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SPIRITUALITY, HEALTH, AND HAPPINESS IN
MINISTRY: HOW NEURO-SCIENTIFIC DATA
CONFIRM THIS WILL ONLY HAPPEN
WITH COMMITMENT AND
CROSS-BEARING

Introduction

These are not easy times to be pastors! Respect for the office has been in marked decline for the past decades. This is evidenced by hard data provided by the Southern Baptist Convention earlier in this decade. Over 760 pastors were reportedly fired in 2000, a figure which was merely part of a fifteen-year pattern in the Convention.¹ David Goetz in his article, "Forced Out," indicates that nearly one-fourth of all clergy from various denominations surveyed had been fired at least once!² Kevin Leicht, director of The Institute for Inequality Studies, The University of Iowa, concludes that the ministers' firing rate is higher than the national labor force, higher than even the rate of dismissal among football coaches in the NFL.³

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¹Larry Witham, *Who Shall Lead Them? The Future of Ministry in America* (London: Oxford University Press, 2005), 90.

²See David L. Goetz, "Forced Out," *Leadership: A Practical Journal for Church Leaders* 17 (Winter 1996): 40-49.

³Austin Cline, *Turnover in the Clergy: Why Don't Clergy Keep Their Jobs?* [newsletter online] (July 6, 2006, accessed 7 December 2006); available from <http://atheism.about.com>; Internet. Also see Jackson W. Carroll, "Protestant Pastoral Ministry at the Beginning of the New Millennium" (paper presented at the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion and Religious Research Association, Houston, TX, October 18, 2001).

G. Lloyd Rediger in *Clergy Killers* calls this the “clergy killer phenomenon.”⁴ Ministry in America today is not a secure job.

It would be interesting to observe if only African-Americans had been polled. Would the statistics be different? Would there be higher satisfaction levels? These data support the writer’s perceptions when attending clergy gatherings, no matter what the denominational or ethnic composition of the group. There is a lot of complaining and unhappiness among pastors. And where there is not much happiness, there is not much health. Interestingly, a more recent survey conducted by the National Opinion Research Center in Chicago for a Duke University Pulpit & Pew research project seems to correct this perception of low clergy morale. The study reveals that seven in ten clergy report never having considered leaving the ministry.⁵

At first glance, these numbers look better. But when one notes that nearly one-third of the clergy surveyed have considered leaving the ministry, the happiness of American pastors does not look so good. Indeed, the survey also indicates that nearly one in five congregations endure major conflict, with leaders or members leaving the church. There are many unhappy pastors in America—too much stress for the important job the Church expects its leaders to do.

Why such unhappiness and what can be done about it? There are two distinct, though related factors with unhappiness with the pastoral vocation—the breakdown of authority (the laity’s loss of confidence in leadership) and the almost wholesale, uncritical adoption by most mainline

⁴G. Lloyd Rediger, *Clergy Killers: Guidance for Pastors and Congregations under Attack* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 2.

⁵John Dart, “Survey: Protestant Pastors Happy, Content,” *The Christian Century* 119, no. 7 (March 27, 2002): 14.

churches of a therapeutic vision of reality. But new, cutting-edge data concerning research on the human brain coupled with what traditional theology has always taught regarding the Christian life as a joyous cross-bearing provide fresh insights to cope with our anxieties.

How We Got Into Our Present Predicament

There is no question that pastors' authority has been eroding significantly since the 1950s. Even if we grant the supposition that respect for authority has not eroded as much in the African-American Church as in predominantly white main-line denominations, we can all share horror stories of difficult congregations having "booted" a colleague. Why? In African-American circles, an educated laity expects more from their pastors today than before the Civil Rights Movement; the post-World War II G.I. Bill opened more opportunities. An educated laity demands an educated clergy.⁶

This is just part of the picture. Our post-1960s social ethos is all about individual needs, a function of the ego-centric Narcissism permeating contemporary American society, has made personal satisfaction the standard by which all things are judged. If one's needs are not met, the relationship has to end.⁷ Cable television and the comput-

⁶C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 129-130.

⁷For an analysis of the impact of Narcissism on contemporary American life, see the writer's *Blessed Are the Cynical: How Original Sin Can Make America a Better Place* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2003); also Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1979); and Cornel West, *Race Matters*, 2d ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 2002).

er ethos have taught us that we "deserve" to keep all the options alive. Loyalty is boring. Besides, CEO management policies have taught us that loyalty is bad business, not good for your career. The rising divorce rates and larger number of congregations terminating the service of their clergy make perfect, insidious sense in such a climate.

Another related factor is the increasingly critical interactions parishioners have with Protestant clergy that emerges as a consequence of the prevalent optimistic view of human nature which has permeated contemporary American society at least since World War II. Its endorsement has been an exposure to German Enlightenment modes of thinking (especially Relativism) to which more and more Americans have been introduced, resulting from the larger percentage of college graduates in the population as a whole. This worldview with which our cultural elites and media gurus have been trained in these quality schools now infuses all segments of society through the media's saturation with such thinking. Alongside, we can identify the impact on American life of a therapeutic view of reality (a reliance on the categories of psychology in order to understand all segments of everyday life). In America, this worldview is a result of Carl Jung's influence and his optimistic view of human capabilities, which has assumed hopefulness about the goodness of human beings.⁸

At any rate, this optimism about what people are capable of accomplishing, when not impeded by their "issues," leads many parishioners to have high expectations of their clergy. This entails a lot more disappointment about today's

⁸For a similar assessment of Jung's optimism and his impact, see Calvin Hall and Gardner Lindzey, *Theories of Personality*, 2d ed. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1970), 111-112.

pastors and will be felt in many congregations, as the obvious shortcomings we all share become obvious. And if these impede having some of the members' personal needs met, the Narcissists among them may even become angry.⁹

We can observe this therapeutic, optimistic mindset in much of today's popular rhetoric. Problematic behavior relates to having "issues," not a function of flaws in one's moral character. Likewise, efforts are made to explain such behavior with reference to one's socio-economic or family background. How frequently we draw upon therapeutic jargon, as we refer to "values," "mid-life crises," "finding yourself," "getting in touch with your feelings" "meeting your needs," and "self-esteem." Ensnared in this thinking, we have created an educational ethos in which academic excellence promotes self-esteem and avoids any intellectual challenges perceived as "threatening."

Though therapy can play an invaluable role in caring for those in despair, in affording beneficial opportunities for growth and self-exploration to people afraid to encounter who they and their environment really are, the therapist's call to "turn inward" to examine the subconscious world of feelings and fantasies fosters the prevailing paradigm for living: a kind of Narcissism. The result is a preoccupation with blurring the boundaries between one's self and the world; people and life's tasks lose their own independent value. When the focus of everything is relative to one's self, then others have no real independent reality and worth. They only have reality as vehicles for the individual's gratification. This is the essence of the Narcissism which so

⁹For the analysis as a whole in this section, see *Blessed Are the Cynical*, esp.120, 18-19; also Cline, "Turnover in the Clergy," 1-2.

infects American culture. Deconstruction and Relativism, the belief that there is no objective, communal truth, that all truth and meaning are functions of one's individual creativity imposed on objects, lend unwitting intellectual support to our present, pervasive cultural selfishness and meaninglessness.¹⁰

These dynamics do not just describe our present American social aberrations; they undergird racism, economic exploitation, and the self-hating victimization that transpires in some inner cities and other impoverished locales. Such dynamics even explain the ennui of today's middle and upper classes as well. It is in this context the American church ministers.

But this is also the ethos of our congregations (and our pulpits) too. If it is all about myself and my feelings, what is in it for me, if the Church and its pastors only have value as vehicles of my receiving good feelings and being made to feel important or successful (today's Prosperity Gospel seems to trade on these sentiments), then the likelihood of conflict is clearly exacerbated as the pastor and the community seek to minister to the common good. Ministering to Narcissists is no easy task.

There is another reason for too many pastors' unhappiness. The therapeutic mindset and the Narcissism it nurtures have infected the leadership of mainline Protestant Christianity too. Pastors themselves are saturated by the therapeutic mindset and Narcissist outlook which inculcates American culture. Even seminary training and certi-

¹⁰For these commitments by the proponents of Deconstruction, see Jacques Derrida, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), 36-44, 129-140; also Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1994), esp. 10.

fication by many denominations is conducted with special attention to whether the candidate for ordination is "psychologically healthy" (by whatever the latest psychologically "in" trait that is chic)."

With this sort of educational background and nurture, it is little wonder that today's pastors trained in the post-World War II ethos, frequently reinterpret the Gospel to suit these therapeutic/Narcissist trends. And so success is measured in ministry by whether you have "grown" a church in membership and finances. The Prosperity Gospel has taught us to measure success by such visible space-time criteria.

One can see the preoccupation with therapeutic and tangible means of gratification in how widely Christian spirituality and ethics have been saturated with such ways of viewing reality. Attend a pastor's conference comprised of clergy from mainline denominations. One will surely hear admonitions that pastors take care of themselves. And, if the rhetoric turns to enhancing spirituality, the dominating discourse will be about the needs and feelings of the speakers. In the past year, the writer attended several seminary events devoted to spirituality, and almost without fail the speakers spent three to four times being more concerned with issues related to personal well-being and their context than they spoke about God. That is a long way from the prescriptions of proponents of classical Christian spirituality who practiced losing themselves in God.¹¹

Other examples of the broad impact of a therapeutic, even Narcissist mindset on the contemporary Protestant mainline denominations are evident in how Jesus' charge

¹¹Two good examples of the classical approach are Bernard of Clairvaux, *Love of God* (1127), X; Meister Eckhart, *Expedit Vobis* (n.d.).

to "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 19:19; Mark 12:31) has come to be an exhortation to love ourselves. "You can't love others if you don't love yourself" has become the mantra of both pulpit and pew. Such exhortation to an erotic love that satisfies the self is a long way from the self-denying *agape* love to which Jesus called the faithful in these texts. This preoccupation with the self and one's personal well-being, along with the Narcissism which characterizes much contemporary American life, goes a long way towards explaining why so many churches spend time and energy of late on questions of personal morality (abortion, homosexuality, etc.), with relatively little to say about broader social issues pertaining to the common good, such as poverty, welfare, health care, ecology, and the like.

This "turn inward" describes both American society and church life and also accounts for spiritual emptiness and unhappiness among the clergy today. Recent cutting-edge, neuro-scientific research bears out these suppositions. When the most important thing in life is one's own satisfaction, there is an emptiness that the self and the feeling generated by self-gratification cannot fill. The part of the brain being used is not rewarded, it seems, by the natural chemical highs with which the brain rewards different, more "other-directed" activities.

Cutting-Edge Research on the Brain

Exciting research on the brain has clarified why preoccupation with ourselves leads to unhappiness. Happiness, it seems, is related at least in part to the chemicals in the brain released when nerve impulses arrive in one of the brain neurons. These chemicals are neurotransmitters some of which

are called monoamines, synthesized from amino acids found in ordinary food. These transmitters relay messages from one nerve cell to another in the brain. Such brain chemicals are produced in neurons (the cells that carry information to and within the brain). The brain, it seems, is always seeking to create new nerve connections; and this is especially stimulated by gaining new knowledge or enjoying new experiences, a process facilitated by these chemical neurotransmitters, some of which are called opioids, which function almost like morphine in dulling pain.¹²

The neurotransmitter most involved in the experience of happiness, bliss, or desire is termed dopamine, a tiny molecule comprised of hydrogen, oxygen, carbon, and nitrogen. It plays a role in stimulating curiosity, creativity, and even sexual drive. Dopamine has several pleasurable results. It heightens awareness of interesting situations, waking us up to regard life as more interesting. It also stimulates pleasurable experiences for the brain's dendrites (the nerve cells of the brain which connect with other bodily cells, making it possible for the brain to interpret the body's experience). It causes them to remember good experiences. In addition, dopamine serves to control our muscles, to ensure that when the brain gives orders the rest of the body executes what we have willed. Not surprisingly, dopamine creates a "high" that activates a response. Under the influence of dopamine, the brain learns to make new connec-

¹²For this exposition of the new insights in neurobiological research the writer is indebted to Stefan Klein, *The Science of Happiness: How Our Bodies Make Us Happy—and What We can Do to Get Happier* (New York: Marlowe & Company, 2006), esp. 35-37, 56-58, 107; also Michael Lemonick, "The Biology of Joy," *Time*, 17 January, 2005, A12-A19; and Dean Hamer, *The God Gene: How Faith Is Hardwired into Our Genes* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), esp. 103-108.

tions, for this neurotransmitter prepares the neurons for novelty. The more nerve impulses are passed from one cell to another, the more connections that are established in the brain, the more these cells release dopamine and its pleasurable reactions.

Monoamines like dopamine are not freely available to the brain. They are produced in the brain cells (neurons). In the case of dopamine, it is produced by cells in the ventral tegmental and substantia nigra regions—cells located deep in the mid-brain. These neuron clusters send these neurotransmitters either to the striatum, which facilitates and regulates bodily motion, or, most relevant for our purposes as church leaders, to the executive portion of the brain, the prefrontal cortex which regulates consciousness.

Neuropsychologist Richard Davidson of the University of Wisconsin-Madison has gained additional insights regarding the dynamics of happiness. He and his colleagues have employed electrodes on subjects to determine which parts of the brain are most active when experiencing contentment. Measuring his subjects this way (much like Buddhist monks in deep-bliss meditation), he discovered that in these instances the prefrontal cortex, the outer layer of gray matter in the prefrontal lobe located behind the eyes, is especially active (especially the left prefrontal cortex).¹³

The prefrontal cortex is the locus of the brain which exercises executive functions. It is the seat of human consciousness and of higher cognitive abilities like abstract reasoning and complex analysis. It is also con-

¹³See R. E. Wheeler, R. J. Davidson, and A. J. Tomarken, "Frontal Brain Asymmetry and Emotional Reactivity: A Biological Substrate of Affective Style," *Psychophysiology* 30 (1993): 547-558.

nected to brain structures like the amygdala which generates emotions. As such, the prefrontal cortex is charged with controlling emotions. It is divided into two halves: the right functioning to react to looming disaster, the left operating pro-actively to enhance our well-being.

That this part of the brain would be more active than other segments when we are happy makes sense. The left prefrontal lobe's purpose in regulating the brain's neural connections entails that the pleasurable sensations resulting from the flow of dopamine to these particular brain cells also has implications for the whole brain. And if the brain in its entirety is governed by such pleasure, it stands to reason that the whole person experiences happiness.

These findings have rich implications for understanding how happiness is experienced, and why the dynamics in American church life do not make happy pastors. We are more likely to be happy when the left prefrontal cortex of the brain is in overdrive. Recall the functions of this part of the brain. As the seat of abstract reasoning and consciousness, it functions to control emotions. And, when this part of the brain is in operation, it is more likely to be saturated by pleasurable neurotransmitters like dopamine. But in our therapeutic, Narcissist climate, where we are encouraged to give free reign to our feelings, where hard conceptual reflection and abstract thinking are not encouraged (not even sometimes in the academy), this part of our brain, in which the dopamine flows, will not be exercised. In fact, the parts of the brain which researchers have identified as most active when people are unhappy are precisely the portions of the brain most likely to be exercised in a society and church pre-

occupied with finding pleasure and getting in touch with the free expression of one's emotions.¹⁴

The implications of this neurological research impacts happiness in ministry, for happiness in daily life is striking. If you spend too much energy and reflection on yourself, your personal circumstances, and your emotions, the left prefrontal cortex of your brain will not be too active and the dopamine will not flow. But if ministry's focus is on something larger than ourselves and engages us in activities calling for abstract reasoning and complex analysis, then that frontal part of the brain goes into overdrive; the dopamine is more likely to flow. The echoes of classical Christian thought resonate profoundly in these reflections. It is as Martin Luther King Jr. indicated in response to a reader lamenting his sense of self: the young man's unhappiness was occasioned by too much attention to himself and not enough towards others. He wrote: "You probably lose confidence in yourself because you are thinking too much about yourself." King advised him of the happy outcomes: "Soon you will find that you spend so much time thinking of others that you have little time to think of yourself. There is so much more to think about than ourselves."¹⁵

¹⁴For a detailed discussion of Antonio Damasio's findings see "Subcortical and Cortical Brain Activity during the Feeling of Self-Generated Emotions," *Nature Neuroscience* 3, no. 10 (2000): 1949-1056); regarding the parts of the brain which are active when people experience unhappiness, see Klein, 17-19.

¹⁵Clayborne Carson, ed. *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, vol. IV, *Symbol of the Movement January 1957 - December 1958*, "Advice for Living" (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 472.

Neurological Roots for the Spiritual Life

How does all this relate to spirituality? It seems that dopamine and the frontal lobe of the brain play crucial roles here as well. Andrew Newberg, director of Nuclear Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania Hospital scans brains for a living. Scanning the brains of those in meditation has revealed that in moments of deepest spiritual experience the frontal lobe and the frontal cortex (which includes the prefrontal cortices) had the most obvious blood flow—were most active. By contrast, the posterial parietal lobe, which functions as the neurological region orienting the self in space and time, defining the self, went blank.¹⁶ As in the case of happiness, spirituality is not likely to be experienced when we are too preoccupied with our own present circumstances, personal satisfaction, or our feelings.

Research indicates that there may be other genetic dynamics contributing to spirituality. In order for the dopamine to flow into the prefrontal cortex and the frontal lobe (of which the prefrontal cortices are a part) it needs to be released by the cells, and before that, such monoamines must be wrapped up by membranes. In this process, the gene called VMAT2 plays a crucial, necessary role in dopamine-producing cells. After the cell produces the monoamines, it wraps them with membranes, which are strong, flexible material made out of proteins, sugars, and fats. VMAT2 is the gene which weaves in and out of the tiny spheres of the membranes, enclosing the dopamine and other monoamines. It forms a channel across the mem-

¹⁶See Andrew E. Newberg, Vince Rause, and Eugene V. D'Aquili, *Why God Won't Go Away: Brain Science and the Biology of Belief* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2002); also Hamer, 121-123.

brane, acting as the border crossing for dopamine and other monoamines. Monoamines, once wrapped with membranes, remain shielded until they are stimulated by pulses of electronic energy from other cells. When that happens, the VMAT2 transporter forms a channel across the membrane that acts as a border crossing for the brain chemical.¹⁷

The research suggests that if we do not have the right kind of VMAT2, the dopamine does not flow as freely into the cells of the frontal lobe (will not be experienced as a significant alteration of monoamine signaling), and so not only abstract thinking but also spirituality is less likely to be pursued. This has led Andrew Newburg and more recently Dean Hamer to refer to it as the "God gene." Aided by other research findings, Hamer has concluded that those most inclined to value spirituality and to practice it by exercising their frontal lobes of their brains more than the back parts which predispose attention to the self, are especially rewarded by flows of higher levels of dopamine. And without that experience, the experience of self-forgetfulness that comes with the shutting down of the parietal lobe in favor of exercising the frontal lobe will not be rewarded. As a result, such spiritual experiences will not be as valued and so probably not sought as much as in the case of those who get more natural highs from increased dopamine flow.

¹⁷For this explanation of the role of VMAT2, see Hamer, 72-76, 105-106, 110; Max V. Myakishev, Y. Khripin, S. Hu, D. H. Hamer, "High Throughput SNP Genotyping by Allele Specific PCR with Universal Energy-Transfer-Labeled Primers," *Genome Research* 11 (2001): 163-169; George Uhl, S. Li, N. Takahashi, K. Itokawa, Z. Lin, M. Hazama, and I. Sora, "The VMAT2 Gene in Mice and Humans: Amphetamine Responses, Locomotion, Cardiac Arrhythmias, Aging, and Vulnerability to Dopaminergic Toxins," *The FASEB Journal* 14 (2000): 2459-2465.

Research demonstrates, Hamer contends, that it is largely a matter of the sort of VMAT2 gene one has. One sort of genetic variation, according to human genome research, pertains to whether one has nucleic acid cytosine (C) in one's DNA or another nucleic acid adenine (A). Human beings with at least some C in their VMAT2 gene seem to test higher with regard to spiritual sensitivity, self-transcendence/forgetfulness and predisposition to exercise the brain's frontal lobe (the seat of spirituality). They have the version of VMAT2 which allows the dopamine to rush in and out of the individual's vesicles (small elevations of cells containing fluids like dopamine), setting off a reverberating circuit accelerated by strong signals from the brain's center and ever weaker input to the parietal lobes.¹⁸

These findings are significant: there are neurobiological foundations for spirituality, and the insights from this science offer us perceptions about the practice of Christian spirituality. The lessons are similar to those we learned regarding happiness. Just as one will not be happy if the main focus is on one's self, exercising the parietal lobe in the back of the brain to the exclusion of concern with projects larger than ourselves employing the prefrontal cortex, so our spiritual lives are not likely to move beyond ourselves and our hang-ups if we start with our own needs and circumstances.

Conclusion

The outcomes of the latest neurobiological and genetic research come as no surprise to readers steeped in the rich insights of the historic Christian faith. After all, the tradi-

¹⁸Hamer, 138-139,70-76; Uhl, 2459-2465.

tion has always been about saying “no” to the world and to ourselves—to crucify the things of the world (Galatians 6:14), to bear the Cross (Mark 8:34-36), and to live our Baptisms (Romans 6:1-14). We have already noted how the theme of losing yourself in God recurs frequently in the historic tradition, in no less eminent Christians than Meister Eckhart and Bernard of Clairvaux. Martin Luther King Jr. made a similar point in his autobiography, “I say to you. . . that if you have never found something so dear and precious that you die for it, then you aren’t fit to live.”¹⁹ The new scientific research verifies the medical-scientific soundness of such a lifestyle.

In view of how thoroughly saturated we have become in the American church in therapeutic jargon and outlooks, even to the point of indulging in Narcissism, there seems to be back-brained thinking among pastors and laity today. (Recall, how often discussions among pastors and the rhetoric about spirituality have become more like quests for self-understanding and mental health than about God.) But with that much activity in the parietal lobe, the part of the brain not saturated by dopamine, it is hardly surprising that ministry is not much fun for some clergy and laity. And since spirituality is not likely to be experienced by people concentrating on themselves, exercising that part of the brain, it is little wonder that many of us tend to be less focused on God, caught up in American society’s drive for success (Prosperity Gospel models of ministry), infatuated with computer technology, and passionate about the therapeutic agendas of self-care and

¹⁹Claborne Carson, ed., *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Warner Books, 1998), 344.

finding self-fulfillment.

The new neuro-scientific data also remind us that finding happiness, wholeness, and enhancing spirituality in ministry are not outcomes that we can will. In fact, they are more likely to happen when we forget ourselves and the outcomes. The parts of the brain that work the hardest in happy, spiritually-centered, and healthy people are the neurons of the frontal lobe, the part of the brain that does not preoccupy us with ourselves and our space-time context. When this part of the brain is activated, which happens when we are involved with projects larger than ourselves, then the dopamine flows, along with the happiness, a sense of intoxication, and the contentment that this monoamine provides.

How does it happen? When we focus on those larger initiatives, a job assignment, a family project, a movement that aims to make a difference (a game, a musical interlude, or a semester of diligent study), self-care, self-fulfillment (and other agendas of the therapeutic, Narcissist mindset) do not matter as much. Are you not happiest in your life in those times when you are lost in such activities? Pastors who see their ministries (the weekly task of sermon preparation and the counseling, the activities and programs of their congregations or community ministries) not just as demands and hassles of the job know something of the happiness and joy in ministry, for the dopamine has flowed in their brains. Christians who experience this sort of joy and happiness are usually healthy too. Various studies have demonstrated that there is a direct connection between a sense of emotional well-being and life expectancy, that health is more than a matter of genetics. Richard Davidson's research

indicates that happy people with active left prefrontal cortexes have lower levels of cortisol, a hormone that depresses immune function.²⁰ When we spiritually engage in projects larger than ourselves, it seems that there are more of our natural resources available for fighting disease. Consequently, we are likely to be healthier.

There is another intriguing insight about this brain research. The frontal lobe is also activated in other activities of concentration, including academic tasks. Want to be happy? Forget your comfort levels, and spend some time learning something new. It will extend the cell connections in your brain, and generate a generous dopamine flow. The tasks of a dedicated pastor and the preparation of a good sermon really are compatible, for both involve the same parts of the brain, and engage us in the self-denying, joyful lifestyle of the cross.

Likewise, you are not likely to have a meaningful spiritual life concentrating too much on yourself. Studies have shown that, insofar as the parietal lobe in the back of the brain goes dim in spiritual experience, spirituality is enhanced by inattention to one's particular circumstances. In fact, on neurological grounds, genuine spiritual experience seems more like a sense of losing oneself in the whole (much like the dynamics associated with happiness). One caught up in a deep spiritual experience feels a delightful (dopamine-inspired) sense of being one with all that is. This will not happen if the primary purpose in prayer and meditation is about spiritual fulfillment and having your needs met.²¹ Brain

²⁰Wheeler, "Frontal Brain Asymmetry," 547-558; cf N. Adler, "Stress and Health: Biology, Behaviour, and the Social Environment" (lecture presented at the Annual Conference of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, San Francisco, 2001); Klein, esp. 239.

²¹See Newberg, *Why God Won't Go Away*; also Hamer, *The God Gene*, esp. 128-129.

research implies that the modern church and its theological institutions may need to junk a lot of Post-Enlightenment (including "Post-Modern") models and get back to the old-time religion of grace-inspired commitment and cross-bearing.

Immersion in one's studies as well as involvement in communal and church activity can sometimes create a sensation that you know the subject studied as well as you know yourself. Sometimes in those moments the success of the project into which you have been dedicated seems to matter more to yourself than you do. Neurological research entails that this should be no surprise; the same part of the brain is operating and the same satisfying brain chemical (the dopamine) is flowing. Who says the academics pursuits, spirituality, and community activism do not belong together? You will never be able to believe that again if you consider the new neuro-scientific data.

The latest neurological research provides at least one more hint for pastors' happiness, health, wholeness, and spirituality. They all fit together. Research indicates that happiness may be enhanced among people who are thankful. The Italian psychiatrist Giovanni Fava has found that patients experiencing depression made progress if encouraged to remember happy times, to celebrate, and give thanks. This finding clearly converges with the neurobiological data we have noted. When we remember, we concentrate on a place and time which does not correspond to our present context. No need for the parietal lobe to be activated. Only the frontal lobe (with all its dopamine) seems likely to function when we are remembering and giving thanks. When you remember in thanksgiving, you focus on the moments of intense

happiness because the memory is geared to focus on the happy high points, precisely when the intoxicating dopamine flowed.²² Thankful remembrance is also a form of spirituality. Bible stories and worship are essentially such remembrances of thanks. Little wonder, then, that Gallup Poll research indicates that regular church-goers engaged in such remembrances have a higher percentage of happiness than the American public as a whole by nearly 10 percent.²³ And as we have noted, such happiness is likely to translate into better health.

Want to enjoy better spirituality, health, and more happiness in ministry? Science and our faith commitments tell us: stop striving for those qualities. Free yourself from the demands of the Law (Galatians 3:10-14). Forget about yourself, your needs, and your circumstances. Focus on God, on neighbors, on endeavors outside yourselves; and then spirituality, health, and happiness will take care of themselves (thanks to the wonderful way that God created us [our minds] and saves us). What a joyful, intoxicating perspective for life and ministry.

²²Giovanni Fava, "Well-Being Therapy: Conceptual and Technical Issues," *Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics* 68 (1999): 171-179; Klein, 202-204.

²³Joseph Carroll, "Americans' Personal Satisfaction," *The Gallup Organization*, 2005.

I No Longer Bleed

I no longer bleed monthly
my body having the knife
cut the power of the blood
from me, a surgical
demise to save my life,
and still I miss the blood
of life, the breath from heaven
that lets the prophet bleed
for days and not die,
slough off the remains
of life potential,
the womb's preparation
of the coming pregnancy
that never happens

I no longer worry when
the blood doesn't flow,
wondering if I am carrying a baby
I cannot afford, emotionally
or otherwise, the womb
itself no longer there and my
life saved, but empty of
the full heat of monthly
crimson tide
and still I miss the blood
of prophets that flows
the power, the power
in the blood and
the blood bearer

happened because the nature of the work was so... happy high... of spinning... with remembrance... Gales Pol... engaged in... of happy... nearly 10...

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