

Mind Energy – Information Flow

Our minds feel like they **flow**. Right? Mine flows off course half the time, but I'm thankful it doesn't stop flowing. So **what is it** that is flowing? In last week's Blog someone said it was Knowledge, which sounds like something you could find in an encyclopaedia. I prefer the word **Knowing** because the stuff of our mind can't quite be captured in a book. It includes many emotions and is led by the all-important **feelings** that lie just beneath our thoughts. To be healthy we must be able to recognise **patterns**, which are what we call **meaning**, and we need to be able to **share** that feeling of meaning with others.

In previous Blogs I've talked about mind forces that sound quite mysterious such as life that sings and bodies that move – 'kinaesthetic melody' and sense of agency, enthusiasm, aliveness, and so on. Energy is a feeling and we associate in with flow. The 'potential to do something' is actually a definition of energy from the world of physics that sounds quite appropriate for psychology as well. How useful are these vague concepts alongside more scientific explanations as a guide for using our minds in everyday situations? And what are some good books to read as we ponder this question?

Amongst American authors of popular neuroscience, the one I find easiest to connect with is Dan Siegel. Although he is a pioneering individual, I associate him with a larger group that builds bridges between East and West – as Kipling's 'two strong men' did 'presently' in his famous poem. I think it was Jon Kabat Zinn who first popularised a Buddhist flavour for mindfulness meditation to reduce stress. The ground-breaking Mind-Life dialogues with the Tibetan Dalai Lama (co-founded by Francisco Varela), Rick Hanson's network of speakers, Richie Davidson and others have continued this thread that I enjoy reading about though I have no proper knowledge of Buddhism myself.

The fact that Siegel has been, at least partly, a clinician – seeing real people with real problems, one on one, as doctors do – has been one thing that attracted me. Added to this is the fact that he rebelled against his early medical training at Harvard because he felt that patients were treated as objects and their subjective experience was ignored, which to him was dehumanising. One particular mentor, a paediatrician, helped him to hold on to this belief that people's minds and feelings are involved in every medical condition, yet return to his training and eventually specialise in working with young people. His early books about the way minds **develop through interactions** established him as one of the founders of what is called **interpersonal neurobiology**. These include *The Developing Mind*, *The Whole-Brain Child*, *Brainstorm - the Power and Purpose of the Teenage Brain* and others.

He coined the term *Mindsight* in another book to describe the way we use our mind to get to know about our mind – to 'monitor our internal world with more clarity and depth.' His leadership of both the Mindsight Institute and the Mindful Awareness Research Centre at UCLA, where he is a clinical professor, has made available many tools and educational programs for knowing your mind better. He has shown that what you learn from this can change the structure and function of your brain with many benefits.

However, what attracted me most about his work was the fact that he seems to regard the mind as **not simply what the brain does**, but as a process that regulates the connectedness between us, occurring both inside us and between us, and enabling what he calls **integration** of our whole being. This distinguishes him from many other neurobiologists in the US. More

specifically he says that mind is an ‘embodied, relational process that **regulates the flow of energy and information** within and between us.’ His semi-autobiographical book that describes how he developed this understanding of mind, which has parallels with my own experience, is called *Mind – A Journey to the Heart of Being Human*.

He says we learn what mind is by **combining our personal felt experience with the written descriptions of what we think happens**. This is what guides me also. In the book he starts with energy and information and develops them into self-organising systems, complexity theory and quantum probabilities that are part of his experience, but not mine. If we can’t see our own experience of mind in ‘self-organisation’ or ‘probability theory’ we are not going to learn what we need to know about our own mind or the minds of others. Theory can be helpful, but experience beats theory every time.

What I like, though, is that he gives the word, information, a much more vague meaning than it has in ‘information theory’ for computers. **It just flows along with energy** in ways that we may not even be aware of. He watched waves forming a beach as the energy in the water meets with the shifting sand and visualised in that interaction the mind that both connects us and makes us who we are. He does not try to say what energy or information are and simply uses the terms in a way that sounds intuitively reasonable for most of us. We can’t say what time and space are either. The late Irish poet, John O’Donohue was a friend of Dan’s and he quotes John, shortly before he died, saying ‘time is like fine sand in your hand’ – it slips through and you can’t hold on to it.

I omitted the words information and energy from my definition of mind because I wanted to emphasise that it is the **connectedness** itself that is essential for us to have our **individuality**. That puts the emphasis on doing everything you can to maximise the quality of your relationships (with people and with everything else), which is another way of saying: **practice love in everything you do**. It doesn’t describe what the flow of mind might be. It is more important to **feel** the flow than to know what it is. Its felt pattern will form your meaning.

The meanings we make are personal and precious, so each of us has to have our own feelings about what it is that flows every day in our mind. The important thing is to believe in that flow, to encourage it and try to sustain it at those times when it ebbs. I think it helps if you can let go of wanting to know objectively about it. It might sound surprising, but you can **call it whatever you like**. The imprecise metaphors for the life force that I mentioned earlier are not really any different from the most detailed scientific explanations, which still don’t explain what actually happens.

Thus I can recommend all of Dan Siegel’s books even though I don’t always agree with his way of explaining things. Often I do. The test is whether you can use the explanation in your own mind in a way that works well for you.

Siegel’s latest book, due out this month, is called *Aware -The Science and Practice of Presence*. I believe it is an expanded account of his well-known meditation methodology called the *Wheel of Awareness*. No doubt there is material for a future Blog.