

THE LAST WORD

RECEPTIVE PRESENCE

by
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When Richard asked me for some thoughts about important directions, about what comes next, I began thinking with the sense of how much relational neuroscience has offered us in the last few decades. Shortly after that, I began to wonder what we humans, our societies, and our planet need most right now. No day passes without a sense that our time as a viable species on this gorgeous, but suffering, planet may be quite short. How did we become so neglectful of our home, of the body of the Earth? And what would relational neuroscience offer as wisdom to guide us toward more sustainable living?

We might begin by recognizing that almost every new discovery deepens our awareness of how thoroughly interwoven we are with each other and with all other living systems. Stephen Porges tells us that “connection is a biological imperative.” We could sit with the meaning of that for a long time, allowing it to shape how we see our place in this world, with each other and with the natural world. It also helps us become sensitive to how much of our nervous system is devoted to this biological imperative. James Coan says, “...it is possible to think of the entire human brain as a neural attachment system.” Pointing toward the depth of neurobiological entanglement with each other, Marco Iacoboni says that “we live within each other.”

If we are able to feel into this, we might begin to sense that in every meaningful relationship, including the way we experience our connection with this earth, there is a third entity created. It is the joining of two (or more) into one system that is neither one nor the other, and certainly not the sum of the two, but its own third thing. My friend, and GAINS board member, Jim Finley tries to reflect this state of unity that preserves individuality this way: “Not-one, yet not-two.” Dan Siegel tries to touch it with “mwe.” It is a paradox that we can experience but not fully define. When we are in this state (but not when we are thinking about it), there is a flow of respect, of dignity, of tenderness and cooperation, and of co-suffering as well. This leads to acts of support and kindness, and willingness to make sacrifices for each other. We cease being and seeing objects, and instead inhabit a world of living relationships.

Even as we acknowledge the truth of this, it stands in dynamic tension with the cultural perspective of the developed world that is guided by left hemisphere values, as Iain McGilchrist expresses them. He calls it a manufacturing mentality, concerned with tasks and behaviors. In our field, this translates into algorithms, protocols, interventions, and evidence-based practice, all of which lose the individual and the present moment in favor of the

attempt to relieve suffering by generic methods. It makes sense that the left hemisphere would take this approach because its way of seeing leaves us with no felt sense of we. This is so contrary to the core of our neurobiological imperative for connection that this isolation drives us to see self-regulation, self-reliance, self-care, self-esteem as core values to be pursued. We are folded back on our sense of aloneness in ways that make us physically sick and emotionally empty, and that leave us unable to establish any kind of relationship with our earth. Barbara Fredrickson and others have done research that suggests that about 75% of us are living in this wasteland now. When I am talking with friends or clients, I have become sensitive to how often their implicit metaphors reflect a sense of being alone and self-responsible, even while they are speaking of co-regulation as an idea.

And this is the core of it. There is such a profound and crucial difference between knowing something and having the lived experience, the felt sense of it. There is very little in simply knowing something that impels us to action or changes our perceptions in ways that alter our day-to-day interactions with others and the natural world. We don't truly get into relationship with whatever we are knowing from that perspective because that isn't what the left hemisphere does. Instead, it keeps the idea separate, analytical, and therefore largely impractical for daily life. However, when we linger long enough to embody it and live with it, to integrate the knowledge with our right hemisphere way of experiencing, then we do get into relationship with it, and it changes us. Over years of soaking in relational neuroscience in the presence of each other, I have watched

people in a study group we hold grow kinder, less judgmental, quieter on the inside, with a more flexible pace and a capacity for following and reflecting others. To a person, they have also changed their relationship with this sacred earth.

One of the aspects of our profession that feels to me like it is guided by a strong push from the culture is the constant pressure to learn the latest techniques for brain change and healing trauma. And to apply them immediately. This is certainly the left hemisphere's method. So many people tell me of their anxiety about not keeping up with these new methods as though they are going to miss something essential. Thanks to the science, these pathways to change are proliferating and that is potentially a good thing. At the same time, it is literally impossible to truly digest this information, integrate it with what else we know, and give it time to become part of our lived experience if we are either overwhelmed or at the next training. All of this is done in the service of relieving suffering and with every good-hearted intention. All of this makes many of us anxious.

Most worrisome, it seems to miss the core of what relational neuroscience is teaching us. The foundation of healing is being present with one another, with as little judgment and agenda as we can at any particular moment. This does not mean we are passive, but are fully, dynamically attentive to our people. We can then follow what is emerging in them, responding with what we have to offer from our reservoir of embodied knowledge, then listening deeply to how this touches them, handing it back and forth, and back and forth, in this profoundly tender and respectful way.

Being without judgment or agenda of our own is the condition for offering safety, as Stephen Porges tells us. As receptive presence brings safety, it makes room for the other person's inner wisdom and inherent health to gradually come forward. For me, this is one of the most important learnings from relational neuroscience: The other person's system holds everything that is needed for healing, just waiting for the necessary support to manifest. This kind of interdependence is written into our humanness from the beginning. I wonder if you remember those distressing images from Romanian orphanages during Ceausescu's dictatorship, where the children were isolated in their cots, contained and separated from each other, where the staff were insensitive and dispassionate towards the children. I remember looking at the image of one baby and thinking that she contains everything she needs to become a fulfilled human being, but for lack of a reflecting, caring, loving other, those inborn potentials can't develop. We have the blessed job to be that available person for those who

have been wounded. When someone comes to us and finds a receptive presence, that person is likely to feel respectfully joined and held, trusted, reflected, and supported. However, if I am busy within myself trying to apply a protocol, assess a person, formulate a treatment plan, or select which evidence-based practice to employ, I am not present with the person who comes into my room. This is such a crossroads for us, and one that our current culture does not support well.

So, we need to hold a sanctuary space for each other in which it is considered best practice to slow our pace, get a sense of which few healing modalities resonate with our inner world, spend all the time we need to embody the work, and above all, practice presence with each other so that we can hear and be heard, offering and receiving safety in abundance. This isn't an idea, but a request, perhaps a plea for spaces in which we can gradually become receptivity itself. Then we will be able to hear and respond to the earth's pleas while helping others develop the capacity to do the same.

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