

Dancing With the Unknown

A Book about FEELINGS and the Everyday Experience of MIND and SOUL

Session 2 – February 15, 2016

The main subject matter of this course is contained in my new book (title above) which will be made available to any participants who want it as soon as it's ready for distribution (probably by the end of Term 1). The Table of Contents sheet is here. As well as this outline – contrary to what I said last time – I will be posting a set of notes (which may be a bit rough) on my BIOSONG website each fortnight. I realise that this is important to some of you especially when people can't get here on the day. And even though I want to adlib for the most part, I will be a bit better organised if I have some notes to refer to myself.

I like to spend time on introductory material and background before we get into the more detailed science, so there will be some repetition today, but lots of new things as well. As I said, it's a new course, so people who haven't been here before are not disadvantaged. We're all starting from the beginning, including me. I want to continue to give the newer people a feel for where we are heading – you might be still deciding whether this is the course you wanted. And for my old friends who are back here, I want to raise some new questions (things for you to think about) that we haven't explored thoroughly before.

I said we all know what our mind is – we take it with us wherever we go – but I want to challenge your ideas about what it is and how it works because I believe that the better we understand it the better our life can be. The starting point that I've already raised is to recognise that feelings and emotions are crucial parts of our mind. The mind that I'm talking about consists of thoughts, feelings and emotions – all tied up together. It's an amazing phenomenon.

It's such a huge subject that anyone who thinks they can write a book on it or give a course on it must be a bit soft in the head for a start! And that goes for anyone who wants to do such a course as well, I suppose! I can only give you a tiny taste, a morsel, about the subject, but hopefully it will be the little bit that has some practical application in your life – as it does in mine. I use what I've learned here in my life every day and it works – reasonably well.

The scientific name for this field of mind science is embodied cognition. Cognition (being cognisant of) is a word for knowing – it's the mental process, or the mind's work, of knowing. Embodied cognition implies that this happens within our whole body, not just in our brain. To illustrate this I started off by reminding you that what we do with our body has some influence on our mind. Anyone who does yoga or tai chi knows this very well and we've all probably found that physical exercise can be good for your mind. I gave some examples of this: the way we sit in a chair – whether we slouch or sit straight – has been shown to have an effect and there is the 'hard chair effect' whereby our mind works slightly differently if we've been sitting in a hard chair compared to a soft one – it becomes a little more rigid and inflexible – so the research tells us.

The best examples are to do with facial expression. Did anyone try a bout of smiling or frowning to see if it affected your feelings? When you smile or frown there are changes in your brain that lead towards feeling happy or feeling sad. It's easier to make yourself sad than it is to make yourself happy so don't overdo it. I found you can become very miserable if you make seriously sad faces for even just a few minutes. When you smile, of course, it not only

cheers other people, it triggers emotional changes within you that make you feel better. It's a two-way thing, of course – when you already feel good you are more likely to smile, anyway. A chap called Rick Hanson in California has an email newsletter, which some of you know about and he wrote in it last week that 'a kindness to others is a kindness to yourself.'

Something I forgot to mention last time was about the amazing effect of Botox on people's minds. Botox is a powerful nerve poison that some people are using to paralyse the muscles in their faces that are causing wrinkles – crow's feet and the wrinkles that are formed by the corrugator muscle across your forehead. Doctors in America were surprised to find that some people who were suffering from depression and had this Botox treatment no longer had depression – one reason being that their faces could not make really good frowns any more. This came from a new book – *How the Body Knows its Mind* by Sian Beilock. There's a serious downside to this that I will talk about later when we come to consider our social interactions and relationships. We recognise feelings in others because our own physiology can produce the same feeling in us – if you can't feel it yourself, you don't recognise it very well in others. So the Botox people had a bit more trouble recognising the feelings of another person from watching their faces, which would not be good for their relationships.

I just wanted to get you thinking about how the body is involved in everything the mind does. This course as a whole – Everyday Experience of Mind and Soul – is mainly about how we use our minds in our daily lives. The 'soul' part is smaller in terms of content and it is just a personal view, of course – I'm not wanting to preach to anybody about their soul. But even so it is very important to the essence of what I'm offering this year so it's a significant part as far as the meaning of this course is concerned. I'll come back to that as we go along.

The way we are using our minds is changing as our society changes – in some respects it's changing quite rapidly. One unfortunate spin-off from this is that the incidence of anxiety disorders and depression is increasing at an alarming rate; it has already doubled in some countries in the last few decades. There are ways of relieving these problems, but no one seems to know how to reverse this trend. That's one reason for asking questions about the way we are using our minds. Perhaps the conditions under which we are living today are making people more prone to anxiety and depression – the diagnostic criteria are different – there are lots of unknowns. I mentioned last week that I suffered from these kinds of problems such that my mind was quite badly affected during my late twenties and most of my thirties and my experience of recovering from this in later life came to influence my research work and the way I am writing about the mind today. In this new book I have included a bit of my own story along with the science. This also gives me an opportunity to repeat that I'm not a doctor or a psychologist so don't take what I say as a therapy. I'm a retired research scientist as most of you know. My subject is wellbeing. I believe in wellbeing for all, no matter what else is going on, and the way we use our mind is one factor in that, but I don't have all the answers, of course.

Another issue today is the way so many of us use mobile digital devices – smartphones – and the internet. An American professor from MIT, Sherry Turkle, who wrote *Alone Together* that I've talked about before (a lovely title, that!) – has another book out called *Reclaiming Conversation*. She says she is not against technology, but she fears that a 'disembodied conversation' is replacing actual face-to-face, synchronous, interpersonal engagement with a physically remote, asynchronous, quasi-independent kind of 'conversation' that utilises only part of our minds and takes place through engineered channels such as chatrooms, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram etc. – our communication media are designed by engineers. Younger

people, especially, say they much prefer it this way because it is more efficient and convenient and, their main reason is, that it's less demanding emotionally. They don't use the phone for ringing people up – or even Facetime very much – for those reasons. It's quite true that the emotional work of our mind is the most demanding part, but we can't really separate it off from the rest of our mind.

The experience of mind is much more than just what we are thinking about. Our mind is much more than our thoughts. It has a conscious level a bit like the top deck of a cruise ship where we notice what is around us and how we are feeling and have a good time, but it also has a huge engine room where its motive power comes from and a hive of activity below decks where the crew is hard at work doing things that we can't see – though we will notice some effects of their work from time to time. That engine room and crew activity is a metaphor for our emotions. Most of the physiology that we call our emotions takes place in our subconscious mind.

In science and psychology there has been a shift in understanding what the emotions actually do. Emotions have always been recognised, but as a secondary component. Mind science over the last 50 years developed around the way rationality interacts with the emotions, especially since Albert Ellis introduced something called Rational Emotive Therapy in the 1960's, which morphed into Cognitive Behaviour Therapy or CBT. It's probably the most tried and trusted tool used in psychology for several decades now. Sarah Edelman's very popular book, *Change Your Thinking*, is one of the best practical guidebooks about CBT, which is the way you can use your thinking to change the way you feel.

They added mindfulness meditation to it more recently, but essentially it involves recognising negative thinking and faulty beliefs – anything 'irrational' (which is a tricky word, because a lot of things about our mind are irrational anyway) – changing them into positive attitudes and learning to do things differently. The idea that thoughts can change emotions is perfectly true. It is very useful – except when it is the emotion that is running the show and it keeps changing the thoughts! I won't contradict anything in this very useful book, but the fact that it has limitations means that we have to go beyond this way of explaining it and bring in some of the newer ideas about emotions and feelings.

It's a change of emphasis. Reason and emotions are not seen nowadays as two different things – they are parts of the same thing – our cognition, our knowing. Emotion does not occur separately from reasoning – it is all the one operation – the emotions shape and configure the thinking – and vice versa. That's why, in the first session, I quoted Mary E. Clarke – one of the wisest women I have ever met – who said that to believe there can be a thought without a feeling attached to it has been a great error in modern ways of thinking, particularly in the Western world. You can't have a thought without a feeling – they work together all the time. But the association between them is very tricky and that's what I'll be talking about in this course.

A famous American philosopher, Martha Nussbaum, says the same thing without using the word 'feelings.' She wrote a 700-page book called *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (the phrase 'upheavals of thought' comes from the novelist Marcel Proust who was a great writer about the mind). Nussbaum said that emotions are 'cognitive appraisals,' an 'intelligent and discerning part of our reasoning process' through which we 'understand the value' of everything we encounter. She is saying that they are at the very centre of our search for meaning. Without our mind we could not make meaning – that is, we could not make

sense of anything. Meaning is a subjective sense of satisfaction that tells us that we understand something – we know what it means. Without it we are in big trouble!

Let's start learning about the feelings themselves. Feelings are an especially important part of our mind for two reasons. The first reason is they occupy a special place in our mind in between our thoughts and our emotions, both of which make claims on them so the feelings can be obscured as they are taken over by either thoughts or emotions. During the break in our last session, a lady (Beth I think), asked the question what is the difference between a feeling and an emotion? This is a very important question for our whole course. My simple answer, for the time being, is that feelings are the recognisable aspect of our emotions – they are the tip of the iceberg that is our emotions – the little bit that is above the waterline, so we are aware of it. The emotions entail a huge part of our physiology. I'll speak about our autonomic nervous system and various hormones and neurotransmitters such as dopamine or adrenaline later on. We only notice the after-effects of all that – most of it is going on down below, as it were. When we recognise a fear or a joy – some anxiety or a flutter of delight – that is a feeling and it is coming partly from an emotion deeper down, but it's only the spin-off – the spray, if you like – from a much larger whirlpool that is our emotions.

That implies that the feelings come just from our emotions, which is not correct. They come from two other sources and sometimes those other sources are more powerful than the emotions. One of them is our thoughts – as I was saying about Cognitive Behaviour Therapy. What we are thinking can influence our feelings. The other is: they come from our senses – from whatever sensations are occurring in our body at that time. Our eyes, ears, nose, hands etc. are our special senses because they pick up the effects of what we are seeing and hearing and tasting or smelling or touching at that time and this affects our feelings – sometimes very dramatically.

So, how many senses do we have? There are five we all know about, but, in the HANDOUT I've given you, there's a list of **15 different senses** that will be or could be part of our mind at any moment. I summarised this from a very new book by a UK professor, Christopher Eccleston – *Embodied – The Psychology of Physical Sensation* (published February this year). As he puts it, 'we exist as bodies operating in a context, both experiencing and experienced,' and our mind is in charge of this existence. This is why he says we need to consider a psychology of physical sensations. Some senses intrude more obviously than others into our conscious mind, but all of them are affecting the state of our mind at any point in time.

HANDOUT

Our mind includes at least 15 different senses that manifest as feelings.

FIVE MAJOR SENSES

They are all *threads of connection* with our world (which is 50% of what our mind does).

Vision – dominates culturally (in language) – misleading if you think of it as a camera.

Hearing – underestimated (relative to seeing) – it's amazing how much meaning we can make from the sounds we hear (e.g. a baby's cry; or from music). Varies with emotions.

Smell and *taste* are conveniently front-loaded – taste has a cultural meaning also – they are more personal and their sensitivity varies as our emotions change.

Touch requires the most obvious physical connection – it implies our embodiment, that our inside is different from what is outside.

TEN NEGLECTED SENSES (The first two are called proprioception)

Balance. Staying upright is a remarkable feat that we take for granted until it fails us. It's a requirement for action because all movement involves balance. There is a distinct psychology of falling – dizziness, vertigo – because it affects your mind's perception of reality.

Movement. We move constantly. We start life by moving some part of our body. The cerebellum at the back of our brain and receptor nerves in our skin, muscles and connective tissue enable us to control movement. Motor skills vary. Our mind gets its main stimulus from moving to explore (under the influence of the primary emotion called 'seeking'). Moving is both conscious and unconscious. Our postures affect our emotions (and vice versa) and they affect our connection with other people.

Pressure. The feeling of force being applied to the body from outside and the feeling of resistance because every movement is against some force – exacerbated by stiffness, for example. This also affects your mind.

Breathing. Our first breath and our last breath do not go unnoticed, but all the breaths in between we largely take for granted and barely noticed in our feelings unless something dramatic happens such as, in panic, we 'catch our breath.' They are regulated by the Autonomic Nervous System, but we can consciously take over our breathing or become deliberately aware of it in mindfulness practice. This is perhaps the most important interface between our conscious and unconscious mind.

Fatigue. Feeling spent, exhausted, weary etc. An important aspect of mind as it stems from our body – poorly understood. Not necessarily resource depletion. Chronic stress-related illnesses increasing.

Pain. Very common feeling, but fortunately usually short-lived. Strong component of mind involved, but still not well understood.

Itch. The feeling that you must scratch can occupy one's mind, which has to grapple with a 'feel good / feel bad' sort of conundrum. A chronic condition has a large effect on mind.

Temperature. We have some natural thermoregulation, but our mind needs to step in to provide assistance in keeping our body comfortable. The skin is the main sense organ. The psychology of feeling cold or hot in social situations is important.

Appetite. Our gut is a very important sense organ and hunger is an enormously significant feeling (not just in relation to food either). The great pleasure of eating – the allure of sugar, for example – the need for self-discipline – cravings, etc. This is a huge challenge for our mind.

Expulsion. We won't dwell on the details, but our body needs to expel gas, liquid and solids from time to time and these feelings are an essential part of our mind. This includes coughs and sneezes, hiccups, burps and so on.

You might like to think about each of these senses and their effects on your mind at any moment in your experience. Some are fleeting parts of your experience; others are ever-present feelings in the back of your mind.

AFTER THE BREAK

I said earlier that feelings are perhaps the most important part of our mind for two reasons. The first was that they occupy this rather mysterious space in between the emotions and the thoughts, both of which make claims upon them, so the feelings can be obscured by either. Another very new (and highly technical) book by a Cornell professor, Laurent Dubreuil, suggests calling this the 'intellective space.' (see *The Intellective Space: Thinking Beyond Cognition*). He says we often say more than we have actually thought or know and we usually know far more than we can actually say or think.

When a feeling gets picked up in language – put into words – and expressed in that way (to somebody or to yourself) it has essentially become a thought. But some of it (possibly a lot of it) has been lost in this process. There are many aspects of feeling that are difficult to put into words – perhaps cannot be put into words. And we can't ignore these if we want to understand the mind – they are a neglected, but very important, part of our mind. The thoughts often run to stand in front of the feelings, saying 'I am more important' and this tricks us into over-emphasising our reasoning. But the fact is that our search for meaning – our subjective sense of meaning – depends very much on the feelings.

That is the second reason that feelings are important – because they generate most of the subjective meaning that we need to survive. The feelings are the pointy end of our mind – they are the leading edge - because they generate the meaning in the first place. If you feel nothing, there is no meaning – whatever is happening or whatever is said, it doesn't matter to you. Someone could explain the theory of relativity to you, but it wouldn't have any meaning, unless the logic of it started to excite something in you so you suddenly felt: 'Ah! I see it! That is beautiful! I can feel it doing me good.' Paul Gilbert wrote in his lovely book *Stumbling on Happiness* (which I only have as an e-book) 'feelings don't just matter; they are what mattering means.'

This is very obvious in daily life because we choose to spend time doing things and with people where we feel comfortable and we avoid things that make us feel uncomfortable. Our consumer society runs on advertising, which is all about feelings. Whether it's a breakfast cereal, a soft drink or a motor car, the ads don't need to tell you much about the product because their emphasis is 'what a feeling.' Every product we use has ingredients in it that have nothing to do with how it works, but make you feel good when you use it – like froth and scents and colour. A classic example was the invention of 'Pepsodent' – the first ever big-selling toothpaste because it was designed to leave a nice fresh tingle in your mouth after you used it. Earlier products had just been designed to clean your teeth – which wasn't so popular.

So I hope you're ready to get into the book in more detail – from the start of the next session. I've already said a bit about experience. It's the word I use to describe everything that

happens to us; partly what happened to us before and what we think might be going to happen – all mixed up with what is actually occurring right now as we experience each moment of our lives. It is essentially how we are feeling because our wellbeing is really the sum of our feelings. Sure, our circumstances affect it, but it boils down to how we feel about them. I've heard some remarkable stories of thriving under great adversity from people sitting in this room.

When we look into it more closely we see that there are two stages of this experience – an immediate effect that is subconscious, involving our emotions, and then a second stage of thinking about it. In other words, we undergo it and then we evaluate it. The first is personal and can't really be shared. To say 'I know what you're going through' is only ever an approximation. The second part is put into words and becomes our story.

We need our story to maintain our sense of meaning. It holds together a historical thread of meaning, which tells us enough about where this present experience came from and where it might be heading for us to feel reasonably contented – or at least okay – for the time being. We can't know everything, of course, but as long as we can fit what is happening now into our story, we will feel okay. What we feel is based on that thread of meaning. It is so precious to us that our mind is working all the time to hold it together. If something happens or someone comes along to throw a spanner in that thread of meaning we have created, our mind will protest strongly – it may have to fight for its existence or else move away to some other place where the story makes more sense.

The story we create is only part of our mind's experience. The first stage – the subconscious emotional part – has meaning too because many of our feelings stem from it. If our sense of meaning was simply our story, without the feelings, we could easily negotiate anything using language – and we do reach agreement with others about all sorts of things. Sometimes it helps to keep your feelings out of it for a while. But to explain and appreciate what is really happening in our mind we need to acknowledge the subconscious threads of meaning.

The thread of meaning that is most precious to me is the central place of love – something that we call, love – it's a very big word, but I will have lots to say about it – as a biological necessity for the operation of our mind. Many years ago I came across a man called Humberto Maturana who became a friend of mine through his visits to Australia and through correspondence and there was a lot about his work in my earlier book, *Mind and Love – The Human Experience*.

This new book is based on the same principles of biology, but it is quite different in several ways. It is much shorter, which I hope makes it easier to read. It's also more personal. I'm using my own life experience as a framework to explain the science – not in too much gory detail, but in a way that I hope makes it easier to read the book. I mentioned last time that the timeline of my life shows a very difficult, unhappy period from my mid-twenties to my late thirties, when I believe I lost the proper use of my mind – I got very confused and made a mess of things. I'm actually grateful for that now because I feel I learned so much from having to find my mind again – along with that some glimpses of my soul. The other thing that's different about this book and this course is that I am drawing on my lifetime of research and study and thinking about stress. That was the subject of my research – mainly with farm animals – the causes and the consequences of too much stress in our lives.

I'd like to leave you with the thought that we are dependent on love for our existence – love is what we need most – and there is an elegant explanation from biological science that explains why this is so.