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Healing the Broken Brain (Science and the Spirit)

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Vicki Griffin

Katrina. How could we forget the horrific images of the aftermath of one of the most devastating hurricanes to hit American shores? The thriving metropolis of New Orleans was reduced to a gutted city flooded by broken levies and numberless shattered lives.

Romans 1:20 tells us that God uses the things that we can see to help us understand the things we cannot see. They are visual aids for teaching us important truths. This principle is illustrated in Proverbs 25:28: “Like a city whose walls are broken down is a man who lacks self-control” (NIV).

The picture is one of a city with two major problems: inner desolation and overall defenselessness. It possesses few inner resources and no power to protect itself. Such a city is subject to looting by vandals, vagrants, and the violent. It has lost its economy, community, synchrony, and vitality.

The sole driving force of the broken city is survival. As a result, it has

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lost the power to diversify, prosper, and progress. It is a city in need of renewal, restoration, and repair. No sector is unaffected; no quarter is without need of serious attention.

Such a city is a graphic caricature of a brain (and a life) that has been ravaged by stress, vandalized by sin, overcome by bad habits and addictions, flooded by negative thinking and depression, and overwhelmed by the storms of life. Such a brain is in survival mode, having lost self-control. It is in need of renewal, restoration, and repair.

Here we see a picture of humankind whose image is far removed from God’s original plan: “Man was originally endowed with noble powers and a well-balanced mind.”¹ The Bible is clear that hereditary tendencies, environmental influences, and our own poor choices create hurricane-force damage—damage that requires as complete a plan for recovery and renewal as any storm-struck city. “Like fish caught in a treacherous net and birds trapped in

a snare, so the sons of men are ensnared at an evil time when it suddenly falls on them” (Eccl. 9:12, NASB).

God uses the graphic visual aid of a ravaged city to describe a deeper human problem—the broken brain—and He has the most complete recovery plan available. He has promised to redirect the desires and renew the thinking of anyone who desires a saving relationship with Him.

“If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new” (2 Cor. 5:17, NKJV). New life, new desires, and new motives spring from the heart that has been surrendered to Christ. This is the starting place for true and lasting growth—growth that will continue as long as life shall last.

God has promised that He will restore hope, courage, perseverance, healing, and joy to anyone who has suffered a life of brokenness (Rom. 15:13). And how does this process happen? Because of God’s great love for humanity, He has engineered us for growth and restoration, so that day by day, as we follow His plan, the original mind—well-balanced, noble, and “sound”—can be achieved (2 Tim. 1:7).

The ability of the brain to respond to new choices, learn, grow, and adapt is referred to as experience-based plasticity. As we make

new decisions; follow new and positive lifestyle choices; think, perceive, and respond in new ways; changes take place in the structure, function, and even genetic expression of the brain.

Ellen White speaks hope as she proclaims our ability even to overcome hereditary leanings: “Christ has given His Spirit as a divine power to overcome all hereditary and cultivated tendencies to evil, and to impress His own character upon His church.”²

Today, science is echoing the words of Inspiration. Noted neuropsychiatrist and author, John Ratey, M.D., notes: “We must remember that genetics is not destiny. . . . Genes set boundaries for human behavior, but within these boundaries there is immense room for variation determined by experience, personal choice, and even chance.

“The point to remember is that genes can be active or inactive and that everything we do affects the activity of our genes. [For example], adult learning increases the activation of genes that turn on the production of proteins in the brain needed to solidify memory.”³

This is not to say that there is not a place for various types of medical intervention or counseling. For instance, individuals suffering from bipolar disorder must be maintained with medication. God has many ways to help His children, and we

must respect those who utilize those choices and appreciate the ways God intervenes in lives.

But a loving God has designed the human brain—the seat of all action—for continual progress and growth, a truth that science is just beginning to understand: “The brain has a tremendous ability to compensate and rewire with practice. . . . Our brains are wonderfully plastic [moldable] throughout adulthood. Brain structure is not predetermined and fixed. We can alter the ongoing development of our brains and thus our capabilities. . . .

“The human brain’s amazing plasticity enables it to continually rewire and learn—not just through academic study, but through experience, thought, action, and emotion. As with our muscles, we can strengthen our neural pathways with brain exercise. Or we can let them wither. The principle is the same: Use it or lose it! Although the brain’s flexibility may decrease with age, it remains plastic throughout life, restructuring itself according to what it learns.”⁴

Our minds enlarge or diminish in proportion to what we focus on. As a man thinks in his heart, the Scripture says, “so is he” (Prov. 23:7). This amazing principle of growth is recognized by Ellen White: “An understanding of the revealed will of God enlarges the mind, expands, elevates, and endows it with new vigor, by

bringing its faculties into contact with stupendous truth. No study is better suited to give energy to the mind, to strengthen the intellect, than the study of the word of God. No other book is so potent in elevating the thoughts, in giving vigor to the faculties, as is the Bible, which contains the most ennobling truths. If God’s word were studied as it should be, we would see breadth of mind, stability of purpose, nobility of character, such as is rarely seen in these times.”⁵

Rebuilding a broken city requires a plan; so does rebuilding a broken brain. Long-term success is achieved by working hard and working smart. The power and the plan both come from God, and He will strengthen you to do your part.

However, for permanent success we must learn to respect the process of change and determine to engage in the battle over the long haul. Notice: “Character is not obtained by amassing wealth, or by gaining worldly honor. Character is not obtained by trying to have others fight the battle of life for us. It must be sought, worked for, fought for; and it requires a purpose, a will, a determination.”⁶

Ellen White talks about how some have harder battles with self to fight than others—they may feel their need more keenly and mistakes more acutely than others—but with perseverance and prayer, success is

within the reach of all. Dr. John Ratey observes: “Genes and the environment work together to shape our brains, and we can manage them both if we want to. It may be harder for people with certain genes or surroundings, but ‘harder’ is a long way from predetermination.”⁷

God will rebuild your life one day at a time by unfolding His plan for living free. That plan includes tools for restoring the entire brain, not just overcoming one bad habit. His plan begins with creating an internal environment of hope, optimism, and thankfulness—a mindset that helps you get up, instead of give up, when you make a mistake.

Just as important is creating an external environment that draws you into making positive choices. That can include simple changes such as keeping your walking shoes by the door rather than in the closet, or replacing that bowl of candy on the table with fresh fruit. These small changes redirect your brain toward the formation of new, positive habits.

But it doesn’t stop there. Rebuilding continues by creating a lifestyle that promotes physical and mental health such as healthful food choices, daily exercise, and plenty of rest. These activities will throttle down

stress and improve your mood—two important safeguards against addiction triggers.

Finally, creating a connection with others and with God provides support and practical resources for learning new skills for living, thinking, and relating to others. Helping others and taking an interest in their lives are the best ways to keep our own problems in perspective. And much practical and spiritual guidance are found in the study of God’s Word.

God has provided other valuable tools such as counseling and medical intervention, both of which may yield great benefit for some on their journey to health and wholeness.

You are valuable, unique, and special. God has a plan for your life. The process of rebuilding, whether a city or a brain, may seem daunting, but with the right tools and the power of God, restoration is sure.

REFERENCES

- ¹ *Steps to Christ*, p. 17.
- ² *The Faith I Live By*, p. 55.
- ³ John Ratey, *User’s Guide to the Brain* (New York: Vintage Books, 2002), p. 32.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 21, 47, 35, 36.
- ⁵ *Signs of the Times* (January 30, 1893).
- ⁶ *Review and Herald* (December 21, 1886), p. 101.
- ⁷ John Ratey, *op cit.*, p. 34.

