

Two Kinds of Smart

Have you heard that business about how we use only 10 percent of our brains at any given time? The 2011 movie *Limitless* takes that idea and runs with it, spinning a story about a writer who takes a secret experimental drug that allows him to use 100 percent of his mind. This causes him, until the drug wears off, to be the perfect version of himself, incredibly creative and attentive.

Everything he's ever read or seen is instantly organized in his mind and available for him to use in whatever way he needs. While he's taking the pills, he's such a radiant and appealing person that people are immediately drawn to him. And with his entire mind focused like a laser, he's able to grasp the details of complex business situations and outguess the stock market, a skill he uses to great financial success.

Of course, there's a wrinkle: bad guys who want to get their hands on this drug and kill anyone else who has it. The movie is an action-thriller that keeps you engaged until the end.

If nothing else, the movie presents one vision of what any of us might be able to do and how dazzling we'd be if only we could use 100 percent of our brains.

But here's the problem: Turns out, we're already using most of our brains! The old assertion that we are using only 10 percent is a myth. Now that we have better technology like PET scans and MRIs for studying brain activity, researchers have found that any mentally complex activity uses many areas of the brain, and over a day, just about every part of our brain gets a workout. Other evidence that the entire brain is operating most of the time is the devastating impact even a small amount of brain damage has on a person.

Our reading from James says, however, that even if we're brain-smart, we might still be dumb; we might still do really stupid things. James talks of wisdom that is from above and wisdom that is earthbound, and he makes his remarks to Christian believers. In verse 16, James speaks of "disorder," which commentator Thorsten Moritz says "is a reference to the schizophrenic situation in which *Christians who are double-minded* find themselves. They claim possession of wisdom from above on the one hand, while on the other hand they display the fruits of wisdom from below." Earthbound, human smart isn't always very smart.

James, who was very concerned about how Christians behaved with one another in the faith community, saw that the community was fit and vigorous only when it was linked to divine wisdom. James's distinction between the two kinds of smart is especially clear in *The Message*, Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of the Bible:

It's the way you live, not the way you talk, that counts. Mean-spirited ambition isn't wisdom. Boasting that you are wise isn't wisdom. Twisting the truth to make yourselves sound wise isn't wisdom. It's the furthest thing from wisdom — it's animal cunning, devilish conniving. Whenever you're trying to look better than others or get the better of others, things fall apart and everyone ends up at the others' throats.

Real wisdom, God's wisdom, begins with a holy life and is characterized by getting along with others. It is gentle and reasonable, overflowing with mercy and blessings, not hot one day and cold the next, not two-faced. You can develop a healthy, robust community that lives right with God, and enjoy its results only if you do the hard work of getting along with each other, treating each other with dignity and honor.

When it's put that plainly, we might want to say that this so-called earthbound smarts is not smarts at all, and James acknowledges that when he says, "It's the furthest thing from wisdom -- it's animal cunning, devilish conniving." But he's meeting people where they are, where even some Christians viewed people who were getting ahead by mean-spirited boasting, twisting the truth and pitting one person against another, as cunningly wise.

It may sound strange to say that even some Christians admired such persons, but sometimes there is a begrudging admiration for the cons among us, or the bullies who get away with their behavior because of their brilliance in other ways. Steve Jobs comes to mind.

Who cannot, on some level, admire the guy. His biographer, Walter Isaacson, compares him to Thomas Edison, the "Wizard of Menlo Park," the prolific inventor of a little more than a hundred years ago. Edison was a 19th-century Steve Jobs, the Genius of Silicon Valley. Jobs changed the world we live in, as did Edison. We can't go through a single hour anymore without being affected in some way by a product Jobs created.

Yet as smart as he was, he was a beast of a human being to work with or work for. Isaacson cites colleagues, friends, family, and acquaintances, and the adjectives that come rolling off the tongue include autocratic, controlling, mercurial, temperamental, cold, absent, obsessive, distant, passionate, rebellious, and so on. He shouted, he yelled, he bad-mouthed people, he misled. He was a jerk. "Velvety diplomacy was ... not a part of his repertoire," writes Isaacson.

He was also only one of the most influential people of the past 40 years.

His mantra might be identified by the ad campaign Apple ran for some time: Think Different.

Jobs knew that for Apple to succeed, the company had to not only have a kind of smarts that was unlike its competitors', but that it had to encourage its customers to tap into their own creativity. He also spotted the wisdom in the idea that "Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication" -- a word which itself is rooted in the Greek word for wisdom, sophia.

So, isn't it true that we're sometimes in awe of people who, on the basis of their brainpower, carve out a moneymaking niche for themselves? People who think different, like

- Mark Zuckerberg launching Facebook from his college dorm room,
- jobless J. K. Rowling writing the Harry Potter series from a story idea she thought of,
- and young Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak founding Apple in Jobs's garage.

Isn't theirs a kind of wisdom that many of us envy? Or how many of us have said something like, "I wish I'd had the wisdom to invest in Apple or IBM or some other successful company when it

first started.”

What we get from our text is that Christians don't automatically get a dose of heavenly smarts. The other kind of wisdom—the world's wisdom—too often predominates in the community of faith. Commenting on this passage, Luke Timothy Johnson says that James “is addressing members of the Christian community who gather in the name of Jesus and profess the faith of the glorious Lord Jesus Christ, but whose attitudes and actions are not yet fully in friendship with God.”

Johnson is not condemning this congregation, but simply recognizing that conversion does not remove the ambiguity of life and that complete consistency “is not given by a first commitment. *It is slowly and painfully won through many conversions.*” He also says, “There is always double-mindedness, even among those who truly want to be friends of God. The wisdom from below is not easy to abandon or avoid, precisely because it is the ‘way of the world,’ inscribed not only in the language and literature of our surrounding culture but also in our very hearts.”

True story: One day, this “Bowery bum” (his description) wanders drunk as a skunk into a downtown mission. Let's call him Frank. He's come to the mission for the free dinner but stays for the service, and when the preacher issues an “altar call,” this Frank finds himself going forward, where a counselor prays with him.

Well, that night is the “big turnaround,” as Frank himself describes it. And long story short, he goes on to recover and becomes a productive member of society. And though it doesn't always happen this way, Frank doesn't drink again after his trip to the altar.

But he says that in many ways, his conversion was only a start. He felt that his sins had been forgiven, but in most ways, he was the same self-centered, profane, bigoted, uncaring person he'd been—except that now, he was attending worship services where he prayed and started listening for God. One by one, God revealed things to Frank that he needed to give up or rethink or do differently or take on if he was to continue following Jesus. Little by little, he began to make those adjustments—more conversions, if you will. He never said he had “arrived,” but he had a sense of where, and toward whom, he was headed.

The point here is not the nature of Frank's conversion, but that he didn't get zapped with divine wisdom in some firestorm of heavenly magic. The appropriation of wisdom that is from above is a lifelong learning event, and that should not discourage us, but animate us. C.S. Lewis, puts it this way using a house -- a lifelong building project -- for a metaphor:

Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what he is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on. ... But presently he starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make sense. What on Earth is he up to? The explanation is that he is building quite a different house from the one you thought of—throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers,

making courtyards. You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage; but he is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it himself.

If current brain research is correct, we're already using most of our brains each day. But that doesn't keep us from being double-minded. Maybe we're giving only 10 percent of our thinking power toward living a holy life. That doesn't disqualify us from discipleship -- but it gives us lots of room for growth ... and lots of room for Jesus to build on.