

BOOK REPORT

Anatomy of the Soul

by Curt Thompson

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Summary of the Book

Anatomy of the Soul, published in 2010 and authored by psychiatrist Curt Thompson, is a book about how recent discoveries in neuroscience can help people understand biblical spirituality to transform their lives and find joy.

After the author heard psychiatrist Daniel Siegel teach that the brains of both teller and listener actually change when someone empathically listens to another person tell his life story, he developed a clinical approach based on a process of becoming known. Focusing on 'knowing things' about people instead of on 'being known,' can result in tiredness, depression, and anxiety.

Dr. Thompson says we have no mind apart from our brains and bodies. The right-left model of the brain emphasizes how spatial and emotional perception occurs in the right hemisphere; while linear, logical, and linguistic thinking occurs in the left hemisphere. The top-down model describes how the social, linguistic, and creative functioning of the higher neocortex layer, including the prefrontal cortex (PFC) that sets us apart as humans, interacts with limbic layer that has unconscious memory of fear and pleasure, which in turn interacts with the lower brain stem and cerebellum that controls things like breathing and balance. Systems, like the sympathetic system that readies us for defense, transcend both hemispheres and multiple top-down layers.

The prefrontal cortex (PFC) is the part of the brain that focuses the brain's attention. It's important to pay attention to what we are paying attention to, because to ignore parts of the brain's communication is to miss God's work in us. Memories are patterns of firings in brain cells. Each time we remember something, we have the

opportunity to reevaluate our past, and thus reimagine our future. Intentionally remembered autobiographical memories are a major element of change, which is why the Bible presents much of its teaching in story form. They help us integrate our emotions into the linear stories of our lives, so we are able to relate to God and other people.

If our initial primary care giver consistently responded to our needs and provided safety, we developed a pattern of attachment that let us feel safe to explore the world. If not, then we become adults that are unable to tell our stories in an emotionally colorful yet linearly coherent way, and handle conflict with others in a healthy manner. However, adults can still rewire their brains with the help of another person who allows us to feel felt when we share our autobiographical stories.

The PFC is the meeting place where the brain is integrated. Body attunement, autobiographical narratives, feeling felt, aerobic activity, focused attention exercises, novel learning experiences, and spiritual disciplines such as meditation, prayer, fasting, study, and confession are strategies to help our PFC's integrate painful emotional experiences and memories. Biblical sin is dis-integration, and biblical redemption is re-integration. Rupture of interpersonal relationships and isolation is the result of sin, and repair is through a renewed mind.

Dr. Thompson says the resurrection is the height of repair, and that confession to others is necessary to avoid unnecessary emotional burdens. Just as the brain is a complex system of connection and independence, where each part is different but valuable; even so we cannot reach the maturity of love and fully integrated PFC's apart from the community in which we are mindful of being minded by others.

Insights and Questions

There has to be some truth and value to Dr. Thompson's insights because of experiences like those of the person he called Roger. Roger said he had no traumas in his past, but was not good at describing his emotions, and was raised in a family that didn't talk about their emotions. Dr. Thompson had him perform a relaxation technique where he focused his attention on different parts of his body to listen to what his body was telling him, and he suddenly remembered seeing his younger brother being hit and killed by a car. Revisiting that memory allowed him to begin using his emotional right brain again.

I was especially impressed with Dr. Thompson's insight that the Bible presents many of its teachings as narratives, similar to shared memories, like the Passover observances that include the tastes and smells of the bitter herbs and other foods. This activates autobiographical recall, experiential vs. cold fact recall, that allows awareness of self across the time of the past, present, and projected future. "This becomes your history, your narrative. You construct your understanding of the world and your place in it through the lens of your own story."¹

Dr. Thompson says it's not possible for a person whose parents did not help him develop 'secure attachment,' to later gain secure attachment without an empathetic third party. No one can "alter their attachment patterns or orientations by themselves. ... Remember, there is no such thing as an individual brain. Transformation requires a collaborative interaction, with one person empathically listening and responding to the other so that the speaker has the experience, perhaps for the first time, of feeling felt by

¹ Curt Thompson, M.D., *Anatomy of the Soul: Surprising Connections between Neuroscience and Spiritual Practices That Can Transform Your Life and Relationships*, (Tyndale House Publishers), 77, Kindle Edition.

another.”² But the stories of the Bible provide a surrogate for an empathetic third party. And the Bible stories become part of our own story. “One reason many people find Scripture to be so regenerative is that, fundamentally, it is a story—one told by many different voices. All of its authors were confronted by a Person. ... Each storyteller was changed by that other Voice.”³

I’ve been witnessing to an agnostic for some time, and he is irritated by the Bible’s story of God’s relationship with man, and only wants to focus on the morality of the Bible. But Dr. Thompson says that “simply reading the Ten Commandments as a list of dos and don’ts has so little efficacy,”⁴ for many people and issues, that the stories and poetry of the Bible are effective in addressing, because that integrate the various parts of our brains.

I think the biggest problems I have with the book relate to Dr. Thompson’s failure to address the relationship of the spirits and souls of men, to the physical brains of men. I understand that such considerations are beyond the scope of neurology, but leaving such questions unaddressed reduces the usefulness of the book when it tries to define biblical concepts like sin and regeneration, because those concepts probably refer mostly to the spirits and souls of men, rather than the physical brains they make use of and interact with.

² *Ibid.*, 137.

³ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 150.

Relevance to Anthropology, Hamartiology, and Soteriology

My personal viewpoint on the composition of men is that our souls are the seat of our will and emotions, our spirit is the seat of logic because “what ... knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him,” 1 Cor. 2:11, and our bodies are part of the physical world. And that this matches up with the trinity, where God the Father is the primary person who wills and has emotions, the Holy Spirit is the primary seat of logic, “For what ... knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him? even so the things of God knoweth [none], but the Spirit of God,” 1 Cor. 2:11, and the Son is the person of God primarily manifest in the physical world.

Nevertheless, each part of man and each person of God can also perform the other functions that is not their primary function in order to be able to relate to the other parts of persons. So it makes sense that although the body of man is not the primary place of will, emotions, and logic; the physical brain would have some capacity of emotions in the left hemisphere, to be able to relate to the soul, and some capacity of logic to be able to relate to the spirit.

Dr. Thompson defines the results of sin as being “separated from God, ... separated from others, and ... separation between different elements of your own mind; ... disconnection, dis-integration, and a host of other ideas that are also used in neuroscience and attachment theory.”⁵ And he links regeneration with “the healing, or integration, of the mind; ... be transformed by the renewing of your mind. ... Romans 12:1-2,”⁶ I think

⁵ *Ibid.*, 183.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 184.

this fails to address the relationship of the soul and spirit to the physical brain and its parts.

As far as I'm concerned, the renewing of the mind Paul spoke of in Romans 12 referred to the spirit of man being legally freed from the master of sin, "our old man is [legally] crucified with him [via union with Messiah], ... that henceforth we should not serve sin. For he that is dead is freed [emancipated] from sin. ... They that are after the flesh do mind the things of the flesh; but they that are after the Spirit the things of the Spirit," (Rom. 6:6-7; 8:5). So, I can't put much stock into Dr. Thompson's observations about sin and regeneration, but I think his investigation into biblical neurology provides a valuable start, and I look forward to further research that gives more recognition to the immaterial part of man and the limitations of a material-only view of man.