

Transcript of FBC Foundational Knowledge Audio Lecture 4

Hello I'm Dr. Leonard Matheson

I'd like to tell you a story about Amy.

Amy is one of my former students at Covenant Theological Seminary, in St. Louis, Missouri. Amy has been using faithful brain character development tools with her children for the past few years. She's begun to take a look at how those same tools can be used to help her with her depression that came upon her as she cared for her dying mother and experienced her death.

The crucial, and at times irreconcilable problem between Amy and her mother was that when Amy was 12 years old, her stepfather began to molest her. He sexually molested her for more than two years. She shared part of her story with a teacher at school who quickly called Child Protective Services and Amy was removed to a foster home.

The ensuing investigation found that there were three children who would also been abused by her stepfather, two girls and one boy. The investigation established that neither their parents nor Amy's mother were aware of the abuse. During the ensuing prosecution, Amy's stepfather accepted a plea deal and went to prison for more than 10 years. Her mother sought and was granted a divorce. Amy had no more contact with him. He was released from prison after six years and died three years later.

Amy is now in her mid-30s. She and her pastor husband now have three children. She's been very excited about her role as a mother and helping her husband plant a new church. Her oldest daughter is 10 years old and as she approaches puberty, Amy has started to recognize a growing anxiety in herself. This anxiety is leading to problems with sleeplessness and a low level of depression.

She's taken courses from me that talk about the relationship between posttraumatic stress disorder and neuroplasticity. She's taken coursework from and participated in therapy with the Allender Center which was quite helpful.

As she tells me,

"I'm no longer burdened by the trauma of the abuse but I still have this problem with anxiety, not trusting people to come into my home as we plant this church, being aware that there may be predators, not wanting my daughter to be around

other men I don't know. I trust my husband and I trust his judgment but I'm really concerned that the same thing will happen to my older daughter.

The things that you've taught me about helping my children develop their faithful brains have been very effective. Now how can I apply that to myself? I'd like not to be so anxious and I don't want this to develop into depression. I don't want to tell my husband that I can't support having a church plant start in our home."

I'll share with you in another lesson the steps that Amy and I went through to help her children with their faithful brain character development, harnessing their neuroplasticity to have their character become more like Christ. For today, we're going to focus on what I did with Amy, how I helped her to deal with her anxiety and potentially burgeoning depression by developing character strengths that reciprocally inhibited the behaviors that might have otherwise led her to become more anxious and depressed.

But we need to be sure that we've all got the same background. I'm going to go back over some of the stuff we've already covered and introduce some new background material that's important to understand as we take a look at character development.

The basic question is, "How can I develop a faithful brain?"

Well, living in synchrony with God's created reality naturally develops our brain optimally. This is the context for which we and our brains were created. As we pay attention to the character of Christ, we begin to develop dominant neural networks that reflect his values. Our Jesus-reflecting values become stable in virtues that are demonstrated by our character.

So the character of Christ is our optimal model. We work within ourselves and with our clients to help develop character that reflects the values of Jesus. As we use our knowledge and techniques to encourage the development of values-based behaviors, the practicing of these behaviors gradually aggregates into neural networks that are stable and gradually become known to others as our character.

Clinical work in this area has been greatly facilitated by the conceptual and research work of many of the leaders of the positive psychology movement, especially Martin EP Seligman and Chris Peterson, who led a team of researchers to develop a model of character strengths that we can use with discernment to help our clients.

In 2004, Peterson and Seligman led 45 researchers to compile an exhaustive model of virtue and character that is regarded as foundational in this area of

study. Unfortunately, this project had a blind spot with regard to virtue and character as described in the Bible. The Bible was a rarely used reference. Jesus was referenced only twice as an example of historical figure with a noteworthy character strength.

It's important to recognize the value that the work of these researchers offers us without becoming too concerned about their blind spots when it comes to their ignorance of God and Jesus. We can build upon their work and bring about change more easily without having to reinvent the wheel. And so, I invite you to get a copy of the Handbook of Character Strengths and Virtues, published in 2004, it's widely available.

But I want to take a moment here and kind of inoculate you against the issue of whether or not the handbook is biased. Jesus is mentioned after Abraham Lincoln, as a paragon of the character strength forgiveness and mercy. This is what they say, "And remember that the last words of Jesus on the cross were, 'forgive them father for they know not what they do'." They continue, "An example from the contemporary world of tabloids is Mary Jo Buttafuoco who forgave not only her straying husband but also the teenager who shot her even petitioning the judge to let Amy Fisher be released early from prison." That's on page 434 the handbook.

For Christians, it can be painful to read material like this in academic establishment textbooks, but we needn't shrink from the challenge and invitation that this offers. My many years of experience as an academic and scientist, has taught me that most of these people are lacking knowledge, that if presented in a way that can engage their intellects and reason, will compel them to take a closer look at Jesus. And so to answer the question, "Is the handbook a useful resource for us?", I have to respond a resoundingly yes, if we approach it with care.

If we are going to fully participate at the modern intersection of faith and neuroscience, we must have the confidence that our faith is up to the enterprise. Faithful brain research both expands and refines what is found in the handbook and sets the stage for a solid and scientific Bible-based perspective on virtue and character.

I sincerely hope that you will not back away from psychological science, especially in areas like this, in which we have an unparalleled strategic advantage. The character of Christ that we all recognize and honor has been taken out of play by these researchers. This means that it is available to us which I see as an amazing opportunity.

I hope that you will join me in further studying how we can help people, ourselves, and our clients, develop character strengths that reflect his image. Let us adopt what these researchers have developed that is useful and consistent with our values, while we go beyond their limited perspective.

And so let's take a look at a couple of important quotes from Peterson and Seligman's handbook. First, "we believe that character strengths are the bedrock of the human condition and that strength congruent activity represents an important route to the psychological good life". Another key quote is, "strengths and virtues can be cultivated but any interventions to nurture strengths needs to be informed by what people in general believe about their origins". These two quotes, provide Christian counselors with a crucial beachhead and powerful strategic advantage over secular counselors.

As we work within the context of Christian beliefs to cultivate the development of virtue and character in ourselves and in our clients, we confidently offer the Jesus-origin of optimal character strengths and virtues. We also challenge the efficacy of secular counseling by asking this question, "What is the origin of your character strengths and virtues?, What are your paragons? What are your exemplars?"

My experience early my career as a secular counselor, before I became a Christian counselor, led me to appreciate the critical importance of rejecting cultural paragons and exemplars. Although some people can be an exemplar of one or another character strength, no one other than Jesus is able to provide a full profile of exemplified character strengths and virtues.

Now let's take a look at the guidance that Jesus gives that helps us to develop character as fully brain integrated resources. These are neural networks that are based in our relationship with God and extends throughout the nervous system and our body and into our relationships with others. And it begins with Jesus' first commandment, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with your entire mind".

We start, by vertically integrating with God through prayer and surrender, setting the stage for healthy horizontal integration with our heart, soul, and brain. Our brain was designed so that the context of a loving relationship with God protects and promotes neurogenesis, neuroplasticity, neural epigenesis and healthy neuroconsolidation. Within a loving relationship with God, hundreds of neurobiological mechanisms are orchestrated to maintain a homeostasis that allows the brain, and through the brain, the whole person, to flourish.

And then we come to Jesus second commandment, “Love your neighbor as yourself”. Now, we are designed for relationship, but the foundation for every healthy relationship starts with God. In *Your Faithful Brain*, Chapter 3, Carol's story reminds us that everything else must come after our healthy relationship with God. And that's part of the problem for Amy.

Although this fact is crucial and absolutely necessary for optimal brain health and development, we must always remember that Jesus' second commandment, “love your neighbor as yourself” is the second step that Jesus tells us that we must take. Our relationship with each other and with ourselves must be within the context of our loving relationship with God.

Carol came to me with confusion and pain, just like Amy did. Without realizing Jesus' first commandment sets the stage for our ability to be in relationship with each other, both Carol and Amy have tried to move on into relationships with others. For both of them turning back and reviving their relationship with God was crucial.

And for Amy, this is part of the beauty of faithful brain counseling. She is absolutely right that inviting strangers into the home is exposing her daughter to potential exploitation. There's no denying that. The risk is probably low, but given her background, that rational information is difficult to embrace. And so, before she can become fully available to love her neighbors as herself, she must turn back to God, love her God with all her heart and soul and mind and strength so that she can then love her neighbor as herself.

And so, like Carol in chapter 3, one of the things that I did with Amy almost immediately was to encourage her to get back and be active in her prayer life especially just before bedtime. I explained to her the promise of neuroconsolidation that's guided by prayer.

Turning to God with prayers of gratitude and petition and surrender, just before we drop off to sleep, sets our brain up for neuroconsolidation that promotes our brains ability to come vertically integrated with God and with God's created reality. Over the course of the night, as we sleep, the last information that was entered into our hippocampus is processed by the brain and supplements already developed neural networks or helps new neural networks to develop.

As the neuroconsolidation unfolds night after night, some of these neural networks will become dominant, and it's the dominant neural networks that represent our character. It's the dominant neural networks that will help Amy, and did help Amy, become more courageous, become more confident, become more

willing to allow herself to relax in the arms of God and in the charge that she and her husband had accepted to plant a church in their home.

Although Amy had been helped by her experience with the Allender Center and in her Allender therapy, those experiences had inadvertently kicked off problems with destructive hippocampal rehearsal. The hippocampal rehearsal of those early memories had reestablished some dominant neural networks that were precipitating the anxiety that she was beginning to feel as her daughter reached puberty, at the same time that she and her husband had accepted the charge to plant a church in their home.

So basically, what I did with Amy was to have her husband join us for several sessions that really turned into a book study of *Your Faithful Brain*. I wanted to equip them with the knowledge to, I guess we could say, pull their own strings, using the God-given capacities that are built into their brains, to help reestablish the homeostasis and the synchronization with God's created reality that their brains were designed to..., and here's the word, enjoy.

Joy is the designed state of a faithful brain. We get back to joy by following Jesus' first commandment "to love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul mind and strength". And it's in synchrony with God's created reality, that we learn to love others, we learn to love ourselves, we learn to love God at a deeper and deeper level, facilitated by our relationship with Jesus.

And really what's happening here, as we allow our neuroconsolidation to be harnessed by God, is a level of very deep learning that goes beneath our knowledge, beneath our attitudes, beneath our beliefs, and coordinates all of that to point us to the ability that God created in us, to love our neighbor as ourselves.

And so to wrap up, the fundamentals of developing a faithful brain are really based on using the character of Christ as our optimal model. When we live in synchrony with God's created reality, our brain develops optimally and the character strengths that we develop, follow the character of Christ. We can never be like Christ, but we can use Christ as our model, and as we do that neuroconsolidation gradually builds dominant neural networks that put us in synchrony with God's created reality.

And for Amy and her situation, developing the character strength of courage was a natural consequence of getting back into synchrony with God's created reality. As she and her husband began to plant the church in their home, each night as she went to bed, she thanked God for helping her be more courageous that day

than she had been the day before. Now we call this the Healthy Hippocampus Exercise and I will get into that in a future lesson.

But for now, the larger point is that we were designed to fit into God's created reality by following Christ, by looking at the character strengths that Christ offers as models for our developing character strengths, harnessing our neuroplasticity, through neuroconsolidation as we sleep, to become more like Christ every day and every night.

And so, thank you for your time and attention.

This wraps up our fourth foundational lesson on “Your Faithful Brain: Designed for so much more!”.

Read the story of Carol in chapter 3. The book is widely available in church bookstores and at Amazon.com.

Please contact us at www.faithfulbrain.com for additional information.

If you are counselor, contact us about how to be listed on our directory.

Thanks again.