

Dear People Whom God Loves,

**ONE CHRISTIAN'S JOURNEY
A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE**

PART 1

I wrote previously about my spiritual journey from a top down perspective. That is the journey of growing into deeper and broader compassion mercy and understanding influenced by my understanding of God changing from a distant powerful being who rewards and punishes us based on our doing or not doing what he wants us to do. Next moving to:

A distant powerful being who loves us with no strings or conditions to:

A Love that is spirit (not a being) that is the source of all beings. The Love that is not only the source of all beings but also lives in us (and all creation) and is constantly working in all of us to bring us to the state of total love and compassion.

I now write about my spiritual journey from the perspective that I call bottom up. That is befriending our body. I believe that requires befriending all of who and what we are.

It helps me to understand this full humanness by looking at our brain. There are three main parts.

The oldest part is the reptilian brain, also called the brain stem. We along with lizards have this brain. It is essential to staying alive. Without it our internal organs would not work. This is the instinctive part of us. It is the source of our bodily sensations. It alerts our bodies to danger with amazing quickness. This helps us to survive.

Recent studies and experiments help us to understand this. When we touch something hot we recoil at once which helps us from a worse burn. We formerly thought we recoiled because of the pain. We now know that we recoil a half second before we feel the pain. The pain is valuable because it helps us to be

careful around hot things but the reptilian brain reacts more quickly than the felt pain. All of this is the fruit of evolutionary survival. We need it to survive.

These primitive sensations grow into the emotions of anger and fear. This builds into great strength to fight or run away from the danger. This along with the drive for food helps us as individuals to survive. Survival of the species is also crucial. That is why sexual drives are essential. If we didn't have sexual drives, we wouldn't be here.

Spiritual wholeness requires that we accept these lizard parts of us. These lizard parts must be integrated with the newer parts. That is true also. I also believe that we can't integrate them if we don't accept them as valuable and good. Without the integration spiritual growth is hindered.

We move now to the newer (middle) part of our brain. This is called the mammalian brain or the limbic system. We have this part of the brain along with cats, dogs, tigers and other mammals. Because we have this part of the brain we have more than bodily sensations. We also have emotions. We feel anger, fear, emotional warmth and closeness. This makes it possible for us to like to hug and cuddle and be with family. This is also why we like status. It also allows us to feel sad. It is what makes it possible to feel the thrill of falling in love.

All of the things which come from the brain stem and limbic system have no morality about them. They are just there. They are a part of being human. When we deny them we lose a part of being human. We lose our wholeness. Our journey requires accepting and integrating them. When we don't accept and integrate them, they will come back to bite us with behavior that is not fully human. We may then move in the direction of hurting others by raging destruction or hurting others by being cold as ice. Indeed we may do both.

Let us pause for a moment to realize that all three parts of the brain influence each other. That influence goes through all three from bottom to top and from top to bottom. That is from the oldest into the newer and newest and from the newest into the older and oldest. That is why the spiritual journey is difficult, confusing, painful and lasts all our life.

The newest part of the brain is the cortex and the newest part of the cortex is the prefrontal part of the cortex. That prefrontal part is only in us humans. That is the part that enables us to reason, to think abstractly, to make moral judgments and to plan. That part enables us to make free will decisions. Without this we would not be humans. All of us are a part of the rest of the universe and all parts are connected and have value and are to be treated properly. At the same time we humans have a unique dignity and may not be treated just as a means to an end.

Are we human's special? Yes. May we treat the rest of creation in any way that we choose? No. Are we animals? Yes. Are we just the same as other animals? No. We are animals who think and have moral responsibility. We are called to wholeness. A wholeness that allows us to be loving, compassionate and related to people. Unless we befriend and integrate all that we are, our spiritual journey is off track.

PART 2

We turn now to a deeper understanding of why it is so difficult for us to grow into more deeply good, compassionate, merciful understanding people, which, of course, is what the spiritual journey is about. Understanding this can help us to be more gentle with ourselves and at the same time see what we need to do to grow. Also to realize that willpower alone will not do the trick. Willpower is certainly not the whole answer and I would say not even the major part of the answer. Willpower has a place. I would say that place is the willingness to take the path of healing. That willingness is the opening for the Love we name God to work in us. What are the obstacles?

One obstacle is the behavior of people around us, who give us bad examples. I am not thinking about behavior that traumatizes. I will treat that later. For example, when we learn that when we want something we should always have it, this easily turns into self-centeredness that lessens our concern for others. We need to have some things that we want but there are limits. Also when we learn that everyone is out to get us, then we must get them before they get us. This puts a shield around us that makes it almost impossible to have healthy caring relationships. These learnings are embedded in us most deeply when we are young.

Another obstacle becomes clearer to us when we look at the threefold brain that we have as a result of evolution. The three parts from oldest to newest (or the lowest to the highest) influence each other from bottom to top and top to bottom. They do not always get along. Getting them into a healthy relationship is difficult. I am 86 years old. They are a long way from being in harmony in me. That complete harmony will never happen in my lifetime. I think that that is the common experience of most if not all of us.

For example: When something is threatening to us, this threat puts the reptilian brain right into motion to protect us. That protective motion is instinctive. There is no free conscious decision in our part. It is just the reptilian brain doing its job. This helps us to survive. We probably don't mistake this for sin.

This bodily sensation quickly moves into the emotions of anger and fear from the mammalian brain. This is still not a free conscious choice. The anger and fear help us to survive. The anger builds up bodily strength so that we can fight the threat. Sometimes the fight option is not the way to go. The other emotion fear also builds bodily strength so that we can escape the threat by running away faster than we normally could. Although these are not free conscious choices, we may have learned that they are wrong. That learning is misleading. There is no sin. The bodily sensations that grow into anger and fear are necessary for survival as individuals. There is also the need for the survival of the species. To assure this, the bodily sensation to procreate moves into lust. Just as with anger and fear, lust is not wrong or a sin. It is just a part of being human.

We can begin to have some understanding why becoming loving compassionate people is a difficult journey.

We now move to the third part of our brain, the cortex. Specifically to the prefrontal part of the cortex. This is the part that only we humans have. Because of this part of the brain we can reason, plan, think abstractly and make free decisions. At the same time remember that our ability to think and to make free choices is influenced by the older parts of our brain. I think that this is why we are prone to prejudice, stubborn clinging to our opinions and beliefs and why we make choices that make no sense at all.

This part gives us the capacity to make judgments, to see consequences of our actions that go beyond the urge or drive that we want fulfilled. We can see negative consequences that affect ourselves, other people and indeed the rest of creation.

When all is working well, this newest part of our brain will prevail and we will choose to follow these drives and urges when the consequences are good and choose not to follow them when these consequences are bad. As we know only too well from our own experiences, it doesn't always go smoothly. Even when we do make good choices it is often very difficult. The rational, free choice part of our brain can indeed influence the emotional and even the sensation parts of our brain. Don't forget. These older parts can influence the rational free choice part.

The strength of these older parts can be scary to us and tempt us to try to be "good" by overpowering them. We may even repress them so that we are unaware that they are there. These older parts don't go away. They will show themselves in destructive ways. They may cause us to be cold and not to be aware of how we hurt people. They may draw us into strong needs for power and control over people without realizing the consequences of our actions.

The remedy is to befriend all of our humanness-all three parts. We need to be aware of the elements of our brain and accept that is what we are as humans. Also to accept the responsibility to integrate them so that they will work better together.

These are two ways that I have found helpful to me. One is to form good habits. When I see that a behavior is leading to becoming better, I start doing it. I suggest, don't try too much at once. We don't have to hurry to the end of the journey. We just need to be on the journey.

Another is mindful meditation. This means becoming aware. Aware of our bodily sensations, our emotions, our thoughts. It means becoming aware of all the things that arise within us and outside of us. It means not only being aware, but being aware without judging them. It means not labeling them as good or bad but just that they are there. The amazing thing is that this meditation builds new neurons in the brain and builds new synapses to connect the different parts of the brain.

I find it helpful to me to have the great Love that holds us, lives in us, with great healing merciful power as a part of the meditation. That will be valuable to some of us and not to others of us. Whichever way you do it, I suggest it to you: it helps us to grow in love, compassion, mercy and understanding.

There is still something else that hinders us in our spiritual journey to becoming more loving compassionate people. That something else is trauma. Trauma is an injury to our nervous system. That injury comes from events that we experience in our lives. We are particularly prone to be traumatized when we are young, though it can happen at any time of life.

We are used to hearing about soldiers coming back from war suffering from trauma. It can come from being raped, being in an accident, a child falling off a tricycle, a child rolling down the steps. It can come from medical procedures and indeed from witnessing scary and awful things.

This is approximately (I am not an expert) how it works. When we sense danger, our nervous system springs into action. It produces adrenaline that gives us super power to fight the danger or to run away from it. We can be in a situation where fight or flight is not possible or practical. When that energy is not released it freezes in us and we become traumatized. We carry this frozen energy within us. It may be retriggered and show up in days, weeks, months, years, decades. We then react--even though we are really safe--as if the original scary event is happening. We may not even connect our reaction to the scary event that we endured.

An example is the traumatized soldier who is back home and hears a loud noise. It is as if he/she is right back in the war zone. This may result in behavior that goes outward into violence or inward into depression and self-loathing. The scary thing is that it just happens and we don't know why.

I would guess that most of us have been traumatized to some degree. Don't we at times do something stupid and afterward ask ourselves why in the world we did that. It doesn't make sense to us. We can even be traumatized while in our mother's womb. When our nervous system is not very developed and we are little and can't defend ourselves, it takes a smaller event to traumatize us.

Fortunately healing from trauma is possible. It doesn't have to be a life sentence.

When we look at all these factors, we shouldn't be surprised that becoming merciful, loving and compassionate people is so difficult. And if we have been blessed not to have encountered these difficulties we are likely to fall into the pride of thinking that we are so much better than those other people.

I am so grateful that no matter where we are on the journey that the great Love we name God is with us and is not interested in revenge and punishment but only in helping us heal and become more whole and happy.

At the end of this article you will find the title of books by Peter A. Levine and Maggie Klein that will give you the wisdom from professionals.

PART 3

I have recently discovered how trauma has affected my life. This helps me to make some sense of events and reactions in my life that seem somewhat crazy. I know that others also have things in their life that seem crazy. I hope that my story can help others to realize that their irrational reaction don't mean that they are bad. It means that our nervous system has been injured and we need healing.

I will write about just one incident in my life that injured my nervous system and how that has affected my life. When we are injured in this way we will act out in ways which are destructive of other people and of course ourselves. Or we may act in ways which hurt ourselves and of course this will affect other people as well.

In my life I have mostly acted in. This acting in has resulted in two big depressions. One in my early twenties and one in my early forties. Another problem was suffering from OCD (obsessive compulsive disorder) that took the form of scrupulosity (almost everything I thought, did or didn't do was a sin for which God would send me to hell). I am grateful that that has healed and now I realize that God is total, infinite Love that God (Love) does not want punishment but only healing. Another is that I periodically struggle with irrational fears that take various forms and still trouble me in little ways and big ways.

Now to my story. The event that took place when I was six years old. I had my tonsils taken out. I don't know what I thought that would entail. Maybe I imagined a knife going into my mouth and cutting me up. I do know that I was scared to death. I was terrified. When the time came to go to the hospital I was so scared that I ran and hid under my bed. I was screaming that I wouldn't go. My dad had to get me to the hospital and since I wouldn't come out from under my bed, he pulled me out fighting and screaming.

I don't remember the drive to the hospital. I do remember being on the operating table. My parents told me that it took five or six people to hold me down. I know now that the adrenaline rush makes a person incredibly strong. The reptilian brain had put me into survival mode. In this terribly agitated state I remember the mask being put on my face. I was now not just being held helpless, I was being smothered. (Remember as child I had no big picture of what this was all about.) Then the ether was given to me.

Next there was this thick ribbon of light spiraling and spiraling upward from my head. It was going faster and faster until it exploded. The next thing I knew was that I was waking up. I remember being given some ice cream. I liked that. All of that strong energy that was built up in me to help me survive had no place to go. It was frozen in me along with the terrifying fear.

I got the ice cream but nothing was done to release all of that frozen energy and fear within me. This was in 1932 when we knew nothing about what was going on in the brain and the body. Much less what to do about it.

What were the effects of this? Since all of the frozen energy was still in me, both obvious and not obvious situations could trigger that energy and make me feel like I was back in that terrifying place. This is sometimes called having a flashback. In all of these situations I had no realization that it was connected to the surgery. I just had the feeling that there was something wrong with me. This was not rational so I must be weird.

For a number of years I would experience having this ribbon of light spiraling up and up and then exploding. This was very scary. I didn't have a clue about what was going on. I never said anything to anyone. I was just scared all by myself.

There was one that I had that happened when I was probably about nine or ten. I was sick. I had the flashback of the spiraling and exploding light. I must have screamed because my dad came in and asked what was wrong. I didn't have words to tell him so I just said "you know, the accident". I couldn't think of any way to explain the ribbon of light that exploded. Since there had been no "accident" he thought that I was just delusional because of my sickness. I was still alone with my fear.

When I was in second grade we had little school desks that were screwed into wooden runners so that one desk was directly behind the other. My desk was a little over halfway past the middle of the row. I would frequently imagine that my desk was enclosed with glass that was several feet higher than the desk. So I was seated higher than the other children. I was higher and enclosed in my glass compartment that nobody could get into. I was safe. There was a place in school where I didn't have to be afraid.

Another series of fears took place, I would guess during the years when I was seven to ten years old and my brother Jimmy was four to seven years old. We shared a double bed and we would wrestle from time to time. Remember, that I was bigger than he was. If I was under the covers arms and all, and he was on top of me, I would freak out. It was the same helpless feeling that I had while being held down on the operating table. (Though I didn't know it). If my body was under the covers but my arms were not, when he was on top of me, I had no fear. If my arms were on top of the covers I felt perfectly safe because I could defend myself. There was no trigger when my arms were on top of the covers.

When I was a young priest in the 1950's, I was at a small meeting in Richfield about developing its recreation facilities. We all sat around a small table. I became frozen and I was completely unable to talk. Toward the end of the meeting someone asked me: "Father do you have something to add". I could not say anything. I just shook my head no. I couldn't imagine what was going on. I felt that I was really weird. Remember that for some years I had been giving sermons, teaching class, being at all kinds of meetings and had no trouble talking at all.

There must have been something in that meeting that triggered that old frozen energy and fear that was still in me. There are still times when that hits me. I am

grateful that I now have some understanding of what is going on. That is helpful but I have need for more healing.

I am learning to heal by allowing myself to be aware of my bodily sensations coming from my reptilian brain and the emotions from my mammalian brain. As best I can I don't judge them. That means not thinking that they are good or bad but just accepting that they are there.

Also when I have unpleasant sensations or emotions, I let myself be aware of them. Then not to dwell on them but to turn to a pleasant sensation or emotion that I have had and enjoy it. I don't do this very well but it does help me to keep from getting stuck. After all, life is always about ups and downs.

What I have written is the thoughts of an amateur. I hope that it can have some healing affect for you.

If you want the wisdom of professional people, I suggest the following four books:

- 1) Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma, by Peter A. Levine. This is a shorter book and not as long as the next one.
- 2) In an Unspoken Voice, by Peter A. Levine. This is a more mature book on the topic.
- 3) Trauma Proofing Your Kids, by Peter A. Levine and Maggie Klein. This is shorter than the next book.
- 4) Trauma Through a Child's Eyes, by Peter A. Levine and Maggie Klein. This is a more complete book than Trauma Proofing Your Kids.

Religion and church are at their best when they are helping us grow in the love, compassion, mercy and understanding that draw us closer to being the image of the infinite Love we name God.

Smile, God Loves You
Father Clay