

Acts 2: 1-4 & 12-21
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“By the Power of the Holy Spirit Part II: Fire in the Gulch!”

Yes this is part two of a sermon that I gave all the way back in August. You may recall that one included stories of Geese and a recommendation to wear crash helmets to church. Today’s message is inspired by a sermon given by Vern Rempel of First Menno in Denver (full sermon at: <http://www.fmcdenver.org>). His sermon was based on an article in the June 28th issue of the New Yorker magazine called, “The Eureka Hunt, Why do good ideas come to us when they do?” by Jonah Lehrer (pp. 40-45). But before I get into how recent brain research relates to the Holy Sprt let me tell you a story.

The summer of 1949 was long and dry, and the afternoon of August 5th was the hottest ever in the state Montana. The fire was spotted in a remote area of Mann Gulch, a valley, like those west of town that lead from the prairie into the mountains. The fire was small and on the timber side of the gulch when the smoke jumpers plane took off. But by the time they had parachuted into the canyon the blaze was out of control. With the wind

blowing the fire away from them on the other side of the gulch, Wag Dodge, the group's leader, directed his men down the grassy slope. Suddenly the wind changed directions and the fire jumped the gulch and began to close in on the firefighters at 700 feet per minute. The men dropped their packs and began running up the steep canyon wall.

Thirteen men did not escape, but one man did, Wag Dodge. Dodge survived the blaze because he stopped running. One thing became clear to Wag, he could not out run the fire, and as he found himself suddenly staring at a wall of flame 50 feet tall and 300 feet deep he also had a remarkable moment of insight. He lit a match and ignited the grass above him. He then stepped into the shadow of the fire he had started, which quickly became a growing buffer of burned land. He then wet a handkerchief with his canteen, and clutching it to his mouth he laid down in the smoldering embers. He closed his eyes and as he breathed the thin layer of oxygen near the ground he waited for the fire to pass over him. After a few terrifying minutes, Dodge walked out, virtually unscathed.

Jonah Lehrer, tells this story and then asks the critical question, "where do insights like this come from?" What Lehrer outlines, as he summarizes the work of several neuroscientists and brain theorists, is that there is a physiology of insight and it is remarkable, elegant, and amazing. What

researcher's call "the insight experience" goes something like this: first a problem is posed, for Dodge, it was an urgent problem of a killer fire approaching fast. For others, the problem might be how to reduce inventory overhead, or the best way to keep second graders engaged in SS class.

So a problem gets the brain going but before there can be a breakthrough, there needs to be an impasse (a mental block). And then the remarkable sometimes happens: an insight arrives as if out of thin air. And with it, generally, there is a great sense of certainty. As Wage Dodge explained it- what he did just seemed logical.

As a result of very recent work, combining the use of fMRI and EEG scans, researches have begun to be able to watch this "insight experience" literally light up the brain. First a problem was posed to an individual wired for observation. The subject would struggle with the problem and often fail to find a solution. But when the puzzle was solved, the person's eyes would often go wide, and sometimes they would even say "aha." All that was lacking was the light bulb appearing above their head. But here's the really cool thing: there was a light bulb, of sorts, lighting up in the brain. In the 300 milliseconds before the "aha" there would be a spike of gamma rhythm, which is the highest electrical frequency generated by the brain. Gamma rhythm is thought to arise from something called the "binding" of

neurons, as cells across the cortex draw themselves into a new network, which can then enter consciousness. This gamma shower in the brain is the light bulb and as Lehrer says, "It's as if the insight had gone incandescent."

What happens, in a rough summary is this, and it's a right brain thing. The anterior superior temporal gyrus, a small fold of tissue in the right hemisphere of the brain, becomes unusually active in the seconds before insight is declared. This activity is marked by a surge of electricity leading to a rush of blood. This marks the organizing of the new neural network. Now in the right brain, the nerve cells are longer with more spines which means that the cells can more quickly search a larger cortical area, bringing diverse and far-ranging resources into play. These nerve cells are less precise than the left brain but they are better connected. That is the light bulb switching on in the brain.

And here's another cool thing, it is amazing but you recognize it as something you already know, this process works best when one relaxes. As the author points out, that's why, so many insights happen in the shower or while we are laying in bed. The greatest limitation to the insight process is that our mornings are usually too rushed, as we jump out of bed to get ourselves and the kids ready and out the door. In actuality we do some of our

best thinking when we're still half asleep, while the drowsy brain is unwound and disorganized, and open to to all sorts of unconventional ideas.

Of course insight can happen literally "under fire" as it did for Wag Dodge in the Mann Gulch tragedy (and with second graders in SS). But even for him, insight did not come until he stopped focussing on trying to outrun the fire. The best path to letting those well-connected long nerve cells that aren't as precise but sure know how to bring together new and unexpected brain resources is to relax and let the brain work.

One final elegant and amazing thing about the brain is that it appears that the prefrontal cortex of the brain orchestrates the brain like a symphony conductor. What this means is that the brain will work on the problem while we're no longer thinking about it. Those long, less-precise, but well-connected nerve cells in the right brain hemisphere are being directed to fire right along, making connections while we go on with our day. Sometimes, they then reveal their answer that evening in the shower, or the next morning while the head is still on the pillow. As other parts of the brain send it information the prefrontal cortex recognizes the correct answer and fires it into consciousness. Lehrer says it is as if, "We suddenly notice the music that has been playing all along." Our job then, most of the time, is to get out of they way and let the brain do its thing!

And this brings me to the key insight from Vern's sermon and that is, the Holy Spirit is the brains of the operation! In his message he called the HS the brain of the MSMC. I will label the Holy Spirit as the brain of our congregation and as he also stated, "she knows far more than we do!" And not only is the Holy Spirit the "brain," but I believe we are also on the brink of insight. Why do I think this? First of all, because we have some major problems posed for us. Our church has always been on the small side and we have been struggling recently to find folks to fill all the leadership roles we need. We also seemed to not be able to keep and maintain our young adults. We also have many questions regarding our identity and our relevance. Who are the Mennonites today? Does this movement matter any more? Does the whole idea of following Christ in life still make sense in the modern world? If so, what are we going to do about it here in FC?

We have our wonderful a cappella singing, but that's a cultural aesthetic which is wonderful. But it is tied to is something achingly profound and that is the possibilities arising from a tradition long devoted to rejection of war in a world still addicted to war. Iraq, Iran, and Afghanistan are just the edge of something- new global relationships are the real story. Will they be horribly stained by violence or will we find pathways toward new global communities?

Mennonites do have some skills here and others have been noticing this. One is the international speaker and writer, Greg Boyd (one of those increasingly complex and interesting evangelicals). He writes in his blog: "There is a beautiful and powerful grassroots Kingdom movement arising all over the globe that Mennonites in particular need to notice. Millions of people are abandoning the Christendom paradigm of the traditional Christian faith in order to become more authentic followers of Jesus. From the Emergent Church movement to the Urban Monastic Movement to a thousand other independent groups and movements, people are waking up to the truth that the Kingdom of God looks like Jesus and that the heart of Christianity is simply imitating him. Millions are waking up to the truth that followers of Jesus are called to love the unlovable, serve the oppressed, live in solidarity with the poor, proclaim Good News to the lost and be willing to lay down our life for our enemies. Multitudes are waking up to the truth that the distinctive mark of the Kingdom is the complete rejection of all hatred and violence and the complete reliance on love and service of others, including our worst enemies. Masses of people are waking up to the truth that followers of Jesus aren't called to try to win the world by acquiring power over others but by exercising power under others — the power of self-sacrificial love.

What many who are being caught up in this movement lack is a sense of tribal identity and historical rooting, and many are looking for this. A central feature of post-modernity is the longing to “live in a story” that’s bigger than oneself. Many, therefore, are looking for a tradition they can align with. The only tradition that embodies what this rising breed of Kingdom radicals is looking for is the Anabaptist tradition (which the Mennonites are heir to). This is the only tradition that consistently refused political power and violence. This is the only tradition that made humble, self-sacrificial love the centerpiece of what it means to follow Jesus. It’s the only tradition that isn’t soaked in blood and the only tradition that looks remotely like Jesus... This tradition is a treasure to be cherished. And it’s a tradition whose time may have come, for this is precisely the vision of the Kingdom that millions today are waking up to.”

Tom Sine in an article in June 3rd’s, *The Mennonite* also speaks at length on several other movements not only in N. American but around the world that are finding inspiration from the Anabaptist tradition. Most of them with out any assistance from the Mennonites.

Wow... It is a lot to think about, and it's also hard to think about. For one thing, we're just not that good! We've let ourselves be beneficiaries of power and war even while not actively engaging in it. And we have a his-

tory of male dominance and the usual domestic abuse and violence to answer for that is the common heritage of all faiths. And our footing is very unsure as we walk out of our rural roots and into urban centers. I also wonder what I have to offer and challenged to live out this tradition.

I think these folks in the story that we read from Acts this morning, are frightened, maybe cause they too are facing a crisis. It wasn't a wall of fire like in Mann Gulch but the flames were dancing around their heads. What's happening? Do they run or stand still? Then Peter starts talking about prophesy, visions and dreams! And its so amazing and remarkable- a radical equality for women and slaves! And its an elegant promise of future crisis, with fire, smoke, blood red moons and stars falling from the sky!

But the Spirit; amazing, elegant, remarkable, like the brain, is working it out searching for the solution and just about ready to go incandescent. But she works more efficiently when we relax and open ourselves to unconventional ideas and frankly- get out of the way! Maybe a warm shower or a nap is in order? After all a problem is not merely "a problem" but it is the first stage in gaining insight. And an impasse is not merely a block to progress, but the necessary step prior to a breakthrough. So don't worry, relax, the Holy Spirit is working it out- ready to go incandescent! And once the light goes on the insight will even come with a sense of cer-

tainty. So step back so you can see it light up, listen carefully and you too may just recognize the tune and realize that the Sprit has been playing the song all along!