

My Stroke of Insight

by
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And when you look at the brain, it's obvious that the two cerebral cortices are completely separate from one another. For those of you who understand computers, our right hemisphere functions like a parallel processor, while our left hemisphere functions like a serial processor. The two hemispheres do communicate with one another through the corpus collosum, which is made up of some 300 million axonal fibers. But other than that, the two hemispheres are completely separate. Because they process information differently, each of our hemispheres think about different things, they care about different things, and, dare I say, they have very different personalities.

Our right human 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.

And it was as though my consciousness had shifted away from my normal perception of reality, where I'm the person on the [exercise] machine having the experience, to some esoteric space where I'm witnessing myself having this experience.

I look down at my arm and I realize that I can no longer define the boundaries of my body. I can't define where I begin and where I end, because the atoms and the molecules of my arm blended with the atoms and molecules of the wall. And all I could detect was this energy -- energy.

And I'm asking myself, "What is wrong with me? What is going on?" And in that moment, my brain chatter -- 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.

Then all of a sudden my left hemisphere comes back online, and it says to me, "Hey! We got a problem! We got a problem! We gotta get some help." And I'm going, "Ahh! I got a problem. I got a problem." So it's like, "OK. OK. I got a problem."

But then I immediately drifted right back out into the consciousness -- and I affectionately refer to this space as La La Land. But it was beautiful there. Imagine what it would be like to be totally disconnected from your brain chatter that connects you to the external world.

So here I am in this space, and my job -- and any stress related to my job -- it was gone. And I felt lighter in my body. And imagine all of the relationships in the external world and any stressors related to any of those -- they were gone. And I felt this sense of peacefulness. And imagine what it would feel like to lose 37 years of emotional baggage! (Laughter) Oh! I felt euphoria -- euphoria. It was beautiful.

And then, again, my left hemisphere comes online and it says, "Hey! You've got to pay attention. We've got to get help." And I'm thinking, "I got to get help. I gotta focus." So I get out of the shower and I mechanically dress and I'm walking around my apartment, and I'm thinking, "I gotta get to work. I gotta get to work. Can I drive? Can I drive?"

And in that moment my right arm went totally paralyzed by my 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." (Laughter) "This is so cool! How many brain scientists have the opportunity to study their own brain from the inside out?" (Laughter)

And then it crosses my mind, "But I'm a very busy woman!" (Laughter) "I don't have time for a stroke!"

And in that moment, I knew that I was no longer the choreographer of my life. And either the doctors rescue my body and give me a second chance at life, or this was perhaps my moment of transition.

When I woke later that afternoon, I was shocked to discover that I was still alive. When I felt my spirit surrender, I said goodbye to my life. 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. Nirvana. I found Nirvana. And I remember thinking, there's no way I would ever be able to squeeze the enormousness of myself back inside this tiny little body.

But then I realized, "But I'm still alive! I'm still alive, and I have found Nirvana. And if I have found Nirvana and I'm still alive, then everyone who is alive can find Nirvana." And 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, neuro-anatomist. 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.