

WHOLE BRAIN LIVING, by Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor, Ph.D.
Book Report and Comment, by David G. Schwartz, M.D., Part I
March 28, 2022

Dr. Taylor, a Harvard trained neuroanatomist, had a severe left sided brain hemorrhage in 1996 that left her without ability to talk, walk, or remember her previous life, but with a feeling of pure unadulterated bliss. After 8 years of recovery, she wrote her memoir, A Stroke Of Insight, 63 weeks on the New York Times nonfiction best seller list. In 2008 she gave the first TED talk to ever go viral on the Internet. She was chosen by Time Magazine to be among the “100 Most Influential People in the World.”

When she had the brain hemorrhage that rendered her left hemisphere nonfunctional, leaving the right hemisphere totally in charge, she felt universal consciousness, at one with all that is, with no sense of time or of her individual consciousness separate from anyone else, with no fear, experiencing a peaceful, blissful, beautiful way of being. Over the intervening 8 years, she gradually recovered the left hemisphere, which allowed her to function physically and to talk, recovering the awareness of herself as an individual.

During her stroke and afterwards, the experience she had seems similar to some parts of the Near Death Experiences described in last month’s article. It seems very spiritual. It would seem to indicate that we could enhance our own spiritual growth by utilizing our right brains more.

In this book she explains how using both hemispheres and integrating feeling and thinking, we can live more whole lives, and she details how those parts of the brain work together. She presents the 4 “characters” that are in everyone’s brain. 1. Left Thinking, 2. Left Feeling, 3. Right Feeling, and 4. Right Thinking.

She introduces these characters as they show up in our everyday lives, and how, with our understanding them and recognizing what they are doing, we can coordinate them in what she calls, the “Brain Huddle.” This empowers us to choose which of these characters to be dominant in each situation and how to help them work together more harmoniously. Often we let one character run on automatic over and over again. Stopping for 90 seconds allows the chemistry of emotion to dissipate and to allow opportunity for looking at the options we have for choosing which emotional circuitry to run. It is important to recognize this basic premise, that we are *feeling* people who can *think*, not the other way around. It is so important that we work with our emotions as a basis before we can work on thinking.

She says “We are the life-force power of the universe with manual dexterity and two cognitive minds.” We can choose to step into the consciousness of the right hemisphere, with 50 trillion beautiful molecular geniuses that make the form, at one with all that is.

We can also choose to step into the consciousness of the left hemisphere, as a single individual, solid, separate from others.

These 2 hemispheric consciousnesses are the “we” that is inside each brain. We need both hemispheres, but she says “*I believe that the more time we spend choosing to run the deep inner peace circuitry of our right hemisphere, the more peace we will project into the world and the more peaceful our planet will be.*”

So she describes how with the #4 right thinking character, we can guide the other characters 1, 2, and 3, into more productive, efficient, functional, peaceful, healthy living, using the brain huddle. She says, “Peace is just a thought away. It is always right there, and always available for you to embody.”

Mastering the 4 characters in the brain is reminiscent of Joseph Campbell’s classic Hero’s Journey, where the hero must step outside the ego-based left brain consciousness and into the right, where she or he feels connected to all that is and enveloped by a sense of deep inner peace.

A brief review of neuroanatomy is in order. Since feeling is more basic than thinking, we need to look at the emotional parts of the brain first.

The emotional brain consists of the left and right, equal sized, amygdalae, hippocampi, and other parts. The amygdala answers the question, “Am I safe?” When sensory information coming into the brain is familiar, we feel safe. When something does not feel familiar, the amygdala tends to signal danger and triggers the fight-or-flight-or-play-dead response. When that happens, the hippocampi are not able to process learning and memory. That’s why when we are freaked out with anxiety, it is hard to learn and remember things. Children living in a “war zone” of drug gangs, etc. and unstable families have a hard time learning in school (my comment).

The left emotional brain compares the present with the past and pushes things away that have a history of hurting us. The right emotional brain does not recollect the past and so it tends to move toward anything that sounds exciting.

So humans are in the process of integrating the newer thinking brain in the higher cortical centers with the older emotional brain, and all these 4 parts are in communication with each other, the thinking parts with the feeling parts, and the 2 left parts with the 2 right parts.

Each of the 4 characters is authentic and deserving of respect and honor, in spite of our society valuing us for what we do rather than who we are. When we “embrace, listen to, and nurture all of our characters, we will mature, grow, and evolve into that person our dog already things we are.” We will promote our own cognitive, emotional, physical, and spiritual wellness. Humanity is getting there one brain at a time.

In the 70’s and 80’s, unfortunately, parents tried to enhance their children’s learning and performance by supporting their natural dominance, giving left brain dominant children more enrichment in science and math, and the more right-brain dominant children more encouragement in the arts and athletics, when it would have helped them develop more whole brain living by encouraging the opposite things.

The left brain helps us think linearly, sequentially, and has individual awareness, and our right brain processes things simultaneously, and has more awareness of collective human consciousness and of universal consciousness, in the present moment.

Here are some of the attributes exhibited by the 4 characters:

Left thinking character #1 – verbal, linear, past/future based, analytical, detail-oriented, looks for differences, judgmental, punctual, individual, precise, fixed, busy, conscious thinking, structure, focus on me.

Right thinking character #4, is the mirror image of each of the left brain characteristics. Nonverbal, pictures, experiential, present moment, kinesthetic, sees the big picture, looks for similarities, compassionate, lost in the flow of time, collective, focus on we, flexible, available, unconsciously motivated, fluid.

These are the emotional left character 2 attributes:
Constricted, rigid, cautious, fear based, stern, conditional love, doubts, bullies, righteous, manipulates, tried and true, independent, selfish, critical, superior/inferior, right/wrong, good/bad.

Then the emotional right character 3:
Expansive, open, risk taking, fearless, friendly, unconditional love, trusts, supports, grateful, go with the flow, creative, collective, sharing, kind, equality, contextual.

The author uses the B-R-A-I-N acronym for the preparation for the brain huddle, where you integrate these 4 characters to work together:

- B - Breathe, focus on the breath, push the pause button
- R - Recognize which of the 4 characters you are most manifesting now
- A - Appreciate the character you are most exhibiting and all the other characters
- I - Inquire within, invite all 4 characters to join the huddle
- N - Navigate a new reality from the best of all 4 characters.

Einstein said that we must give up what we are in order to become what we will be. As Joseph Campbell said in the hero's Journey, leave behind the rational, ego-based consciousness of the external world, enter the unconscious realm of the right brain.

The following are the author's messages to each of these characters about how to use this book:

Note to #1 You will be rewarded with tools you can use to create more order in your world and obtain a greater feeling of connection with those around you.

Note to #2 It's OK You matter. Without your guidance we cannot stay safe and we cannot evolve into our best selves or live our best life. This material will help the other characters better understand you, keep you safe and value you.

Note to #3 I know you would rather do something really exciting right now, but if you can grasp this material, the other characters will recognize how important you are and give you more time for play and innovation.

Note to #4 Here is the key to unlock the peace that is just a thought away. You are our connection to our Higher Power, as you see that it is our number one job to love each other, those outside ourselves, and the characters within.

Here is how the 4 characters might look at the book after reading it:

1 Know your brain, own your power. The why behind emotional intelligence. Wow, those other parts of me actually have value.

2 Feelings matter. Master your pain. We are feeling creatures who think. It's OK for me to be feeling what I am feeling. I can be happy. I am OK. I know why I feel the way I do. I feel empowered.

3 My brain is super cool. The 4 make up the whole enchilada. Life is better than I imagined. I love being connected to us all.

4 Free to be you. We are the Life-Force Power. We are One.

How do these characters show up at work and at play?

Character 1 is a master organizer, thinks in terms of time and space, sets priorities, is purposeful, intentional, and thorough, groups things in repeatable and predictable routines, is an effective leader, focuses on details, is very productive, reasons the way to the best decision, is perfectionist, is good at fixing things, respects rules and authority, keeps us from doing stupid things.

The character 1 can be soft or hard. The soft 1 is a great team builder, thoughtful, kind, available, empathetic, creates a vision and a road map for the team, is transparent, and workers feel like they are working *with* rather than *for* the boss. They feel safe because they know what is expected from them. The soft 1 leader celebrates little wins along the way, is open to new methods, views complications as opportunities rather than failures. The soft 1 worker feels safe in an environment that manages change slowly and will thrive on service and go above and beyond the job description to serve the team.

The hard character 1 is generated in response to the emotional upset of character 2 and treats everything as if it is an emergency, even if the emergency is only inside its own mind. It becomes commander in chief instead of team leader. Instead of shepherding the flock, helping them as they go, it will lead the group like a cattle driver who circles the herd and drives them with a prod from behind. It maintains authority by keeping workers somewhat in the dark about the process. It keeps a poker face and believes emotions don't belong in the workplace (except it's own character 2's emotions). Its leadership style functions linearly and piecemeal, so holistic solutions may not be seen until too late. Hard 1 leaders are self-critical, take the credit *and* the blame for successes and failures, often feel isolated. They operate from a fear of failure, and when they fall, they fall hard. Hard 1 workers do what they are asked to do and nothing more. They don't manifest insight or genius. Hard 1 leaders don't want workers to think too much so as to be a threat to their superior status. Hard 1 leaders endure changes if it means getting an edge on the competition, but they tend not to be of much help in the details of executing the change.

So both the soft and hard characters 1 are strong thinkers and leaders and create order out of randomness, but the style can differ considerably based on whether or not the character 1 allows the fear of character 2 to intrude.

The character 1 at the beach goes with an agenda, brings a well organized bag with all the lovely things that are needed, and arrives with expensive, stylish sportswear, will build a little beach station, and set a schedule for how much time each side of the body gets sun exposure, and has checked the expiration date on the sunscreen. They take care to protect their possessions from the migration of children playing behind. Inclusion is important, so they may have matching visors, eat together and play volleyball together. The thinking left brain automatically compares different birds and shells and may carry a guide book.

So the author recommends the reader to ask oneself, Do you recognize your character 1? What does it feel like in your body? How much time do you let this character run your life? What character 1's in your life have influenced you? Who in your current life likes to hang out with your character 1? Who does not get along with your character 1? How kind is the relationship inside your head between your character 1 and your other characters?

The character 2 is found in the emotional, older, “reptilian” brain, the part that is rigid and compulsive, and when the circuit is turned on, it stays on until either satiated or exhausted. For example, hunger, thirst, the need to breathe harder, the need to sleep, etc. Sensory input into the amygdala is interpreted as “Am I safe or not?” The left amygdala interprets it differently from the right. In character 2, the information is passed on to the left thinking brain, character 1, as it compares the experience with experiences in the past. If the character 1 dismisses or represses the emotion, it will come out in other ways, often destructive, sometimes causing illness. When we were born, these emotion brains, characters 2 and 3 were already hooked up in circuits, since we are primarily feeling creatures. The thinking brain may take years to develop its connections. So the character 2 is the source of our richest and most profound emotions, as we see expressed at the opera and in other dramas. It experiences happiness contingent on external things and circumstances, in contrast to joy, which is a character 3 phenomenon.

So the character 2 is similar to the shadow, or the dark side of our personality, often presenting itself as the deeply pained part of our unconscious left brain. It sees or feels every experience through the filter of being on the lookout for pain, danger, and scarcity, sees “the glass ½ empty.” There is never enough money, love, stuff, safety, or food for everyone. It wants to get its fair share, and with this constricted thinking, it can feel insatiably discontent, always looking for more. It is not unusual for it to become bitter and hold grudges, plotting revenge. This character can be hateful, bullying, using sarcastic humor, selfish, self-absorbed, manipulative, lying, cheating, narcissistic, arrogant, controlling, pompous, self righteous, and cruel, but never taking responsibility for anything, and behaves as if it is above the law. (Does this remind you of someone in power recently? My comment.)

On the job the character 2 leader will not trust the workers, and the character 2 workers do not trust the leader. They tend to take things personally, so constructive criticism may feel like abuse. The character 2 leader makes short-sighted decisions, and a character 2 worker cannot handle more than one thing at a time.

Character 2 at the beach is worried about the sand everywhere, getting on the towel, in the hair, etc. Will something bite or sting me? It’s spooky and salty and buggy here. Too much wind or not enough breeze to cool me. Those kids keep screaming, that dead fish stinks. This is a boring place, when can we go home? Character 2’s prefer to observe rather than participate, and will likely not join the volleyball game. Since misery loves company, they may invite other character 2’s along. Amid all the discontent, they are rarely self-aware and don’t understand why the only people who want to relate to them are character 2’s, and the rest of the people shy away from them. This only serves to reinforce the negative mindset.

The author recommends looking at our character 2’s. Do you recognize your character 2? Many of the feelings masquerade as anger. What does character 2 feel like in the body? This left emotional brain is the leading edge of our personal growth. Mastering that is key to living peacefully with ourselves and others. Calling the 4 characters together in the brain Huddle is the best way to hold the character 2 in love and to retain inner peace. Do you value your character 2 or does it scare you? Who are the people whose character 2’s have influenced you? Who has character 2’s that want to hang out with yours? Who does not get along with your character 2? If you tend to keep your emotions under wraps, you may not recognize your character 2.

In my perspective, it is our character 2’s that lead us to need psychotherapy, because it has the unseemly characteristics that we hide or repress, and the subsequent feelings that are frozen in the past frequently come to the surface in unconscious ways. When we recognize those feelings, bring them up

and feel them and let them go, and love and comfort ourselves when we identify with those emotions, then we can heal. The brain huddle gives our character 2 validation, respect, and comfort, so it is not run so automatically by fear and anger. If we all respected our characters 2 and gave it its proper place as part of the whole, it would not explode out of control and sabotage our living.

In Part II, we will flush out our characters 3 and 4, and see how they help the other characters unite to make more wholesome living. We shall see how the brain huddle can help in special situations, such as addictions. Altogether an amazing creation! Peace is just a thought away.