

Working With Feelings: Affect and the Practice of Everyday Life
St. John's College Quiet Room/St. John's College Chapel

Friday, March 12, 2010

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We are all Alexithymic

In the 1980's a researcher by the name of Dr Graham Taylor at the University of Toronto began doing leading edge work in the development and research of a construct called alexithymia. A-lexi-thymia: Literally meaning "no words for emotions". While contemporary research puts this psychological disorder as affecting 3 to 8% of the population, my experience as a theoretician and clinician leads me to believe that if you look closely at our society, these proportions are grossly underestimated, each of us, and the majority of people we know and the relatively normal people that show up for therapy for depression, anxiety, chronic anger, marital problems, etc all suffer from alexithymia. Obviously I am not using the same criteria as the formal questionnaire assessments, but I am also not pointing to something less extreme or to a mild version of alexithymia... I do mean full out, full blown alexithymia – a deficit in the perception, the experience, the expression, or the resolution of feelings and emotions.

How many people here think that emotions and feelings are an important part of life? If you said yes you are agreeing with your brain. Some 10% to 30% of your neural tissue is dedicated to processing emotions! This is an interesting way to think about what's important to being human. According to a psychiatrist named McLean, who published his triune brain concept circa 1950, we have three brains crammed into our skull, all operating simultaneously; something we inherited via our evolutionary past. There is the physical brain, which looks after basic body functions, our survival behaviours, and our physical dexterity and skills; the emotional brain, because of its non-verbal inter-personal communication capacities, allowed maternal bonding to occur, and groups to form and work and live together; and the intellectual brain gave us the ability to transcend our immediate moment of experience and think about the past and future, which in turn allowed reason and logic and refined language to develop!

So... three brains, each specialized for processing different aspects of reality. How do we treat and educate each of our brains and how does this affect the culture we create and live within. The Physical brain - Phys-ed and sports and physical fitness for all of school and for life if you are smart about it. Similarly we have schooling and training for the intellectual brain for 12+ years, then university, advanced degrees and in some areas, continuing education for entire careers. And the emotional brain – Nothing! No training what so ever. In fact worse than that – we actively suppress and abuse its proper functioning out of our kids, more obviously in the past, but the abuse or neglect is still around. How many people here have ever heard the words "you want to cry, I'll give you something to cry about!" or the milder version "I don't care how you feel, just do what I tell you to". That latter statement is the implicit and explicit foundation of our entire public educational system....

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No training at all for the emotional brain and yet some of the most complex challenges we will ever send our children out to engage in can only be solved by the healthy and proper functioning of the emotional brain. Every relationship we are involved in is a complex, dynamic dance and interplay of feelings and emotions, even if not a single emotional or feeling word is ever uttered. We engage with people based on our feelings for them. The quality of the relationship - the excitement or the hesitancy, the enjoyment or the dread - is all based on the emotional brain and its perception of that part of our reality. I go so far to say that feelings are the language of relationship and if you do not know how to experience and express that language – and that's not something we teach our kids - the chances of our relationships staying positive and healthy in the long term is on the slim side to say the least.

Speaking of the language of relationship, let's looks more closely at the language of our culture. The constructs and words "stress", "anxiety", and the "fight-flight response" – these are all cultural examples of how we are trained out of our emotions and taught to be alexithymic, in many ways, an unfortunate legacy of the behavioural psychology revolution that occurred in the 1950's. How many people here have heard of the fight flight response (LP). Pretty much everybody. How about the anger-fear response? No – well that's what the fight-flight response is really all about. We are biologically programmed to respond to threat with the emotions of either anger or fear: we can get angry and attack or we can get afraid and run. Either way the emotional response will release chemicals in our body which will allow us to either fight or run faster and longer and more intensely than if we did not have that emotional response. Prior to this presentation I reviewed the "fight-flight response" on Wikipedia. The words "emotion" and "fear" did not appear at all, and "angry" appeared once, ironically, as a descriptor of behavior. Cultural alexithymia...

Let's look at stress. My boss, my job, the snow storm. All stressful. Not really. My boss treated me nice, my job is going well, the snow storm is beautiful because I'm on holidays. The stressful part of anything stressful is the negative relationship and feelings I have with it. I feel overworked and underappreciated by my boss; my job feels meaningless and makes me feel insignificant; and the snow storm – What if the planes are grounded and we miss our vacation? AnyTHING we refer to as "stressful" distracts us from the fact that we are emotionally activated and usually, not processing it as an emotion. This is even clearer with "anxiety". The construct of anxiety allows us to point at the activation of our body – butterflies in my stomach, cold hands or feet, a fast heartrate, etc – and not acknowledge that we are emotionally activated. In 99.9% of the cases we are afraid of something, and that something is usually the feelings that will be, or are being, elicited by the situations we are "anxious" about. Some examples: Social anxiety is often a fear of feeling socially inappropriate or inadequate. Public speaking anxiety – fear of feeling scrutinized and judged and feeling insignificant or inadequate. Panic disorder – I am emotionally activated and have no idea when or how I got activated. I once worked with a

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woman who had generalized anxiety and a driving phobia and had been suffering from it for over three years. She had done all the desensitization treatments, the relaxation exercises, the breathing and cognitive restructuring, but in the end she had a very hard time driving. I spent one session teaching her the bio-emotive framework I had developed for therapy, essentially a taxonomy of emotions and feelings, and one session helping her feel and re-experience the helplessness she felt at the time of her near fatal car accident. She cried and cried and as she cried, vividly remembered the music on the radio, the sounds of screeching tires, and the look of the other driver's eyes, as they realized they could not stop in time. She talked about and expressed the feelings of helplessness and insignificance she felt in those moments of the accident, something she had never done before. And the next week when I came to see her, 80% of her generalized anxiety was gone, she was sleeping through the night for the first time in three years, and she had started driving her car and not having panic attacks as she drove. As simple shift from being alexithymic, to feeling, experiencing, and expressing her feelings and emotions. As simple shift from dysfunction to health; from acting her life, to living and feeling her life. Yes, we have all been trained to be alexithymic, but we don't have to stay that way.

I believe that the developmental state of psychology is presently at the same state chemistry was in when it was still alchemy: A bunch of smart people making up stories about the mysteries of the material universe, but completely missing an understanding of the fundamental laws and building blocks of matter - More magic and ritual than science. The tide did not really turn until the periodic table was discovered. I think a similar development will occur in psychology and in the psychological well-being of our culture, when we discover the fundamental laws and components of the emotional system and integrate it into our parenting practices and public school system. In the mean time, I would suggest you start looking at our culture through the lens of alexithymia and see if you can express how you feel about what you see.

Thank you

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