

SHARPENING THE AGING BRAIN : WHETTING THE WHEREWITHAL By John Basinger

The aging brain exists in an aging body. The two work in tandem. The Greek saying that I have followed is: a sound mind in a sound body. Follows a list of things I have done and continue doing and why.

MEMORIZING

For years performing with the National Theater of the Deaf, I worked with deaf actors presenting poetry in sign and speech. Motion and speech. Placing signs in space and speaking at the same time reinforces the artistry of the presentation, but it also aids the recall process since both mind and body are simultaneously involved. Muscle memory is part of the process. Later I used these practices when I began memorizing Paradise Lost. That more or less daily process went like this: I go to the gym, get on an exercycle, open the poem and begin pedaling and speaking (sotto voce---muscle memory re the lips, tongue, jaws, diaphragm and the like) and repeating about 7 lines of text. In 15 minutes I have the new stuff down. The next 15 minutes I review the previous 7 lines and connect them. Up to 30 minutes of easy pedaling. Then i go to the weight machines, select light loads and then spend 15 minutes on the various machines exercising different areas of the body while reciting the 14 lines of poetry. About 7 different machines, about 7 times reciting the 14 lines. Done for the day. The next session is a repeat. So it went. I later learned from John Seamon, a psychologist at Wesleyan University who specializes in memory research that this pattern I fell into is pretty much standard for memorizers. I capsulized the process this way; DO AS LITTLE AS YOU CAN AS OFTEN AS YOU CAN. The big thing is consistency. So, never try to do too much at a time. On days I didn't want to memorize, I wanted to work out, so i went to the gym and did both. On days i didn't want to exercise, I went to the gym to memorize and did both. Other than that I would drill the memorized material in checkout lines bouncing lightly on my feet. While driving, ticking off syllables with my fingers. While taking a walk. While waiting in a doctor's office. Before falling asleep. Does this sharpen my brain? I believe that my natural tendency to talk a lot is enhanced by mastering Milton's thought processes and language. I do feel that sometimes I am able to feel more size in my thinking. Not always, but sometimes. Of course having memorized Paradise Lost, I can move through that enormous cathedral as I will. What a thrill. It must be like conductors who have memorized the scores to symphonies, cantatas---and have that music sound in their minds. I remember one time hearing Moussorgsky's Pictures at an Exhibition in a dream. The full symphonic thing. My God. What fantastic experiences the brain/mind is capable of. I continue to memorize bits and pieces of things. Most recently, the presidents. The top 25 women's basketball teams. They shift so that makes it a bit challenging. The key to remembering where you put your keys is to follow a mindful regime. Talk out loud to yourself as you do things: I put my keys in my back pocket. I am going upstairs to brush my teeth. Generally your short term memory works pretty well if the thought has been audibly articulated. Often I neglect to articulate. C'est la vie.

EXERCISING

In a manner of speaking, all of our daily activities is exercise. But being mindful can enhance this process. When i go to the supermarket I park as far away as I can. The times (all too frequent) when i forget to take my green bag with me!!! I turn around and walk back to the car. Only this time I walk mindfully. I straighten up a little, lengthen my stride a bit, plant my heels firmly and consciously breath more deeply. Found exercise time is what i call it. This can happen anyplace. If you are walking down Main Street, do the same thing for half the block. At home I practice a little inefficiency going up and down stairs, increasing the number of trips a bit and mindfully plant my feet and thrust upward. Sometimes. Any household task can be a mini-exercise moment if approached mindfully. Sweeping. Vacuuming. Mopping. Picking things up around the house and putting them away

can be choreographed into a dance. If you speak as you do it, you create a performance piece. Of course, engaging in a program of exercise is great. But the big thing is to keep it short enough so that you don't not go because you just can't face it. I trick myself by saying, I'll just go for 5 minutes. And I exercise in my street clothes so i don't have the task of dressing and undressing and all that. And of course the 5 minutes becomes 10. Or maybe 15. But rarely longer. I don't want to raise the bar so high that it is psychologically daunting to just go the gym and do it. My guiding mantra is "Do as little as you can as often as you can." On days you just can't or just don't want to face it, then don't. Go the next day. Does this all sharpen my brain? I know when leaving the gym and walking to the car, i feel more sprightly than when having entered it. And I know that exercise does bathe the brain with blood. So, yes. Another found exercise moment comes when heating my coffee in the microwave. About 60-90 seconds of time during which i exercise calf muscles by raising up and down on the toes of one foot a bunch of times until fatigue forces me to switch to the other one. Or when waiting at the cash register in the drug store. Or hurrying back downstairs to put money in the parking meter which I should have done when I parked there 45 minutes ago. But I'm back now and didn't find a ticket under the wiper blade.

LUMOSITY

Most everybody has heard of it. I was given a year's subscription as a gift from a friend. Since then I've kept it going. Based on neuroscience, these games are grouped into 5 categories: Memory. Attention. Speed. Flexibility. Problem Solving. Each session consists of 5 short games, 1 from each category. Your results are fed back immediately and are factored in with previous sessions so you can mark your progress. A session lasts maybe 15 or so minutes. Does it help sharpen my brain? Maybe yes. I believe so. So at least i have the Placebo effect going for me. I do mindfully use the attention games in conjunction with my driving. While driving, I imagine that it is a lumosity game, and I track the traffic as if it were a game. I find that helps my concentration. Not all the time, but usually when in heavy traffic, etc. There are other brain training regimes advertised on line. I suppose that all of them do some good. I also do crossword puzzles and other things like cryptics and puns and anagram puzzles. I also love the daily jumbled word puzzles in the newspaper. The interesting thing about lumosity is that you can compare your performance with people from other age groups. I am in the 75 to 99 year old group. By now I have a graph that shows my progress over nearly 3 years. The value of this will be to see when and at what rate the curves begin to slope downward!!!

SPONTANEITY AND IMPULSE

Turing postulated that if you have a conversation, say like in a chat room with a machine, and it is just like any other respondent, then the machine is consciously intelligent. That maybe so. Though my Turing test would be a bit different. We know computers can write poetry and compose music. But does a computer choose to read poetry and listen to music. Well, maybe such a machine has its equivalents to those self absorptions. But I doubt it. So what? Well, music, poetry, dance, theater, fiction, storytelling and the like are activities that depend upon spontaneity and impulse. What you have that separates you from a Turing robot, I believe is impulse. That sudden little devil that in certain contexts comes out of nowhere and would have you do God knows what. Curse, sing, but for sure, that impulse is telling a contextual truth. And as such it is the artist's gold. All art is born of impulse. And spontaneity is the way it pops out. Yield to it. Will it sharpen your brain? Hey, it is the manifestation that your brain is already sharp. Sharp enough to pierce right through a given context to that something you, your mind, your body, your emotions has come up with and needs at that instant. It might be perfectly germane to the moment. It might be wildly non pc. But for sure it is your truth. Every single brush stroke on the canvas of your life is a choice based upon an impulse. Unless you are painting by the numbers. And even then you can suddenly slip over the line. What fun.

PLAY THE DEVIL'S ADVOCATE

This is very important for artists, but actually important for anyone seeking to honor Socrates' thought that the unexamined life is not worth living. What better way to examine your belief and behavior system than by play the devil's advocate, challenging your comfortable structure with counter examples or wretched world views that make you want to vomit. But in art, especially in theater this practice pops up naturally. Often one is obliged as an actor to render truthfully a character whose actions or choices are not yours, whose inferred beliefs are not yours. It is not unlike debate where you represent a side you don't like and, to win the debate, savagely attack the one who is advancing the position you hold dear. Sometimes storytellers fall in love with a particular story and in telling, smother it with verbal caresses. The antidote to this tendency is to approach the story with a cynical sneer in your voice, as if saying, "can you believe this crap?" If the story genuinely works, soon enough it will oblige you to shift your tone. The resultant approach will be a much more balanced and believable presentation. Playing the devil's advocate of course does sharpen your brain.

LEARN SOMETHING NEW

It is the case, MRI scans assure us, that aging brains can generate new neurons to accompany learned activities. So, if you want to sharpen your brain, undertake learning how to do something you have not already mastered. Following my own advice I have learned to juggle three balls. I have not yet seriously aimed at 4. This is good hand and eye practice. Or start in with a musical instrument. Maybe not the pipe organ. It involves hand motions, brain hand and ear coordination, learning how to read music. All at a modest level, but new knowledge and hence new neurons grow. Or begin rock hunting. Or collecting leafs. Or coins. Or stamps. Or assembling a pre-fabricated kit. Or volunteer in a local hospital, arts center, church. Do whatever takes you into a relatively new area. It doesn't have to be uncomfortable, though that may be an initial feeling that dissipates as the activity becomes familiar. Of course, if I were to practice what I preach, I would begin to seriously address all this g--d--- new communication technology that I avoid lest like the sorcerer's apprentice I find myself drowning in a sea of increasingly less comprehensible information.

SEMI-FINAL THOUGHTS AND OTHER LIES

I didn't stress the word Narrative and should have. Creating a narrative can be the Mary Poppins spoon full of sugar that makes the medicine go down. How so? Well, oops, now I have to produce a rationale. Okay. Suppose the medicine is a physical task. That one is pretty easy. I have already mentioned turning mindless vacuuming into a dance, and the machine itself your partner. And I tell you from experience that is truly transformative. Fatigue disappears. Time flies. You can dress up the performance by visualizing the crowd watching you, by hearing in the dense harmonics and overtones of the vacuum something of Phillip Glass's music, or if that is a bad choice, imagine some avant garde compose, perhaps yourself, putting out there some found "sound." And so forth. If the medicine is a mental thing, that might be a bit more challenging. Let's see. A math professor once said to the class that some mathematicians find it helpful, that he finds it helpful when confronting a difficult problem to get angry at it. Not symbolically angry in principle, but actually let the problem have it. Yell at it. Throw the problem on the floor. Stamp on it. Maybe write it down and a separate piece of paper and ball it up and throw it. Or tear it to bits. Get your inner "Baby Mad!!" act going. Oh, I have sometimes stood on my head when trying to recall something that just won't come. It has worked. And once it certainly wowed a room full of people. How is that a narrative? The mental problem is objectified as a physical thing---eg a piece of paper that then is 'solved' by getting a real thumping if it doesn't yield up its secret, maybe. Another way of sharpening things mentally is to lie. I did actually accuse myself of lying during the session last Friday. And I do lie. But of course we all do. I lie to myself frequently, well not mortal sin lies, usually, just kind of daydream lies mostly that cast me or my activities in a warmer light than they might deserve in actual fact. Here's an example. I construct a fantasy in which I achieve things I could actually never do. And I feel great for that brief time of mingling with the immortals who have in fact done them. On the negative side, I do vacillate between being sure that I am brilliant and being abysmally certain that I am a cretin. Or even worse, that I am a despicable human being. Those are great stones against which to whet your wits. It is usually, for me, a particular painful recollection that ambushes me. I actually physically wince, double over and groan and utter, my god what a wretch you are. Unworthy to

live. Go. Die. Now. Spare the world any more of your...whatever! How does this sharpen the brain? Actually I don't know. But here is what I think. We are told to let go of negativity. Be positive. Visualize success. Visualize beauty. No, I will argue. A lot of life is actually unbearable horror. For some actual suffering. For others who contemplate that, a sinking into blackness. But still life goes on. Note here a bit of devils advocating. It is not just metaphorically true that out of mud grow roses. Grab beauty in the form of a rose and you get a painful handful of blood. But you have the beauty in your hand. If the ugliness is internal, I can say that the self-hate that characterizes some of those moments of wretched recall is actually, for me, a spur to keep on going. Since the only sane response to self-hate is suicide, the decision to continue living is to approach the next thing that you must do with renewed commitment to life. Well, that sounds all nice and uplifting. It might even be a little bit true. Wherein is self-hate a lie? Because it is of course an exaggeration, I suspect, for most of us who fall prey to it. But, wallow in a lie and the truth must finally emerge. I postulate. How does that sharpen the brain? The brain is the Calder-like mobile of moving "parts" in which our lives are conducted, in a manner of speaking. And if it takes a wallow or two to solve a life-wrenching lurch, well, that suggests that the wallow is a useful tool. Now I am just rambling. Enough. Let me finish on a positive note. All life is a narrative and like a storyteller, we have the power to shape its flow. It may work out to be a black comedy, a tragedy or a farce, or maybe like a day after the carnival leaves town, but we can make it feel our input, feel our will, feel our desire, feel our love. And as I look at the squirrels in my yard, I am pretty sure that my ups and downs are not going to trouble them overmuch. Finally the thrust of creation uses us all. See you all one day at the Great Whetstone in the sky.