

What's So Great About Now?

Part Two

by Rev. Don Garrett

delivered April 14, 2013 at the

Unitarian Universalist Church of the Lehigh Valley

Last week, in a sermon called “What’s So Great About Now?” we started with a 46-year-old song, “Stop children, what’s that sound? Everybody look what’s goin’ down.” We all want to be able to stop, listen and know what’s really happening but we learned it’s not as easy as we’d like. So we took a long detour through the neuroscience of human information processing.

We learned that human perception excludes far more than it includes; that we are overwhelmed with such a tremendous amount of sensory data every moment that we have to ignore most of it in order to see any of it. We tend to perceive in a figure to ground manner where we focus on one element while everything else recedes into the background.

We learned that distortion is so prevalent that eye witness testimony, once thought to be the most accurate source of information possible, has been revealed to be the least reliable of all. We see what we want to see; we see what we think we see; we remember our reactions to events far more than we remember the events themselves.

We learned that we have interpretive frameworks called schemas that help us to understand what we see; that, while these schemas are normal and can be very useful, they can also be misleading. For example, a child may learn what a horse looks like – a large, hairy animal with four legs and a tail. This information could form a simple schema for identifying horses in the future. But the first time the child sees a cow, she might think it’s a horse because it fulfills the expectations of the horse schema. In this way, schemas need to be continuously revised in the light of new information.

But we also learned that we're not very good at revising our schemas, and this is where it can become a problem. If we're absolutely, positively sure that we're looking at horses, not only might we miss the fact that they're actually cows, we might also miss out on a lot of milk, cream, butter, and cheese. We might even try to saddle and ride them.

This can be a problem for our understanding of the world around us. But it turns out to be an even bigger problem for understanding the world within us – our emotions. Schemas are not only cognitive formulas; they are emotional as well. They can act as triggers to the release of negative emotional responses, activating our fight-or-flight reflexes set in place at times when we have felt that our personal or emotional needs were not met.

I drew on Tara Bennett-Goleman's book, *Emotional Alchemy: how the mind can heal the heart*. Explaining how these schemas arise, she says that, "A child who is much loved and well cared for will grow up with the highly adaptive schema that the psychoanalyst Erik Ericson called basic trust. Throughout her life this person will tend to first assume that people and the universe pose no threat to her. She'll see people as trustworthy unless they show themselves to be otherwise. People with basic trust make friends more easily, because they approach people with an attitude of goodwill, assuming the best about others. For the same reasons their relationships tend to be stable.

"By contrast, a child who is abused in his early years is likely to grow up with a very maladaptive schema: mistrust. His first assumption about people will be that they cannot be counted on to care about his needs, and he may too readily misinterpret neutral or even positive acts as threats or as proof of his assumption of untrustworthiness. That, of course, was an appropriate self-protective response in childhood. But as adults, those with basic mistrust still approach others with suspicion and so find it more difficult to make friends and sustain intimate relationships. Because they so readily see hostility or negativity in what people do, their closest relationships become battlegrounds."

So our schemas can be positive or negative, useful or harmful. Although some may argue that even useful, positive schemas could include some distortion, they mostly do help us live happier, more fulfilled lives. But our negative, harmful schemas definitely impair our ability to live a happy, fulfilled life.

She gives us an overview of some of the most common maladaptive schemas. There are fears of abandonment and deprivation, subjugation and mistrust. Some feel unlovable and excluded, others feel overwhelmingly vulnerable. Some are dominated by schemas of failure, others by perfectionism. Some of us feel entitled to special treatment. Most of us have more than one. And when they're activated, they produce what's called a schema attack.

Bennett-Goleman says that a schema attack comes by way of a "neural back alley, a one-neuron-long link between the thalamus, where all we see and hear first enters the brain, and the amygdala, where our emotional memories scan all we experience. But there's a problem with this arrangement: The circuit to the amygdala gets only a small portion of the information coming into the brain – what amounts to a fuzzy picture of an out-of-focus movie.

"The amygdala comes to its conclusions much, much faster in brain time than do the more rational circuits in the thinking brain. In fact, this emotional snap judgment can be made before the thinking brain has time to figure out what's going on.

"That's where the problem begins. The amygdala bases its reactions on a fuzzier picture than the thinking brain gets, and does so with lightning speed. This must have worked well enough during most of evolution, when there were so many real, physical threats. But in modern life we still respond to symbolic threats . . . with the same intensity as though they were actual physical dangers.

"This design flaw in our neural architecture means a snap decision based on a blurry picture can readily lead to a schema attack. A brain response that worked so well in ancient times can today lead to disaster.

“When the amygdala gets triggered, it floods the body with the stress hormones that prepare it for an emergency. . . . These biological responses mean that the small crises of a stressful day build up progressively higher levels of stress hormones. . . . Schemas can stay primed for hours, while those stress hormones surge inside us. And because a primed schema can make us more susceptible to more schema reactivity, the process can be self-sustaining, going on over days or weeks,” or becoming the dominant feeling-tone of our whole lives.

The good news is that we can reduce their power over us. As we begin to notice that there are certain emotional themes in our lives, we can start to identify their elements.

One critical element of the neuroscience of schema attacks is that we only have about one-quarter of a second, sometimes called the magic quarter second, during which we can reject a self-defeating emotional impulse. And we usually don't even notice the impulse until after it's well underway and it's too late to intervene.

When we're caught up in our emotional schemas, our feelings tend to seem inevitable, that we have no choice in the matter. When something happens and a strong emotion arises, we tend to point at the activating event rather than noticing our latent emotional schema as the source of our feelings. But, as Bennett-Goleman points out, it is possible to become aware of our feelings in more subtle, nuanced ways.

She tells us that, “The week before my grandmother died, I took a bouquet of lilies to her in the hospital. She was developing pneumonia, however, and her labored breath made it clear that the scent of the lilies was too strong for her. So I took them home and put them in a special place next to her picture.

Bennett-Goleman went on, “I'm familiar with the life cycle of lilies, since they're my favorite flower. These lilies surprised me, lasting much, much longer than usual. In a sense, it was as though I still had something of my grandmother's

life with me – the taking care of her flowers, which lived on even after her life had come to an end.

“The lilies had a place of honor in the sunroom, where I ate breakfast each morning. As each petal was transformed from soft pink into sienna, folding in its edges as its life came to a close, I watched the bouquet dwindle down to just the decorative greens, which also lasted several weeks beyond their typical life span. Two stems with shiny green leaves were still standing alert after five weeks.

“One morning when I came downstairs I looked for the last brave remnants of my grandmother’s bouquet – and the vase was empty! A houseguest who didn’t know about my quiet ritual had, understandably, thrown out the last two stems of greens as she was tidying up.

“I made breakfast as I absorbed the shock. ‘They’re gone now. It’s time to let go,’ a grown-up voice inside me soberly instructed me – as I almost poured coffee into my eggs.

“ ‘I want my grandmother’s flowers back!’ a less grown-up inner voice protested. I was not ready for the vase to be empty, just as I wasn’t prepared for my grandmother to be gone, even though she was ninety-one.

“ ‘We were supposed to have more time together,’ the voice complained. I hadn’t expected my grandmother to be absent from my life with such suddenness. I knew I should accept the loss, but something in me just couldn’t.

“I could feel the inner tug-of-war between the rational voice that advised acceptance and the emotional voice that fought against it – the rational adult voice of reason telling me to let go now, and the voice of the vulnerable granddaughter who needed to adjust to this profound loss through her quiet ritual of decaying flowers.

Bennett-Goleman observed that, “As I quietly reflected on these abrupt losses, I felt a sense of compassion for my own denial. When someone we love is taken away from us so quickly, the shock seems too much to bear all at once. Too often we let our impatient judgmental grown-up inner voices browbeat us about

how we're supposed to feel. The vulnerable child inside understands that she will eventually have to adjust – but she needs more time.

She concludes, “Grieving for the loss of a grandmother, of course, is a natural and healthy process. But with patterns of feeling that may be less healthy, we need to be just as compassionate with ourselves. As we enter the territory of our most difficult emotional habits, we need to bring to bear a tender empathy for ourselves as we let go of these old familiar ways of being. Before we can turn to a more rational view, we need to empathize with our emotional needs – before we can change, we need to accept and be loving to ourselves.”

Bennett-Goleman presents the techniques of mindfulness practice as the perfect tools to use for identifying our emotional schemas by being able to be compassionately present to our experience as it happens, even when our feelings are uncomfortable.

I've heard some people say, “I can't meditate. My mind just won't stop thinking!” This represents a complete misunderstanding of what mindfulness practice is. We don't stop our thinking – thinking is going to keep happening, all by itself. But we can learn to throw out the clutch of our mind, even as the motor continues to run. We can learn to disengage from identifying with the contents of our mind even as we continue to be aware of everything that's going on.

Bennett-Goleman points out that “Sometimes people confuse the concept of letting go of a thought or feeling – noticing it arise in your awareness but not pursuing it – with pushing a painful feeling away by trying to suppress it. But suppression is not mindfulness. Mindfulness hides from nothing. It allows us to cut through the daze of denial and be straight with ourselves. Mindful attention lets us see the bare facts and not fall for our own cover stories.”

She says that “The power of sustained awareness lies in its impact on our thoughts, moods, and emotions. When we face a jumble of emotion with mindfulness, our sustained attention quiets the inner disorder and confusion; as mindfulness gains a hold, it calms the turmoil.

“If we can have the presence of mind to bring mindfulness to a moment when we are awash with anger or fear, for example, something begins to occur in the brain. The left prefrontal area contains a main array of neurons that tone down disturbing surges from the amygdala, something like the way a dam holds back all but a mild flow from an otherwise raging river. Mindfulness strengthens this dam, making these restraining neurons more active, so that they act as more powerful curbs to a distressing emotion.”

These changes have been measured and observed in people after just two months of mindfulness practice – it truly is possible to make real changes in our emotional reactivity in a short amount of time if we can bring ourselves to believe in the possibility.

I’d like to close with an exercise in beginning mindfulness, with suggestions for further inquiry. I invite you to sit calmly, comfortably, with your spine erect and your breathing relaxed. You may close your eyes if you wish.

The first step is always the breath. In mindfulness practice, we are always mindful of something. The breath, the very spirit of life, is always with us as we breathe in and out every minute, every hour, every day of our lives. . . .

So we begin by simply bringing our awareness to the flow of our breath. . . . We just notice the rising and falling of our chest or belly as air flows in and out. . . . As we do so, our minds will probably stir up something to think about and draw our attention away from the breath. When that happens, just remember and bring your awareness back to the rising and falling of your breath, in and out. . . .

The next step is to regard the rest of your body with the same open, uncritical awareness you brought to the breath. . . . Notice the pressure of the seat where you’re sitting, the sensation of your feet on the floor, and any other sensations. . . . It’s your body – just observe it as it is, in this moment, not judging or changing anything – just experiencing it as it is. . . .

As you settle into a gentle awareness of your breath and your body, you may become aware of the presence of emotions. . . . Are you feeling happy and

peaceful – or are perhaps feeling irritated and annoyed? . . . I invite you to just be present with your emotions. They're part of you, just as your breath and body are parts of you, and you can observe them clearly if you can suspend your habits of identifying with your emotions. . . .

Of course, then there will be thoughts. . . . Thoughts happen. . . . We don't stop them, but we can learn to observe them as phenomena, just like we did with our breath, our body, and our emotions. . . .

This is the practice of bringing the power of mindfulness to our experience in the moment, every moment. This is the clarity that can support us when we feel that our “buttons” have been pushed and we're tempted to slip into an impulsive emotional response.

As we learn to be present in the moment to all that we are – our breath, our body, our feelings and our thoughts – we can begin to get wise to the emotional patterns of our own schema attacks as we observe them taking place in real time. We can learn when they happen, and if we pay really close attention, we can begin to understand why they happen, and when we do they begin to lose their power over us. When this happens we have the option of being able to choose our emotional responses rather than have them choose us.

We can be present during the magic quarter-second when choice is possible. We can choose to be compassionate rather than hurt. We can choose to be generous rather than anxious. We can gain the ability to live our highest values in our emotional lives, not just our intellectual ones. What could be better than that?

May it be so.