

Who's In Charge Here?

(If you are not in control, something else, or someone else will be)

You're walking along, perhaps daydreaming, or perhaps reading something, when you step off the sidewalk curb into oncoming traffic. People yell at you...a truck blares its horn...and you instantly jump out of the way of oncoming traffic and back to the safety of the curb. Whew! That was close! Your training from the youngest age as well as your own experiences, your feelings of self-preservation, and your quick reaction time have saved you from certain injury and possible death. Thank goodness for all of that “training” you have received over a lifetime.

There are countless examples of this kind of training we received as children, which we hardly think of as adults. And, if you are responsible for a young child, then perhaps you have imparted the same sort of training and “wisdom” to them. We touch a stove top carefully if we are not certain that it is cool. We don't jam our hands under a running water faucet, but use the tip of finger instead, until we are sure that it's not scalding hot. Who hasn't waved a hand through the spray of a bathroom shower before stepping completely into the water? As adults, we think of this as common sense stuff. Yet, as certain as we must teach a small child not to run out into the street, someone had to teach us the same lesson when we were children. This is never so evident as when we are working with an adult who has been brain damaged through some kind of accident. In those instances, things that it seems any grown person would know, may have to be re-taught as if the person was a child all over again.

When we are children, those entrusted with our care almost always go to great lengths to make sure that we are prepared for survival as adults. If we are loved, then we are trained, educated, monitored and sent out into the adult world well prepared for the dangers that we may face...except for one area: our thoughts! I wrote “danger” on purpose, because our thoughts can be as dangerous as that speeding truck and have just as fatal consequences if we are unwilling or unknowing in the ways of controlling them.

Your mind is an amazing and wonderful organ with billions and billions of interconnected neurons. The sheer computing power of your brain and its ability to control bodily processes without your active intervention is nothing short of a miracle. While man-made supercomputers may be able to execute a set of pre-programmed steps faster or to “see” patterns in data that most humans cannot grasp, the brain is capable of something that not even the world's fastest computer can do...something that sets us apart from every other species on the face of the planet. We have thoughts! It's the handling of those thoughts that is not taught to us as young children or in schools.

Your brain never stops working until it is severely injured, it becomes too sick to function, as in Alzheimer's, or you die from some other cause. From well before the moment of your birth until the instant your life expires, your brain is alive and functioning. Before you even learn to open your eyes or hold your head up in infancy, your incredible brain is taking care of bodily functions. Your brain is taking in sights, sounds, and tactile stimulation from its new world until that day comes when you are capable of independent thought. It seems that it's from this point that much of our trouble begins. For, with all the training we receive about everything from “pot” (as in potty!) to “hot”, no one prepares us for this new experience called...thought!

My dog is scared of vacuum cleaners. The moment the vacuum starts, she is panting like a race horse, probably from some unfortunate stimulus in her earlier life, before we adopted her. No amount of sweet talking or petting can convince her that the vacuum is anything less than a monster. Perhaps one day she will outgrow her fears, but it's unlikely. She has no intellect that she can draw on to rationalize or make sense of the situation. She's simply fearful. As young children, with limited experiences, we sometimes have fears that are just as irrational, but just as real. Think of the small child who is afraid of the dark or of the monster that they are

certain is hiding under their bed. No one would compare the child's brain to that of my dog, but usually only repetitive nights of shining a light under the bed or leaving a closet light on will convince the child that monsters do not lurk in every shadow of a dark room.

However, this situation would easily explain why we don't let small children watch horror movies or movies with particularly gruesome or realistic special effects. It's also why we probably shouldn't let children watch movies where people fly about the room in defiance of gravity. Their brains are just not developed enough, nor do they have experiences enough to discern the differences between reality and what grew out of a special effects studio in Hollywood. As parents, we assure that little scared one, tuck them in one more time, and kiss them goodnight again, assuring them that they will be safe and that all will be well in the morning. Sweet, isn't it?

You might chuckle, too...just as I did. Yet, as adults, our brain can manufacture visions just as frightening, just as vivid, just as fearful, and just as inaccurate as a child's vision of monsters at the back of their closet. Think about it this way for a moment: We go out to see a movie. It could be a horror movie, but not necessarily. "Titanic" always does it for me. It's just a movie. When I watch it at home, it's just digital information on a plastic disc. And, yet, if I let myself get immersed in the scenes, the story, and the music, I can feel my heart beating faster and my breath coming more quickly as water fills the ship. I've watched the movie a dozen times, probably. It always ends the same. The ship sinks. The people drown. I'm quivering as I write about it. That's how real the feelings are!

Now, let's take your situation. Are you plagued by scary thoughts? Are you beset by anxious or angry thoughts? Did your boss make a comment about your work, and now you fear that you will be fired? Do you fret over and over again about a comment that someone made about your hair, your clothes, your car, your weight or body shape? Do you "catastrophize" about the economy, your health, social issues, justice, politics, etc? The list can go on for as many "things" as there are in the world, and sometimes things that are out of this world, like meteors, asteroids, and even men from Mars. This marvelous brain of ours, which runs incredible organs like our heart, lungs, stomach, endocrine system, and all the other parts of our body without us even knowing about it, can simultaneously serve up the most marvelously detailed, rich, and vivid "lies" of any machine in the world. The brain never stops doing it. This internal "movie machine of the mind" is running 24/7. At night, we call these "movies" by another name: dreams. During the day, we call them by less simple names: fear, anger, pride, embarrassment, revenge, etc. The list of these often and mostly incorrect "thoughts" is quite lengthy.

I used the word "lies" in the last paragraph, and it was intentional. There is much that the mind feeds us that is useful. Often, reasonable "fear" keeps us from taking foolish actions that might easily kill us. Reasonable "anger" keeps us from being a doormat to society. Reasonable "pride" makes us bathe, wear nice clothes, and brush our teeth. It's the word "unreasonable" that I want to associate with "lies" a word that was used intentionally to get your attention. In the next message we want to explore the "lies" that your mind may be feeding you. But, as I end this section, here's some homework for you...something to try for a few days, just to see if there's any difference in how you feel. Here it is: For even a few minutes each day (longer, if you can), try to control what you think about. If one of your better known "scary thoughts" arrives, try saying something as simple as, "No thanks! I don't need that thought today." You may not be successful the first few times you try this. If you suffer from a severe case of anxiety, then you may see no improvement for many days. But, just try it...not for me, but for your own peace of mind. Try other phrases. Be more insistent, if necessary. You may even resort to demanding that the thought disappear. That's OK. What ever works! And, if the scary thought departs, or recedes, try to take an inventory of how you feel. Is your breathing lighter? Does your heart slow down a bit? Do you feel more in control? If so, then I am wildly excited for your success, and I think you will be too.

Next time: **My Think Don't Stink! Oh, Yes It Does!**