

2016 U3A Course based on

Dancing With the Unknown

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

Session 12 – August 29, 2016

At times in the past we used to joke about how difficult the exam would be at the end of the year because you might not remember all the details that I've talked about!! We don't have exams, of course, and I've often said that it's far more important for you to glean a few ideas of your own that you can use in your everyday life than to remember anything that I've said. The feeling that we understand something about our mind and soul can be very satisfying, especially if we also try not to worry about the fact that there will always be so much more that we don't know – that nobody knows, in fact. I'm assuming that you do take something away that is relevant for you because you keep coming back for more!

Today I've written the names of four of my favourite people on the whiteboard; these are medical scientists – all of them with a background outside mainstream medicine, actually – who have influenced my thinking so much that I've built this Course around their work. I also admire and mention many other writers, but these four provided the foundations on which my understanding of mind and soul has been constructed over the last several decades. The names are Humberto Maturana, Stephen Porges, Jaak Panksepp and Iain McGilchrist. So we could have a surprise exam – a test of all your hard work and concentration! What are these people famous for and what have we learned from each of them? By the way, they are all well represented online in lectures, blogs, interviews and videos (especially Porges and McGilchrist) so you can learn more about them if you wish.

Maturana (who'll be 88 in a few weeks) is known for his 'biology of cognition' by which he means the whole mind, not just our thinking. Everyone who has studied cognition will have heard of him, but he is not really a 'big name' in mainstream, cognitive science because he chose all along, I think, not to fit in exactly where he was supposed to and he liked to think for himself. He was honoured in a little-known book I bought in today called *Something Beyond Greatness* by Judy Rogers and Gayatre Naraine. What they wrote about Maturana was mostly his ideas about love – that 'love is a biological, relational disposition and does not need philosophical or religious justification for being there.' It is the way we see the legitimacy of one another. 'You don't really see if you don't love,' he says. His biological explanation gave us the basic principles of autonomy and connectedness from which our human mind evolved. When we have those foundational principles in place we can add all the things that are so special about being human.

Porges (who is 71 this year and had quite serious ill-health, I believe, during his 60's) showed us in his 'polyvagal theory' that we humans have this new function of our autonomic nervous system – he called it the smart vagus at first and it's being called the ventral vagus system nowadays – I call it the new soothing vagus – which enables us to form loving relationships with one another. In fact we have to do that because it is the human way of dealing with the inevitable stress in our lives. We can still resort to fight and flight and we can even suffer a freeze condition, which are more ancient responses that suit other animals, but our mind is designed for social engagement of the loving kind. Porges first proposed this idea decades ago, but it's only fairly recently that it has really caught on in mind science and in many forms of therapy.

Panksepp (who is 73 and was also seriously ill a few years ago) was born in Estonia, which has a proud history of famous biologists as Andreas Weber mentions in his book. Panksepp's work with animals in America helps to clarify and simplify the enormous subject of the emotions. Distinguishing between the instinctual primary emotions and their learned derivatives makes it easier to look at what individual emotions do, in my opinion. We are only part way through that subject at this stage of this Course.

McGilchrist (who must be in his early 60's) studied the historical thread of Western culture (literature, art and music), to identify the most recent evolutionary trend for the human mind, which has been called 'shifting left' – the idea that we are using the properties of the left side of our brain more and more at the expense of the properties of the right side and this is leading our mind and soul seriously astray. I explained in the last session that our attention is guided by left brain activity for experiencing precise details and manipulations and by our right brain activity for experiencing context and relationships. He tackled a subject that had become almost taboo in mainstream mind science – the fact that we essentially have two brains so we can capture two different aspects of our experience and fit them together properly like two halves of our mind. This is what I call the crowning glory of my story about mind and soul. It builds on the biological background created by the Maturana, Porges and Panksepp to complete my story in the way I find the most satisfying and true to my actual experience of life.

The two halves of our mind and what it is like to have only half a mind – these are the subjects I want to talk about today. Chapter 14 in my book is called *Too Much Self*. It's a gross oversimplification, which I will explain in more detail, but we could say that the two halves of our mind are called **self** and **soul**. I talked about self-consciousness early in the Course and the way that my mind had become cut off from loving human relationships because of my addiction. I called it the improper use of my mind. Self-pity, self-righteousness and self-condemnation – the feeling that I was not loved – plagued those early years of my adulthood. It was only in spiritual breadth – recognising the unknown – and the warmth of social engagement that I recovered what I call the proper use of my mind and have come to enjoy a contented and happy life.

Iain McGilchrist wrote *The Master and his Emissary* and a follow-up, which is a short e-book called *The Divided Brain and the Search for Meaning – Why are we so Unhappy?* What his work has done for me is to explain why I need a whole mind that includes a soul and why I was unhappy in the past when only part of my mind was operating – why I need music, art and the great storytellers, ancient and modern, and why loving relationships are so important for my mind. These are the subjects that I am endeavouring to cover in this Course.

I expect that part of the reason you come to the Course is to find out what is happening in the worlds of brain science and psychology generally. I can't cover all of that – I have to pick out a few bits that I think are important and join them together in a coherent way. But Maturana, Porges, Panksepp and McGilchrist are not the only players in the game, of course. In fact, none of them is a really typical, hard-nosed, brain-oriented, reductionist, arch-apostle of the mainstream of mind science; only one, McGilchrist, is a medico by training and that only as an add-on.

So you will want to know how the mainstream view might differ from what I've been saying. In most respects it's not much different except for what I call the spiritual parts – connection with the unknown – and the emphasis on love. In that regard I belong to a world-wide *Scientific and Medical Network* of doctors and scientists who have a spiritual bent so I am certainly not alone. Many brain scientists argue that the mind is simply what the brain does, which I do not accept. Otherwise, my science and psychology fits quite easily somewhere in the mainstream. But the mainstream is not one thing that's agreed by all. It has many different currents and there are strong disagreements between different researchers, especially about the role played by different parts of the brain in our mind's work. That is why I don't include a lot of detail here about different regions of the brain and I emphasise its patterns of connectivity in a general way.

Some of the fiercest disagreement is about brain laterality – the difference between the two hemispheres of the brain. As I said earlier no self-respecting scientist wanted to talk about this after their early work was hijacked by the popular press (and particularly the ‘new age’) to create simplistic notions of arty right-brainers and nerdy left-brainers, which was such a gross oversimplification that they found it offensive. There is a certain amount of scientific hubris here because academics generally don’t feel good when the hoi-polloi claim to know as much about something as they do. It’s interesting that sometimes folk-psychology or the equivalent in science is actually more relevant to everyday experience than the more detailed explanation would be; it can also be misleading.

Many American researchers are highly critical of what McGilchrist’s says and even deny that brain laterality could be important given that every part of the brain seems to be involved in everything we do. This is surprising on two counts – pronounced laterality is apparent in all other animals and birds that have a brain and McGilchrist’s research is by far the most thorough ever conducted. There is a book by Stephen Kosslyn and Wayne Miller called *Top Brain, Bottom Brain*, which is a good example of how some of the American mainstream has, in my opinion, missed the point of McGilchrist’s work. They have a chapter called ‘Sweeping Claims’ that dismisses laterality altogether and the rest of the book suggests that what is important is the way the lower brain receives the information and the higher brain processes it and plans what to do. This is not a new idea and has some truth in it, though the information-processing model of the brain as a computer has been largely left behind in mind science generally. You can read McGilchrist’s comments on their book at his website.

Michael Gazzaniga from the University of California has probably conducted more experiments with split-brain patients than anybody else and he is a worthy representative of the American mainstream of brain science. He sees the left brain as the creator of the self through our story. He calls it the interpreter and says it is the essential and natural leader of the mind – it rules the roost. He thinks the right brain can’t do this interpreting and managing function and it relates more to the humanities, which are secondary and rather meaningless indulgences of our mind. He says McGilchrist’s story is a neat hypothesis created by the interpreter in the left brain.

His thinking is in fact exactly how McGilchrist says our left brain operates. It doesn’t know what it doesn’t know and it feels confident that it has explained everything to its own satisfaction, not realising its ‘hall of mirrors’ prevents it from seeing the world of wonder and mystery, faith and hope, that is the human mind. I heard Gazzaniga say once in a video interview that ‘he wouldn’t like to have a date with his right hemisphere.’ Personally I would love to have a deep and meaningful relationship with my right hemisphere because I believe it will be absolutely essential to keep music, art and literature alive to nourish our souls so we can make better decisions regarding our ecology and our human relationships across the world.

Steven Pinker, a very big name in mind science, wrote an article decrying the humanities for what he said was their criticism (and even scorn) of science and McGilchrist’s reply to this makes interesting reading. He says that if we don’t nourish this part of our mind we will not be able to appreciate the difficulties we face around ecology and relationships. But it requires a leap of the imagination to include respect for the unknown, appreciate beauty for its own sake and stand in awe of something greater than ourselves. This is the purpose of poetry, literature, art and music and religion.

Another important thread in American mind science stems from the Mind-Life Institute, which is a regular meeting of Buddhist academics, including the Dalai Lama, with Western neuroscientists that has been very productive. I mentioned it earlier in the Course and have referred to Rick Hanson’s book, *Buddha’s Brain*, and his website and the interesting network of those American researchers who do emphasise the neuroscience of human relationships. There is a book by Richie Davidson (with Sharon Begley) called *The Emotional Life of Your Brain* that I should mention because

it takes a slightly different approach again. He is a strong believer that what is happening within the brain will explain everything we need to know about the mind even though he is also a strong protagonist of mindfulness meditation and various Buddhist practices. This is not a contradiction because mind control (without the need for a God) is consistent with Buddhist practice.

His book is built around the idea that there are six different 'emotional styles,' which are consistently different ways of responding to life experiences. They are called *Resilience* (fast to recover or slow to recover from adversity), *Outlook* (positive or negative and how long you can sustain it), *Social Intuition* (intuitive or puzzled), *Self-Awareness* (aware or opaque), *Sensitivity to Context* (tuned in or out) and *Attention* (focussed or unfocussed).

Without a lot of actual data, but based on brain wave patterns (EEG) and some MRI scanning, he suggests that each style reflects a different brain pattern or network. Resilience needs left > right PFC (prefrontal cortex) activation providing more effective inhibition of the amygdala. Outlook requires the left PFC and the nucleus accumbens pleasure circuitry. Social intuition requires less amygdala activation. Context recognition requires hippocampal activity and it fails in PTSD because the hippocampus has shrunk and the amygdala is overactive. Self-awareness comes from the insula monitoring feelings throughout the body. Focussed attention comes from phase-locking in the PFC.

Richie Davidson says he got the idea very early in his career that happiness was associated with the left hemisphere and unhappiness with the right hemisphere because he read a description of patients with damage to the left side crying a lot and those with damage to the right side laughing a lot. In his later research he found some evidence to support this when he saw greater activity in the left PFC when people were happy and more activity in the right PFC when they were sad in a small number of subjects. But I think this is a rather misleading idea. You can experiment with this yourself by squeezing a rubber ball repeatedly with your right hand (activating the left side of your motor cortex) or your left hand (activating the right side) and checking your feelings afterward. People have reported feeling sad after the right brain exercising, which would be entirely consistent with McGilchrist's explanation. After the left brain experience people don't exactly report feeling happy – it is more like feeling more strongly in control and more powerful. The left brain activity that McGilchrist describes is a kind of cocky self-assurance that it knows everything it needs to know – it is a natural optimist – but this is a rather limited kind of happiness. I think real happiness is more likely to be found when the whole brain is in its most integrated state rather than when it is active on the left side.

Davidson was the first person to put an experience Buddhist monk into an MRI machine. The monk was Mathieu Ricard (also a distinguished author in this field) and the results were only analysed in a late night sitting the day before the Dalai Lama came to visit the laboratory. Everyone was pleased that the monk's mindfulness showed up so clearly in the scans. Subsequent research with Ricard and other meditators, both experienced and novice, has helped to explain why mindfulness is good for health and wellbeing. It benefits Resilience and Outlook by increasing left PFC activity and improving the connectivity with the amygdala, insula and nucleus accumbens. I think this makes good sense because it is the overall integration of the brain – the patterns of connectivity – that promote the most satisfying ways of using our mind.

Each person's brain can be very different and because we still know so little, really, about its operation, I don't take too seriously the simplistic explanations that people like Davidson propose. The conclusion that happiness might come from left brain activity may have been distorted by the fact that these monks have highly developed powers of concentration and mind control that do not necessarily translate into the best use of the mind for average people like you and I. Sadness is a very necessary component of appreciating our vulnerability and our need for one another, which I think are vital right brain activities that give us humility and a spiritual perspective.

When the left brain becomes dominant in our attention process, as I explained in more detail in the last session, it is likely that the soul, which is not a circumscribed entity or part of the brain, gets overwhelmed by the self, which makes itself out to be a real circumscribed entity, but is not at all real in that way because it actually created itself. This is the subject that Eckhart Tolle introduced us to way back at the beginning of the Course when I was saying that our egoic self thinks it knows and can control things unrealistically and tells us lies such as: other people are better than I am – or worse (it’s the same thing) – and I can’t change my habits and so on.

In my dark times I thought a lot about myself. It’s a curious paradox that there is nothing more important than preserving a healthy autonomy yet the ‘self’ is also the last thing that we need to spend time thinking, talking or worrying about. The proverbial aim of getting to ‘know yourself’ is an interesting kind of trap for the mind. It is most useful when it leads to accepting yourself and then forgetting yourself, which is a particular kind of self-discipline that is less about willpower than it is about humility. I said earlier that the smaller my sense of self in relation to everything else the larger my sense of belonging seems to be.

BREAK

The Sydney psychiatrist I mentioned very early in the Course, Julian Short, said the two ways of being that help us most are *kindness* (for our relationships) and *dignity* (for our autonomy.) Dignity is a lovely word to describe being confident in yourself in a humble rather than a prideful way. Self-confidence is entirely different from pride. It comes not from celebrating past achievements or expecting future ones – it comes from being in the present moment with a feeling of faith and trust. We often feel that we’re living in a rut and don’t have much free will because we are controlled by whatever happened before or what could happen next. The present moment is the only time that all possibilities are truly open to us, but our mind spends a lot of time elsewhere. In the practice of mindfulness we draw confidence in the present moment from that feeling of trust in something bigger than ourselves of which we are simply a part .

Lacking this perspective we experience a false pride rather than the one that manifests as feeling worthy. Pride heads the list of a well-known catalogue of human imperfections known as the Seven Deadly Sins. I learned from Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham who wrote *The Spirituality of Imperfection* that it was Evagrius Ponticus (an Egyptian monk in the 4th century AD) who originally formulated this list of what he called ‘*bad habits*’ that he thought were the causes of our emotional problems. Religions make much of the word ‘sin,’ but its derivation is from a word meaning ‘missing the target’ that can be interpreted as living unskillfully; Evagrius thought these were the everyday faults of the mind that were the most common ‘enemies of the soul.’ Gluttony was his own downfall, apparently, to which he added anger, avarice, envy, fornication (now called lust) and acedia (now called sloth). He had two more, which have now been combined into one called pride. All of them are self-serving and self-centred; not one of them is humble.

Eckhart Tolle wrote more about the problems caused by too much self in his later book *A New Earth*. The egoic self likes to play roles such as ‘victim’ or ‘villain’ as well as those of self-aggrandisement. False pride is equally suited to being bad as being good; in fact this is its more common manifestation. In love there is no sense of superior or inferior. Many of us have used our roles at work as a kind of escape because they enable us to be someone a little different from the version of ourselves that might be having difficulties elsewhere. Happiness is a role that people like to play at times – and unhappiness too. Discussing things as an adult with your parents (or with ex-partners) is always difficult because, despite your best intentions to avoid this, you are likely to slip into your role from the past with all the subconscious history that entails.

Your thoughts and the voice in your head are not who you are. When you can see that you are not what they are telling you there is a better chance that the real you can express itself. Tolle recommends being comfortable with not knowing who you are because you will be who you are anyway! The self that you will come to love will be the self that you really are. Defining yourself through thought is limiting to yourself and to your relationships in the same way that all superficial thinking narrows our existence. John O'Donohue, in his book *Eternal Echoes* called this the 'cage of frightened identity' and he wrote that we often fall back on the 'refuge of false belonging.'

One of the worst lies our mind can tell us is that we are unworthy. Rollo May in *Man's Search for Himself* pointed out that we use self-condemnation as an arrogant substitute for self-worth. Being unworthy and being imperfect are very different. Everyone is imperfect and, as I said, our strength arises from recognising our vulnerability. Perfectionism is an inhuman aim activated by trying to please others. Dignity includes not seeing yourself as being whatever other people say about you. Your ego takes everything personally, but other people's perceptions are primarily the result of their experience and their story and often have little to do with you anyway.

The everyday feelings of inadequacy that, nevertheless, seem to be so common for all of us show up in an extraordinary amount of hero worship whereby sports stars, pop singers and film stars become some kind of *alter ego*. Feeling unworthy also affects our attitude to scarcity, which is the feeling that you never have quite enough. The ego thrives on wanting rather than having so it couldn't ever be satisfied and the opposite of scarcity doesn't have to be abundance; it could simply be enough, as Brené Brown likes to say.

I said earlier that we tend to make more judgments than are really necessary and from these we form opinions that our egoic self would like others to know about. Social media such as Twitter and Facebook have expanded our opportunities in this regard. I do this too, but I gradually came to the conclusion that, although I need to make some judgments to help me act appropriately, I am surely not here on earth to be the judge of everything that happens. There can be a pleasant easing of tension in your mind when you don't need to cling to your opinions and you can allow them to change. Whenever we put up resistance, which we need to do at times, we will notice that whatever we are resisting will push back accordingly and will persist in our mind for as long as we want to give it that kind of attention. We can always remove the power we have given it by choosing not to resist at this point in time.

Ego is a form of boundary protection, so it's not in favour of connectedness and likes to play what O'Donohue calls a 'false game of judgment, comparison and assumption.' I know from experience that it's easy to lose your sense of belonging through undue preoccupation with the self. This is also a neglect of the soul, which is where the love comes from – for me. Your smile is an act of love so if you can smile at your own ego you are much less likely to be ruled by it.

What is tricky about this is that we do need a sense of self, but we get it from our relationships with others and through honest reflection, not by selfish rumination that separates us from the rest of the universe. Apparently people lose their sense of self after long periods in solitary confinement and some have said they were able to prevent the worst effects of this by conversing freely with other people who were only there in their imagination.

Recognising our inadequacy is a kind of self-appraisal that is honest, but not demeaning, humble but perfectly accurate, so it is very different from experiencing feelings of shame. In our next session we will look more closely at all the emotions that contribute most to our suffering. At the head of this list is the feeling of shame.

The healing of shame is facilitated by being with other people who accept their vulnerability and their weaknesses and inadequacy and are willing to talk about it openly. Their stories demonstrate that it is possible to live without shame – or at least without so much of it. Humans are probably

the only animals for who our emotions are so revealing that we would rather not have them at all sometimes. But that is what emotions are meant to do – to reveal our limitations.

It is our responsibility is to listen to the stories of other people and also to share our stories with them. The reason this empowers us is that it helps to remove the need for shame, which exists because of our false pride. The more real and authentic you can be the less pride you have and therefore the less need for shame. Pride and shame live together in our mind and the shame won't go away until we can lessen the pride.