the environment that we created so much as how the environment created us.

The human brain, along with the development of multi-cellular life, is arguably the most influential and amazing change ever brought about by evolution in the entire history of our planet. With that in mind, let us now get into Peabody and Sherman’s “way-back” machine and set it to Africa, in the year 2 million BC, when our ancestors, the early hominids, began developing this big brain of ours.

First though, a big caveat for today’s sermon; no one really knows how our brain developed, and consequently why the brains of other primate cousins did not. So today I will talk about theories about how this happened, with an emphasis on theories that provide glimpses into our capacity for spiritual, or mystical, experiences. Then I will talk about research into the wonders of our brain and our capacity for spiritual experiences.

Numerous scientists, philosophers, and theologians have speculated about what caused the development of the modern human with our big brain. Darwin, of course, considered most evolution to be carried out by natural selection; which was encouraged by survival of the fittest among other drivers. Generally speaking, for our ancestors, being fit meant being better able to find food and reproduce our species. It has been shown that a mere 1% difference in reproductive success could result in replacement of one species with another in 30 generations. In a fossil record, 30 generations is a bat of the eyelash, which is why finding transitional species, the so-called “missing links,” is not an easy proposition.

Ok, now back to two million BC, when our ancestors were tree dwellers living in dense jungles alongside of our primate cousins. As we move forward in time, we see that the climate started to change, and the trees began to thin, leaving more wide open savannas. Finding food then became much harder. Our ancestors adapted to this change by coming down from the trees, walking upright, and learning how to hunt and gather communally.

Material theories of our evolution into the Homo genus focus on such things as the increasing complexity of tools; the need to create “mental maps” where sparse food sources were located, how and when they are ripe, how to eat them, etc; how eating diets rich in Omega-3 fatty acids increased brain size; or how the change from occasionally “coming into heat” to near constant reproductive availability allowed for increasing population size.

However, for our purposes today, I want to look at social theories of our evolution. In Malcolm Gladwell’s best seller, “The Tipping Point,” he talks about the importance of “Dunbar’s Number.” Robin Dunbar is a British anthropologist who has noted that among primates, including humans, the larger the neocortex of our brain the larger the average size of the groups in which they live. The neocortex is the part of the brain which processes all conscious thought.

While our earliest ancestors and current non-human primates groom each other to maintain close social contact, early hominids developed language and ever larger brains to handle the complexities of ever larger social groups. It has been shown that even relatively small increases in group size create exponentially more complex social and intellectual burden in primates. So our brains grew to deal with this complexity.

We did, however, reach a limit for the number of people in a group that our human brains can deal with and this number, 148, is called “Dunbar’s Number,” but is usually rounded by Gladwell and others to 150. Groups of less than 150 members usually display a level of intimacy, interdependency, and efficiency that begins to fall apart as soon as the group’s size gets to be over 150.

So what does this tell us about our faith and practice? First, because survival meant that we developed the ability and need to maintain close social networks, we are essentially hard-wired to form congregations of small, intentional communities. Since the advent of agriculture, we have become a largely urban species, often working in large organizations, so we are compelled to seek the solace of a small group of people working toward a common goal. In our case, our goal is the pursuit of the divine within ourselves and others. This theory of brain development also speaks volumes about the positive value of covenant groups and smaller services.

Now let’s climb back into the wayback machine again and travel forward to around 90,000 years ago, when Homo sapiens arrived and populated Africa and Eurasia, living in small bands of hunter gathers. All of these societies shared common fundamental characteristics until about 10,000 BC and the beginnings of agriculture. We know how they lived through fossil records and through studying the last remaining foraging bands.

Besides the similar ways in which they all obtained and prepared their food, there are more interesting social commonalities that I want to explore a bit. According to British historian Chris Harman’s terrific book, “A People’s History of the World,” these bands existed as small egalitarian groups with no rulers, bosses or class divisions – and almost no gender divisions.

There was no private land ownership and no specialization of labor. People made decisions about the activities for which they were responsible. Consensus was reached within whatever group would be carrying out a collective activity. Generosity prevailed over selfishness. Individuals

helped each other. People shared whatever they had, especially food. There was no greed because there were no possessions.

As John Lennon sang: “Imagine no possessions. I wonder if you can.”

Harman points out the implications for human nature. We were molded by millennia of such egalitarian living. As ethnographer Richard Lee points out, “Despite our seeming adaptation to life in hierarchical societies, and despite the rather dismal track record of human rights in many parts of the world, there are signs that humankind retains deep-rooted sense of egalitarianism, a deep-rooted commitment to the norm of reciprocity, and deep-rooted sense of community.”

It would appear that, as Joni Mitchell sang, we “got to get ourselves back to the garden,” where the garden is the primordial state of egalitarian human existence. Imagine, if you would, that the biblical Garden of Eden is a metaphor for this lost lifestyle in the woods and savannas. That the “eating of the fruit of knowledge” refers to the advent of agriculture, and all that came with it, including the dominance of men over women, the rise of class divisions, war, and subsequent subjugation of some people over others.

We gained knowledge, but lost our innocence.

This has implications for how we conduct business in our church and in the rest of our lives, to our liberal faith and personal activism, and to our connections to nature. There is a reason why nature-centered religious practices are common in our faith. We were forged in harmony with nature and with each other, so we seek to return to that fallen state of grace. So “getting back to the garden” is not just a metaphor. Gardening, and other ways to connect with nature, in fact connects us to our deep seated spiritual roots; to our human nature.

Now I want to switch gears to current areas of research specifically about the brain and spirituality. I just finished a fascinating book by NPR reporter Barbara Bradley Hagerty, called “The Fingerprints of God: The Search for the Science of Spirituality,” where she seeks to answer such questions as whether spiritual experience is real, whether consciousness depends entirely on our brain, and when we pray or meditate what happens?

Her findings show that science does not dismiss the existence of the divine so much as it informs it.

She uses “mystical” and “spiritual” experiences as synonyms, as I will. The attempt to describe a mystical experience using words is somewhat of a lesson in futility, because words always fall short of capturing feelings. It reminds me of the saying, often attributed to musician Elvis Costello; “Writing about music is like dancing about architecture.”

What we feel in a mystical experience is something that is “beyond” or better yet “outside” of words. Nonetheless, if I do not attempt to describe such experiences, my sermon would have to end here, which while gratifying some of you, does not accomplish my goals for today.

Hagerty gives numerous case examples of mystical experiences, including her own, and while they vary wildly there are enough commonalities to be able to fold them into a common set of experiences. They all include a loss of anxiety, a feeling of pure joy and unconditional love, and profound loss of ego boundaries and subsequent feeling of connection with everything. The particulars, such as visions that people may or may not see, vary by a person's religious upbringing. Some will have a conversation with Jesus while others see mandalas forming and reforming. But all such experiences change someone's life forever.

Looking back on my life, I have had numerous glimpses of the divine or what I would call mini-mystical experiences, where the curtain of this mortal world was pulled back just enough to know that what we see here before us with our eyes is not all that there is to our world. Yet I have not had the type of bed-rock shifting experience described in this book. Given that I grew up in the 1970s, some of my experiences have been "synthetic spirituality" or "medical mysticism." Such experiences gave me glimpses, but are fleeting, since one is aware while experiencing such phenomena that the experience is chemically induced. While Aldous Huxley, Timothy Leary and others would heartily disagree, it is hard for me to imagine the divine coming in a pill.

However, I would heartily agree that while it is not the way, it does point toward the way.

Like Hagerty, I am not sure I am ready for what may come of a life-changing mystical experience. While I want to experience more of a spiritual life, I am not ready to let go of where I am now. Becoming a mystic strikes me as being a full time gig. So, for now, my own spiritual quest is, admittedly, somewhat superficial. However, I look forward to a time when my life is simpler; when I can pursue the divine with more gusto.

Despite my own tepid forays into the mystical experience, many people have experienced life-changing mystical experiences that they can tap into at any time, and we are all in a place now where such people tend to congregate. So I suspect there are mystics among us now. As I was writing this, I took time off to have lunch with my neighbor who told me how she came to embrace Catholicism so late in life. She had an astonishingly moving, mystical experience while staring at a statue of the Virgin Mary. It is an honor to hear such stories, because it means that we are trusted to listen with an open heart and mind.

I am certain that some of you have had mystical experiences. Hopefully some of you would be willing to share your experiences with us today, trusting that we will listen with an open heart and mind to your stories. Out of respect for others who may want to share, please keep your stories brief.

Given the commonality of such experiences, mainstream scientists are now studying mystics with high-tech medical equipment and getting interesting results. They are studying neurotransmitter systems, specific areas of the brain, and different brain waves.

What was interesting about this research is that there is such a thing as virtuoso spiritual brain. In another bestselling Malcolm Gladwell book, "Outliers," he talks about the 10,000 hour rule. People who are among the best at whatever they do have spent at least 10,000 practicing their

craft. Such is the case with the brain waves and scans of Franciscan nuns, Sikhs, and Tibetan Buddhist monks that were studied while in meditative states. Not only were they easily able to switch their brains into deep meditative states, but their brains are permanently altered by the thousands of hours of meditation they had already done. Put bluntly, their brains are not like mine and in all probability not like yours either.

What I found to be interesting is that in the tests on these brain areas and systems, there was no difference between Christians, Buddhists, or other mystics in either contemplative prayer or meditation. This is a profoundly Unitarian Universalist finding. There are, as we profess, many paths to enlightenment. And we have science to prove it, which certainly is appealing to such a rational faith like ours. But of course we are left, after reading a book like “The Fingerprints of God,” with more questions than answers. Which, of course, is another comfortable place for Unitarian Universalists, since we tend to like questions more than answers.

Research on near death experiences also leaves us with more questions than answers. Such questions include: are we merely a meat-sack full of quantifiable hard and squishy bits, or do we possess a separate mind and/or a soul? There have been so many reports of near death experiences, all so very similar, that finally science is taking the subject seriously. For hard-core materialists, there is no convincing them that the mind is a separate entity than the body, because there is no way to peer into someone’s thoughts. If they cannot measure it, then of course it is not real. Afterall, we have only their descriptions of what they have seen to go by.

However, some of these descriptions defy any reasonable means of explanation, other than we are more than a collection of organic goo and scaffolding. Take the case of the woman who had an otherwise inoperable brain aneurism. In order to get access to her brain, she had to be chilled and drugged into a state of suspended animation where there was no measurable brain activity. During this state she left her body and looked down on medical staff working hard to revive her. She was able to describe the procedures in detail, even though her eyes were taped shut and her ears were not only subjected to 90 decibels of sound but the electrodes measuring her auditory system showed no response to that noise. Hers ears were essentially dead.

In another even more fascinating case a woman had a near death experience and also gave a detailed account of the procedures that were done to revive her. What made her descriptions even more compelling was that this woman had been profoundly blind from birth. She could not even see shadows. Her visual nerves were, and had always been dead. Yet she described things which she obviously had never seen before in her life.

These near death experiences left indelible fingerprints. They changed people’s lives and their brains forever. A near death experience unfolds in the brain in much the same way as a meditative union with the divine. It lights up the same areas and travels the same neural pathways. Of course, this cannot be tested in the same way as meditation because there is no way to predict when someone is going to have such an experience in order to hook them up ahead of time to testing apparatus. However, many near death experiencers are able to recreate in a lab the same unconditional love and joy they felt while standing in the light.

While I have been talking this morning about “the divine,” the term many people in her book use, including Hagerty herself, is “God.” Because I have not wanted you to squirm throughout this sermon, I have not used that term, yet the term “God” is finding itself on the lips of more and more scientists because of this research. But this is a God stripped of all imagery. No flowing white beard of Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel, but rather the functions of God with infinite information, omnipresence, and the compassionate love that is available to all. I have come to the conclusion that in order to understand this sense of God, one needs to have and to hold onto a mystical experience. And this realization is dawning on some scientists as well.

Some scientists understood this long ago. For example, Albert Einstein considered himself a mystic. He wrote that “It is very difficult to elucidate this cosmic religious feeling to anyone who is entirely without it. . . The religious geniuses of all ages have been distinguished by this kind of religious feeling, which knows no dogma and no God conceived in man's image; so that there can be no church whose central teachings are based on it ... In my view, it is the most important function of art and science to awaken this feeling and keep it alive in those who are receptive to it.”

I thank you for your attention this morning. Namaste.