

*“Welcome to Las Vegas! A faith-based community!” The  
bicameral mind and  
The movie playing in our head!*

(I need to begin with a confession. I haven't been entirely successful in banishing the preacher inside me but I've done my best. I apologize in advance for those moments when exhortation swamps analysis).

The cartoon -- a flashing high-way sign with the message, "Welcome to Las Vegas! A faith-based community!" -- expresses the fact that we all live in some sort of "faith" community. But I'm using the word "faith" in a very broad non-religious sense -- to indicate the picture we have of life and the world that we take for granted. I've used the Las Vegas cartoon as a point of entry into the subject because Las Vegas is a place of obvious wishful-thinking with its places of worship, seductive liturgies and opportunities for both pleasure and penitence. Las Vegas -- a faith-based community -- can be best understood by looking at some of the literature on the bicameral mind, the divided brain. Neuro-science is a rich field of enquiry with many factions and divisions. It seems that for every affirmation there's a contradiction when it comes to the issue of consciousness. But the great thing is that you don't have to believe literally in this stuff for it to be illuminating and true at some level. It might not work as science but it does as metaphor. We are all part of a faith-based community.

The central image I want to focus on is the feeling or fact that there's a movie going on in our heads, which isn't necessarily true but is, nevertheless, necessary for our being in the world. It's not that we're passive moviegoers. We interact with it. It can change yet we're not in control of it. One clue about the movie in your head can come from asking yourself "Am I an Arcadian or a Utopian?" Are you an Arcadian -- looking to an idealized past (wishing you were 30 again and Eisenhower were president) or are you a Utopian -- looking to an idealized future, where the internet makes us all friends in one happy global family -- all of us making money and buying stuff?

This is a good time of year to think about the movies going on inside our heads, those stories we tell each other when we're afraid of the dark! In fact, this time of year is like one big movie festival. There's the Christmas movie, the Hanukkah movie, the Winter Solstice movie, the Kwanza movie, and the New Atheists' Movie. Evidently in Times Square there's a new Atheist ad? "Keep the Merry!" and "Dump the Myth!" But if the cartoon is onto something, you can't get rid of myth. You can exchange

it but you can't dump it. We're all caught up in some faith-based community making assumptions about life, about what's real and what isn't.

There are also the minor movies in our heads we do have some control over, depending on our education and experiences – whatever it is in our background that enables us to connect the dots of experience and forge (note the double meaning) them into some kind of narrative or story. For example, I was given recently a CD gift set of Mahler's Ninth Symphony. But it wasn't any old recording. There was a date (1938) and a place (Vienna) and a conductor (Bruno Walter). Now connect the dots of these four facts and make a story – a horrendous when you remember what Adolf Hitler was up to at the time.

Or, think about the battling mythologies going on in Congress at the moment! Our politics is a cacophonous mêlée of conflicting movie plots. Whose vision of the world rings more true to you (I won't mention any names!)? Does America have a "manifest destiny"? Are we truly "exceptional" and, if so, what way? The movie studios of Congress are busy churning out movies about health care, foreign policy, entitlement reform, the role of government.

What else competes with the movie in our head? There are mighty facts of the universe brought to us by modern science, which give shape to the way we view the world. Last April – (reported last month) there was the biggest cosmic explosion ever witnessed -- 3.7 billion light years away. It took that long to reach us. How does that information affect the movie going on inside your head? Bill Bryson begins his *Short*

*History of Nearly Everything*:

"Welcome. And congratulations. I am delighted that you could make it . . . For you to be here now trillions of drifting atoms had somehow to assemble in an intricate and curiously obliging manner to create you . . . For the next many years these tiny particles will uncomplainingly engage in all the billions of deft, co-operative efforts necessary to keep you in tact and let you experience the supremely agreeable but generally under-appreciated state known as life . . . Being you is not a gratifying experience at the atomic level . . . Yet, somehow for the period of your existence they will answer to a single rigid impulse: to keep you you. The bad news is that the atoms are fickle and their time of devotion is fleeting . . . Even a long human life adds up to only about 650,000 hours. And

when that modest milestone flashes into view, for reasons unknown your atoms will close you down, and silently disassemble and go off to be other things. And that's it for you."

Is that part of the movie going on in your head?

Think of the inevitable heat death of the universe 150 billion years from now and Woody Allen's hilarious treatment of it in his movie *Annie Hall*. Given the fact that the world is going to end Alvy (who's nine) sees *no* point doing his homework!

Doctor in Brooklyn: Why are you depressed, Alvy?

Alvy's Mom: Tell Dr. Flicker.

Alvy's Mom: It's something he read.

Doctor in Brooklyn: Something he read, huh?

Alvy at 9: [*his head still down*] The universe is expanding.

Doctor in Brooklyn: The universe is expanding?

Alvy at 9: Well, the universe is everything, and if it's expanding, someday it will break apart and that would be the end of everything!

Alvy's Mom: What is that your business?

[*she turns back to the doctor*]

Alvy's Mom: He stopped doing his homework!

Alvy at 9: What's the point?

Alvy's Mom: What has the universe got to do with it? You're here in Brooklyn! Brooklyn is not expanding!

Doctor in Brooklyn: It won't be expanding for billions of years yet, Alvy. And

we've gotta try to enjoy ourselves while we're here!

Alvy Singer: [*addressing the camera*] There's an old joke - um... two elderly women are at a Catskill mountain resort, and one of 'em says, "Boy, the food at this place is really terrible." The other one says, "Yeah, I know; and such small portions." Well, that's essentially how I feel about life - full of loneliness, and misery, and suffering, and unhappiness, and it's all over much too quickly."

Allen's pessimism runs deep. Here's his summary of the movie going on in his head: "I don't want to achieve immortality through my work; I want to achieve immortality by not dying. I don't want to live on in the hearts of my countrymen; I want to live on in my apartment."

Politics, cosmology, culture – all provide the story-line and dialogue for our movie. The trouble is the cultural movie we're all in tends to assume a *mechanistic* view of the universe. We tend to take it for granted that truth becomes something proved by argument. What current thinking about the relationship between the brain and the mind has brought to the fore is the importance of another, (and to me) ultimately more powerful revealer of truth, metaphor.

Iain McGilchrist – a psychiatrist and teacher of literature -- laments the fact that a mechanistic view of the universe has come to dominate the movie going on in our heads. He tells us: "We need metaphor and *mythos* in order to understand the world. Such myths and metaphors are not dispensable luxuries or 'optional extras', still less the means of obfuscation: they are fundamental and essential to the process. When we are not given anything better, we revert to the metaphor or myth of the machine. But we cannot . . . get far in understanding the world, or in deriving values that will help us live well in it, by likening it to the bike in the garage."<sup>iii</sup> The myth of the machine leads to a smallness of vision. Samuel Taylor Coleridge confessed: "I can at times feel strongly the beauties you describe in themselves . . . but more frequently *all things* appear little . . . the universe itself – what but an immense heap of *little things*?" "I can contemplate nothing but parts." He could also write about this love of "the Great" "the Whole". But is the Universe but a mass of *little things*? Is the movie in your head only something you've cobbled together from the rag and bone shop of your necessarily limited experience?

McGilchrist's book, *The Master and his Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*, is written from the perspectives of philosophy, neurology and neuropsychology. The title is taken from a short story by Nietzsche. The Master is

betrayed by his emissary who comes to think he should be master. When it comes to the brain, the claim is that the Right has been betrayed by the Left. The current literature and work on the divided brain, the bi-cameral mind has a lot to teach us. McGilchrist's thesis is that the hemispheres have complementary but conflicting tasks to fulfill, and need to maintain a high degree and mutual ignorance. At the same time they need to co-operate! The entrenched prejudice is that the Left is superior to the Right. The RIGHT hemisphere adds a bit of color to life, it's the LEFT that does the *serious* business.

We're not talking about two different ways of *thinking about* the world but two different ways of *being in* the world. And note, the right hemisphere is longer, wider, and heavier than the left. There's a clear asymmetry relating to language (favoring the left) – so, it's WORDS in the Left and PICTURES in the right? But be warned – “every identifiable human activity is actually served at some level by both hemispheres.” Yet, at the same time, there seems to be striking differences in the information-processing abilities. McGilchrist writes, “My thesis is that for us as human beings there are two fundamentally opposed realities, two different modes of experience; that each is of ultimate importance in bringing about a recognizably human world; and that their difference is rooted in the bihemispheric structure of the brain. It follows that the hemispheres need to cooperate, but I believe they are in fact involved in a sort of power struggle, and that this explains many aspects of contemporary Western culture.”

One of the problems, McGilchrist warns us is “a misplaced need for certainty.” Giving up our need for certainty? Can we do it? There's an old axiom: *surfaces can be seen but depths must be interpreted.* “The left hemisphere likes things that are man-made. Things we make are also more certain: we know them inside out, because we put them together. They are not, like living things, constantly changing and moving, beyond our *grasp.*” The LEFT hemisphere “needs certainty and needs to be right.” The RIGHT “makes it possible to hold several ambiguous possibilities in suspension together without premature closure on one outcome.” Again, “Certainty is . . . related to narrowness, as though the more certain we become of something the less we see.”

Gilchrist even writes of The RIGHT'S inclination towards melancholy – related to it's being more in touch with and concerned for others. John Donne was right brained when he wrote, "No man is an island." "The more we are aware of and empathetically connected to whatever it is that exists apart from ourselves, the more we are likely to suffer." There's a story about the composer Hector Berlioz. He sobbed at musical performance – a sympathetic onlooker remarked: 'You seem to greatly affected, monsieur. Had you not better retire for a while?' Berlioz snapped back: "Are you under the impression that I am here to enjoy myself?"

This echoes Jonathan Haidt's (in *The Righteous Mind*) point that we lead with the emotions – the primacy of affect.<sup>liii</sup> "The disposition towards the world comes first: any cognitions are subsequent to and consequent on that disposition." The model we choose to use to understand something determines what we find. "If we assume a purely mechanical universe and take the machine as our model, we will uncover the view that – surprise, surprise – the body, and the brain with it, is a machine. To a man with a hammer everything begins to look like a nail." "The metaphor we choose governs what we see."

The Greek word – *meta pherein* – to carry across a gap. "The point of a metaphor is to bring together the whole of one thing with the whole of another, so that each is looked at in a different light." The LEFT, on the other hand, sees metaphor as a lie – "perfect cheats" (John Locke) a distracting ornament – "in the interests of certainty the left prefers single meanings." But we can't get away from the ambiguous, cryptic and open-endedness of being human. We are many layered, contradictory and incomplete beings. This isn't a cop out. This doesn't mean we shouldn't try as long as we acknowledge the limits of human understanding.

Which brings me back to the movie inside our head and how what we pay attention to enacts our relationship with the world. Attention is not just another 'function' of the brain. "The kind of attention we bring to bear on the world changes the nature of the world we attend to . . . Attention changes *what* kind of a thing comes into

being for us: in that way it changes the world . . . And yet nothing is *objectively* has changed." Take for example the way we might talk of a mountain. "A mountain that is a landmark to a navigator, a source of wealth to a prospector, a many-textured form to a painter, or to another a dwelling place of the gods, is changed by the attention given to it. There no 'real' mountain which can be distinguished from these, no one way of thinking which reveals the true mountain."

McGilchrist claims that, "How we see the world alters not just others, but who *we* are. We need to be careful what we spend our time attending to, and in what way . . . What we attend to, and how we attend to it, changes it and changes us." Watch out! Bad stories are bad for you. We know that "Old people primed with negative stereotypes of ageing can even give up with will to live."

When it comes to making movies ATTENTION isn't enough. INTENTION is important. "The focused but detached attention of the surgeon, with intent to care, may easily mimic the focused but detached attention of the torturer, with intent to control; only the knowledge of *intention* changes the way we understand the act." Think of the chilling attention of the "experts" who organized the concentration camps in the Holocaust. Fritz Stangl was brilliantly efficient.

When science brings "a focused but utterly detached attention to bear, it is merely exercising another human faculty, that of standing back from something and seeing it in this detached, in some important sense, denatured way. *There is no reason to see that particular way as privileged*, except that it enables us to do certain things more easily, to use things, to have power over things – the preoccupation of the left hemisphere." As if abstracted language and alienating vision is the proper and only approach to truth. Creativity – making movies? – is at the heart of being human – a means of helping us negotiate the craziness and wonder of the world, a way of asserting significance in the face of the immensity of the universe.



Many adolescents, let alone adults, do not have the skill, which only creativity can bring, of being able to negotiate the great *absence* at the heart of the psyche. And, why have a benign view of the world anyway? Why choose to be benign? For example, what comes to mind when you hear, "Twinkle, twinkle little star"? Did you ever sing it? What did you think about when you sang it? Do you remember how it made you feel? Philosopher Martha Nussbaum tells the story of one of her students who responded to the question in this way. He saw a sky beautifully blazing with stars and bands of bright color and the sight made him look in a new way at his dog, a cocker spaniel. "I used to look into the dog's eyes and wonder what the dog was really thinking and feeling. Was my dog ever sad? It pleased me to think about my dog and the way he experienced the world. I looked him in the eyes and knew that he loved me and was capable of feeling pleasure and pain. It then made me think tenderly about my mom and dad and other children I knew."<sup>[111]</sup>

Why would "Twinkle, twinkle little star" make someone think that the starry sky was benevolent and not malevolent? Why think of your dog as loving and good rather than devilish and cruel? Who cares whether some dog is happy or sad? There are plenty of

people who take pleasure in an animal's pain. Martha Nussbaum assures us that something important is going on. Attention has consequences.

"The strange fact is that the nursery rhyme itself, like other rhymes, nourished a tender humanity within us and stirs up in us the prospect of friendship. It doesn't make us think paranoid thoughts of a hateful being in the sky who's out to get us. It tells the child think of a star like a diamond rather than as a missile of destruction and also not like a machine good only for production and consumption. The nursery rhyme nourishes a generous construction of the seen."

*A generous construction of the seen* – an imaginative charity – is the antidote to the idiocy of a totally private world of the isolated self. Remember, we do not so much experience the world as experience our *representation* of the world. The world is no longer 'present' but 're-presented', a virtual world, a copy that exists in conceptual form in the mind. It's a movie!

And please note that I'm not advocating "belief" as against unbelief! I am, however, asserting that we are all believers one way or another! "Unbeliever" Nicholas Humphrey in *Soul Dust* asserts that the movie in our head is necessary but an illusion. He wonders if we need a grandiose view of our own nature to survive? A necessary illusion – if so, evolution has done its work – a trick played by the "illusionist" in our genes to make us better at surviving. Humphrey, unlike McGilchrist, believes that there's nothing beyond materialism but it is "useful" for us to believe so. All we can do is go to the movies!<sup>[iv]</sup>

How to sum up and bring some of this together? The conversation needs to be re-framed by going back to a richer understanding of language that respects facts but acknowledges that narrative and story-telling is required to make sense of the facts. We need stories to connect the dots. Remember my story of a friend of mine who gave me a new CD issue of an old recording of Mahler's Ninth Symphony. I added three other "facts" to this gift – the year, 1938; the place, Vienna; the conductor, Bruno Walter – a story (not a pretty one) emerges which ties all these facts together in the context of a terrible war and the persecution and attempted extinction of a whole people. There's no such thing as an isolated "fact". You need to connect the dots.

We confuse "fact" with "truth" – the result is a comforting shrinkage in understanding. What we think we understand we can control. There are those who think that the relationship between the brain and consciousness is *insoluble*. Colin McGinn believes it's like trying to get "numbers from biscuits, or ethics from rhubarb." It's that kind of challenge. But this doesn't mean we cannot do anything. We can, at least, restore the power of metaphor in our understanding of truth. <sup>lv</sup>

The intellectual challenge is expressed by Jared Lanier from Silicon Valley. In his book *You Are Not A Gadget*, he makes the simple point that *information under-represents reality*. We live in a data junk yard and we need a new kind of "faith-based" community, which, in a never-ending conversation, helps us enlarge our horizons, discern the facts and connect the dots. We need both science and art: both, at their best, increase our tolerance for ambiguity and our appreciation of wonder.

So "Welcome to Las Vegas!"

We can begin to give up our commitment to smallness by noticing that there are others on the journey. The human quest isn't a private trip. It involves others and, in the end it comes down to the concrete and personal. Viktor Frankl, in his account of his concentration camp experiences, speaks of the "intensification of inner life" that came over the prisoners, so that sunsets, remembered lines of verse, and even the most

ordinary actions of the past (taking a bus answering the telephone, turning on the lights) become filled with beauty and longing. And scientist Timothy McDermott makes is personal when he writes, "I had an aunt called Nellie who lived with my family from the age of thirty, when she was almost totally disabled by a stroke, to her death at the age of eighty-nine. No picture of the universe is adequate, theistic or atheistic, which doesn't give Nellie her place at its significant centre."<sup>[vii]</sup>

Michel de Montaigne, in the sixteenth century, wrote of his speaking with Brazilian Indians in Rouen. He was struck how they spoke of men as halves of one another, wondering at the sight of rich Frenchmen gorging themselves while their 'other halves' starved on their doorstep.

A coda: McGilchrist makes much of music. He quotes Nietzsche: "Compared with music all communication by words is shameless; words dilute and brutalize; words depersonalize; words make the uncommon common." (Sorry for all these words!) Steven Pinker on the other hand tells us that music is as meaningless and self-indulgent as pornography or fatty food! I wonder what he thinks of the movies?

*Welcome to the Chit Chat Club in San Francisco! A faith-based community!*

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<sup>[i]</sup> One doorway into this mystery is the current literature and work on the divided brain, the bi-cameral mind. See McGilchrist, Iain, *The Master and his Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*, Yale, 2009.

<sup>[ii]</sup> See Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*, New York: Pantheon, 2012.

<sup>[iii]</sup> Paraphrase from Martha Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1995, pp. 38-39

<sup>[iv]</sup> See also Michael Trimble's *The Soul in the Brain: The Cerebral Basis of Language, Art and Belief* (2007) and Julian Jaynes's *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*, 1976.

<sup>[v]</sup> Joseph Campbell puts the modern dilemma in these terms: "Half the people in the world think that the metaphors of their religious traditions are facts. And the other half contends that they are not facts at all. As a result we have people who consider themselves believers because they accept metaphors as facts, and we have others who classify themselves as atheists because they think religious metaphors are lies."

<sup>[vi]</sup> Timothy McDermott's review of Steve Jones, *The Serpent's Promise: The Bible Retold as Science*, in the TLS August 9, 2013, p. 21.

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