

RIGHT BRAIN, WRONG BRAIN

Michael Hicks

I suppose I cannot be blamed for being nervous at talking about, thinking about, my brain. Meditating on the brain is for me akin to an experience I had when I was about ten—lying on a long table watching in a mirror my numbed foot being cut and probed by a physician. I was fascinated by the complexity of my own dear limb and by the procedure that revealed it. But I was also vexed by the detachment of it all, my assaulted but unfelt foot being experienced only in a small, backwards image. So with our discussions of the brain, in which, it seems, the word is both scalpel and mirror. It can penetrate, lay bare, sever. But as the medium of thought itself it also reflects and refracts its own surgery. I find thinking about thinking the most precarious and dis-comfitting of operations.

Nonetheless, we are all driven to such introspection, some more vigorously than others. The last few years have brought forth some resonantly stated books and articles on the thinking brain, the most interesting of which, to my mind, are those that pursue the geography of intelligence, the charting of the brain's natural hemispheres.

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The halves of the brain, we now know, have distinct callings. The left governs speech and critical and analytical thought, while the right fosters intuition, pattern-recognition, and almost anything we might call creativity. The right brain, controlling the left side of the body, is the imaginative side, its counterpart the coolly logical left brain. The right brain makes connections; the left checks the fittings.

A dominance of one hemisphere over the other, some speculate, may account for personality types. Right-brain dominance in particular connotes three related phenomena: artistry, insanity, and prophecy. These three share a number of traits. There is the obsession with strange images, whether at Patmos, the sanitarium, or the surrealist gallery. Too, there is the frequent intrusion of "other worlds," foreign districts of experience, into

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everyday life. There is the loss of the sense of self. (T.S. Eliot called the artistic process "depersonalization"; psychologists have the same term for a symptom; prophets, of course, blithely preface their speech with "Thus saith the Lord . . ."). And always there is that irritating pre-occupation with inner matters.

Telling an artist from a lunatic from a prophet strictly by what they do and say may tax our powers of taxonomy. How, for instance, might we judge this action: In a church meeting a man grabs and wrestles off the belt of a visiting apostle, ties up his own hands and feet, cattle-like, and insists that the belt's owner will likewise be bound if he returns to church headquarters. This might be (1) a calculatedly eccentric performance, intended to shock and arouse an audience and communicate in a fresh and powerful way; (2) an outbreak of dementia in a potentially dangerous schizophrenic; or (3) a divinely inspired and delivered message. (The scenario I describe, of course, is that of Agabus—the prophet—found in Acts 21.) All three judgments seem feasible. Our left brains would require more evidence to judge right.

Joseph Smith left reams of documents by which people have judged him either prophetic or insane (or—

euphemistically—disturbed, imbalanced, or deluded). Few have called him an artist, unless we count those who think him a poser, an actor. Emmeline Wells showed insight, I think, when she described Joseph as possessing or being possessed by "the most highly cultivated . . . poetical nature." Imaginary worlds—that is, worlds made of images—certainly intruded upon Joseph, and the more alien and archaic the better they seemed to him. He could think God's thoughts as God, and so speak. For all his gregariousness, he was often moody and inward. And he loved vivid verbal images and allusions. I am struck by his description of the wood frames of Dr. Foster's disapproved Nauvoo housing projects as the "little skeletons" on the hill. And I doubt I could forget his remark, in the same discourse, that "fools ought to hide their heads in hollow pumpkins and never take them out." (Compare this with Jesus' style—the absurd but potent juxtaposition of a needle's eye and a camel.) A good deal of what offends some people about Joseph is what offends them about artists generally: the scarcely checked imagination, the comfortability with contradiction, and, above all, the relentless confrontation. Right-mindedness, literal right-mindedness, always means wrong-headedness.

Artists have the license, even the mandate, to go crazy. Yet lunacy late in life can retroactively impugn a career so as to deftly place the artist's difficult works beyond serious consideration. Think of Schumann, Van Gogh, and Nietzsche, exemplars of brains gone wrong.

Artistry is, in many ways, lunacy controlled. It is, as Plato unflinchingly called it, a divine madness, or, as I think of it, a synthesis of prophecy and insanity. And this divine madness may also be a kind of enlightened darkness. Recent experiments have shown that the left eye in concert with the right brain tends to see the world as more unpleasant, malicious, and repulsive than does its counterpart. The right brain's dark vision (and frequent cynicism) usually capitulates to the more cheerful left brain. But where that darkness dominates, we may encounter the "temperamental" artist, the paranoic, or the man in sackcloth.

The question is, of what use is all this darkness in the kingdom of light? A church—the Church—which must be bound up, Agabus-like, in codes, strictures, and edifying order can hardly countenance the chaotic physiognomy of right-brain thought. I find that artists in the Church in particular tend to cleave, speak out of

turn, embarrass, inflame. Some disruptive element seems bound up in their very souls, their hopelessly wrong brains. How can conventional left-brain society condone, much less cherish them?

I wonder. Somehow the human brain itself, despite its antipathetic hemispheres, seems determined to survive and flourish. There are, after all, areas of exchange in the brain by which one side dispenses and delegates to the other. Each side maintains its integrity but also cooperates with the other. They are independent in function but nurturing in spirit. They work not in harmony, it is true, but in counterpoint.

When I look at something with one eye, the stimulation of that eye field produces an inhibition in the area of the brain that controls the other eye field. This permits my eyes to work together and lets me concentrate with both eyes (and both brains) on a single sight—to gaze, to read, even to study my foot in a mirror. Certain areas within the brain's hemispheres, like those that govern sight, are what is called *mutually inhibitory*. The excitation of an area in one side inhibits the corresponding area in the other. This inner sympathy prevents bilateral functions from warring against each other.

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If only we could cultivate some sort of mutually inhibitory response between those who, for order's sake, chide right-brain thinking in the Church and those who reproach left-brain conventions by which the right brains are judged. The beehive church might begin to resemble a brain, a coherent mind whose glory is intelligence, with its requisite polyphony of logic and intuition. We might even begin to see straight, to see clearly, and to love looking—now that, according to the dark sage's promise, our eyes have been opened.

GIFTS DIFFERING

Marvin Rytting

When Isabel Briggs came home from college with a fiancé, her mother Katharine, was perplexed. It was not that she objected to Clarence Myers; he was a perfectly nice man and in all objective ways a suitable husband for her daughter. But he did not seem to perceive the world in the same way that they did. Intrigued with these differences in personality, Katharine searched for a typology that would explain the variation she had observed. Unfortunately, nothing seemed to fit until 1923 when Carl Jung's *Psychological Types* was translated into English.

Jung's theory of personality types helped her not only understand, but also appreciate, Clarence's different approach to life. These insights, which she shared with Isabel, proved to be of enormous practical value in lubricating a marriage of opposite personalities. They waited for someone to convert Jung's theory into a practical model with an instrument to measure his personality types, but when it did not happen by 1942, they undertook to do it themselves. It then took thirty more years for psychologists to discover the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) they had developed and begin to recognize it as a valuable tool in understanding personality characteristics and interpersonal interaction.

The MBTI measures four dimensions of a person's orientation to the world. The first dimension is defined by the opposite characteristics of extraversion and introversion. *Extraverts* focus their attention on the outer world of people and things, while *introverts* are more comfortable within the inner world of ideas and feelings. The second dimension identifies two modes of perceiving the world: *Sensing* types look at the world realistically and like to work with known facts which are clear-cut. *Intuitives* prefer to look for possibilities and relationships and question whether the facts are ever

really black and white. There are also two ways to make judgments: *Thinking* types base their judgments mainly on impersonal and logical analysis, whereas *feeling* types place greater importance upon their personal values in their evaluations. The final dimension measures the preference between the judging and perceiving dimensions. Those with a *judging* attitude (whether thinking or feeling) make decisions easily and also tend to like a planned, orderly way of life. People who prefer to use the *perceptive* modes (either sensing or intuition) are inclined to enjoy a spontaneous,

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flexible way of life but find it difficult to make decisions.

When the four dimensions are combined, they produce sixteen personality types, every one of which is positive. Each has its strengths and weaknesses, but all are praiseworthy and of good report. The dominant theme in Myers' interpretation of Jung is therefore acceptance, which she relates to a text from Romans: "For as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office. . . . having then gifts differing" (Rom. 12:4-6). The focus is upon acknowledging our own gifts and appreciating those of others. There is no reason to try to change anybody's basic personality. Instead, our goal ought to be to develop talents within our own type. We should strive to be better, not different.

Unfortunately, we spend incredible amounts of energy trying to change people's personality types—either our own or those of children, spouses,

friends, fellow Saints. Jung strongly maintained that it is harmful to attempt to change our basic personality preferences, implying that we should consider them fundamentally unchangeable.

I am an introverted-feeling type with a strong dose of intuition. I therefore focus upon the inner world of ideas which I judge mainly in terms of my own personal value system. I approach the world in the perceptive mode (intuition), looking for possibilities and relationships rather than facts. As a result, I have a difficult time making decisions and prefer a flexible, spontaneous way of life.

I enjoy being the type of person I am, but have become aware of how these personality preferences can sometimes get in the way. For example, many people—like Isabel and Clarence Myers—are married to opposite types and sometimes need a translator because in a very real sense, they speak different languages, approaching the world in disparate ways. The MBTI is very useful in marriage counseling. Couples who become aware of and accept their differences can use them productively to compensate for each other's weak areas instead of being frustrated by the foreign languages they speak.

On the other hand, a couple with the same personality types can also have problems. My wife, for example, is an introverted-intuitive-feeling type like me, differing only in her preference for the judging rather than the perceptive mode. While this means that we understand each other well, we also tend to reinforce each other's weaknesses.

Most of my friends are also some combination of the introverted, intuitive, feeling, and perceptive preferences. I like this because it gives me many warm and close personal relationships which I value highly. The disadvantage is that I flounder terribly in social situations, the domain of the extraverted-sensing types. My inability to relate well in large groups is a serious liability and I would do well to cultivate some of the extraverted characteristics.

I have become acutely aware of how my personality type affects my teaching style. In fact, I often have my students take the MBTI so that they will realize how their experience in the classroom is affected by the concordance or divergence of our types. Extraverted-sensing-judging types (my opposite) are often frustrated in my classroom. They want

facts and answers while I mainly offer possibilities and questions. It is fortunate that these students usually go into business and do not take many psychology courses. Psychology majors are predominantly intuitive types even though the population in general is about 70% sensing. People are drawn—or should be, at least—to their vocations by their personality types. Intuitive-feeling types do well in the behavioral sciences, in literature and the arts, and in teaching.

I suspect that we are also drawn to religious vocation by our personality preferences. Too often, however, in the Mormon church, we do not accept the concept of vocation. We are all expected to follow the same spiritual pattern whether it fits or not. A man, for example, is supposed to receive and exercise the priesthood, go on a mission, get married and be a patriarch in the home, magnify his callings by progressing from Scoutmaster to bishop to stake president (or at least high councilor), obey the leaders, conform to the Mormon way of life, and believe the teachings. Introverted-intuitive-perceptive types are not well suited to do any of these things with ease.

In my case, things started unraveling during my mission. The missionary vocation is a natural for extraverted-sensing-judging types. Extraverts find it easier to approach people and to knock on the doors of strangers than do introverts. Sensing types can have a firm conviction that the gospel is *the* truth and should be presented literally as factual, whereas intuitives are aware of other possible interpretations. They are better suited for teaching than proselyting. Judging types adapt well to the structured lifestyle of the mission field and have no problem telling people what is right and wrong, while perceptives find the regimentation intolerable and have difficulty making decisions for themselves, let alone for others. As an introverted-intuitive-perceptive, being a missionary was like trying to do everything with my left hand. Sixteen months of proselyting (thank heaven for the eight months in the mission home) were fifteen months too many. I somehow stumbled through, but my lack of vocation was obvious and there is still no activity that I am less inclined to do.

On all four dimensions of the MBTI, my personality preferences are shared by less than half of the population (some by only 30%). I am therefore accustomed to being in the minority. This is rarely a problem for me

because it is generally not an issue in daily life, and in my professional life—both as a professor and a psychologist—I am among soul mates. It is only in the Church that my personality type becomes a moral defect. The approved Mormon script is more natural for extraverted-sensing-judging types and those of us with the opposite preferences are seen as not quite measuring up to the norm. The conflict is only less salient now than on my mission because I can move it to the background most of the time.

I find it sad that in my attempts to understand why the orthodox form of Mormon religiosity did not fit very well, I disowned my spirituality. I concluded that I must not really be a spiritual person and that what everyone had interpreted as signs of a religious young man had merely been the behavior of someone intelligent enough to play the game well. If I did not fit the Mormon mold, I decided, then I must be one of those secular intellectuals.

But my inherent spirituality would not die. It kept coming out, usually with non-Mormon friends, particularly in the context of humanistic psychology. It would catch me by surprise. Why was I the most spiritual when I was being the least Mormon?

I am now in the process of reclaiming my spirituality—but *my type* of spirituality. The natural spiritual path of introverted-intuitive-perceptive types emphasizes reflection, awareness, and spontaneity, while the opposite personality type is drawn to action, service and discipline—precisely the characteristics valued by the Mormon culture. I am torn on the thinking-feeling dimension between knowledge and devotion and I think it is also unclear which the Church values most. On the dimensions where my preferences are strong, however, I am obviously at odds with Mormon ideals.

Nonetheless, it feels good to find a spiritual path that I can follow. It may not be the straight and narrow path of an active, disciplined Mormon, but it is a *spiritual* path. I realize that a certain level of participation, service, and discipline are needed to achieve wholeness, but these should never dominate life at the expense of natural expressions of spirituality. I believe that my path might ultimately lead to godhood, but if not, it at least directs me in a way that is right for me.

In the next column I shall discuss the spiritual paths of different personality types in greater detail and examine how they relate to patterns of affirmation and disaffection.