

Lucia Lloyd's sermon
May 22, 2011
John 14:15-22 and Acts 17:22-31

Easter 6, Year A

My Stroke of Insight is a very clever title for the book. The author, Jill Bolte Taylor would not call herself a Christian or a member of any other religion, for that matter. She had devoted her life to science, and had become a highly accomplished Harvard neuroanatomist, who was already winning prestigious awards in her thirties. It is clear that she is both brilliant and dedicated to her study of the brain, with a kind of nerdy charm of someone who is genuinely enthusiastic about learning. She also holds no romanticized notions about mental illness. Her brother has suffered intensely from his schizophrenia, and it was a desire to help him and others like him that led her to her research of the brain in the first place. In her spare time, she became involved with the National Alliance on Mental Illness, and became the youngest person ever elected to their board.

So it came as a huge surprise to her that she got up one morning and had a sudden stroke at the age of 37. Her book describes in detail the piercing pain as the brain hemorrhage advances, the frustration of knowing her life is in danger and not being able to think clearly enough to get help, the difficulty of trying to call her work phone number, but not knowing what it is, and not being able to make sense of the images and squiggles on her file of business cards so that it takes her forty-five minutes to determine which business card is hers, and to painstakingly correlate the squiggles on the card with the squiggles on the telephone so that she can dial the digits, and then when a colleague picks up the phone, to find that she can no longer decipher his speech and can no longer form words herself.

The functioning of various sections of her brain comes and goes in waves. The damage to her brain is severe, so severe that if she had lost her will to live she might very well have slipped into death. But she wants to live. She prays that she will live. It takes her eight years to recover from the stroke, which includes doing a tremendous amount of extremely hard work, and enduring a considerable amount of physical pain. It is not something anyone would choose to go through. But she is profoundly grateful to have

had this experience, and even more profoundly grateful that she has lived to tell about it, because telling about it is vitally important to her.

She describes the moment that her right arm falls totally paralyzed at her side: "Then I realized, "Oh my gosh! I'm having a stroke! I'm having a stroke!" And the next thing my brain says to me is, "Wow! This is so cool. This is so cool! How many brain scientists have the opportunity to study their own brain from the inside out?"

There is a part of her that is suffering, and a part of her that is deeply peaceful. And I mean that quite literally when I say that there is a part of her that is suffering and a part of her that is deeply peaceful. In the book, she provides a scientific explanation of the differences between the left part of the brain and the right part of the brain.

She gives a 15-minute lecture in which she stands on a stage holding in her hands a human brain and showing that the separation between the two hemispheres of the brain. You can watch this lecture on the internet; it's part of a lecture series called TED. I'm using quotes from the lecture as well as the book today. She describes the differences between the two parts of the brain:

Our right hemisphere is all about this present moment. It's all about "right here, right now." Our right hemisphere, it thinks in pictures and it learns kinesthetically through the movement of our bodies. Information, in the form of energy, streams in simultaneously through all of our sensory systems and then it explodes into this enormous collage of what this present moment looks like, what this present moment smells like and tastes like, what it feels like and what it sounds like. I am an energy-being connected to the energy all around me through the consciousness of my right hemisphere. We are energy-beings connected to one another through the consciousness of our right hemispheres as one human family. And right here, right now, we are brothers and sisters on this planet, here to make the world a better place. And in this moment we are perfect, we are whole and we are beautiful.

My left hemisphere -- our left hemisphere -- is a very different place. Our left hemisphere thinks linearly and methodically. Our left hemisphere is all about the past and it's all about the future. Our left hemisphere is designed to take that enormous collage of the present moment and start picking out details, details and more details about those details. It then categorizes and organizes all that information, associates it with everything in the

past we've ever learned, and projects into the future all of our possibilities. And our left hemisphere thinks in language. It's that ongoing brain chatter that connects me and my internal world to my external world. It's that little voice that says to me, "Hey, you gotta remember to pick up bananas on your way home. I need them in the morning."

It's that calculating intelligence that reminds me when I have to do my laundry. But perhaps most important, it's that little voice that says to me, "I am. I am." And as soon as my left hemisphere says to me "I am," I become separate. I become a single solid individual, separate from the energy flow around me and separate from you. And this was the portion of my brain that I lost on the morning of my stroke.

Taylor says the left hemisphere of her brain suddenly goes "offline":

"My left hemisphere brain chatter -- went totally silent. Just like someone took a remote control and pushed the mute button. Total silence. And at first I was shocked to find myself inside of a silent mind. But then I was immediately captivated by the magnificence of the energy around me. And because I could no longer identify the boundaries of my body, I felt enormous and expansive. I felt at one with all the energy that was, and it was beautiful there.

She describes the sense of being free of all the stress from her job, free of all the stress from other people, and free of 37 years of emotional baggage. Can you imagine that? It is euphoria.

"My left hemisphere had been trained to perceive myself as a solid, separate from others. Now, released from that restrictive circuitry, my right hemisphere relished in its attachment to the eternal flow. I was no longer isolated and alone. My soul was as big as the universe and frolicked with glee in a boundless sea....Prior to this morning, when I had experienced myself as a solid, I had possessed the ability to experience loss—either physical loss via death or injury, or emotional loss through heartache. But in this shifted perception, it was impossible for me to perceive either physical or emotional loss because I was not capable of experiencing separation or individuality. Despite my neurological trauma, an unforgettable sense of peace pervaded my entire being and I felt calm."

Lying in the hospital that first day, she says,

And my mind was now suspended between two very opposite planes of reality. Stimulation coming in through my sensory systems felt like pure pain. Light burned my brain like wildfire, and sounds were so loud and chaotic that I could not pick a voice out from the background noise, and I just wanted to escape. Because I could not identify the position of my body in space, I felt enormous and expansive, like a genie just liberated from her bottle. And my spirit soared free, like a great whale gliding through the sea of silent euphoria. And I remember thinking, there's no way I would ever be able to squeeze the enormosity of myself back inside this tiny little body.

But she is thrilled that she is still alive after having found this connection, and she wants other people to find it too. At the end of her lecture, she tells her audience,

I pictured a world filled with beautiful, peaceful, compassionate, loving people who knew that they could come to this space at any time. And that they could purposely choose to step to the right of their left hemispheres and find this peace. And then I realized what a tremendous gift this experience could be, what a stroke of insight this could be, to how we live our lives. And it motivated me to recover.

So who are we? We are the life force power of the universe, with manual dexterity and two cognitive minds. And we have the power to choose, moment by moment, who and how we want to be in the world. Right here, right now, I can step into the consciousness of my right hemisphere, where we are. I am the life-force power of the universe. I am the life-force power of the 50 trillion beautiful molecular geniuses that make up my form, at one with all that is. Or, I can choose to step into the consciousness of my left hemisphere, where I become a single individual, a solid. Separate from the flow, separate from you. I am Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor: intellectual, neuroanatomist. These are the "we" inside of me. Which would you choose? Which do you choose? And when? I believe that the more time we spend choosing to run the deep inner-peace circuitry of our right hemispheres, the more peace we will project into the world, and the more peaceful our planet will be. And I thought that was an idea worth spreading.

The audience applauds.

People in my line of work spend a lot of time thinking about how to talk about our connection to God and the spiritual world in a way that people will not dismiss you as a wacko. It is not an easy task, and it gets harder all the time as more and more people in

modern society are predisposed to think of religious people as wacko even before you open your mouth. So I am grateful to have a highly respected neuroanatomist talk about her glimpse into the spiritual world. The words she uses to describe it are her own words, and they are different from mine.

She reminds me of kids minding their own business, messing around in the upstairs room of an old house, hiding in a wardrobe full of old coats, leaning into them, and suddenly stumbling into Narnia. Jill Bolte Taylor seems to have stumbled into something that Christian theologians have been trying to tell us about for centuries: the sense of divine infinity and eternity being not something separate from us, but something that is within us. This is what the apostle Paul is trying to tell the Athenians in today's reading from Acts 17: "The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. They would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him-- though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For `In him we live and move and have our being';"

God is not far from each one of us. God is as near as the right hemisphere of your own brain. God is in you. In him we live and move and have our being.

Has Jill Bolte Taylor stumbled in on some of what Jesus was talking about 2000 years ago,

Jesus said to his disciples, "This is the Spirit of truth. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. You will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. Those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them."

I can see why we human beings have trouble wrapping our minds around the concept of the Trinity. Our left brain can't quite manage it. But when the brain chatter of our left brain settles down for a little while, our right brain feels right at home in the blissful, euphoric, connectedness of the Trinity. Hasn't Jesus been trying to tell us all along about this peace, this connectedness in which nothing is separate, and eternity is in the present

moment, and infinity is right here? The Holy Spirit is God within us. Jesus tells us, “The Spirit abides with you, and he will be in you. I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. Those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.” It’s not as strange as it seems, really.

Jesus says, “If you love me, you will obey my commandments.” And what are Jesus’ commandments? He tells us: “Love God. Love your neighbor.” Peace. Compassion.

Taylor says, [I pictured a world filled with beautiful, peaceful, compassionate, loving people who knew that they could come to this space at any time. I believe that the more time we spend choosing to run the deep inner-peace circuitry of our right hemispheres, the more peace we will project into the world, and the more peaceful our planet will be.](#)

I do not think Jill Bolte Taylor is the Messiah, and I do not think her book contains all things necessary to salvation. When the Apostle Paul stands in front of the Areopagus to speak to the Athenians, he begins by pointing out to them that they already have a sense of connection to holiness; he points out that they have an altar with the inscription, “to an unknown God.” He goes on to say, “What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.” His task as a preacher is to name the unknown god, and he tells them the good news of the gospel, and how it enriches the sense of connection to holiness that they have already.

It is a good way to deal with the skepticism in the world, and the skepticism in ourselves: to begin with whatever sense of connection to God we have, which God gives to people so that they will search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him-- though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For ‘In him we live and move and have our being.’ It is an idea worth spreading.