

**RIGHT BRAIN, LEFT BRAIN, WHO'S GOT THE WHOLE BRAIN?**  
**A sermon by Rev. Elizabeth L. Greene**  
**Boise Unitarian Universalist Fellowship**  
**January 12, 2003**

**Readings**

A poem should be palpable and mute  
As a globed fruit,

Dumb  
As old medallions to the thumb,

Silent as the sleeve-worn stone  
Of casement ledges where the moss has grown—

A poem should be wordless  
As the flight of birds.

.....  
A poem should be motionless in time  
As the moon climbs,

Leaving, as the moon releases  
Twig by twig the night-entangled trees,

Leaving, as the moon behind the winter leaves,  
Memory by memory the mind—

A poem should be equal to:  
Not true

For all the history of grief  
An empty doorway and a maple leaf

For love  
The leaning grasses and two lights above the sea—

A poem should not mean  
But be. (“Ars Poetica,” by Archibald MacLeish)

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In the novel, *Properties of Light*, by Rebecca Goldstein, a younger physicist and an older one are conversing about what the older one has learned from his life's work. The younger man, Justin, is relating the conversation, beginning with his question:

*--And the essential fact?*

He bends his gaze at last to merge with mine, and in the clarity of his light-streaming eyes I can at last unravel the fury of the passions that we are given to live.

The one eye's message is of the eros contained in the thought, injecting its fire into our yearning to know. And in the other is the knowingness that comes of love. We are things that would know and we are things that would love, and oh how fused is that entanglement, how fused and fierce and forever in our entangled passions.

*--Of course, Justin, of course the essential fact.*

### **Sermon**

You recall the poem we heard as our reading. Let it linger in the spaces of your heart and brain as I read to you a definition of poetry: "a poem is a brief composition in words that uses images and figures of speech to convey large concepts like beauty and timelessness and grief and love." Now let's hear some of the poem again.

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As a globed fruit,

Dumb  
As old medallions to the thumb,

Silent as the sleeve-worn stone  
Of casement ledges where the moss has grown—

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A poem should be equal to:  
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A poem should not mean  
But be. (Archibald MacLeish)

The definition is primarily from the left brain. It is *about* the subject, explaining by using words, by using abstract concepts. Beauty, grief.

The poem sprang, in its essence, from Archibald MacLeish's right brain. Although he must needs use words, the wordless images are what stay with us. "For love/the leaning grasses and two lights above the sea."

What is all this about "right brain" and "left brain," anyway? And what does it matter to a congregation of people who have given up a piece of their Sunday morning in the hopes of a little spiritual and intellectual nourishment?

First, what it is. (Those of you who already know all this may think about something else, or meditate, according to your inclinations.)

The human brain has two hemispheres, each with a very different set of abilities, each functioning distinct and apart from the other. The two halves are connected and in communication, important for flexibility of functioning, which is a definition of intelligence. However, human beings for a long time have felt the left to be the more important.

In fact, in early research exploring the two brain halves, the left half was dubbed "dominant" or "major." It controls the right side of the body (except for a minority of people, to whom I apologize in advance for appearing to leave out—you'll have to translate). The left brain is linear, sequential, abstract and analytical. Time as a line going through history—linear time—is a left brain idea.

Language is one of left brain's most important inventions, allowing for abstraction and concept. Think about it: each and every word is a *representation*, a symbol for at least one thing, usually several or many. Words allow us to talk about past and future. Alphabets are a really major invention of the left brain—written symbols that can be arranged in agreed-upon ways to represent things, even things that aren't present or can't be perceived by the senses. Like timelessness and love. We have a lot of conscious control over what we do with our left brain, allowing us to be tactful, to inhibit what we say or write, in the interests of the greater good. It gives us the capacity to lie.

Civilization would not be possible without the development of the left brain, and our language embodies the gratitude we feel. (Remember that the left brain controls the right side of the body.) If a person speaks correctly, she is "right." *Droit* is the word for "right" in French. In English, if a person is agile and clever, he is "adroit."

Now, the right hemisphere of the brain—dubbed the "inferior" or "minor" brain by early researchers—is "holistic, simultaneous, synthetic, concrete" (Schlain, 1), an older part of us than the left brain is. It controls the left half of the body. It is non-verbal, operating when we have experiences about which we say, "It's so hard to put into words," or "It's an intuitive thing." The right brain does not put things in logical order, but deals in whole perceptions, often presenting itself in images. "For all the history of grief/An empty doorway and a maple leaf." It gives us signals through bodily sensations, too. The tightening of the upper shoulders, when the resident "pain in the neck" appears.

While our left brain is listening to the meaning of words, our right brain is busy monitoring the non-verbal symbols the other person is communicating: expression, stance, gesture, tension or lack thereof, tone of voice. It brings us some of what is most important in humanity: music, art, dance, poetry, religious experience. (Always remembering that we have to switch to left brain to write down things about these esthetic and emotional and spiritual experiences, the ones that come to us originally as wholes.) If time, as we Westerners usually conceive it, is the realm of the left brain, space is the realm of the right. The left is more involved in doing, the right in being.

We have little conscious control over our right brain, causing us sometimes to blush or stammer or stand in a certain way, in contradiction to our words. The right brain doesn't lie.

We don't much like it, either. Listen to our language. (Remember that the right brain controls the left half of the body.) Do any of us want to receive a "left-handed compliment"? *Gauche* means "left" in French. If a person is awkward, she is "gauche." *Sinister* means "left" in Latin. If a person is sneaky, in an evil sort of way, he is "sinister."

So, why does any of this matter, especially a Sunday morning in our church?

It matters a lot, given Western civilization's tendency to discount, downplay, ignore or downright dismiss the realm of the right brain. We Unitarian Universalists, having the highest formal-education level of any denomination, are particularly likely to elevate logic and analysis over intuition and experience. We, like most modern Westerners, have tended to divide matters into left-brain process vs. right-brain process, putting our faith in the former.

The most reductionist version of valuing the left-brain over the right declares that matter—empirically-verifiable "stuff"—is the basis for all that is. Non-empirically-verifiable stuff, this view holds—like thought and love and hope and beauty and grief—exists as corollaries of matter. Our universe, as we understand it, is all there is. Period. Huston Smith in a recent book comments of this view,

To think that science can speak to [the question of whether the universe is all that exists] is like thinking that people floating through space in a huge balloon could use the same flashlight that illumines its interior to see where the balloon is situated in space. (42)

As long as science cannot satisfactorily and rationally explain either First Cause or eternity, science alone is inadequate.

Left-brain science, to its eternal credit, has helped us move away from old religion's right-brain blind faith in Something Supernatural. But as we have thrown out the bathwater of irrationality and supernaturalism, we have often thrown out the babies of non-rationality and wordlessness and wonder. We have tended to become literalistic about words, forgetting that they are sometimes-inadequate representations of the right brain's very real human experiences. We dismiss much that humanity has cherished for thousands of years, calling it "touchy-feely," or "woo-woo," or "New Age," or superstition.

Dismissal hasn't worked all that well. Putting almost all our trust in reason and science hasn't worked much better than putting almost all our trust in the non-rational. The glorious achievements of the left brain have brought about huge issues of their own. We cherish our capacity to communicate through language—and we also find ourselves at each others' throats over words with dismaying frequency. Science has brought us longer and healthier lives, and the ability to build wondrous things. It has also brought us the atom bomb and the ability to destroy huge buildings in one fell, airplane-driven swoop. The jury is still out as to whether this lovely blue-green marble upon which we live will survive our tenancy—whether human misuse of science and technology, human greed and sin, will destroy our very home.

To deal with the universe, we need to reclaim the right brain and look at ourselves as whole human persons. To come to grips with humanity's undiminished bent for misuse of power—for warfare, destruction, death-dealing, and pettiness, we need to stop acting as though one side of the human brain is superior to the other. We need to quit drawing false lines and looking down upon those we suspect of dwelling on the other side. We need to revere art and beauty and intuition and “spiritual experience,” just as we revere rationality and thinking and science and analysis. We need to have respectful whole-brain conversations about our words, finding where we truly differ and where we just bring our own assumed definitions to the conversation.

How many of you have been a part of an inter-personal difficulty that arose because of the content of e-mail? E-mail comes to us courtesy of our left brain, symbols arranged in an agreed-upon manner on our screen. The right-brain, non-verbal monitoring that gives a more complete picture when we are talking face-to-face is completely absent, so unpleasant results may occur, especially when communicating about issues with emotional content.

Say I am upset with something someone has done or said, so I decide to send an e-mail. Without the face and body and whole self of the other in front of me, I may speak more harshly than I would otherwise; without the myriad of non-verbal signals I get (usually unconsciously) when I am exchanging words in person, I may choose harder, rougher words than we would otherwise. (Not to mention that I can fire it off in the heat of the moment.) I might say something like, “How dare you...!” which is an extremely strong phrase I would not be likely to use in person. The poor hapless recipient, unable to perceive all the non-verbal signals I would be continuously giving in person, will probably interpret what I have said as a *very* negative statement. (It happened to me once, and it felt like a slap in the face.) In person, I might, in addition to my words, be conveying affection, or bewilderment, or nervousness, or hurt feelings—more likely, all of the above. “How dare you...?” In an e-mail, only my righteous outrage will come across.

There are more profound issues than e-mail.

The right brain, with its intuitive leaps, its wordless messages, is our source of wonder. When we are sufficiently filled with wonder, we are humble in the face of the universe. When we are humble, we are unlikely to ravish the planet or to treat others as inferior. If every single person on earth quit doing planet-ravishing activities and began genuinely treating all others as though they had something worthy to contribute, this old world would probably be peaceful and prosperous.

Science itself teaches that humanity cannot live by left brain alone. I continue to rhapsodize about a book I read recently, *Properties of Light*, by Rebecca Goldstein, subtitled, “a novel of love, betrayal and quantum physics.” The whole book is a complex artistic exploration of rationality and non-rationality, left brain and right brain. One of the primary characters, a scientist, says that “he felt the equations inside his muscles, in sensations that lay deeper down than reason.” (102) He dances out solutions before he can truly understand them. (It is not incidental to the book's theme that another primary character muses, “...I could attach no sense to *deeper down than reason*.”) The strange, brilliant, dancing physicist also has depended for inspiration on his love for a chaotic, alcoholic woman. He and his scientist daughter quote two Williams, Blake and Yeats, mystical poets.

We are complete persons. We are poets and scientists all.

We are, certainly, more than our right brains. We are more than bipeds of unexamined faith and beliefs, adherents of unquestioned and scientifically-disprovable dogma fed to us by authority. We are more than our wordless, believing, faithful, selves. We are also more than our left brains. We are more than *homo sapiens* with the ability to investigate and analyze matter, questioners of received information and wisdom. We are more than our language-creating, idea-spinning, intellectually-brilliant, left-brained selves.

Rebecca Goldstein says it better than I can:

He bends his gaze at last to merge with mine, and in the clarity of his light-streaming eyes I can at last unravel the fury of the passions that we are given to live.

The one eye's message is of the eros contained in the thought, injecting its fire into our yearning to know. And in the other is the knowingness that comes of love. We are things that would know and we are things that would love, and oh how fused is that entanglement, how fused and fierce and forever in our entangled passions.

We can figure out what makes things tick, and we can stand wide-eyed in wordless wonder. We can write philosophy showing the fallacies of old beliefs, and we can give ourselves to the bliss of merging with the Nameless One. We can analyze and we can love. We can speak or write profound insights into the workings of the universe, and we can let our bodies dance the Mystery of All That Is.

We can, if we have the intelligence and the generosity of spirit, be fully human.

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