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The Wavy Seas of My Brain

Risa Denenberg · Monday, July 12th, 2021

I woke this morning thinking that my thoughts are worth writing down. At least to keep them from drowning in the wavy seas of my brain's currents. To pinpoint where my brimful (brain-full) of thoughts is currently stationed. And where they are heading. And, if my brain's power is waning—as I know it is—will I be able to see evidence of its diminishment in the language of my own writing?

In the eighties, a group of elderly nuns agreed to donate their postmortem brains for the study of Alzheimer's dementia. Here was a group of women living together into old age with very similar lifestyles and environmental factors. This made them a great cohort to study. Not only that, the researchers had access to these women's autobiographical essays, written in young adulthood, just prior to taking their vows. Essays that ranged from lyrical and intellectually dense to those that were unimaginative and written with the most basic language skills. It has been theorized that better language skills in youth are protective of dementia in later life. And though I always seem to hear about the brilliant writer or scientist who succumbs to dementia, apparently a number of studies bear this out. And by the by, I did exceptionally well on my English SATs. Math, not so much.

These days, I think a lot about my own brain. I was thinking about it about it while reading Elizabeth Kolbert's article in a recent *New Yorker*, where I learned that “clean energy transition is not possible without taking billions of tons of metal from the planet.” And by the planet, she means dredging the ocean depths—another huge crap-shoot for the future of our planet. Kolbert is the author of *The Sixth Extinction*, a retelling of the first five planetary extinctions, and a chilling prediction of the next one—the one humans are in the process of causing.

I wonder if any of my thoughts are valuable or just remnants of the narrow gaze my human self allows me. I wonder if I know anything deeply enough to have the strong opinions that I seem to have. I want the earth to be healthy again, for people to want to become what I think of as enlightened and unselfish. But I am neither savvy nor selfless enough to point a finger. I know the drill: do what you can, don't expect to live to see the fruits of your labors. But what does it mean to want to survive on what seems to be an unsurvivable moment for this planet.

My thinking brain has changed considerably from what it was in high school. At least it seems so. Then, I would have said if you study a narrow subject to the ends of what is possible to know about it, you will be graced with an encyclopedic grasp of all things. In other words, an expert is by nature a genius, and knowledge is a line stretching out to infinity in a curved universe. I learned

over time how untrue that thought was. I didn't realize then that medicine would eventually focus on isolated body parts to such an absurd degree that it is often difficult for a medical specialist to see a whole person. I'm guessing you would probably agree.

I was so much smarter in my teens—this is not meant as back-looking sentimentality—I was indeed smarter. But less wise. That's axiomatic I suppose, but facing it this morning, I decided that my thoughts are probably worth writing down. More cogently, I should write them down if I want to have the benefits of written memory for myself. And of course, there is posterity to consider.

So I updated the story of my life's accumulations—a list of possessions—and sent a copy to my son. I want him to know how to find things I'll inevitably leave behind—bank records, car title, passwords, and so forth. This presumes I'll be living in this house when I die. I like the thought of never having to move again. But I don't believe it will turn out that way. It hardly ever does.

It's also axiomatic that to clean something is to make another thing dirty. Laws of physics, which I only pretend to grasp, bear weight here. No one can really explain what time is, other than its relative, space. There is no airy cloud storing written history/garbage without fossil fuels. There is no transportation without excavating the earth. And apparently, there are no more smartphones without dredging the ocean floor for metals, which would seem simply to be another way to postpone the inevitable. Why didn't I know this before today? And, speaking of heat waves and forest fires in my neck of the woods, I'm already seeing the effects of climate change.

I've been trying fruitlessly to understand how brains work—and the experts are no help here. And while I can see and feel the changes of aging in my body, I don't pretend to know what is going in my brain as it ages. My fervent hope is not for longevity, but that death comes while my brain is still working. Of course, the stakes for a future for my progenies and for the planet, are higher than my personal brain function, my small but precious-to-me life.

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