

YOUR FAITHFUL BRAIN

Designed for so much more!

Leonard N. Matheson, PhD

YOUR FAITHFUL BRAIN:

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Chapter 11 Excerpt

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Faithful Brain Institute

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PREFACE

As I look back over more than 40 years helping people live their lives to the full, it seems to me that our brains were designed for both redemption and rehabilitation; one supporting the other. Redemption and brain rehabilitation are important to all of us because only one of us was ever perfect; the rest have fallen short of God's best.

The premise of *Your Faithful Brain* is that neuroscientific evidence supports and affirms the Biblical narrative of redemption and brain rehabilitation through Jesus and his lessons.

I have been blessed with thousands of clients with brain injuries and diseases who have helped me to understand the intimate importance of the human brain. Many of the people you will meet in this book have experienced severe trauma. They have taught me that life to the full is possible in spite of our circumstances. Redemption and rehabilitation are built-in brain capacities that allow us to synchronize with God's created reality, transcending our trauma and healing our scars. We can take advantage of these capacities by developing faithful brains. When we do so, we experience hope and joy and peace and we grow beyond our circumstances.

If you are reading *Your Faithful Brain* as a self-development study, our online Assessment provides an analysis of faithful brain fitness. The assessment and analysis are available from www.faithfulbrainfitness.com.

The intersection of faith and neuroscience is controversial but I hope that we can all examine it thoughtfully. With *Your Faithful Brain* I hope to encourage many discussions about how faith and neuroscience are complementary, applying both to our daily lives. Please join the conversation by visiting the Faithful Brain community page at www.facebook.com/faithfulbrain. We look forward to meeting you.

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A NOTE ABOUT REFERENCES

Consilience is the process of bringing together evidence from apparently unrelated sources to create powerful new ideas. This book explores the consilience of faith and neuroscience, focused on the idea that the human brain was designed to function best within God's created reality.

To some this is a powerful old idea to which their beliefs led them years ago. To others this is an absurd idea; they believe that the topics of faith and neuroscience are incompatible. For myself, I find this to be an intriguing idea because it's my brain that either knows God or rejects God. If there is a God that created me for a personal relationship, the more I know about my brain, the more I know about God.

The evidence for the consilience of faith and neuroscience is that your brain's development and function is optimal within God's created reality. To encourage exploration of this idea, I culled through thousands of studies to select a few hundred pertinent references from well-recognized scientists and scholars. Most of the references in the Bibliography are no more than a few years old. Neuroscience is developing so rapidly that studies and texts prior to the 21st century are included only if they are very highly-regarded classics. All of the references are the cream of the crop, readily available, and full of fascinating information. You can access these through sources such as Google Scholar or Pub Med, where you can set up a free account to save your favorites. If you have additional references that may be helpful, please let me know.

CHAPTER 11: A FAITHFUL BRAIN IS INTENTIONAL

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God - this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. (Romans 12:1-2)

BRAIN BASICS

1. We begin to develop a faithful brain by adopting the character of Jesus.
2. Contemplation of heaven is serenity in the brain; with joy its predominant feeling.
3. Prayer, studying the Bible, and participating in healthy communities of faith help us develop faithful brains.
4. Learning about brain structure and function compliments our spiritual development.

“... A LIVING SACRIFICE, HOLY AND PLEASING TO GOD”?

Saul of Tarsus was one of the least likely people to become a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God. A zealous and dangerous enemy of Jesus's followers, his brain was transformed by his encounter with Jesus and he became the author of the words above. His brain transformation began when Jesus appeared to Saul as he traveled on the road to Damascus after Jesus's death and resurrection. He was knocked to the ground and blinded. Jesus spoke to Saul and sent him on to Damascus to await further orders. After three days in Damascus, blind and without food or water, Jesus sent to him a frightened follower named Ananias:

“Placing his hands on Saul, he said, ‘Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.’ Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength”. (Acts 9:17-18)

Saul thereafter used his Roman name, Paul and began to develop a faithful brain by adopting the character of Jesus. Neuroplasticity, neurogenesis, and neural epigenesis were all harnessed to transform his brain so that he became a great leader of the early Christian church, extending it far beyond the Jewish community of its roots. He was the first international evangelist and wrote much of the New Testament to encourage and guide Jesus-followers, offering his transformation as an example to others.

Paul is also an excellent example for us because he is so transparent about his brokenness and its painful effects in his own life, as he wrote in his letter to the Christian community in Rome:

“I do not understand what I do. What I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do... I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do - this I keep on doing.” (Romans 7:15-19)

Paul seemed to understand that what we now know as neuroplasticity, neurogenesis, and neural epigenesis are mechanisms by which we can develop our good habits as well as “the evil I do not want to do”.

As I look back on my early adulthood, I was a lot like Saul, an angry and zealous anti-theist. I was doing my best to try to debunk God and make fun of religious practices and anyone who espoused Christian faith. I didn’t know it then, but God was placing in my life people who eventually would draw me back to Jesus, including Danny Munday.

WHAT DO YOU WANT MOST OUT OF LIFE?

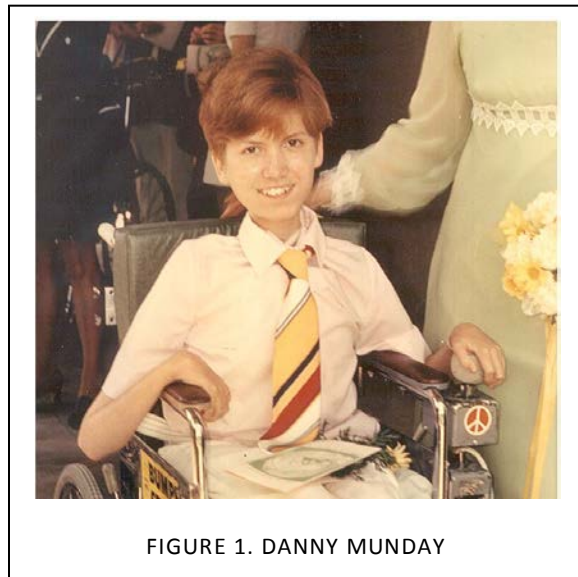
I met Danny Munday on Ward 905 at Rancho Los Amigos Hospital on the first day of my career, February 3, 1970. I had walked into the nursing station after the patients’ breakfast and was greeted by Nurse Marci Worthington. Marci introduced me to Danny, a redhead boy with green eyes and a huge smile, made all the more startling by its placement atop a tiny body shrunk by spinal muscular atrophy, an advancing and always fatal neuromuscular disorder.

“Hi, I’m Danny,” he gurgled.

Calmly handing me a soft rubber hose, Marci showed me how to guide it down Danny’s tracheostomy tube to suction mucous from his lungs. Danny could just barely breathe. Death from suffocation was part of Danny’s constant reality. His gurgling was caused by mucous that would suffocate him if it weren’t removed promptly.

As Danny sat in his wheelchair and looked up at me, his smile and bright green eyes patiently allowing Marci to guide my clumsy hands to pull death from his lungs, I was introduced to the fragility of life.

At first, meeting Danny just reinforced the idea that God lets bad things happen to good people. This was my main objection to Christianity when I walked away from God a few years before. If God is all-powerful and lets bad things to happen to good people, why should we love God at all, let alone with all your heart, soul, and mind?



I didn’t recognize until much later that God had begun to answer my question immediately, placing in my life many good people to whom bad things had happened. If I paid attention to how they were learning to live life to the full, they would help me understand.

Danny helped me appreciate that, outside of critical care hospital rooms or in active combat, we aren’t normally aware that death is our constant companion. But several times each day mucous would cause

Danny to struggle for breath. Whenever this happened, he had a few minutes to live. In between, he lived with joy, pursuing goals that made life worth living.

Through Danny I was introduced to the potential for joy up close to death. Many people don't know that joy is even a possibility when death is close. Getting close to death cancels their joy and brings only despair. But it didn't for Danny. Joy was what Danny wanted most out of life.

WHAT IS JOY?

Joy is the designed state of a faithful brain, fully integrated with God, within itself and with others. Joy erupts as we are fully engaged in the moment. If we are well-loved and cared for, we experience joy often when we are young. Joy is the usual state of a faithful brain, erupting when we are fully integrated with God, within ourselves, and with each other. We spend much time, attention, and capital pursuing joy.

Unfortunately, people often mistakenly think that joy depends on their circumstances: "The emotion evoked by well-being, success, or good fortune or by the prospect of possessing what one desires" ^[1]. From this perspective joy will increase or decrease as our circumstances improve or deteriorate.

For Danny and all of my clients with fatal illnesses or serious disabilities, this is absolutely unacceptable. If joy depended on "well-being, success, or good fortune", my clients would never be joyful. Danny was the first of thousands of people who have taught me that this is a lie, and research conducted at Rancho confirms its falsity ^[2]. As my good friend Bryan Kemp says, "Once you have the basic needs met, improving your standard of living doesn't improve your quality-of-life. What we need most is a purpose in life that's greater than our circumstances."

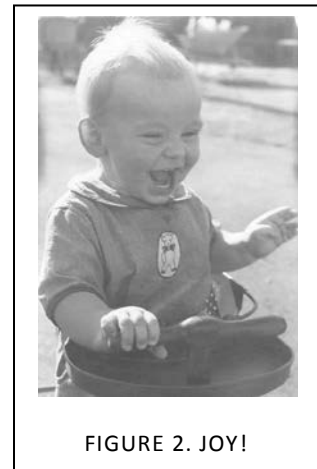


FIGURE 2. JOY!

Searching for joy in our circumstances is a fool's errand. Basing joy on our circumstances is an attempt to be independent from God, when joy actually is a consequence of our ability to safely rest in God.

C.S. Lewis wrote that "Joy is the serious business of Heaven" ^[3]. For Lewis and me and many others, joy flows from dependence on Jesus, who guarantees our relationship with God:

When we are lost in the woods the sight of a signpost is a great matter. He who first sees it cries, "Look!" The whole party gathers round and stares. But when we have found the road and are passing signposts every few miles, we shall not stop and stare. ^[4]

Lewis considered joy as a signpost that points to God. Joy pulls us out of the dark woods toward the light of God's love. Our relationship with God brings us joy as the "peace that passes all understanding" that Paul described in his letter to the Philippians. Kay Warren's definition of joy is very helpful to me:

The settled assurance that God is in control of all the details of my life, the quiet confidence that ultimately everything is going to be alright, and the determined choice to praise God in every situation. ^[5]

Warren writes that “joy is a choice” we must make in spite of our circumstances. Depending on God to be in control of the details of life allows us to not be dependent on our circumstances. Joy is our brain’s natural response when we are closer to God than we are to our circumstances.

HOW CAN I FIND JOY IN DIFFICULT CIRCUMSTANCES?

But “... everything is going to be alright”? For me and Saddleback Church Pastors Rick and Kay Warren and so many others, Jesus makes joy available in tough times. The Warrens lost their son Matthew to mental illness in 2013. Matthew Warren’s suicide was tragic and very painful, but I am confident that his family has “the quiet confidence that ultimately everything is going to be alright”. Here is what Kay shared with the Saddleback Church community several months after Matthew’s death:

I was wearing a necklace that says “Choose Joy”. After I wrote that several years ago, I wrote the book because I struggled with low levels of depression my whole life. Yet here’s a verse like Romans 5:3-5 that says, “We can have joy even in our troubles because we know these troubles produce endurance. And endurance produces character, and character produces hope. And this hope will not disappoint us, because God has poured his love to fill our hearts.”

I began to look for some jewelry that I could wear on a daily basis to remind me that I could choose joy, that there could be joy even in troubles.

The day that Matthew passed away, as Rick said, I had a terrible sense of foreboding. I had very good reasons to believe that he had taken his life. But we had to wait hours before it could be confirmed.

When I got up that morning I deliberately went to my jewelry box and with my hands shaking and my heart pounding and my stomach heaving I picked this necklace out of the jewelry box. I wasn’t really thinking very clearly. But I knew that by putting it on in some way I was fighting back against the nightmare that I was pretty sure was going to unfold that day.

As we stood at Matthew’s house together waiting for the police to confirm this terrible news, I don’t know why but in a moment I looked down and saw it and then I raised it to him in a very tiny feeble attempt to affirm what I knew to be the truth. Even when, as Rick said, our hearts were shattering.

How could I do that? How could I even wear the necklace that day? How could I lift it to him in a gesture of belief in God? A belief that joy can be chosen even in our darkest moments. How could I do that? And how could he through his tears receive it and not push me away and not tell me I was crazy and to stop it, and not do that?

It’s because of what we know. Because we know that joy is still present. We know it, because God is good. And because we have spent the last fifty years of our lives putting

our spiritual roots down deep into the rich soil of God's grace, his mercy, his faithfulness and his goodness. And because of that, because of those roots that have gone deep into the soil of who God is, getting to know him, when troubles have come our way we have been able to produce endurance. It has been produced. And hopefully character. And from that character, hope and joy.

Verse 5 from Romans 5 again, look at that, "And this hope will not disappoint us, because God has poured his love to fill our hearts."

I was learning a lot about joy in the last few years so I could say, "Yes God, I trust you and I'm going to have joy even in this very dark day".^[6]

Joy is a life-affirming experience that arises from our surrender to God. Relying on God so that we can choose joy is especially important in difficult times.

No one becomes free of problems when we follow Jesus. I have fewer problems caused by my self-centeredness, but my life still has many challenges. The difference is that when life goes other than how I had planned, I interpret the new direction as God's will and try to use the challenge to grow.

I often do not know God's precise purpose for my life, but I have quiet confidence that ultimately everything is going to be alright. My ongoing challenges are now taken as signposts that I am to follow, rather than as fear-inducing. I have the settled assurance and quiet confidence that there is deeper meaning in these challenges. As I seek their deeper meaning, I sometimes find it, and more often I find joy.

The way this seems to work is to accept our circumstances as the reality that we must face, rather than wishing that life were different. This is a perspective that we can develop. Cancer, heart disease, paralysis, brain damage, amputations, blindness, mental illness, and progressive neurologic diseases are approached by me and many of my clients with the quiet confidence that everything is going to be alright. Danny was the first of thousands of people who taught me this lesson.

HOW DID DANNY TEACH YOU ABOUT JOY?

During evenings at the hospital after he had finished therapy and school, Danny and I would find a quiet corner and have serious conversations about life. I have a favorite question that I ask seriously ill children: "I know you don't really believe in magic, but if you had a magic wand, what would you do with it?" I am looking for one of two answers. Some children tell me that they would use their magic wand to walk again or to cure their illness. Others tell me that they want more friends or to visit Disneyland. The first group of kids is struggling with the reality of their lives. The second group has begun to transcend their reality and negotiate with life on life's terms.

When I asked Danny my Magic Wand question, he quickly answered, "To kiss Jane Fonda", which definitely put Danny in the second group. He had a movie poster of Ms. Fonda as "Barbarella" tacked to the ceiling above his bed.

Did you just say to yourself, “How useless! What a foolish goal! Kissing Jane Fonda when he’s got a fatal illness! Why waste time with foolishness like that?!”

The first part of the answer to your question about wasting time is that we don’t know how much time we have left, even when we are as sick as Danny.

The second part of the answer to your question is that meaningful goals can lead to optimism, which gives us more time because optimism improves our health ^[7-9]. Our immune system is healthier, our stress responses calm down, and depression is avoided or resolved by optimism. Neuroplasticity, neurogenesis, and neural epigenesis unfold more dependably when we are optimistic. Our brain is literally energized as we move toward meaningful goals ^[10-12] and problems with stress and depression can be more easily resolved. Given the detrimental effects of stress and depression on the brain, meaningful goals can be brain-protective.

The third part of the answer is that meaningful goals pursued with optimism pull us into a valued future ^[13]. Danny’s goal to kiss Jane Fonda linked him to a valued future. Time and again, with thousands of terminally ill and severely disabled clients, I have seen goals pull the person into an unexpectedly bright future. Having something to live for helps each day to become valuable and encourages our engagement in life.

The final part of the answer is that pursuing goals toward a valued future in the face of apparently overwhelming obstacles can remind us that we need God. Think about this for a moment; I don’t want you to miss it. If you have never experienced paralysis or overwhelming pain, it’s very hard to understand. Because Danny’s paralysis was almost total, it was obvious that he was dependent on others. And beyond his dependence on others, it was vitally important to Danny to depend on God.

WHY WAS DANNY’S DEPENDENCE ON GOD IMPORTANT?

The answer is simple. God is completely dependable and people are not. Danny could experience joy in spite of his circumstances because he trusted God. Danny expected that whatever awaited him would be worthy of that trust. He welcomed God’s presence in his life.

Danny taught me that disability can be a valuable opportunity if it expands our ability to become comfortable with dependence. Overwhelming pain and terminal illness offer similar opportunities.

At first the thought of becoming comfortable with dependence sounded so strange to me that I couldn’t believe it. Dependence is difficult for many people, as it is for me. Many of us pretend we are always and completely independent, in spite of plenty of evidence to the contrary. We struggle to project an image of independence, although we are designed to be dependent on God and interdependent with others.

Danny’s surrender to God’s trustworthy love allowed optimism up close to death, which he practiced every day. Many people don’t know that optimism is a possibility when death is close; imminent death brings only pessimism and despair. But Danny not only taught me that optimism is vital when we are facing death, he helped me learn how to achieve it.

One night at the hospital after he had finished therapy and school and dinner, Danny asked me, “What’s the one thing that if you lost it, would make life less worth living?”

Wow!

As a physically healthy 22-year-old whose main concern was planning for the next weekend, I had not thought much about what might make life less worth living. Why would I? My life stretched out in front of me beyond my horizon. I could be carefree and live life with little care or intention.

Danny’s question assumed that life was worth living. He was proving that by waking up each morning and getting into the day, every day. Because he had strung so many of these mornings and days together, we can easily miss this point, but Danny didn’t. He was intentional about every day and savored each morning, afternoon, and evening. Opportunities to embrace and make progress toward goals were treasured.

Danny’s dependence on a loving and trustworthy God allowed him to fall asleep each night with the expectation that tomorrow would be better than today, in spite of his circumstances. Danny showed me what it would be like to trust God. Although I was too early in my faith journey to fully accept his example, Danny’s lesson eventually took hold in my life.

In many ways a fatally ill 14-year-old was my most profound life-lesson teacher. Danny taught me to trust God and live with goal-oriented intention, which I now understand is a powerful combination that harnesses major brain circuits and resources.

Danny’s question about “the one thing that if you lost it, would make life less worth living?” has a corollary: “What’s one thing that would make life more worth living?” I have asked this question in various ways to several thousand clients. It’s the core of the *Goaling Process*^[14] that I have taught in hundreds of medical schools and hospitals. It’s the question that I use with myself on a daily basis to help me to be more intentional about how I live my life.

We all need to be linked to a valued future by meaningful goals that we can share with others. We start by carefully developing healthy and well-rounded goals that describe the future that we value. Once we identify those goals, we can be intentional in their pursuit. Danny knew that he needed to be intentional and focused about how he spent his time. It was not acceptable to Danny for other people to set goals for him; he just didn’t (literally) have the time.

Once Danny set a goal, he didn’t put it on the shelf. He started planning and talking about it with others. As he talked about it, the path to the goal would become clearer and the goal would gather momentum.

The power of goals lies in their ability to focus how we spend our time and in encouraging others to join us in living life to the full. For Danny and me, his question set the stage for choosing whatever each of us identified as a goal that we would pursue; something to seek that would make life more worth living.

As it turned out, Danny did survive his time in the hospital and he returned home. Was his goal to kiss Jane Fonda crucial? I don't know, but our support of this goal and many others helped him to understand that returning home was a possibility.

And Danny got that kiss. On the way to promoting new legislation for universal access to buildings for persons with a disability, Danny was befriended by Jane and Henry Fonda, Nancy Sinatra, Joey Bishop and Bob Hope and many others. Chuck Connors, television's "Rifleman" was my favorite Hollywood star, because he actively cared for Danny and several other severely disabled children, making himself readily available for fundraising and other uplifting events.

But his influence didn't stop with Hollywood. Danny also was befriended by the astronauts who visited the moon. While he was in our hospital, he entrusted me with moon rocks, a letter postmarked on the moon, and other memorabilia that were given to him because he inspired them.

How does anyone inspire a moon-walking astronaut? Is that possible? Heroes to millions, have you ever wondered who might be an astronaut's hero?

Famous friends and kisses and autographed photographs and moon rocks were given to Danny because he inspired all of us to get beyond ourselves and live life to the full, in spite of our circumstances.

My experience with Danny and many people since is that joyful goals shared with others pull us into valued futures. The power of joyful goals lies in their ability to focus how we spend our time living life-to-the-full. Pushing through obstacles that might seem overwhelming, joyful goals develop momentum. Often, I have to get out of my clients' way as they storm into their valued futures!

As things turn out when one is living intentionally, Danny achieved many of his goals and developed a purpose that changed the lives of many before he died in his sleep on December 27, 1970 at age 15. I had talked to him on Christmas day and my last memory of Danny was his joyful voice. I honestly don't remember what we discussed, but I know that I was inspired by his presence in my life.

Since Danny's death I have struggled with God, who has been very patient with me. For many years I continued to do life on my own until I couldn't anymore, which is a story for another time. What I can share with you now is that Danny's example helped prepare me to handle the crisis that eventually came. Because I had known Danny, I realized that my circumstances don't dictate my joy and that God offers much more. When I hit bottom, I found many loving people waiting for me, most of them Jesus-followers. I also found the Bible, which I now use as my primary reference. An ancient book that many people embrace and revere and others reject or despise, the Bible helps me to fit in to God's created reality.

HOW DID THE BIBLE HELP YOU?

The Bible provides examples of the redemption of willful and broken people, just like me. Given that the Apostle Paul hit a hard bottom and experienced profound redemption and neurorehabilitation, I often look to his letters for pastoral guidance. Paul echoes the neuroscience lessons we have learned in

previous chapters. In addition to his apparent awareness of what we now call neuroplasticity, Paul taught about the need for intentional participation in adopting the character of Jesus and thereby developing our faithful brains. In his letter to the Church in Colossae, Paul wrote:

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, forbearing one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.
(Colossians 3:12-14)

In this and many other lessons Paul encourages us to put on the character of Jesus, an active process, requiring intention. Biblical scholar N.T. Wright points out that we need to participate in the development of our faithful brain because...

*Each individual Christian must make the key choices to "put on" the things which genuinely anticipate, in the present, the life we are promised in the future, life we have already been given in Christ. And, having made those key choices, each Christian must acquire the habit of making them over and over again ... **to create patterns of memory and imagination** deep within the psyche, and as we saw from contemporary neuroscience, deep within the actual physical structure of our mysterious brain.*^{[[15]p 142]}

The path leading to the kingdom of heaven begins with redemption as we surrender to God. As we seek God's "good, pleasing and perfect will" for our lives, we begin brain transformation. This creates serenity in the brain, "the peace that passes all understanding" (Philippians 4:7).

We are created in the image of God but have fallen short and tend to see ourselves darkly. As our faithful brain synchronizes with God, we come fully to life. As Paul explained, "For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known." (1 Corinthians 13:2) Serenity is the condition of the brain when we are fully alive, trusting and relaxing in the embrace of God. The Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous ^[16] promises that "we will comprehend the word serenity and we will know peace" as we abandon our old selves and surrender to God.

Figure 2 is of me, my personal reminder of the brain's designed-in potential. I expect that there is a picture of you somewhere that can be your personal reminder. Every child has the capacity for joy as the brain develops faithful to its design. When I am able to abandon my old self and surrender to God, serenity returns to my brain and releases the ecstatic joy of childhood. I gradually and more frequently realize this potential by allowing God to guide my faithful brain development. You can join me, starting immediately. Thank you for your time and attention.

CHAPTER TAKE-AWAYS

1. Seeking God's will harnesses neuroplasticity to develop your faithful brain.
2. We begin to develop a faithful brain by adopting the character of Jesus.
3. Prayer, Bible study, and participating in communities of faith help develop a faithful brain.
4. Contemplation of heaven is serenity in the brain; with joy its predominant feeling.
5. Learning about brain structure and function compliments our spiritual development.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How did God use the design of Saul's brain to transform him into a Jesus-follower who lived life to the full and continues to impact the world through his life and teaching?
2. What does Danny's story teach you about quality-of life?
3. How can we experience joy regardless of our circumstances?
4. How does setting goals help us move forward into a valued future?
5. What is one thing you can do today to begin developing the character of Jesus?

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