

### Natural Wisdom

Why do we say that wisdom comes with age? Rigidity, fear, and discouragement seem equally likely outcomes as I listen to my clients talk about their aging parents. I am, in fact, an aging parent as well, standing in the presence of what Erik Erikson aptly called the crisis of Integrity versus Despair. Does integrity, as he used it, have anything to do with wisdom? If we think about the quality of life as strongly correlated with our degree of neural integration, we may be able to get a better idea about the underpinnings of satisfying elder years.

As part of his ongoing investigation of aging well, cognitive scientist Elkhonon Goldberg (2006) wrote *The Wisdom Paradox: How Your Mind Can Grow Stronger as Your Brain Grows Older*. He proposes that the right hemisphere is mainly devoted to novelty, while the left hemisphere accumulates and organizes experience. As we age, our brain's capacity for pattern recognition allows us to coordinate our storehouse of knowledge so we have increasing areas of competence. For Goldberg, wisdom emerges from this broad ability to know what to do.

We can possibly question the proposition that the most salient idea about the hemispheres is that the right brain specializes in novelty while the left specializes in what is already known. In fact, we could even wonder if that is broadly true, considering that the right amygdala is a sometimes unruly and demanding storehouse of past fears. Leaving that aside, interpersonal neurobiology would at least be more interested in the ongoing relationship between the two halves of the brain, with the right providing the social/emotional/motivational context for the left. In a well-integrated brain, this continual flow of energy and information from right to left forms the basis for our constantly emerging coherent narrative.



I believe this capacity to embrace our history with ever-deepening compassion for ourselves and the generations that preceded us could be one way to understand wisdom. The image of broad-ranging neural integration might be echoed in the coherent mind's sense of having lived a meaningful life. Dan Siegel's (2007) triangle of well-being suggests that these two will be accompanied by the capacity for empathic relationships. In many tribal traditions, the wise person is precisely the one who embodies and passes on the experience of the group – the coherent narrative expressing the meaning of membership in this closely knit band. He or she helps the group maintain its integrity, a word that means not only adherence to truth, but completeness and wholeness.

In this way, we circle back to the place where wisdom and integrity meet. These qualities might be the natural outcome of advancing neural integration when we use our store of years to loosen whatever emotional and cognitive invariant representations (Hawkins & Blakeslee, 2004), as well as body-based patterns (Ogden, Minton, & Pain, 2006), stand in the way of our brain's innate movement toward complexity and well-being. The FACES of mental health can then accompany us into old age as flexible, adaptive, coherent, energized, and stable coots – with the capacity to offer these qualities to the next generation. Rigidity, fear, and discouragement can capture us if our history remains dis-integrated, neurally undigested into a body of wisdom.

If we think of wisdom as primarily a cognitive capacity, we may see the knowledge storehouse as the primary foundation. However, if we sense that the *quality* of wisdom must include the sense of integrity, of having lived a meaningful life, and through resonance circuits, having the capacity to pass this on to those who will follow us, then we must look to the neurobiology of an integrated brain.

# Authors' References

## A Personal Journey of Discovery and Inspiration

- Cheng, Y., Meltzoff, A. N., & Decety, J. (2007). Motivation modulates the activity of the human mirror-neuron system. *Cerebral Cortex*, *17*, 1979-1986.
- His Holiness the Dalai Lama. (2008). Public addresses given at Seeds of Compassion. Ending quote downloaded from [www.dalailama.com/](http://www.dalailama.com/), his official website.
- Iacoboni, M. (2008). *Mirroring people: The new science of how we connect with people*. NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.
- Jackson, P. L., Meltzoff, A. N., & Decety, J. (2006). Neural circuits involved in imitation and perspective-taking. *NeuroImage*, *31*, 429-439.
- Kringelbach, M. L., Lehtonen, A., Squire, S., Harvey, A. G., Craske, M. G., Holliday, et al. (2008). A specific and rapid neural signature for parental instinct. *PLoS ONE* *3*(2):e1664. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0001664.
- Lazar, S. W., Kerr, C., Wasserman, R. H., Gray, J.R., Greve, D., Treadway, M.T., et al. (2005). Meditation experience is associated with increased cortical thickness. *NeuroReport*, *16*, 1893-1897.
- Lutz, A., Brefczynski-Lewis, J., Johnstone, T., & Davidson, R. J. (2008). Regulation of the neural circuitry of emotion by compassion meditation: Effects of meditative expertise. *PLoS ONE* *3*(3): e1897. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0001897.
- Menon, V. & Levitin, D. J. (2005). The rewards of music listening: Response and physiological connectivity of the mesolimbic system. *NeuroImage*, *28*, 175-184.
- Olsson, A., Nearing, K. I., & Phelps, E. A. (2007). Learning fears by observing others: the neural systems of social fear transmission. *Social, Cognitive, and Affective Neuroscience*, *2*, 3-11.
- Panksepp, J. (2006). Emotional endophenotypes in evolutionary psychiatry. *Progress in Neuro-psychopharmacology and Biological Psychiatry*, *30*, 774-784.
- Seeds of Compassion. [www.seedsofcompassion.org](http://www.seedsofcompassion.org). GAINS has gratefully downloaded photographs and a graphic recording. This and much more available at the site.
- Siegel, D. J. (1999). *The developing mind: How relationships and the brain interact to shape who we are*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Siegel, D. J. (2006). An interpersonal neurobiology approach to psychotherapy: Awareness, mirror neurons, and neural plasticity in the development of well-being. *Psychiatric Annals*, *36*(4), 247-258.
- Siegel, D. J. (2007). *The mindful brain: Reflection and attunement in the cultivation of well-being*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Swain, J. E., Lorberbaum, J. P., Kose, S., & Lane, S. (2007). Brain basis of early parent-infant interactions: psychology, physiology - , and in vivo functional neuroimaging studies. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, *48*(3-4), 262-287.
- Zak, P. J. (2008, June). The neurobiology of trust. *Scientific American*, *298*(6), 88-95.

## Natural Wisdom

- Goldberg, E. (2006). *Wisdom paradox: How your mind can grow stronger as your brain grows older*. New York: Gotham Books.
- Hawkins, J., & Blakeslee, S. (2004). *On intelligence: How a new understanding of the brain will lead to the creation of truly intelligent machines*. New York: Times Books.
- Ogden, P., Minton, K., & Pain, C. (2006). *Trauma and the body: A sensorimotor approach to psychotherapy*. New York: Norton.
- Siegel, D. J. (2007). *The mindful brain: Reflection and attunement in the cultivation of well-being*. New York: Norton.