

Helping Amygdalas Jump to the Left

Written by Alex Baer

Thursday, 31 January 2013 18:00

Intellectual knowledge is one thing, and emotional experience is another. This is one reason why it's "a darned shame" when you hear a friend's story of having compared ticket prices on the plane with fellow passengers, finding out he or she paid a couple hundred bucks more than any of the others for the same deal -- and why it's "a murderously cutthroat breakdown in society" when you are the one stuck with that extra-jumbo-jet of a bill.

Those differences are the birth pangs of empathy, so mutter away, and to your heart's content. Welcome to humanity. We are not ants or otherwise able to experience the hive mind, so we have to grow our awareness and empathy fresh, every day. And yes, tending that particular garden can be a real drag at times.

You can unexpectedly explode an expelled spew of coffee over a sudden comeuppance or shock of news, or choke without warning on a bite of food, or have your tongue trip over a sip of soup and collapse. The causes of the so-called *spit-take* can be many. Roll around some of these possibilities in your mind's eye, while swirling around some pleasant liquid or other in your figurative -- or literal -- mouth:

Say, when your spouse or significant other, who has worked tirelessly with you on progressive political causes, suddenly announces, "You know, that whole Libertarian-Teabagger thing really makes perfect sense to me now!"

Or, when your child, or a nephew or niece, proclaims to a roomful of proudly logical family members gathered for some learned familial tradition or college graduation rite, "I've decided to become a Jehovah's Witness, so I can trespass on people's property, without any invitation at all, interrupting their lives, pestering them with my creation myths and fantasies about how this world and the next one works!"

Sometimes that spit-take is right out of the sitcom playbook, and sometimes not. Sometimes, it can happen before you're even aware that the cue's already been given -- as when your doctor says, "There's a mass that's showed up on the x-rays of your right lung..." and you find yourself snapped back into place, whiplashed into this world, into this time and place, saying, "Can you let me have that again?" while shaking off the last of whatever partial reverie or daydreaming had gone on just before the exam room door opened.

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Thankfully, I've not yet experienced Situation One or Two, but Situation Three has cleanly snagged me, dragging me into its crosshairs about a week -- and a small bundle of additional, gratefully *external* tests -- ago.

I'd envisioned having to stuff myself, and my Size Twenty-three body, down the length of a Size Eleven MRI machine, riding the conducting tongue down that snug sausage tube able to induce claustrophobic thoughts in the steeliest, most disciplined mind.

But, no -- I lucked out. For the added round of information gathering, I did not need to hire a tamping-down crew, nor equip them with pillow-tipped poles, cotton wadding, and extracting ankle-loop snares to pull me back out like a chaffed champagne cork.

Instead, I drew a ticket for the Big Metal Donut, and got a CAT scan. Soon, I was riding the smoothly automatic-gurney-slab in through the donut hole, and then back out, two passes in all -- and then, done. Maybe three minutes, tops. Nice and airy. Plenty of room. No *whanging* or banging magnetic apparatus twirling and spinning around me, this way and that, making me tongue-touch my fillings to make sure they were staying in place, trying to remember if I'd already surrendered and shed my watch... or if it would become a lethal projectile in its brainless hurry to meet up and mate with the machine's powerful magnets.

Owing to the vagaries of health care in this country, my doctor is about 70 miles away, one way, as are all the various, large, and numerous medical facilities in which he and a host of specialists all serve. It is a teaching institution offering first-rate care. And, owing to the generosity of private and government grants, even people of severely-reduced economic circumstances, with a smidgeon of private insurance, such as myself, can take part.

From puzzling symptoms to chest x-rays, and on to CAT scans I have so far ridden, hoping the various contours of destinations, directions, and what to do next all come into view. Ever so slowly, they do.

Time is relative, of course. Ten minutes is an eternity while waiting on such test results, never mind a follow-up that runs into the next day or week. Those same amounts of time, spent in

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happy endeavors -- or way back when, on vacation -- are vapor, having flashed past in an instant.

(I've had too much practice with this sort of stuff, with bodily operations suddenly sliding sideways, going on the fritz. At least, whenever I find time warping, I've already got a handy tune memorized and rolling. It's a talisman, a touchstone, and a comfort tune, all rolled into one -- something solid to hang onto in any of life's fogs.)

Eventually, back in Lung Land, all the computer modeling has been done and the 3-D recreations of my insides has been turned inside-out for interpretation by computer topographers, all trying to understand the nature of any lifeforms within me that are trying to set up shop.

During the wait, I try not to feel what I think I feel -- I imagine, if I were another species, a determined need to cough up a fist-sized hairball consisting of hair, fur, fibers, dust clods, damp feathers, popcorn-sized chunks of memory foam, and a few styrofoam peanuts.

I try not to imagine the critter from the movie, "Alien," nor how it made its initial appearance.

I find myself spending a *lot* of intense, active effort trying to *not* imagine anything that begins with the letter C -- represented in astrological circles by the symbol "69" and by a sideways-scooting crustacean.

And, no -- I am not speaking here of a difficult case of Crabs. Even though we are all not yet certain what it might be we are dealing with here -- even though, technically, it is my own personal lung, and wholly outside the domain of everyone else included in the helpful pack of "we" in this scenario -- I suspect we would all of us make a sight-unseen trade: a case of the crabs, swapped for whatever cluster of cells it is that's taken up unhelpful residence in the Warm Moist Motel I find myself running.

Outside of a game of Monopoly, I've never been a proprietor of a motel. Not even a hapless, unintended one. Perhaps I am coming up in the world at last.

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(The track record on that one is pretty flat, though. As they say, whenever my ship has come in, I haven't been down at the docks to greet it, arms waving wildly -- instead, I've been out at the airport, glumly checking arriving flights, just in case.)

Meanwhile, the information gathering continues through one more investigative course. It's seemingly one right out of a medieval playbook, one bristling with bear skins and stone knives: Introduce a tube down the throat via the nose, slide some cameras down to take a look around, and then sample the surroundings, taking biopsy souvenirs here and there.

This is on deck for tomorrow. I am currently an amygdala-driven construct, critically thinking my way through nothing at this point, but certainly running through the useful possibilities of various remembered hospital floor plans, once the dumped adrenalin hits the muscle walls and the fight-or-flight mechanism really kicks in.

The calm, methodical prefrontal cortex, of course, has been engaging the leery, jumpy amygdala in various noises of attempted communication since this Tubular Sightseeing Trip has been in discussion as a vital next step in this dance of a thousand lung snapshots.

It is here that all those attempts at transmitting information, and having them be clearly received, have all but completely broken down.

Logic cannot speak to Emotion -- they have no common language, no common empathy, no common *anything* in common. (Although a case could be made that, in this case, they share me, but I am a latecomer to this ancient battle of cool reason versus electrocuted gibberish.)

It's also why there is no breaking through to Republican terrorists and extremist Teabaggers using the auspices of reason, fact, and logic: There is so much confused, contused, and concussed hot-button emotion swirling around in there, stirred up by the Fox Network psychotics and the Limbaugh-Beck cotillion -- and all their wannabe debutantes -- that no amount of step-by-step thinking can break through.

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No, if we want any measure of bipartisanship, we will have to kidnap and deprogram Teabaggers and Republicans, wiping them clean with extreme counter-programming -- I'd suggest mandatory viewings of The Rocky Horror Picture Show until the twitching mostly stopped.

Then, we could take them back through childhood again, helping millionaires and billionaires discover how to share their toys and see beans as life-sustaining entities rather than as chits to be endlessly counted and recounted with joyless glee. We could even help these poor sots learn the various math tables, shifting their current focus away from grief and greed, and toward the gift of greenery and rare goodness we've all been given right here, on this small orb, hanging in space, wearing its onionskin of breathable air.

It's a long, slow process, educating the ignorant, it is true. But, without it, reasonable people will never break through and communicate with our other half. With this process, though, we all have a chance -- even them, too.

Given enough time, we might even have heads of Congressional science and technology committees who think of both as useful tools, rather than as hellspawn of Satan to be avoided, disbelieved, and mistrusted at all costs.

Why, if we are granted enough time to act, and do so very thoroughly, we might even have the head of the Presidential Council on Jobs and Competitiveness be someone who does not in fact eliminate jobs and ship advanced technology and American factories to China.

We might even succeed in the non-surgical removal of the automatic obstructionist in each one, complete with the knee-jerk reflex to repeat the word "no," no matter what the subject matter, question, or context.

Bold and hopeful statements that are nearly beyond the pale, I know. Such things are extremely difficult to envision at this point, both in the application and in the positive end result. But, then...

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It's a little like getting a tube jammed up your nose and then down into your chest, and then purposefully setting the medical pros loose on you with a chestful of Dremel tools.

Of course, we can continue to ignore the national prefrontal cortex, and keep feeding our coast-to-coast amygdalas a stew of rich steroids, like always, avoiding the doing of the things we all know, in truth, need to be done.

I'll be a little bit busy tomorrow, doing what I know is best -- standing on my amygdala if I have to, and being the antsy host of too many alien hoses crowding my airways -- but, if you like, please feel free to go on without me and begin. You can only fight the disease where you find it -- where it actually is. We all have to start somewhere.

It's just a jump to the left...

The Rocky Horror Picture Show: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Rocky_Horror_Picture_Show

Time Warp: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rtkdo7bOmJc>

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