

Mindsight and ‘My Mother’s Gaze’

A few months after child psychiatrist Daniel Siegel’s book, *The Developing Mind: Toward a Neurobiology of Interpersonal Experience*, was published in 1999, Siegel received an e-mail, purporting to be from a representative of Pope John Paul II, asking him to come to the Vatican to talk to the Pope. Assuming the e-mail was a prank, Siegel ignored it – why would the Pope invite an expert on the neurobiology of childhood attachment over to the Vatican to schmooze? Nevertheless; one enigmatic detail of the message stuck in Siegel’s mind as he deleted it: the Pope, according to the message, wanted very much to know why ‘the mother’s gaze’ was so critical to the growth and emotional well-being of a baby.

As it turned out, the e-mail was legitimate. An official letter soon followed from the Pontifical Council for the Family, formally inviting Siegel to be the main speaker at a Vatican conference for church leaders and Catholic social services providers and missionaries, to be followed by a private Papal audience for Siegel and his family. Siegel accepted the invitation with one caveat; he wanted the Pope to know ahead of time that the all-important loving gaze could come from either parent or from another attachment figure – it didn’t have to originate from the mother.

Reading John Paul’s biography before he left for Rome, Siegel discovered something he thought might explain the Pope’s request. When John Paul was asked by the biographer if he remembered much about his mother, who had died when he was a young child, he said no at first. Then, a bit later, he backed up, saying he did recall one thing – “I remember my mother’s gaze.” Could the Pope want Siegel to explain what happened in the brain that made this ephemeral moment in the life of a young boy still resonate, like a lost dream, many decades later in the heart and mind of a frail, elderly man?

What drew the Pope to Siegel’s work was apparently the search for some illumination about the small, everyday miracle of that gaze – what novelist George Eliot called “the meeting eyes of love” – that everychild yearns for and must have, literally, to survive. Repeated tens of thousands of times in the child’s life, these small moments of mutual rapport serve to transmit the best part of our humanity – our capacity for love – from one generation to the next.

In Siegel’s vision the brain is an exquisitely social organ. From birth, it’s not the relentless unfolding of a genetic plan that determines the shape of our adult minds, Siegel explains, but what happens between different brains and in the environment that largely shapes what happens inside our individual brains. He opens up unexplored vistas of a self-renewing brain, with capacities to rewire itself in response to changing circumstances that go well beyond assumptions about our innate, hardwired limitations prevalent until very recently in neuroscience circles.

In academic psychiatry during the '80's, an increasingly reductionistic biological (i.e. psychopharmaceutical) industry had just begun its relentless push for dominance. With the advent of DSM III and the torrent of new medication pouring out of the pharmaceutical pipeline, psychiatry grew ever more inclined to define emotional and mental problems as purely medical illnesses reflecting biochemical imbalances in the brain. Diagnosis became a game of parsing DSM categories and subcategories, and treatment a matter of prescribing meds to amp-up or dampen down the synaptic exchange of neurotransmitters. Practitioners were supposed to be experts on the brain, and all they were interested in was knowing how neurons fire – they weren't interested in feelings. The emerging infatuation with the DSM-n-Drugs combo was deeply distasteful and a betrayal of what should be the deeper mission of healing.

Mindsight, alternatively, is a process that enables us to monitor and modify the flow of energy and information within the arena of well-being. The monitoring aspect of mindsight involves sensing this flow within ourselves – perceiving it in our own nervous systems (the brain), and within others through our relationships that involve the sharing of energy and information flow through various means of communication. We can then modify this flow through awareness and intention, fundamental aspects of our mind, directly shaping the paths that energy and information flow take in our lives.

A core aspect of the mind, mindsight is the embodied and relational process that regulates the flow of energy and information. It allows us to address the question, "How are we to mold our minds toward health?" Studies of expert meditators focusing on compassion showed the largest amount of gamma waves ever recorded. These EEG findings are consistent with massive neural synchrony, an outcome of an integrated brain. A host of new studies suggests that developing a compassionate mind is a win-win-win situation as we promote better physiological health, improve psychological well-being, and enhanced interpersonal relationships. Researchers suggest that self-compassion includes a sense of kindness toward the self, a feeling that one's experiences are a part of a common humanity, and mindful acceptance of our thoughts and feelings without becoming identified by them.

With mindsight we are given the tools of empathy and insight to more deeply sense and understand ourselves and others within relationships, the process of our ever changing brains, and even how our mind itself functions. This inner clarity can help us to modify the flow of energy and information within our own lives and in our interactions with others in a very specific manner. The power to move our lives from non-integrated states of rigidity or chaos toward the more flexible and harmonious flow of an integrated system is what we create when we intentionally cultivate neural integration in our lives.

Interpersonal neurobiology makes us more aware of inner processes inside ourselves and in our relationships with others. We can see ourselves connected to other human beings, belonging to the whole planet, and even a part of the entire universe in a way that extends our own dimensions far beyond our merely mortal selves. In this state, we become part of something that has existed long before we were born and will continue long after we die. The Larger Story awaits.