

## “Christian Brain, Peaceful Brain”

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As you’ve probably guessed, my talk today is going to have something to do with peace. But my purpose isn’t to harangue you with a long oration for peace and against war. What I hope to do this morning is begin to make a convincing case that we are born with brains that are hardwired for peace. And that Christianity provides us everything we need to teach our children how to live in peace, work cooperatively, and resist the lure of violence for solving problems. Along the way, I’ll be including points made by our wonderful speakers over the last couple of months along with some developments in neuroscience research and stories, my own and others’. When we part company in a bit, I would like for us to be resolved that we here at First Congregational Church can be the peace that the world longs for and that our Creator intends for us to have. I hope that in the face of our very troubled times, we can take heart from Paul’s assurance to the Romans in today’s Gospel, that “we have access by faith into this grace.”

To start with, I’d like to ask a question. Why do we have a Department of Defense with a cabinet-level secretary, and the Pentagon, but we don’t have a Department of Peace and a huge building with millions of employees for that work? Let’s think about that.

Most of you know that I’m about 90% retired from the University of Alaska Anchorage College of Education. One of the strategies I learned over the years was always to do myself anything that I assigned to my students. So, when they were required to write their educational philosophy, I gave them a copy of mine and read it aloud during the first class meeting of the semester. I’m going to share a portion of it with you to give you an idea of my meditations on a word, as Eric Johnson spoke about. My word is “peace.”

Before I read, I should explain the first few sentences where I talk about eliminating violent language from my vocabulary. When I was in my doctoral program at University of Oregon, I majored in secondary and adult reading. One of my professors led us in a search of published textbooks for gender stereotyped language. In other words, we went hunting for such things as using the male pronoun to refer to both males and females. Why did we do that? Because she believed (and research has now strongly supported her position) that our brains do not supply the missing imagery. In other words, what we hear and read is what we see in our mind’s eye.

Some years later, I decided to do the same search for violent language and eliminate it from my own communication because “Sticks and Stones May Break My Bones, But Words Will Never Hurt Me” is 100% wrong. I’m reminded of what Marilyn, the Native American character on *Northern Exposure* said: “If words were wings, birds couldn’t fly.” So, for example, when I make an unnumbered list, I set the items off with dots, never bullets. And when I give an Internet address, it’s http colon backstroke backstroke instead of slash slash. And we focus on a group of people, we don’t target them. One of the results of my efforts was that my colleagues over at COE started watching their language, too. Jim Powell can verify that when I’m in the room, they actually apologize when they slip back into their old violent language patterns. Of course, now that I’m retired, they’ve tended to revert to their bad, old ways.

Here’s the beginning of my educational philosophy.

“It’s a Long Way Off” – Teaching and Learning Peace”

After more than 30 years, I don’t have to think before I say, “feed two birds with one ear of corn,” rather than “kill two birds with one stone.” It’s finally in my unconscious mind; I no longer have to translate. The image that pops up is of those birds (they’re always black birds, for some reason) eating the corn on the edge of a just-harvested, Midwestern field.

I don’t remember when I first heard the revised cliché. I don’t know why it lodged itself so quickly and permanently in my brain. What I like to think now is that for a long time I’d been preparing to hear poet Denise Levertov, in a 1992 interview on public radio, ask the question, “Is there a poetry of peace?” and then explain that the answer has to be, “No.” We are not able to write poems of peace because we have no images, no words, no way to describe peace, especially permanent, world peace. Levertov wrote, “Peace as a positive condition of society, not merely an interim between wars, is something so unknown that it casts no images on the mind’s screen.”

Five years later, Levertov wrote the Forward for *Writing between the lines: An anthology on war and its social consequences*. The poet described going to Viet Nam with friends in 1973 and, after days of reeling from the sights of armless children and shattered villages, one quiet morning she found a Viet Nam which until that time was for her “unimagined” because she had seen nothing like it on television or in print news reports. In those several moments, face to face with what she understood as Viet Nam’s “essential reality,” she also felt “peace...in the midst of war.” All human beings, Levertov asserted, have similar experiences, evanescent glimpses of peace shadowed by the horror which frames them and the yearning to prolong them.

Perhaps one reason why I feed two birds with one ear of corn is that my education includes a year that contrasts in an interesting way with Levertov’s brief trip to North Viet Nam. From January 1964 to January 1965, I lived in Saigon. South Viet Nam. I spoke French with an accent not identifiable as USA, so I had conversations with Vietnamese who helped me understand the war from their point of view. For much of that year, I worked in the news room of Armed Forces Radio Saigon, pulling copy off the wire service printers and re-writing it for the broadcasters to read on-air. This gave me the official version of the war. Occasionally, U.S. military men came into the AFRS station and talked about the war that they were fighting upcountry. Naïve as I was at age 21, even I could see that there were at least three wars in Viet Nam. Later, I learned that many others were going on simultaneously.

Maybe my journey to Viet Nam already had impressed on my relatively unformed mind that war is something human beings invent. Perhaps that time when I lived in the midst of violence but found myself learning from people who created a stunningly beautiful culture able to endure through centuries of conquest, began making the connections in my brain. Probably these changes to my perceptual screen permitted me to hear Levertov’s words and begin to make changes in my own small sphere of influence that inspires me to teach peace whenever and wherever I’m able.

(If you want to read the rest of my educational philosophy, I’ll be happy to supply it.)

What’s different for me now is that I have a response to Levertov because what I believe is that we Christians do have images of peace; we know how to spend more time living, playing, laughing, and dancing with other human beings than we do fighting. And

for over 2000 years we've had the words to write the poetry and compose the songs that teach our children to seek out and embrace what Paul calls "this grace."

Num. 6: 24-26 The Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord make His face shine on you, And be gracious to you; The Lord lift up His countenance on you, And give you peace.

When I read these words the other day, my mind formed the image of the laughing Jesus that Marsha showed the children. And as a singer, I can't read them without hearing the tune of the benediction we often sing.

Psalm 4: 8 I will both lie down in peace, and sleep; For You alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety. When you hear these words, can't you immediately feel your tense muscles relax and your stressed mind begin to see a beautiful, sun-filled meadow?

And, of course, the glorious Psalm 23 The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want...

Those examples are only a few from the Old Testament.

Then we have the words of Hymn 561 in our red book: When peace like a river attendeth my way, when sorrows like sea billows roll, whatever my lot, thou has taught me to say, It is well, It is well with my soul. Poems and songs, indeed.

Let's talk now about our brains and how we know they're hardwired as much for peace as they are for war. The story I want to tell you is about a neuroscientist named James Fallon. Sometime after the human genome was mapped, Fallon got interested in a gene that's involved in the development of the orbital cortex, the area that scientists believe is involved with ethical behavior, moral decision-making, and impulse control. This is the system that puts a brake on another part of the brain called the amygdala, that's involved in aggression and appetites. A person whose early development is guided by the defective gene has an inactive orbital cortex—their brains can't respond to the calming effects of the orbital cortex system, so their amygdalas encourage them to run amok with nothing to help them mediate such behavior. You can see why when it's defective it has been dubbed the "killer gene." Well, when his mother mentioned that his family included "some cuckoos," one of whom was Lizzy Borden, by the way, Fallon decided to do brain scans of all his family members and himself. What he found shocked him to the core. Of all his family, he was the only one who had no activity in his orbital cortex. Then he tested everyone's DNA and discovered he was the only one with the killer gene, which meant that his potential for violence was 100%. But he wasn't a killer and he was far from a sociopath, according to his family and friends. The only conclusion Fallon could draw was that his loving, compassionate, and tightly-knit family helped him learn how to mitigate the influence of the gene. He's gone on to study criminals and others who don't seem to be able to interact well socially. These data are confirming his theory about how he avoided jail or dying on the mean streets.

I'm sure my point here is pretty obvious. If our brains have the capability of creating neural pathways that corral the killer gene with the right kind of nurturing, any one of us can choose to create what Jeremy Rifkin calls an empathic civilization. And if we here at First Congregational Church learn, practice and model behaviors for each other and our children like friendly competition (because after all, competition is healthy, too), compassion, altruism, and commitment to ideals, who knows where the ripples of our example will reach. As Marcia pointed out last week, we haven't even begun to realize our power as wounded healers, people who have opened their minds, hearts and souls to others' pain and fear. That we can interact in these ways almost unawares speaks loudly, I think, about the capability of our brains to create neural pathways that don't seem to be

connected with our survival. The skeptic sneers, how is spending time with someone who's lost in dementia going to put food on our table? Pay the bills? What our brains know and what Jesus understood is that these acts of compassion ARE the only way we will survive. We must help each other and especially our children develop our emotional and social intelligence with as much fervor as we do the cognitive.

Before we let our brains rest from all this mental activity, I want to share with you a discovery from neuroscience that riveted me from the first time I heard about it—that we all have mirror neurons. Once upon a time, some scientists fitted monkeys with equipment that detects brain activity. They made lots of detailed color printouts while the monkeys performed various tasks or interacted with each other and the humans. One day a scientist strolled back into the lab to monitor the equipment and, when he spotted a dish of the peanuts they fed to the monkeys as a reward for good behavior, he helped himself to a treat. All of a sudden, the monkeys' brain scans lit up in the same patterns they would show if they were eating the peanut. Intrigued, the scientist picked up another peanut and ate it. The monkeys' "eating-a-peanut" neurons fired again. Naturally, more experiments followed, which led to the discovery that not only do monkeys have mirror neurons, but that we humans are fairly certain to have them, too. In fact, current research is gathering evidence that mirror neurons are our connection to other human beings and without them, we are at a grave disadvantage in social situations. One strand of this research is looking at the correlation between a lack of mirror neurons and the inability of those with autism to interact successfully with other people.

Again, you've probably guessed my point in mentioning mirror neurons. If we as Christians make the human connections that our faith has demanded of us for two millenia, others' mirror neurons will fire as if THEY are making those connections. If we show by our behavior that we are compassionate, peace-loving, collaborative, moral and ethical people, others are more likely to interact with us in similar ways, and our children will have "practice" in living Christian lives even before their brains are mature enough to choose such behavior for themselves.

You can see that one conclusion from all this discussion of the brain is that the first years of a child's life are absolutely critical in guiding her or his future development. As Elisabeth, Angela and Marcia have pointed out, our sacred obligation is to live, teach, and act as compassionate, moral, ethical, Christian people so that our children will have models and coaches from their earliest years. Also, they need to have plenty of opportunities to rehearse living Christian lives while they're safe in our arms to prepare them for the time when they'll be out there without us in the wings prompting them. The Ten Commandments and Deb and Dennis' "other five" need to be part of our children's very hearts and souls so they act without thinking as if all people are as worthy of love as God himself.

I have one last story that, I think, makes a clear connection between our brains on peace and our ability to coneract the effects of violence and aggression. A group of soldiers in Iraq set out to contact the town's chief cleric to ask his help in organizing the distribution of relief supplies. They encountered a large mob who feared the soldiers were coming to arrest the cleric or destroy the mosque. The platoon's lieutenant thought fast. He told his soldiers to "take a knee," meaning kneel on one knee. Next, he ordered them to point their rifles toward the ground. Then his order was, "Smile." Immediately the crowd's

mood morphed and most were now smiling in return. A few even patted the soldiers on the back, as the lieutenant ordered them to walk slowly away—backward—still smiling.

I want to remind us of Kathleen Bailey's talk two weeks ago and her compelling description of what happens when we change our perceptual screens to let in stimuli that we've been blocking from getting into our brains. Can we change even if we're older adults? The good news is, through my thirty plus years of following the neuroscience research, I've never found any credible study that puts limits on what we can learn or when we can learn it. Yes, if you decide to learn Japanese when you're 93, the process will be different than for Margaret Wolfe, who's in the Japanese immersion program at her elementary school. It might take you a bit longer to be able to ask the way to the rest room without being handed a bowl of noodles. But you will be able to learn it, and furthermore your ability to use the new language will be more sophisticated than a child's. My point is—we're never too old or too young to activate our peaceful brains and connect the neurons that help us choose gentleness over force, calm over turmoil, and love over hate.

Finally, let's consider the story in *Parade* from two weeks ago. This sweet face belongs to a dog named Jonny, who was brutalized as one of Michael Vick's notorious pit bulls. He was rescued and, through caring and careful rehabilitation, has found new life as a children's reading buddy. Jonny's trainer put him "on a firm program of walks, feedings, playtime, and relaxation, which helped relieve his insecurity and fear, emotions that can drive canine misbehavior." How can we accept for ourselves and our fellow human beings a world without the same supportive environment? How can we as a faith community, with our rational brains, possibly explain away doing less for our brothers and sisters than we did for Jonny?

I want to close with a prayer by Thomas Ken that was placed at the door of a Christian hospital sometime in the 17<sup>th</sup> or early 18<sup>th</sup> Century.

O God, make the door of this house wide enough  
to receive all who need human love and friendship  
but narrow enough to shut out all envy, pride, and malice.  
Make its threshold smooth enough to be no  
stumbling-block to children, nor to straying feet,  
but strong enough to turn away the power of evil.  
God, make the door of this house a gateway  
to your eternal kingdom.

This prayer will be answered every minute of every day by our brains on peace.