

A Mind Under Fire

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As a teacher of 7th and 8th graders, I am in the business of forming minds and shaping hearts. God has given me the grace to read my students and recognize when something is amiss in their lives. I may not always be able to decipher exactly what is bothering them, but at least I often know to ask. I am no psychologist, but I have learned some about how the brain works. The brain is not the mind, and the mind is not the brain, yet they are intimately connected. We know the brain is adaptable and flexible. Brain science refers to neural plasticity, meaning that whenever we learn something, new dendrites, new connections are formed between the neurons in our brain. It would nonetheless be difficult, if you could find the specific dendrites that grew when you mastered the times tables, for example, to also locate the thoughts associated with that physical growth.

We have evidence of improved thought processing as children grow older and learn more. There have been studies conducted on laboratory rats which have lived in enhanced environments to prove that, compared to rats in non-enhanced environments, they have incurred greater growth of dendritic connections between their neurons (Leggio, 2005). In other words, their brains were denser than control rats.

On April 18, 1955, Albert Einstein died in Princeton Hospital. The pathologist on duty at the time, Thomas Harvey, stole Einstein's brain, later to be chopped up in pieces and sent to different labs for analysis, much against Einstein's personal wishes (The Tragic Story, 2014). The results were controversial, with claims made and refuted, but one observation was clear, the brain tissue was denser than normal. There were more cells and cell connections packed into a

normal sized skull cavity. Einstein also had a very large corpus callosum, the white matter connections between the two halves of the brain (Quora, retrieved Nov, 12, 2018).

The enhanced density of dendritic connections relates to greater learning. Greater learning connects to higher intellectual capacity and improved mental functioning. At this point we have connected learning to additional brain growth, to increased thought processing, but where do these thoughts reside. No dissection of the brain has ever located thought; has never pinpointed the origin of the mind, even though we see mental capacities increase with increased dendritic growth. Perhaps the mind is just the interface between the body and the soul, but it is this interface that we as teachers are trying to influence, and therefore it behooves us to talk more about what we know about it and the things in life that influence it.

My life's experiences help me to be more compassionate of what must be going on in my students' lives, so I will venture to fill in some of the gaps I have previously left unspoken – these are the things that most of us will not speak of, but are the very things going on in our students' lives that effect their ability to perform well in school.

Family Life

I know little about how my parents met, but that Dad was an officer in Navy Merchant Marines and Mom was a factory worker in Long Beach, CA, making aircraft for the war. Dad was from Atchison, Kansas and Mom from San Francisco. Neither had many local relatives, so they drove off to Las Vegas and were married there. My sister is eight years older than me and my brother six years older, which sets this scene somewhere around 1942 to 1943. These were war years and the nation was fighting for its existence. Blackouts were common along the

western coast and Japanese residents had been rounded up and placed in internment camps. No doubt this was a time of real tension in the lives of ordinary people.

Dad smoked heavily and as the proverbial sailor, could swear a blue streak. His parents, my grandparents, were not known as the warm and fuzzy type of folks, but came from a hardline staunch Lutheran root. Our forefather, who came from Germany to this country, was a Lutheran pastor who shepherded a congregation in Frohna, Missouri. My sense of the family line was one of a boot-strapping, no-nonsense clan. Dad had a hard time expressing positive and affirming emotions, and the most dreaded phrase spoken in our household, was Mom scolding us for something, followed by “just wait ‘til your Father gets home!” We knew what that meant, he would take off his belt and beat us with it soundly. Dad had real anger problems, and yelling arguments were common in our home.

There were a couple of incidents that stand out to me. At the age of about seven or eight, I was across the street at the neighbor’s house, and returning home I found a pornographic photograph in their bushes. The image meant little to me, but it sounded like something I should give to my parents, because it was some “grown-up” thing. Very innocently I gave this to Dad, saying I found it across the street. I don’t know what was going on in his head, but he became furious with me, took off his belt, and beat the daylights out of me. I’m not sure what the lesson was there, but it made me trust him less, because I knew I wasn’t doing anything wrong. On the contrary, children are taught to bring things they find to their parents, because they will know what to do with them. Another time, my brother and I were in the kitchen and a pot of hot water was boiling on the stove. My brother said, “feel the steam over the pot, as he waved his hand in the swirling vapors. I copied him, but my sense of danger and coordination was not well formed at the time, and I hit the edge of the pot, knocking it off the stove and pouring it all down my

chest. Talk about the rage of Mt. Vesuvius, my Dad hit the ceiling and dragged my brother off for a belt beating he would never forget, while Mom tried to tend to me, screaming because the boiling water was burning my skin. To make my misery worse, I could hear my brother's howls from the other room, and I wished Dad would stop it. This was the night Mom took a stand against Dad, pronouncing that if he ever beat the kids again, there would be dire consequences. Everybody was in a turmoil as I was rushed off to the doctor's office in town for medical care. I still have the scars from that night on my upper left chest. But those were not the only scars remaining, there were mental and emotional scars, both from my injuries, my brother's pain as well as scars caused by the discord between my parents, which I thought was my fault. If I hadn't been so clumsy, I wouldn't have burned myself, my brother, whom I deeply loved, would not have been beaten and my parents would still be in love with each other. It all made sense. I returned home with my chest bandaged and it took a long time to heal.

The epilepsy was not the highly demonstrative type, but petite mal. Nonetheless, the "spells," as we used to call them, were frightening. I could not control my own thoughts. I would hear strange voices in my head, as my body tingled unpleasantly on my frame. This sensation was largely discernable in my fingers and hands, making them feel like unreal attachments to my body, but everything was out of sync somehow. My first recollection about them occurred when I was ten when working with great concentration building a model ship. It is a scary thing to think about, even as I write now. This was the baggage I carried with me into school; there was fear building inside me related to all the important relationships in my life. This included my sister, in that she would take the role of punisher-in-chief in Dad's absence.

I was a fearful kid, never knowing when I would have an epileptic incident, when I would be embroiled in an angry family argument or when I would cross some invisible behavior line

and end up getting beaten. To complicate the insecurity, my vision was going bad. In fifth grade, there was a day when the teacher wrote something on the board for us to copy. I could not make it out, so I raised my hand and asked to come up so I could read it. I had to be close to the board to see it. My teacher asked, "When was the last time you had your eyes checked?" I honestly didn't know what she was referring to, but no doubt, a note went home to my parents to have an examination. It turns out that I was legally blind, with vision of 20/400. Fortunately, Dr. Clopton knew how to fix things, and I received corrective glasses for the first time. Walking out of his office with my new glasses was a most amazing experience. I had to stop outside the door, and looking at a tree for the first time clearly, thought everything was so crisp with clean lines. The leaves looked like they would break if I touched them. I had been restored to a level of perception I had never known. This certainly boosted my confidence in one sense, but I became completely dependent on having my glasses to see, and consequently, I knew that if I ever got into a fight with another kid, my glasses would immediately be knocked off my face and I would be virtually blind again. Coming to grips with this reality in the fifth grade served me well throughout life. Even though it added to my insecurity, it also tempered my behavior, and I have never struck another person in anger, as far as I can remember.

For the epilepsy, I was placed on Dilantin, an anti-seizure medicine, and life began to settle down. I was about 16 years-of-age when the medicine stopped, but by about 18, voices and fears started up again. Strangely enough, I did not put the pieces together to see that this might be connected to the epilepsy of my youth. I probably should have gone back on the medicine, but shame and embarrassment kept me from sharing much about it. Once again, it must be my own fault that this is happening. Maybe I was being punished for all my misdeeds. I didn't know. Once, I shared my struggles with Mom, but my description must have been vague,

or I wasn't clear because I was ashamed it had started again. Mom was convinced it would just go away by itself, but it didn't. Once again I was not in control of my thoughts and fear of being out of control grew daily.

The onset of this second bout must have started after my 18th summer, because I remember being free of any mental aberrations during a trip overseas. I traveled to Austria and Germany with a group of students organized by the Foreign Study League of Salt Lake City, Utah. Starting with 7th and 8th grade in Lutheran school, I had studied the German Language. In high school, I continued studying German, and was the only student in German 5 at Villa Park High School, Villa Park, CA. My parents drove me to Los Angeles Airport, heading to New York before flying to Munich, Germany. This departure was memorable, not because of any startling events that took place; at least no one viewing the scene would have picked up on anything unusual. But my Father extended his hand to shake mine. I was taken aback, because the only time in the past that I remember him touching me, was to beat me for some violation. Now at 18, I was an adult, and this handshake was to signal a change in our relationship. I gladly shook his hand and boarded the plane, having crossed some rite of passage into manhood.

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