

Turning to the Right: A Gift of Insight
UU Church of Tallahassee
August 9, 2009
Lay Leader: Trudy Deyle
Speaker: Bob Deyle
Music Director: Amy Menard

CHALICE LIGHTING

The chalice lighting words are adapted from Hymn #1031 in the teal hymnal, "Filled with Loving Kindness."

*May we be filled with loving kindness,
May we be well.
May we be peaceful and at ease;
May we be whole.*

STORY FOR ALL AGES [Trudy] "When Sophie Gets Angry . . . Really Really Angry" By Molly Banger

- Today's story for all ages is adapted from Molly Banger's Caldecott Award-winning book, "When Sophie Gets Angry . . . Really Really Angry."

Before I tell you about Sophie, I want to ask you a question - What do you do when you get angry?

- Repeat what they say, then ask:
 - Do you ever count to 10 to give the anger time cool down?
- OK, let's see what Sophie does . . .

Sophie was busy playing when . . . "My turn!" . . . Her sister grabbed their stuffed animal, "Gorilla."

"No!" said Sophie.

"Yes!" said her mother. . . . It is her turn now, Sophie."

As her sister snatched Gorilla away, Sophie fell over the truck on the floor.

Oh, is Sophie ever angry NOW!

She kicks. . . . She screams. . . . She wants to smash the world to smithereens.

She roars a red, red roar.

She is a volcano ready to explode.

Sophie is angry . . . really, really angry . . .

PABAM!

The front door slams and she runs out.

She runs and runs and runs until she can't run anymore.

And then, for a little while, she cries.

Now she sees the rocks . . . the trees and ferns. . . . She hears the birds.

She comes to the old beech tree at the top of the hill. . . . She climbs.

She feels the breeze blow her hair.

She watches the sea and the waves.

The wide world comforts her.

Sophie feels better now. . . . She climbs back down . . . and heads for home.

The house is warm. . . . Everyone is glad she's home.

Everything is right again. . . . And Sophie isn't angry anymore.

- What did Sophie do when she got angry?
 - Did she yell at her sister and call her names?
 - Did she smash the world to smithereens?
 - Did she explode like a volcano?
 - She yelled "No!" and roared but she didn't take it out on her sister or mother.
 - She didn't actually explode.
 - She ran outside and ran the anger out
 - And then what did she do?
 - She cried and let her hurt feelings out.
 - And then?
 - She let the world around her comfort her – the trees and ferns, the singing birds, the gentle breeze, and the waves on the sea
 - And how did she feel when she got home?
 - Everything was right again
- During the rest of the service today we are going to talk about ways to deal with strong emotions, like when we get angry or scared; ways to avoid exploding like a volcano and ways to make things right again by letting the world comfort us.
- Now, we are going to sing the children out to their RE class by singing the Children's Recessional in the Order of Service two times through – **Please note that some of the words in the second line are different from what we usually sing.**

The children may leave when Keitha gives the signal. After the service, remember to ask the adults who brought you here this morning what they learned about making things right after their emotions get stirred up.

CHILDREN'S RECESSONAL

*Go now in peace, go now in peace
May **the love of the wide world** surround you,
Everywhere, everywhere, you may go.*

TURNING TO THE RIGHT [Trudy]

- As Unitarian Universalists, we aspire to live right by honoring our first principle to “affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person.”

As members of the UU Church of Tallahassee, we have embraced a Covenant of Right Relations that calls on us to act on that first principle by . . .

- taking responsibility to listen to the ideas, beliefs, and opinions of each other and speaking respectfully, compassionately, and empathetically.
- Dan Damerville suggested in his sermon on July 12th, we might feel called to extend that moral principle further to aspire to living a life of “loving kindness,”

that is, being “kindly, generously, and compassionately inclined toward ourselves, toward other people, and toward all of existence.”

- Based on some of the insights shared by Dr. Jill Bolte **[boh-tee]** Taylor in her recent book, *My Stroke of Insight: A Brain Scientist’s Personal Journey*, today’s service explores ways we can nurture our propensity to
- live by our first UU principle,
 - honor the spirit of our Covenant of Right Relations,
 - and strive for a life of loving kindness.

Dr. Taylor’s discovery of our ability to “turn to the right,” that is, to turn away from the analytical, judgmental, and argumentative neural circuitry of our left brain and to turn to the holistic, spontaneous, and empathetic neural circuitry of our right brain, can empower us to emulate Sophie by making intentional choices about how we view the world, how we relate to each other and ourselves, and how we “tend the gardens of our minds.”

- My husband, Bob Deyle, will elaborate on those insights for us. He picked up Taylor’s book at the Gainesville UU Church bookstore during a visit last Fall when he and some of the other members of our Executive Board accompanied Robin on a pulpit swap.

Bob was initially interested in the book because it recounts the details of Jill Taylor’s stroke and her recovery. He quickly discovered, however, that the book has many insightful themes, and one of those spoke very clearly to his efforts to better live the spirit of our church’s Covenant of Right Relations and the parallel covenant adopted by the Church Executive Board to guide their relationships with each other.

Bob inherited a quick emotional trigger from his father and has found it challenging to live by some of our Covenant principles. As President of the Board last year, he tried to model behavior that honored these principles, but found that he was, in fact, more significantly challenged.

Jill Bolte Taylor’s assertion that we are “feeling creatures who think,” and her discovery of how we can “tend the gardens of our minds” to nurture our right brain personalities, stimulated for Bob a profound change in his approach to stressful relationships and stress in general.

His new-found glimpses of serenity, are not, therefore, solely the product of having completed his term as President of the Executive Board. He hopes that sharing these insights from Jill Bolte Taylor will help you to make things right again when life’s challenges stir your emotions.

- As a prelude to digging more deeply into Dr. Taylor’s insights about our left and right brain personalities and our power to “turn to the right,” let us reaffirm our commitment to right relations with each other by singing a song in the teal-colored hymnal, “Singing the Journey.”

So, please stand as you are willing and able and join me in singing Hymn #1053, “How Could Anyone?”

THE DEATH AND REBIRTH OF JILL BOLTE TAYLOR [Bob Deyle]

- At the age of 37, Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor, a neuroanatomist on the staff at the Harvard Medical School, experienced a hemorrhagic stroke that flooded the left hemisphere of her brain with toxic blood.

Over the course of four hours she observed with a mix of horror and fascination, the loss of nearly all her left-brain capabilities, and the death of the person she had known as Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor.

In the course of rebuilding her left brain functions over the next eight years, Jill Taylor discovered her “right brain personality” and came to realize that she had the power to choose how she reacts in the face of strong emotions such as the anger experienced by Sophie, regrets about her past, and fears about her future.

- Growing up in the shadow of a schizophrenic older brother, Jill Taylor’s intellectual curiosity about the human brain began at an early age. She studied physiological psychology and human biology while an undergraduate at Indiana University in the late 1970s.

She subsequently earned a PhD from Indiana State University and pursued a career as a neuroanatomist.

- On the morning of December 10, 1996, Dr. Taylor awoke to a sharp piercing pain directly behind her left eye, which signaled the onset of the stroke. Her account of what ensued offers a compelling view of how our brains work (pp. 37-44 ff).
- Over the next three hours, she lost the function of the language center of her left hemisphere and with it the ability to differentiate time and to think linearly and analytically. She also lost the memories that comprised her understanding of who she was:

She says: “When I lost my left hemisphere and its language centers, I also lost the clock that would break my moments into consecutive brief instances. . . .I stopped thinking in language and shifted to taking new pictures of what was going on in the present moment. . . . All I could perceive was right here, right now, and it was beautiful.” (pp. 70-71)

- “Without a language center telling me ‘I am Jill Bolte Taylor’ I felt no obligation to be her anymore. . . .
 - [W]ithout her emotional circuitry reminding me of her likes and dislikes, or her ego center reminding me about her patterns of critical judgment, I didn’t think like her anymore. . . .

From a practical perspective, considering the amount of biological damage, being her again wasn’t even an option!

. . . [T]hat Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor died that morning and no longer existed.

- “Although I experienced enormous grief for the death of my left hemisphere consciousness – and the woman I had been, I concurrently felt tremendous relief.

That Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor had grown up with lots of anger and a lifetime of emotional baggage . . . She was passionate about her work . . .

But despite her likeable and perhaps even admirable characteristics, in my present form I had not inherited her fundamental hostility.

- I had forgotten about my brother and his illness.
- I had forgotten about my parents and their divorce.
- I had forgotten about my job and all the things in my life that brought me stress. “ (p. 70)

- On that special day, I learned the meaning of simply ‘being.’” (p. 70)

- Taylor's account of how she "orchestrated her rescue" is equally compelling but I haven't time to recount it.

She eventually underwent surgery to remedy the rare congenital arterio-venous malformation that caused the stroke and to remove a golf-ball-sized blood clot from her left cerebral cortex.

- With the help of her mother, who moved in with her, Taylor gradually rebuilt the neurological capabilities of her left brain over the course of eight years.

She had to learn from scratch how to sit up, stand, and walk; how to talk, read, and recognize numbers.

- Taylor describes the principal insight she gained from her stroke as follows:

"Before the stroke, I believed I was a product of this brain and that I had minimal say about how I felt or what I thought. Since the hemorrhage, my eyes have been opened to how much choice I actually have about what goes on between my ears" (p. 128)

This revelation was the foundation for the rebirth of Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor.

She says: "[T]here was both freedom and challenge for me in recognizing that our perception of the external world, and our relationship to it, is a product of our neurological circuitry. For all those years of my life, I really had been a figment of my own imagination!" (p. 74)

- In the final chapters of her book, Dr. Taylor describes the very intentional process she followed to "step to the right," which I have paraphrased as "turn to the right."

Based on her experience, she argues that we all have the power to influence our personalities, how we think, and how we react to the world and people around us.

And she shares some of the ways she has found effective for "turning to the right" when she believes that the here and now presence of her right brain personality better serves her needs than the detail-oriented, critical, and analytical personality of her left brain.

- Our Offertory this morning offers a foreshadowing of Jill Taylor's insights about how to turn to the right. "Learn to be Still" by Don Henley and Stan Lynch of The Eagles, is an invocation to "quiet the voices ringing in our heads" and find the "heaven lying at our feet."

Please take this opportunity to share your gifts of money to support the work of our congregation, as our music director, Amy Menard, performs this offertory song for us.

[5/35] OFFERTORY

"Learn to be Still" by Henley & Lynch of The Eagles

It's just another day in paradise
 As you stumble to your bed
 You'd give anything to silence
 Those voices ringing in your head
 You thought you could find happiness
 Just over that green hill
 You thought you would be satisfied

But you never will-
Learn to be still

We are like sheep without a shepherd
We don't know how to be alone
So we wander 'round this desert
And wind up following the wrong gods home
But the flock cries out for another
And they keep answering that bell
And one more starry-eyed messiah
Meets a violent farewell-
Learn to be still
Learn to be still

Now the flowers in your garden
They don't smell so sweet
Maybe you've forgotten
The heaven lying at your feet

There are so many contradictions
In all these messages we send
(we keep asking)
How do I get out of here
Where do I fit in?
Though the world is torn and shaken
Even if your heart is breakin'
It's waiting for you to awaken
And someday you will-
Learn to be still
Learn to be still

TENDING THE GARDEN OF YOUR MIND [Bob Deyle]

- Jill Bolte Taylor asserts that we are unconsciously making choices about how we respond to the world around us all the time and that, in fact, we have the power to be more deliberate about our reactions.

She urges us to "tend the gardens of our minds" to reinforce the neural circuitry that facilitates the ways of thinking and reacting that we choose to exercise.

- Three fundamental neurophysiologic premises form the foundation of Taylor's exhortation to "own our power" to make such choices.

First, she maintains that we are "feeling creatures who think" rather than "thinking creatures who feel."

Second, she argues that our left and right hemispheres, while working seamlessly to create the reality we experience, are the seats of fundamentally different personalities.

And third, she asserts that we can train our minds to change our brains and thereby alter the way we react to external stimuli and even our recollections of the past.

- The outer layers of our cerebral cortex contain the neurons that make our brains uniquely human – the left brain seats of language, linear thinking, and abstract reasoning, and the right brain seats of imagination, creativity, and compassion.

"The deeper layers of the cerebral cortex make up the cells of the limbic system . . . often referred to as the 'reptilian brain' or the 'emotional brain' . . . [which places] an affect, or emotion, on information

streaming in through our senses." (p. 18).

"By the time a message reaches our cerebral cortex for higher thinking, . . . [our limbic system has] already placed a 'feeling' upon how we view that stimulation . . ." (p. 19).

- Thus, Taylor argues that while "many of us may [like to] think of ourselves as thinking creatures who feel, biologically we are feeling creatures who think." (p. 19)

But Taylor maintains that we have the ability to choose how we respond to stimulation coming through our sensory systems at any moment in time." (p. 146)

- The neural circuitries of our limbic systems become wired together in response to sensory stimulation that we experience as newborns. . . .

"[A]lthough our limbic system functions throughout our lifetime, it does not mature. As a result, when our emotional 'buttons' are pushed, we retain the ability to react to incoming stimulation as though we are a two year old, even when we are adults." (p. 18).

- "As our higher cortical cells mature, we gain the ability to take 'new pictures' of the present moment . . . [with which] we can reevaluate the . . . situation and purposely choose a more mature response." (p. 18)
- For me, the real nugget of neurophysiologic insight in her explanation of the limbic system is the 90 second rule:

Although those limbic system emotional programs are triggered automatically, "it takes less than 90 seconds for one of these programs to be triggered, surge through our body, and then be completely flushed out of our blood stream." (p. 146)

What we do next, and how we feel about it, is then a function of our higher cerebral cortex.

- Taylor's second neurophysiologic premise is an extension of the fact that the left and right hemispheres of the cerebral cortex are "unique in the specific types of information [they] process. . ." but "work together to generate a single seamless perception of the world" (p. 13).

She says, "[V]irtually every cognitive behavior we exhibit involves activity in both hemispheres . . . [but] "they . . . [each] do it differently" (p. 28).

- The left hemisphere houses the brain's language center and with it the ability to conceptualize time and to think linearly and deductively (pp. 30-31). It creates understanding by weaving facts and details into stories.

It also "categorizes information into hierarchies" and is the seat of our critical judgment of good and bad (p. 32).

The left hemisphere also is the home of the ego, defining who we are based on our life experience, and it contains an orientation association center which physically differentiates our bodies from our surroundings (pp. 32; 34)

- The right hemisphere does not recognize time and, therefore, is grounded in the moment, but it is "designed to remember things as they relate to each other" and is the seat of "[o]ur ability to be empathic" (pp. 29; 30).
- Taylor maintains that her "two hemispheric personalities not only think about things differently, . . . they [also] process emotions . . . in easily distinguishable ways. . . .

- o She says, “My right mind is all about the richness of this present moment. It is filled with gratitude for my life and everyone and everything in it.

It is content, compassionate, nurturing, and eternally optimistic.

To my right mind character, there is no judgment of good/bad or right/wrong, so everything exists on a continuum of relativity.

It takes things as they are and acknowledges what is in the present” (p. 146)

- o “In contrast, my left hemisphere is preoccupied with details . . .

It is my more serious side. It clenches my jaw and makes decisions based upon what it has learned in the past.

It defines boundaries and judges everything as right/wrong or good/bad.” (p. 146)

“It thrives in its constant contemplation and calculation. . . . It is a perfectionist . . .” (p. 149)

- Jill Taylor’s third neurophysiologic premise is at the root of the practice of cognitive behavioral therapy:

namely the neural plasticity of our brains that can allow us to change our thought patterns by intentionally altering our neural circuitry, or, to paraphrase the title of another fascinating book that I have not yet fully read, authored by Sharon Begley, “we can train our minds to change our brains.”

As Taylor explains, the neural circuitry that underlies our higher cortex patterns of thought are reinforced when we use them repeatedly. (p. 146).

- “Our left hemisphere thinks in patterned responses to incoming stimulation. It establishes neurological circuits that run relatively automatically [in response] to [specific] sensory information.

These circuits allow us to process large volumes of information without having to spend much time focusing on the details” (p. 32).

Every time one of these circuits is stimulated, “it takes less external stimulation for that particular circuit to run [again]” (p. 32).

This, however, can lead to thought pattern loops that run rampant and are difficult to shut off (p. 152).

Sometimes it’s a song you can’t get out of your head, or some problem you’re working on that you can’t seem to set aside.

Other times it may be a negative thought pattern of fear, anxiety, anger, or depression, that actually stimulates a limbic system response and results in a positive feedback loop with the left brain.

- Taylor argues that we can harness the neural plasticity of our brains by consciously choosing to “turn to the right” to reinforce the “here and now” mindfulness of our right hemisphere, while raising the threshold for inducing those left-brain neural circuitry loops.

- Taylor's approach to stimuli that evoke a strong emotional reaction from her limbic system "is to surrender completely to . . . [an] emotion when its loop of physiology comes over . . . [her]. [She] . . . simply [resigns herself] to the loop and let[s] it run its course for 90 seconds.

But where a limbic response stimulates a negative left-brain thought pattern, her next steps are to recognize that she is hooked into one of those loops and to adopt a "position of non-judgmental witness" to choose how to react (p. 159).

- Sometimes, she says, "there are . . . occasions when I will choose to step into the world as a single, solid, ego center separate from you.

Sometimes it is just pure satisfaction for me to bump my left hemisphere stuff and attitudes up against your left hemisphere stuff and attitudes, in argument or debate." (p. 155)

- "More often than not," Taylor says, "I don't like how aggression feels inside my body so I shy away from hostile confrontation and [turning to my right brain personality] choose compassion" (p. 155).

- In making her pitch for "tending the gardens of our minds," Taylor quotes Albert Einstein who said "I must be willing to give up what I am in order to become what I will be" (p. 185).

As Don Weed suggested during the discussion after Dan Damerville's sermon on living a life of loving kindness: "we need to change our personas."

Taylor says, "I view the garden in my mind as a sacred patch of cosmic real estate that the universe has entrusted me to tend . . .

Regardless of the garden I have inherited, once I consciously take over the responsibility of tending my mind, I choose to nurture those circuits that I want to grow, and consciously prune back those circuits I prefer to live without.

Although it is easier for me to nip a weed when it is just a sprouting bud, with determination and perseverance, even the gnarliest of vines, when deprived of fuel, will eventually lose its strength and fall to the side" (p. 186).

- Taylor also shares some of the techniques she uses to "turn to the right," especially when her left brain is intent on running one of those negative loops.
 - "When my [left] brain runs loops that feel harshly judgmental, counter-productive, or out of control, I wait 90 seconds for the emotional/physiological response to dissipate and then I speak to my brain as though it is a group of children.

I say with sincerity, 'I appreciate your ability to think thoughts and feel emotions, but I am really not interested in thinking these thoughts or feeling these emotions anymore. Please stop bringing this stuff up.'" (p. 160)
 - In extreme situations, she imposes a time limit on her left brain. She gives it "full permission to whine rampantly between 9-9:30 am and then again between 9-9:30 pm. If it accidentally misses whine time, it is not allowed to reengage in that behavior until its next allotted appointment" (p. 161).
 - Taylor also uses a variety of techniques to shift her consciousness to her right brain:
 - She "remember[s] something . . . [she] finds fascinating that . . . [she] would like to ponder more deeply . . .

- [She] think[s] about something that brings . . . [her] terrific joy, or . . .
- [She] think[s] about something . . . [she] would like to do" (p. 162).
- She employees methods used in meditation such as concentrating on her breathing or repeating a phrase or mantra or listening to a verbal meditation (p. 169)
- Sometimes, she says that simply focusing on immediate sensory experiences can be sufficient to shift her consciousness to the here and now of her right brain - Intently focusing on sight, taste, smell, sound, or touch (pp. 171-176):
 - Lighting a scented candle
 - Widening her vision to the big picture of an open vista
 - Listening to music without engaging in cognitive analysis
 - Standing in the rain, soaking in the tub
 - Standing on the ocean's edge where all the senses are stimulated

- Is Jill Taylor on to something here, or is all this "insight" the product of an extraordinary individual experience that most of us will never replicate?

- Taylor assures us that we all are capable of "turning to the right" and cultivating the persona of loving kindness

She maintains that "Feeling deep inner peace and sharing kindness is always a choice for either of us. Forgiving others and forgiving myself is always a choice," she says. "Seeing this moment as a perfect moment is always a choice." (p. 148)

"If you have lost your ability to experience [the core right brain feeling of] joy, rest assured the circuitry is still there. It is simply being inhibited by more anxious or fearful circuitry. . . .

"Most important," she says, "[O]ur desire for peace must be stronger than our attachment to our misery, our ego, or our need to be right." (p. 181)

- I am here this morning to bear witness to the efficacy of some of Jill Bolte Taylor's techniques for turning to the right as I have struggled in my efforts to be in right relations with my UUCT brothers and sisters, my colleagues at FSU, my students, my family, and myself.

- Most liberating has been the 90-second rule: Counting to 90 does work for me.

In fact it's more than 9 times as effective as counting to 10 because it gets me past the physiological threshold of my limbic response!

But even more effective than counting to 90 is my occasional ability to dispassionately observe my own response:

"Jeez, that really ticked me off; now if I can just stay cool long enough to settle down, maybe I can respond in a compassionate and respectful way."

This approach has worked for me, even in the cauldrons of UUCT Board meetings and discussions with students about their grades.

But sometimes, I don't pull it off. Then it's been more of a retrospective analysis of what I could have done or should have done.

- o The music thing has worked for me too.

One evening I got in a flap over something, maybe the kids running off and leaving me with a messy kitchen to clean up while Trudy was at a meeting.

I remember banging around in the sink, and then walking over and punching the on button of the CD player.

Out flowed the baroque music of Bach or Vivaldi and I thought to myself, "Gee, I really like this music, I need to just immerse myself in it and [snap my fingers] - End of negative thought loop!

- o I've also successfully employed the time-out technique when I've gotten locked into one of those left-brain loops over some conflict that was simmering in my life.

On one occasion, I kept going over and over the "He said X and then I said Y. I should have said Z. Now what should I say next?" thing. I was in the shower and realized I'd been stewing over this thing for several hours.

I invoked the time out rule and told myself I was done for the day and I'd take it up again after breakfast the next day.

I had to remind myself several times, but it actually worked. I got to sleep, and when I woke up in the middle of the night I simply promised myself I'd worry about it in the morning.

- Which brings me back to Sophie. Remember Sophie?

Based on the pictures in the book, I'd guess Sophie is about 7 years old. In the story, Sophie's initial reaction is driven by her 2-year old's limbic system – Yelling "No!" Feeling like smashing the world to smithereens, roaring a red, red roar, and feeling like a volcano ready to explode.

She managed not to say anything hurtful to her sister or her mother. She ran that limbic response out, and finished it off with a good little cry.

But then what did she do? She stopped that emotional reaction loop by turning to the sensory stimuli of the wide wide world to bring her the comfort and safety of the right-brain mindfulness of the moment:

The trees and ferns, the singing birds, the gentle breeze, and the waves on the sea

And by the time she returned home, "Everything was right again."

- Now I'd like to invite you to join me in singing one of my favorite hymns #16: "'Tis A Gift to be Simple."

While you are singing, consider the possibility that one reason why this may be a favorite song for many of us is because it is about "turning to the right."

And perhaps, after today, some of the lines of this song may work for you as a mantra when you want to choose to turn to the right:

"'Tis a gift to be simple, 'tis a gift to be free, 'tis a gift to come down where we ought to be. . . .

To turn, turn will be our delight, 'till by turning, turning, we come 'round right."

So, please stand as you are willing and able and join me in singing hymn #16.

HYMN

"Tis A Gift to be Simple" (#16)

CHALICE EXTINGUISHING

We close with our chalice extinguishing which comprises words of guarded optimism adapted from the "Men's Prayer," the closing ritual of the Possum Lodge from the somewhat obscure, Canadian TV comedy, the Red Green Show.

The words are very simple, so I invite you to repeat each phrase after me as Trudy extinguishes the chalice:

I am a Unitarian Universalist,

And I can change.

If I want to . . .

I guess . . .

POSTLUDE

Reprise: "Tis A Gift to be Simple"