

A Journey Through the Whole Brain

There are many reasons to love Linden Waldorf School, whether for its curriculum, community, natural materials, or progressive philosophy about media exposure. But to me, it's the sum of them that is most compelling: true whole-brain learning and development, a rare occurrence in education of any era.

Our beautiful brains evolved tens of thousands of years ago with two major functions: to look out for us, and to look after us.

The protective mode is about solving problems. Under real duress, we draw on primitive reflexes to bring ourselves to perceived safety, classically known by the instincts Fight, Flight, Freeze, and Flock. Under mere stress (which for many is, unfortunately, nearly constant) we use similarly reductionistic linear thinking—one block at a time, rather than holistically—to dissect our problematic experience and attack it with sometimes under-informed logic until we feel resolved. This mode loves measurement, evaluation, and distinction, sometimes to the point where we can't turn it off and is associated with occasions when the left brain dominates.

The nurturing mode, in which the right hemisphere takes the lead, is about nearly every other aspect of life. Rather than reflexive, it involves pausing and pondering. Rather than conceptually reductionistic, it's creative, expansive, intuitive, and highly complex. And rather than oriented to threatening problems, it addresses deeper problems, such as meaning, relationship, or paths to peace. It instinctively seeks opportunity, collaboration, inclusion, and, where possible,

play. And best of all, when it's active, we flood with dopamine, which not only feels wonderful but turns on all the learning centers of the brain. So not only do we learn and remember more when the right side is in charge (think about how much more you got from your favorite teacher of all time), but we learn at levels of sophistication, context, and enjoyment simply not available when the left side is dominant. So it is essential to living and learning in easy, happy balance.

Is this to say that linear, left-brained thinking is wrong or bad? Not at all. It's an indispensable tool for all of us. But it is to say that it makes a far better servant than a master.

After all, as the old adage goes, *When your only tool is a hammer, all the world is a nail*. When your only well-developed tool is a problem-solver, what does that make the world to you? Quite a problem. Indeed, when we are dominated by this mode of thinking, we live largely in dysregulated stress, shame, and longing, as we quietly evaluate all we see in ourselves and the world as problematic. With minimal self-awareness in this mode, we may not even pause long enough to know that we're miserable.

During childhood, when the Pause-Ponder-Plan mode of thinking is so richly available, it is essential that we remember the brain's eternal rule of thumb: *Use it or lose it*. In the same way

that language centers used early literally remain larger through adulthood, right brains cultivated early work better for life. Why? Because whatever we experience intensely or repeatedly our brains will physically change to accommodate.

Sadly, the growing trend in American education is in favor of developing left-brain dominance as soon as

the other hand, experience something very different. Going beyond occasional forays into "creative modules," whole-brain integration is constantly infused into learning all day. Math is taught with movement and rhythm; letters, with drawings and stories; music notation, with touch and interaction; biology, with outdoor cultivation; and subjects of every kind, with children writing, and illustrating their own lesson books so that

the information becomes their own. Meanwhile, through natural materials, teacher continuity, and collaborative (not competitive) learning, minds are soothed, not threatened, so they function expansively not reactively. The process is remarkable, and the results, phenomenal. Linden's eighth graders are highly recruited (lauded by one private school as "the kids we see with light left in

their eyes..."); they not only know the material they should but still love school and learning. Not surprisingly, they thrive in public and private schools alike and return in droves to Linden events. They actually like it here.

But best of all, Waldorf students are prepared not only for successful performance at the next academic level, but for greater balance, awareness, and enjoyment of life itself well beyond school-aged years. Isn't that the whole point of education? Think about it—from both sides of your brain.

— B. Dodge Rea, PsyD, Linden parent, is a clinical psychologist in private practice here in Nashville. He recommends the collective work of Dan Siegel, PhD, and the book *The Master and His Emmissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* by Iain McGilchrist for those who'd like to read further.



possible (a major mistake, in my opinion) and at all costs. Even with caring, well-meaning faculty, children go to school in largely stressful situations, sitting in rows under threat of punishment or embarrassment, consuming information bit by bit, under pressure to perform on timed essays or standardized tests, and typically with minimal rest, play, or creative collaboration. It's the perfect recipe for Elephantiasis of the Left-Brain. That is, it trains protection-based dominance nearly all day, while starving the processing mode that is meant to be developed first so it can remain in charge for life. Is it any wonder our culture is so reactive, defensive, and disconnected?

Waldorf students, on