

TEEN BRAINS

We have 5 Brains all together, and they build on one another. At five approximate periods of human life (years 1, 4, 7, 11, and 14-17), we experience major brain surges where all past experiences are stored and secured, and we become ready to connect with the next higher brain. At each stage, we need models of higher brain function in our lives to move ourselves to that higher level of consciousness and conscience. Thus good and mature people in our lives are important at each of these stages. If you live around people at the "sex and survival" level, the "lizard brain" level, you have little chance of moving beyond the lizard brain yourself, despite all the catechism classes in the world. It is not that we have not given people great visions, but it is that they use too little of themselves to see and, therefore, they do not see very far.

As teenagers we begin the last major brain surge, which connects all four brains to the holistic heart brain, which is probably why that first intoxicating teenage love is so utterly romantic and forever idealized. Everything is getting connected, and we feel fantastically awake and alive! But if the right conditions are not present at each stage, not only do we not connect with the next brain level, but also we suffer one of the greatest tragedies in human biology: millions and millions of unused cells die off, in a process called "neural pruning." It produces a kind of deep disappointment, cynicism, and even rage in a young person. It produces less conscious and less alert people. With the brain, it is literally use it or lose it. Initiation and mentors protected society from this disaster. Wise elders around you actually reverse this strange law of gravity. A person's continuous, healthy development depends on being exposed during each period to people who provide nurturing and safe love, people who themselves live out of a higher brain and a bigger vision of life. We need models of higher development around us to move forward. We are socially contagious, especially in the teen years. This probably explains why initiations-confirmations and bar mitzvahs-were done in early teenage years in a community context. Once initiation rites stopped honoring this time-sensitive period, and once there were no real godfathers and godmothers, they became mere hocus pocus and empty ritual. In Catholic circles, there is often more concern about pleasing the bishop than transforming the kids. We are, it seems, both more biologically dependent and socially interdependent than the myth of the autonomous mind suggests.

In addition, brain development requires some degree of safe and loving human touch. Untouched infants and children simply stop moving through the brain levels and stop growing in other ways besides. Human beings have a kind of skin hunger. This surely indicates why any form of physical or sexual abuse at an early age is so devastating. The cells of the body know, remember, heal, and self-destruct according to the messages that they receive. For too long we limited consciousness to the head brain, but now we know that we are much more a whole body brain. Consciousness resides on many levels, and maybe that is why initiation rites were so holistic in their approach, not just verbal lectures. There are many ways of knowing yourself and your world.

Such data about brain surges provides evidence for the excitement and enthusiasm that we see in most children. We are wired for transcendence and greatness, it seems. Watch it on the faces of high school students at pep rallies, sports events, and any group gathering. They are wanting and expecting and looking for greatness, significance, a compelling vision for life, a challenge, holiness, even God. Children and teenagers are unbelievably hopeful by nature; all of their life is out in front of them. If that big picture is not given to them - through contact with bigger people and at special windows of opportunity - young people will seek to fulfill the expectation in other ways: big crowds, loud music, marching armies, totally unrealistic fantasies, fame (or infamy!), money, and popularity. Anything loud, large, or socially admired becomes the substitute for the cosmic and the transcendent that they are really longing for. Someone needs to tell them that.

If there is no contact with greatness, there is an almost cosmic disappointment inside of us, a deep sadness, a capacity for cynical dismissal and sullen coldness, exactly as we see in so many of our young today. The visionary gleam is lost. It is as if they are saying, "There are no great people or great patterns. I will not believe in anything. I will not be disappointed again." It is called post modernism, and it is the general assumption of our jaded and uninitiated society. But it is not the presence of pain or suffering that destroys the brain; rather it is the lack of larger-than-life people around us. Primal cultures seemed to know that if young people missed being exposed to a greater meaning and greater people during key periods of their lives, especially the last clear opportunity at ages fourteen to seventeen, the result would be disastrous both for the young person and for the society.

Grace, of course, can finally prevail over anything, anywhere, anytime. However, today we have nothing in place structurally that will expose our young people to significance, and thus they miss the grace that is available in those critical years when they are most ripe for vision, Breadth, and depth. I know for myself that it was my youthful dreams that set the runway for my entire life.

Some young people may stumble upon this bigger vision providentially - reading the life of a saint or a hero, meeting a friend or mentor that invites them into the big picture; but the lack of personal and social exposure to real depth and breadth makes most young people vulnerable to cheap religion, cults, and crowds as a substitute for largeness, hoping for salvation from their jobs or companies, selling their souls for fame and fundamentalism. All of which will die and eventually disappoint. All our youthful idealism, all our grand visions and hopes are practice runs and disguised desires for the great run for which we were created.

The momentum toward greatness is on the hard drive of our very brain. We were created for transcendence, and our deepest level we all know it. But we have to install software for one another. It is God's great gamble and great responsibility.

From Adam's Return by Richard Rohr. includes Research taken from "the Biology of Transcendence: a Blueprint of the Human Spirit by Joseph Chilton Pearce