

“How to Run Your Brain”
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I’ve been in St. Louis exactly once. It was at the Unitarian Universalist General Assembly in June of 2006. On the last night, I go to a party that’s being held at a hotel about 3 blocks away from where I’m staying. The party breaks up a little after 11 o’clock, and head outside. I cross the street, where a bunch people are standing, including a young guy wearing a do-rag, he’s maybe this tall (a little shorter than I am). As soon as we make eye contact, I can see that he’s probably high on something. He says, “Can you gimme a few dollars?”

I say, “No, sorry.” I turn away from him, with my purse over my shoulder and cross the other side of the intersection. I only have to walk three blocks, past the back and the side of my hotel, then take a right to get to the hotel entrance. Then I hear that guy a half a block behind me, whining, “Give me some money!” He keeps repeating this, over and over.

I get really annoyed and I yell over my shoulder, “No! Leave me alone!”

I pass a tall older man going in the opposite direction. And then I realize there is no one else –anywhere, except me –and this creep who’s following me.

Then a car slows down, and a young couple stops and asks me for directions. I can’t help them, because I don’t know the area. However, it gives the guy a chance to catch up with us. I am desperately trying to think of some way to alert them to the fact that this guy is bothering me, but then they’re gone.

I took martial arts for a few years, but in this moment, I cannot think of a single move that might help me.

I turn the corner for the final stretch –the side of my hotel. In the next moment, the guy is one step behind me, and before I know what’s happening, he somehow throws me off-balance and pushes my face into the concrete sidewalk. And yes, it feels and sounds exactly like you’d imagine it would.

He’s trying to pull my purse off my shoulder –and somehow, I’m holding on and I start kicking at him as hard as I can. Then, we’re both on our feet and struggling. He finally wrenches my purse free and takes off back the way we came. I stand

there, stunned, for a second. But then I think, “There is over \$350 in that purse and he’s not going to get it.” And something tells me to yell –anything, to attract attention. So I sprint after him, yelling a string of obscenities and insults as loud as I can. Creative phrases I’ve never said before or since. He’s also running at top speed, he looks over his shoulder in disbelief for a second, and keeps on going.

At that moment, another car comes along and the kid panics and drops my purse and disappears into a parking garage. I pick up my purse and start walking back to my hotel.

Hotel security guards finally came out to see what the commotion was all about. They escorted me back to the hotel lobby. I had a few cuts on my face which cleaned up pretty well. I was basically OK. And I had my purse!

The big problem for me was that my mind kept replaying the scene –over and over. After a couple of weeks of this, I was driving myself insane. One day, I had an idea. I tried pretending that I was watching the scene through a video camera, and I zoomed out. Now the scene was small and far away. I couldn’t see the details clearly.

Now here’s the weird thing. Shortly after that, I read Anthony Robbins’ book, Unlimited Power, where he talks about manipulating our visual images in exactly this way. If we close our eyes, we can put the image in the middle of the blank field in front of us, or we can move it here, or here, put it wherever we want to. We can make the image bright or dim. Sharp or fuzzy. Zoom in or zoom out. We can turn the sound up or down as well. I found that I could zoom way out and make the sound so low that I couldn’t really hear or see what was going on. Every time the scene started playing again, that’s what I did, I zoomed out and turned down the sound. It didn’t take that long until the replaying of the scene stopped almost completely.

The title of this sermon comes from the title of one of the chapters in Robbins’ book. My experience of ridding myself of post-traumatic images was a powerful example of how I could “run my brain,” instead of my brain running me.

I used to have a tendency to focus on the negative things in my life, and I still get this way once in awhile. Mostly things that were beyond my control –other people, places and things. I now know some depression was involved. But a lot of it was caused by the way I thought – including my self-image, my attitudes, my expectations, my assumptions and my worries. When things weren’t going the

way I wanted them to, my habitual ways of thinking would lead me to focus on the negative.

Not that life isn't challenging sometimes. Sometimes, there's a lot of negative to focus on! On Christmas Eve of 1980, I was 23 and living in a cabin out in Kempton, out in Berks County, Pennsylvania, and working in Emmaus for Rodale Press. We were let out at noon for the holiday, and my car wouldn't start. My husband at the time came to try to fix it, and got it started, but then got angry over a misunderstanding and drove away, instead of following me home as we had planned. The car broke down again partway home, and I ended up spending a bitterly cold night in a cheap hotel nearby. All that was on TV were Christmas specials, and believe me, I was feeling sorry for myself. We didn't have a phone, and there was no way for my husband and me to communicate.

The next morning, I hitchhiked to a friend's house. It took almost an hour before anyone would stop. My perception was that people were giving me dirty looks for not being at home celebrating the holiday, like something was wrong with me. They all seemed to be in a hurry to get to their own celebrations. Eventually I made my way to my friend's house and my husband finally found me there later that afternoon. In my mind, I was a complete victim. It never occurred to me that there might be another way to see this experience.

After the mugging, though, I began awakening to the fact that I didn't have to be a victim of my circumstances –or of the misery that my own mind created.

In The Art of Happiness, psychiatrist Howard C. Cutler explains, "The systematic training of the mind –the cultivation of happiness, the genuine inner transformation by deliberately selecting and focusing on positive mental states and challenging negative mental states –is possible because of the very structure and function of the brain....The wiring of our brains is not static, not irrevocably fixed." Our brains are plastic, flexible.

Many spiritual traditions, including Buddhism, teach that genuine happiness can be achieved by transforming our outlook and our way of thinking. It's not a simple task. In the Art of Happiness, the Dalai Lama says, "...In order to achieve happiness, you need a variety of approaches and methods to deal with and overcome the varied and complex negative mental states...Change takes time...It isn't easy. It requires the repeated application of various techniques...It's a process of learning."

The Dalai Lama is speaking of Buddhist practices such as meditation. But the general approach he recommends can apply to non-Buddhists, as well. He continues, "...As time goes on, you can make positive changes. Every day as soon as you get up, you can develop a sincere positive motivation, thinking, "I will utilize this day in a more positive way. ...And then, at night before bed, check what you've done, asking yourself, "Did I utilize this day as I planned: if so you should rejoice. If things went wrong then...critique the day. Through methods such as this you can gradually strengthen the positive aspect of the mind."

"Through training," he says, "we can change; we can transform ourselves."

Sometimes when we have a new insight, it's almost as if we've put on new glasses, and we begin to see our world differently. Shortly after the St. Louis experience, more learning opportunities were put in front of me. I learned I was only a victim if I chose to see myself that way. I had choices in how I interpreted situations, what meaning I ascribed to them, what I focused on.

I began meeting people who were happy in spite of the fact that each one of them had very serious problems going on in their lives. I wanted what they had. From that point on, I became serious about following a spiritual path.

I used to worry almost constantly. With daily practice and vigilance, I managed to break that habit. Every time I caught myself worrying about bad things that might happen, I would remind myself that there is just as much chance that the future holds things more wonderful than I can imagine. And besides, my worries were almost always about people and situations over which I had no control, anyway. I learned to have faith that whatever happened, I would be able to handle it.

I used to have a lot of inflexible rules about how people should behave. And when they didn't meet my expectations, I became angry and resentful. I recently saw a poster that said, "Resentment is the poison you take hoping the other person will die." (Pause) I chose to let go of expectations and bring more serenity into my life.

I also had unrealistic expectations of myself, not surprisingly, and I had to learn to be gentle with myself. I have practiced, and continue to practice eliminating the notion that people and things "should" behave in certain ways, and focus on accepting reality. Choosing to accept reality rather than arguing with it just makes more sense when you think about it. A friend of mine told me he once spilled a whole box of screws on the floor, and was about to react with the usual expletives

and grumpiness, when he had another thought, which was, “I could just pick them up.”

What saved me from my negativity and self-imposed victim mentality was the practice of gratitude. When we’re feeling negative, we can get tunnel vision and can completely tune out all the good stuff –things like beauty and wonder and kindness.

That Christmas Eve over 30 years ago now, I was so focused on everything that didn’t go the way I had wanted it to, that my brain filtered out a lot of other information. With the dawning realization that the way in which I experienced my life had everything to do with my own attitudes, I began to review the experience. This time, I remembered things I had minimized because they didn’t fit into my victim story. My car broke down right in front of a motel. I had cash with me to pay for a room. What about the motel owner who invited me into his family’s private quarters for a glass of sherry and an extra blanket? What about the young couple who picked me up and drove me to my friend’s house? What about the way my friend graciously helped me to feel a part of her family’s celebration? The fact that I’d had a warm place to sleep at all...that I’d had a friend’s house to go at...that I even owned a car, for heaven’s sake. I had so much to be grateful for, and I had been blind to it all.

It’s not easy to effect significant and lasting change in our thinking. And few of us are going to be Anthony Robbinses, or his protégés, who change their thinking so radically that they can supposedly walk on hot coals. That’s not for me, anyway. My goal is to spend as much of each day as possible feeling at peace, with a mind that is relaxed and focused on the present.

For me, the positive changes in the way I think would not have been possible without taming my inner critic. You know what I mean. That critical voice that tells us we’re not good enough, that we’re stupid, all that negative stuff. I began paying more attention to what it was telling me. And I started to recognize that it was telling me lies. So I got mad at that voice and started telling it to shut up. But it didn’t shut up. It just got louder and meaner.

The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results... so clearly, attacking my inner critic with criticism wasn’t working. I think I understand why now. Because the inner critic is the voice of fear. And you can’t fight fear with criticism, because that only generates more fear. So, the next time my inner critic spoke up with some kind of putdown, I just

sat quietly. I didn't try to do anything. And then, I heard a voice inside me saying to the critic, in a very loving and gentle way, "It's OK. You can quiet down now." And the critic had nothing else to say. It was silent!

I had apparently given it what it had needed all along: unconditional love. Whether we believe unconditional love comes from God or from something larger than ourselves or from right here (hand over heart), an important spiritual goal is give ourselves unconditional love. That means being kind to ourselves, being patient with our shortcomings, being gentle with our fears. We can cultivate the presence of the unconditional loving aspect of ourselves. We may have to give it lines to say. Like when someone asks you to do something and it's going to stress you out, you can make your loving voice say, "What do you need to do to take care of yourself today?"

We are in charge of our lives. We can run our brains, rather than letting our brains run us. One last thing. As far as my running after that purse-snatcher: a lot of people will say I was stupid for doing that, and maybe they're right. But, I want to say this: even though I forgot all my martial arts moves, the reason I was able to react like that (snap) and keep going after having my head smashed into the concrete, to kick and to fight back, was because of the hours of martial arts training of not just my body, but my brain. Otherwise, I would have curled up into a fetal position on the sidewalk, feeling like a victim and moaning. And I would have been short 350 bucks.

May we learn to empower ourselves, to use our brains to help us reach our full potential as human beings, and to lead us to a place of peace, serenity and happiness. May it be so.