

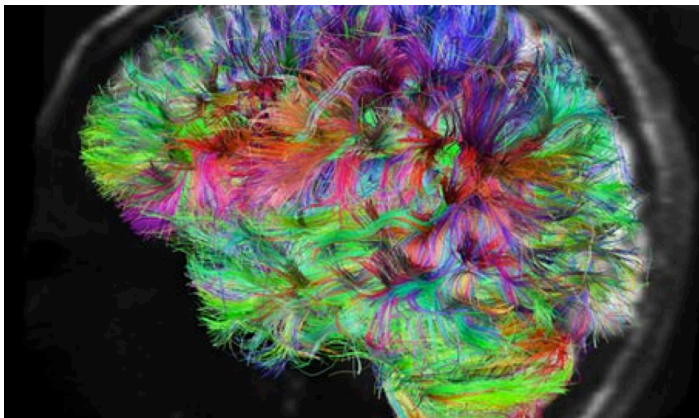
Relationship is Everything: Inhabiting the Space Between

Bonnie Badenoch

In the last fifteen years, two books landed powerfully in the space between who I was at that moment and who I would become. Both radically changed how I experience the world. Their ability to move so deeply into my embodied self seemed to arise from how much they embodied what matters to their authors. The first was Dan Siegel's (1999, 2012) *The Developing Mind*, making its appearance in my world in 2003. It was as though the mysteries of the neural landscape began to unroll within me like a delicate scroll, much in the manner that the universe had become a bit unveiled during my first encounters with a telescope. I was transfixed. That moved me to study deeply, being carried down into the unfamiliar – yet familiar – depths of the interlacing of brain, mind, and relationships. I believe the familiarity came because Dan was writing about the scientific side of our daily experience, so even within the complexities of concept and language, there were echoes of what we already know through embodied experience. His dedication to what he was writing about is woven into the winding pathways of complicated ideas, life-giving juice from his deep seeing.

My interns and I immersed ourselves in this world until we began to feel it moving in the way we carried ourselves in the world, in how our eyes saw others with broader compassion, in the tenderness of gesture and gaze that arose from the growing awareness that each person is doing the best he or she can given their neural constraints and the level of support he or she is able to receive. We were changing as we became infused with concepts in a felt sense, embodied way. So much of how I have moved along the trail of attachment repair for those I teach or counsel has been guided by the vision Dan was able to capture and convey. At this point, it has become so interwoven with my sense of myself that I have difficulty speaking about the particulars – a rather lovely problem to have.

Then in 2010, I found myself picking up Iain McGilchrist's (2009) *The Master and His Emissary*, a weighty book that speaks about the divided brain and its influence on the way culture has unfolded throughout western history. The relationship between the two hemispheres of our brains is such a thorny subject with a checkered past.



At one time, we believed that the two halves of our brains were specialized in terms of what they did, but then learned, through brain scans, that circuitry in both halves fire for everything we do. One glance at a connectome – a diffusion MRI that tracks the movement of water molecules along axons - begins to give us the sense of the teeming firestorm that's unfolding bi-hemispherically all the time. From there, it was an easy jump to begin to assume that there were no real differences between the hemispheres, except that (as Kosslyn and Miller [2013] outline) a few small areas have particular functions. But maybe we were throwing the baby

out with the bath water with that explanation. It seems reasonable to imagine that the bi-hemispheric division has persisted in the course of evolution for some reason.

Iain's experience with reading poetry for the felt sense of it (deeply moving) in contrast to reading it with a critical eye (coldly eviscerating) led him gradually toward the profound need to write a book about the different ways we can *attend* to our world and the enormous consequences for the culture we create through these modes of attention. He moved the conversation from concerns for what each hemisphere *does* to exploring *how* each hemisphere looks out on the world through a different lens. Said in the briefest way, our

right hemispheres have developed to attend to the space between in this moment of emerging experience. This way of seeing is profoundly relational and constantly flowing, and therefore filled with uncertainty and paradox. In contrast, our left hemispheres reprocess information received from the right, rendering it static so that the resulting information can be used to create systems, give us a sense (even if a somewhat false sense) of stability and security. Rather than a relational focus, this hemisphere has more of a mechanical, manufacturing mentality, needing as it does to get things done. The culture that arises depends on the *relationship* between the two hemispheres.

Most significantly for me, Iain's work isn't a collection of dead left-mode concepts. While his research is meticulous, his mode of expression embodies his passionate concern. I was again transfixed. I could almost feel two streams joining: my Dan-nurtured passion for attachment and Iain's devotion to the essential nourishment of the space between. In the concluding chapter of *The Master and His Emissary*, Iain writes about this in a way that continues to touch me deeply with each reading.

Putting it in such human terms, it appears essential for the creation of full human consciousness and imagination that the right hemisphere places itself in a position of vulnerability to the left. The right hemisphere, the one that believes, but does not know, has to depend on the other, the left hemisphere, that knows, but doesn't believe. It is as though a power that has an infinite, and therefore intrinsically uncertain, potential Being needs nonetheless to submit to be delimited – needs stasis, certainty, fixity – in order to Be. The greater purpose demands the submission. The Master needs to trust, to believe in, his emissary, knowing all the while that that trust may be abused. The emissary knows, but knows wrongly, that he is invulnerable. If the relationship holds, they are invincible; but if it is abused, it is not just the Master that suffers, but both of them, since the emissary owes his existence to the Master. (Kindle Locations 11134-11140)

His concluding chapter suggests that the Master has indeed been betrayed and that tragically, the emissary is unable to even notice it has happened. We have lost the relationship between the two that could support a rich and relationally thriving way of life that unfolds when the lens of the right supplies the ongoing vision, while the left uses its substantial resources to manifest that vision, feeding back again to the right for continual input about this moment's needs, circling back to the left for flexible implementation. This immediately calls to mind Dan's FACES flow – flexible, adaptive, coherent, energized, and stable – a blend of the strengths of both hemispheres in the service of a humane way of life centered in a sense of connection and the deep respect and support that engenders.



When instead our culture begins to see life dominantly through the left-mode, it becomes literally impossible to *sense* the relational world as significant. We might have *ideas* about the importance of relationship, but without the felt sense, little will actually happen. Instead, we are pushed back toward the satisfaction of our own needs and toward a perception that everything around us is for our use. This can include our own bodies. We walk them around the block or do 30 push-ups, shape them – sometimes surgically - in ways that we imagine society requires, and feed them what we hear

will make them healthy. The body becomes an object to be manipulated as we lose touch with its inherent guiding wisdom. The relationship is one of master and slave. Even the words “inherent guiding wisdom” become meaningless if we don't have a felt sense of the experience of receiving these ever-flowing communications.

Much of Iain's book is about how we might have arrived at this particular doorstep, and each of us might benefit from reading and rereading his entire book. One piece of the puzzle may lie in how frightening our world has become. The speed at which we're moving is agitating for the nervous system and undermines our primary source of security (and integrated neural circuitry), leisurely face-to-face relationships with one another. If we add our moment-to-moment awareness of historical events unfolding across the world, including images of unimaginable suffering, it becomes easy to understand why we might want to disconnect from our right-based perception of ongoing internal and external events. If we are able to shift into a more isolated left-mode of perception, this can insulate us from fear and suffering because we move out of touch with our embodied experience, don't process the felt sense of relatedness to others very much, don't take in the *meaning* of history (cultural and personal) well, and as a result, experience an overly rosy picture of the present moment. The very significant downsides, of course, are that we are essentially alone and don't know it, and don't have a felt sense of how our consuming ways are damaging relationships and the very environment on which we depend for our existence.

Given that we are implicitly bathing in a left-mode culture all the time (which modifies, however subtly, our own implicit memory), how might we begin to become allies for the healing relationship between the two hemispheres? Simply noticing when we have slipped away into an isolated left mode may be a beginning. Sometimes I can listen to the language that spontaneously flows out of me, shaped by the location of my implicit self in that moment. For example, I might say, "I want to create a space where people can work with their attachment experience." Or instead, "It feels good to imagine cultivating a space where people can rest into their attachment experience." The assumption of "create" in the first statement (which feels like a forward arrow in my body) is that I must *do* something because the space won't exist without my intervention. This then extends to the participants needing to do something – "work." The second set of words (which has a relaxing, open quality in my body – along with an image of trowel and dirt) springs from the felt sense of "cultivating" something already in existence, of supporting a process already underway. This, in turn, leads to the sense that by "rest[ing] into" the space, what is needed will unfold – along with whatever left-mode emergent experiences might be needed in the moment. We don't forego *doing*, but it is more in the service of and arising spontaneously from *being*. This is the essential relatedness that Iain points toward.



It may be that this way of seeing the world is actually more in tune with *what is* in terms of neural integration. Complexity theory tells us that our brains are self-organizing within the bounds of whatever constraints may be present. Once the constraints shift, our brains pursue their integrative pathway without any conscious management by us. I believe when we can listen with kindness to our language, we may be able to play with other modes of expression to see how they land in our bodies. After a few years of doing this, it's pretty delightful to hear myself travel back and forth between left-first and right-first expression.

As I keep reading Iain's words, they are gradually settling on the foundation of essential relatedness that was initially stirred by Dan's vision. Bit by bit, seeing the in-between has become more natural so that the margins of books and articles are now littered with little notes of LM and RM (left-mode and right-mode). Daily life offers continual opportunities to come from the space-between perspective, too, yielding a rich if unsettling brew of contradictions, paradoxes, and beauty. So there we have it – settling and unsettling at the same moment. What follows here are three reflections on the in-between - the centrality of relatedness and interwoven connection - occurring in odd places that have been particularly meaningful for me of late.

- The little wisps of knowing that are arising from the realm of epigenetics are beginning to suggest that there is a temporal “space between” that is richly inhabited by the remnants in our genes of the experiences of our ancestors. Interpersonal experiences, what we eat, how we orient ourselves in our world – all of these and so much more are constantly activating and inhibiting the nearly infinite combinations possible with our genetic material. So the space between grandma and grandpa now rests below our awareness and stretches out in time to nudge us this way and that, subject always to how current relatedness will make further changes in these subtle switching stations. Just as the on-off in our neural architecture creates the flowing ecstasy and anguish – or boredom - of our daily lives, so this cavalcade of activations and inhibitions contributes the texture of what we like, how we move, and how we choose.

some resources – and checking the internet frequently will yield many more:

James Gallagher (December 1, 2010). “Memories pass between generations.” *BBC News* (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-25156510>)

Andy Coughlin (January 25, 2013). “Stress can affect future generation’s genes.” *New Scientist* (http://www.newscientist.com/article/dn23109-stress-can-affect-future-generations-genes.html#.UsHqG_Y6JWY)

Geddes, Linda (December 1, 2013). “Fear of smell can be passed down several generations.” *New Scientist*. (<http://www.newscientist.com/article/dn24677-fear-of-a-smell-can-be-passed-down-several-generations.html#.UsHwZPY6JWY>)

“Ghosts in Your Genes” (a documentary). <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dibpxvU4ml0>

- We are just beginning to discover the intricacies of another rich relational universe that exists within our bellies, and whose messages are sent throughout our bodies, influencing not only physical health, but thoughts, feelings, and behaviors as well – which then connect this microbiome to the rest of our world – which then influences our bacterial guests. We are at the edges of inquiring into its modes of continuous nonverbal communication. About 98% of our DNA belongs to these internal bacterial visitors who inhabit our skin, tongue, and (mostly) our bellies – some 170 trillion strong and are so responsive to our environment that their epigenetics change from moment to moment. What would it be like to be in communication with them, to take seriously that they are sending meaningful messages?

a few resources (although you will see new information about this in the news almost daily):

Michael Pollan (May 15, 2013). “Some of My Best Friends are Germs,” *New York Times*. (http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/19/magazine/say-hello-to-the-100-trillion-bacteria-that-make-up-your-microbiome.html?_r=0)

Rachel Champeau (May 28, 2013). “Changing gut bacteria through diet affects brain function, UCLA study shows.” (<http://newsroom.ucla.edu/portal/ucla/changing-gut-bacteria-through-245617.aspx>)

Rob Stein (November 18, 2013). “Gut Bacteria Might Guide the Workings of Our Minds.” (<http://www.npr.org/blogs/health/2013/11/18/244526773/gut-bacteria-might-guide-the-workings-of-our-minds>)

Carrie Arnold (August 21, 2013). “Gut feelings: the future of psychiatry may be inside your stomach.” (<http://www.theverge.com/2013/8/21/4595712/gut-feelings-the-future-of-psychiatry-may-be-inside-your-stomach>)

- We might want to try an experiment. “Look at” someone or something. Then “gaze” at this same object or person. What might we notice happening in our bodies? Here is what Philip Shepherd (2010) has to say about gazing:

When you look into the darkness of someone's pupils, though, you encounter her[his] non-objective self--her[his] Being. And let's be clear about this: the pupils are black holes--they are empty and the retina beyond is black; to look at a pupil is not to look at an object anymore than looking into darkness through the mouth of a cave is looking at an object. There is nothing in the dark emptiness of the pupil to actually see or describe or objectify or know, and *yet*: by looking into it, you connect with someone's *life*; you encounter her[his] *Being*. And in that encounter, you precipitate an exchange of energies in which you are both participant. (Kindle Location 6512-6518)

Participation – that seems to be the essence of right-mode attending. We have the inestimable and life-giving privilege of ongoing being with whatever is drawing our attention in the moment.

Here’s a concluding thought or two about where we may be now. A statistic of around 75% arises in some significant pieces of research, seeming to indicate that perhaps as many as three-quarters of us may be residing in a more-or-less left-mode perceptual universe. Approximately 75% of college students are significantly less empathic than 30 years ago (Konrath, O’Brien, & Hsing, 2010), a sign of lost felt connection with others. About 75% of participants in a research study regarding meaning and happiness show the pro-inflammatory epigenetic profile of those who are pursuing happiness without meaning – and happiness is the concern of the left-mode, while meaning arises in the right-mode. (See “The Whole Elephant” in this edition of the *Journal* for reflections on this study.) The ongoing research regarding narcissistic traits points to consistent generational increases, with as much as 89% of college students showing greater self-focus over prior generations (Konrath, 2007; Twenge & Foster, 2010). The researchers point to the ongoing emphasis on individuality in our culture, and we might go further to correlate this with a left-shift in which relationships become less tangibly important, leading us to naturally focus on our own immediate needs.

Many of us may tend to blame social media and other technological inventions for the difficulties; however, it may have more to do with the underlying left-shift into which these technologies drop. In the spirit of the right-mode perspective, how do we hold a nonjudgmental, both/and stance toward these developments as a beginning inroad into supporting a shift toward the right’s vision being implemented by the left? I do believe that our dedication to inhabiting the in-between is an intention worthy of our sustained attention. One beautiful part is that in so doing, we also nurture the roots of attachment, build more integrated embodied brains, support the inner ecosystem – both in ourselves and in others. As we walk this earth, we may send ripples of this visionary stance out to all around us.

Bonnie Badenoch, PhD, LMFT delights in sharing the felt sense of interpersonal neurobiology with students, fellow clinicians, and anyone who is interested. She is on the Advisory Board of GAINS, teaches at Portland State University, writes books about IPNB, and travels about sharing her sense of implicit memory, attachment, and the foundational “we” at the center of our being and life. Convinced that longer and deeper immersion in these experiences is wonderful, she offers retreats and year-long programs in Portland, Oregon, with co-conspirators, Sarah Peyton, Kate Cook, and Coease Scott. Her website nurturingtheheart.org has more information and ways to make contact.

References

- Frederickson, B. L., Grewen, K. M., Coffey, K. A., Algoe, S. B., Firestone, A. M., Arevalo, J. M. G.... Cole, S. W. (2013). A functional genomic perspective on human well-being. *PNAS Early Edition*, 1-6. doi/10.1073/pnas.1305419110
- Konrath, S. H. (2007). Egos inflating over time: Rising narcissism and its implications for self-construal, cognitive style, and behavior. Retrieved at http://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/bitstream/2027.42/57606/3/skonrath_1.pdf
- Konrath, S. H., O'Brien, E. H., & Hsing, C. (2010). Changes in disposition empathy in American college students: A meta-analysis. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*. doi:10.1177/1088868310377395
- Kosslyn, S., & Miller, G. M. (2013). *Top brain, bottom brain: Surprising insights into how you think*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
- McGilchrist, I. (2009). *The master and his emissary: The divided brain and the making of the western world*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Shepherd, P. (2010). *New self, new world: Recovering our senses in the 21st century*. Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books.
- Siegel, D. J. (2012). *The developing mind: How relationships and the brain interact to shape who we are* (2nd edition). New York, NY: Guilford.
- Twenge, J. M., & Foster, J. D. (2010). Birth cohort increases in narcissistic personality traits among American college students, 1982-2009. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 1(1), 99-106. doi:10.1177/1948550609355719



The great blessing is that Shams has
poured a strength into the ground that
lets us wait and trust the waiting.

-Rumi
translated by Coleman Barks