

REFLECTION

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I entered college 62 years ago this September. The word “neuroscience” had not been devised. I took no science, premed or psychology courses. I was an English major; I think by default.

I went to law school, solely to avoid Vietnam which was beginning to heat up in the Spring of 1963 when I graduated from college. Although I also graduated from law school in many ways I feel my formal education ended when I graduated from college.

Following law school there were some nervous months waiting for notice that I was drafted as a private into the army. Surprisingly, I was deferred from the draft until a national emergency, which no President ever declared. After receiving that good news, I enthusiastically joined the “rat race”. My father died when he was 50 and all my pursuits were driven by that haunting deadline. I was a young man in a hurry and there was little time or seeming interest in self-reflection.

Believe it or not, while it is almost 80 years since I was born and 30 years beyond my self-imagined drop-dead date, I still think of myself as a young man in a hurry.

Four years ago, this Fall, my second wife, in words I will never forget, said to me “I am completely done with you”. I still wear the shame of my two divorces as my own Scarlet Letter.

A month or so after the decree of my second divorce, in a moment of uncharacteristic humility and self-awareness, I entertained the idea that perhaps, just perhaps, after two failed marriages, I might bear some responsibility.

The therapist recommended by a dear friend, a sister in every way, except she had different parents, was smart and competent. She was an adherent of the “family of origin” theory of therapy, as was my sister. To me it seems we spent too much time blaming others and mucking around in nasty little family stories, and while my mother had her struggles, as we all do, at this point I felt no antipathy towards her and in fact felt sympathy for the unexpected and pre-mature collapse of her family.

About 3 years ago, a year after my dismissal by my second wife, my sister by different parents, was visiting and insisted, as she always does when she visits, that we spend some time at the Yale bookstore, formerly the Yale Coop. While idly browsing there, I saw a book with an intriguing cover. The book was titled “Going On Being” by Mark Epstein, M.D. But it was the subtitle that caught my interest: “Life at the Crossroads of Buddhism and Psychotherapy.” Even more compelling was a sentence in the first paragraph of the Introduction: “There was something missing in Freud’s approach—too many patients simply did not get better.”

I had never read anything about Buddhism and I found Epstein’s description of Buddhism and his own experiences with Buddhist ideas to be totally absorbing. But there was one idea he discussed that was about to change my life.

Prior to reading this book, I knew nothing about neuroscience or meditation or how the brain controlled and directed our behaviors and our actions, perhaps “reactions” is a more accurate term. Since college, I had believed that each person was

born with certain attributes and certain shortcomings and the goal was to manage these assets and liabilities, as best we could. I understand that was not an uncommon view in the 60s.

Epstein, in his book first published in 2001, described how the brain was almost always running in the background brewing a stew of ideas, experiences, dreams, expectations, disappointments, insults and regrets that often were completely detached from reality, except they were in my head. Epstein said you could “retrain the brain” to ignore or overcome this noise. I was fascinated by this idea. What did it mean? Was it true for other people, as well? Was it applicable to someone my age?

I do not remember the exact path I followed, but within months I found a recently published book titled “Aware” by Daniel J. Siegel, MD. Siegel is a clinical professor of psychiatry at the UCLA School of Medicine. Like Epstein, Siegel is committed to the study of the effect of meditation on the performance and operation of the brain. Unlike Epstein, there is little, if any, mention of Buddhism in Siegel’s book. Rather, Siegel talked about the wisdom traditions of Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism and the Islamic faith. There is no doubt I was also fascinated with Siegel’s ideas, but in the middle of the book, Siegel talks about his friendship with John O’Donohue, the Irish poet, philosopher, mystic and former Catholic priest. Siegel mentions how he and O’Donohue discussed the consilience between a spiritual view and a neuroscience-based view of consciousness.

In the two- and one-half years since reading Epstein and Siegel, I have been consumed with learning as much as I can about meditation, both spiritual and secular and brain function. There are now peer reviewed, double blind, studies using the latest

brain imaging technology demonstrating that meditation can change brain function and architecture , as well as behavior.

One of the lessons from 50 years of practicing law is that you cannot go into court just having read one case, even if it is the most important case. You need to read and understand all the relevant cases and statutes and come to an understanding of how they differ and how they fit together, even if it is just in your own mind. After all these years, I have come to realize I do everything like a lawyer. I even cook like a lawyer. Before I cook something new, I will gather many recipes and compare them before I begin cooking, even simple stuff, like bread and soup.

Since first reading Epstein and Siegel in 2018 and particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, I have attempted to use this same methodology to gain an understanding of the operation of the brain and meditation from the prospective of the neuroscientists and spiritual leaders. The volume of available material is almost limitless. There are books, cds, YouTube videos and even apps for your phone.

Thomas Keating, who recently passed away, was Trappist monk who was a leader in the modern day Christian meditation movement, which he called “Centering Prayer”. He has hours and hours of videos on YouTube. In several of those videos he says: “It (Centering Prayer) all begins with just sitting down in a chair in a quiet place, most people don’t find that too difficult”.

I realize that what I have been describing is a largely mechanical, through the windshield, view of my journey through meditation and neuroscience. So in closing, I would like to share you with some small inspiration in the words of John O’Donohue, the Irish poet, philosopher and mystic who was a great friend of Daniel Siegel.

“It is far more creative to work with the idea of mindfulness rather than with the idea of will. Too often people try to change their lives by using the will as a kind of hammer to beat their life into that shape. The intellect identifies the goal of the program, and the will accordingly forces the life into the shape. This way of approaching the sacredness of one’s own presence is externalist and violent. It brings you falsely outside yourself and you can spend years lost in the wilderness of your own mechanical, spiritual program. You can perish in a famine of your own making.

..... If you attend to yourself and seek to come into your presence, you will find exactly the right rhythm for your own life.” Anam Cara, A Book of Celtic Wisdom, John O’Donohue p. 57-58.