

Use Your Head!

Twenty A

Are big brains smarter than small ones? Not necessarily. But large or small, the brain of the apostle Paul came up with some crazy ideas.

Some people ought to have their heads examined.

That's a sentiment most of us have had from time to time in our less charitable moments.

But, of course, heads get examined all the time — in hospital labs, ERs and clinics.

Used to be that heads were examined, not for the presence of brain wave activity or tumors, but to predict a person's future occupation and other personality traits. Now, a new book takes a look at that long-abandoned practice.

In his book, *Postcards from the Brain Museum*, Brian Burrell, explores the bizarre history of phrenology, whereby people attempted to determine the sources of genius and depravity by studying the actual physical properties of the

head and when possible, the brain. While phrenology has long been discredited as a pseudo-science, the basic premise is still part of a greater debate. How much can we learn about people by examining this endlessly enigmatic organ?

Our interest in brains has given way to the collecting of them. That's why we know that English poet Lord Byron's brain weighs an amazing six pounds. Compare that poundage to the relatively — no pun — small size of Einstein's brain, or Walt Whitman's.

Brain collecting is not limited to the gray matter of poets and scientists. In the former Soviet Union, KGB were stationed around the clock to guard Lenin's brain.

According to neuroscientists, the human brain is the single most complex object in the universe, and also the most mysterious. If this is the case — and it is — then the brain of the apostle Paul clearly warranted examination.

His brain, and that of a faithful Christian, doesn't function like other brains. Witness his words in the text. How do you explain the perspective and

value system described here unless you offer the caveat that, “Well, we’re going to have to get inside Paul’s head to understand this”?

What would cause a person to embrace suffering and celebrate selflessness? When Paul wrote to the Philippians from his prison cell, “For me, to live is Christ and to die is gain” (1:21), clearly, he needed his head examined.

Let’s take a moment to get inside Paul’s head.

“To live is Christ.” Paul spent too many years of his life, prior to his conversion, focused on his own agenda. He was an oppressor. He was a persecutor. He was feared by believers everywhere. He believed that to kill an idea, you had to kill those embracing the idea. After taking a tumble on the Damascus road, Paul’s eyes were opened. He went through a total brain drain and was never the same. And along the way he learned that life is not just about living — it’s about being transformed. For him, it was all about serving Jesus Christ.

“To die is gain.” Paul’s not depressed. He’s not suicidal. Granted, as he was writing his letter he’s under house arrest with less freedom that

Martha Stewart on a bad day. He's on to something much more profound. "I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far" (1:23).

This is a totally counter intuitive mentality, one that flies in the face of conventional wisdom. Our brains tell us that this life is all there is. We'll do what we can to preserve it. Nothing wrong with that — unless it clouds our vision of eternal realities.

There are a number of reasons why Paul says that dying is a plus, a positive. Of course, death would free him from pain and suffering. But there is no suggestion here that he would seek assistance to end it, or do anything to end his own life prematurely. He is simply stating the obvious: death can be a positive thing.

Think back about seven months. You might remember some press reports about gonzo journalist Hunter S. Thompson's suicide. Suffering from cancer — in fear and loathing — he took a shotgun and went out in a blaze of glory. The press played it up. He came off as some sort of maverick hero.

On the same front pages were articles about Pope John Paul II's ongoing struggle with Parkinson's. He had only weeks to live — but he lived them.

That's the difference between a spiritually challenged brain, and a spiritually enhanced brain. For the one, living was Self, and death was the easy way out. For the other, living was the Savior, and death was a hard way out, but a glorious way out when it came.

But death for Paul was more than release from pain and suffering. It also meant union with Christ. The death of the body, which in Greek philosophical circles was regarded as the prison-house of the soul, meant release into the presence of the Lord. (For more, see 2 Corinthians 5:1-10.)

And speaking of the Greek Platonic mind, Paul understood that this life is a sunset; the afterlife is the sunrise. In a very real sense, Paul anticipated with considerable excitement his departure from the temporal world of unreality to the eternal world of reality.

That's the way his brain was thinking.

But — his thinking is tempered by other considerations. He's also thinking of others. ("It is more necessary for you that I remain in the body") (1:24). The needs of the community compel Paul. He wants their "joy in faith" to be increased (1:25). This new thinking turns standard logic on its own head. He does what he does for others, not for himself. He continues, not because he has personal needs left unmet, but because others have needs unmet.

It doesn't matter what he *personally* wants for himself. What matters is what God wants. Once he recognizes that it will be better for the people that he stay alive, what Paul wants is beside the point. It may seem better to die and be with Christ, yet it is more important to remain in this life in order to serve the people (1:23-24). This is what Paul refers to as the "high calling of God" toward which he presses on until he reaches the prize (3:14).

Let's be clear about this. Biologically speaking, the brain of the Christian is no different from the cerebral cortex of anyone else — research about our brains being hard-wired for God notwithstanding.

Examine our heads and you'll notice no difference. They come in all shapes and sizes. *As Postcards from the Brain Museum* reminds us, the size and physical properties of a brain do not reveal anything about intelligence or demeanor.

All the same, Christians often seem a little off, or "touched" as they used to say. We are sometimes perceived as not thinking straight.

So was Paul really out of his mind? Are Christians crazy? If Paul's confidence had no foundation, we could certainly break out the straightjacket for him. Embracing suffering is not crazy. For in doing so, we share in Christ's suffering. Paul says, "For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well"(1:29).

Of course, tell this to a person living in the 21st century. Our threshold for tolerating pain diminishes with every generation. Comfort replaces true security. We need to get out of our mind and adopt the mind of Christ.

When we do, we will learn that *joy comes from*

genuine community. Suffering causes us to turn inwards, often in selfish ways that does not honor Christ. Sharing life with genuine community invites us to participate with others, and gives us perspective beyond our own needs. We find our joy, not in isolation, but within the community of Christ.

As in The Wizard of Oz, Aunty Em is looking for Dorothy, as she is trying to get back home, “Dorothy, Dorothy, where are you?” This week I counted the names of inactive members in this church, 50, 60 70 families and I want to say to them, “Dorothy, Glucinda, Tinman, Cowardly Lion, where are you? And I want to ask you who are here today, “When was it that you did a crazy thing and called upon these whom you know and said to them, “I challenge you to come with me and find God in Trinity Church!”

We need to learn that *there's value in losing our minds*. We're not asked to drain our brains, but to adopt a new mindset, the mind of Christ. And Paul goes into more specific detail in the verses that follow (2:1-11)

Sooooooooo... What kind of brains do we have? How long has it been since someone has said,

“Have you lost your mind?” and meant it as a compliment — sort of? The people of history who have made a difference, have been people who refused to think like everyone else. Their vision was larger, their compassion greater, the perspective wide-ranging.

“To live is Christ. To die is gain.” That’s a life motto for all of us. AMEN