

Dialogue With My Daughter: Part IV

Emotion v. Reason

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<http://mccue.cc/bob/spirituality.htm>

A few people have contacted me and indicated that while what I write is interesting and useful, it is far too long and uses language that is too technical. They have accordingly encouraged me to try to follow the KISS (keep it simple stupid) principle. Accordingly, I am experimenting with recording some of the conversations I have with my kids and am as a result finding a more accessible presentation style. Some of the same people who asked for easier to read versions of my material have indicated this approach works for them. So, here is another conversation summary. As is the case with all of my pieces of this sort, most of the content of this summary is drawn from actual conversations with my older daughters (ages 17 to 22). However, lots of extraneous material has been excluded and I have taken some creative license to "smooth" things out. The conversation setting is in my car on the way to drop a daughter off at work. The content summarized here represents a small fraction of what we talk about.

Bob: I can't believe we have more snow today.

Daughter: This sucks. It feels like Spring will never come. How are your eyes feeling?

B: The low-grade ache from last night is gone, and things look pretty clear. The doctor said I should have more than 90% of my vision today.

D: That's incredible! Those sunglasses look goofy today. What was that suction cup thing you mentioned last night?

B: Well, the only part of the procedure that really got to me was when they put a suction cup around my cornea in order to immobilize the eye before they make the incision, which raises a flap on the cornea to allow them to burn out some material with the laser. The flap is then put down, and the fact that they have removed some material changes the shape of the cornea so that your vision is improved. While they were burning with the laser, it smelt like a cattle branding. That was a little disconcerting, but not too bad. But when they clamp that suction cup onto your eye and you feel the incision and then everything goes dark, it is terrifying. I spoke with other people after. One of them said that it didn't bother him at all. But most of us had a tremendous adrenaline surge at about that point. On the second eye, even though I knew exactly what was going to happen, I had a similar reaction. I had to will myself to remain still. I have never trusted

another human being in anything in like the way I trusted that doctor.

D: Do you think it was worth it?

B: I think so. Ask me again in about a week. But even now, it is incredible to be able to see without glasses. This is miraculous as far as I'm concerned. When I mentioned that fear that I felt, when I had to will myself to remain still, it reminded me of some things that we have talked about before.

D: What do you mean?

B: Well, remember how we've talked about the difference between the reptilian core of our brain and our reasoning faculties?

D: Yes.

B: Well, that was the process at work. Our eyes are so important to us that a great number of our instincts and reflexes are designed to protect them. Often when a person is threatened, their instinctive move is to first protect their eyes. To have someone start poking around in your eyes the way that doctor was made my reptilian core scream that I had to do something to stop that from happening. And yet, I had read the statistics with regard to the likelihood of harm being done to me, and spoken to a bunch of people who had had the procedure, and had come to a position of intellectual comfort with the idea that everything would be ok. There was a fight between the reptilian core of my brain and my intellect, which the intellect managed to win. However, I was hyperventilating during the procedure, and by the time it was over and I stood up to walk back to the recovery area, my hands were tingling. The nurse told me that if I had continued to hyperventilate for much longer, I would have passed out. A significant percentage of people who have the procedure do pass out. I was somewhere around the median in terms of the amount of distress that I displayed.

D: Hmmm.

B: Since you are in sales, here is something else you might find interesting. Remember how we've talked before about the way our emotional buttons, connected to the reptilian core, can be pushed and manipulate our behaviour?

D: Yes.

B: Well, I was treated yesterday to a textbook example of how that is done over at the eye clinic. I think they stepped over the professionalism line, and it made me kind of angry.

D: What happened?

B: Well, I have been thinking about getting this laser vision correction for over ten years. However, I have been concerned about the technology and so have put it

off until recently. It appeared to me that some of the fairly recent changes they've made brought the procedure up to a point of safety that was acceptable to me. But the thing that got me going was an ad I heard on the radio. They offered laser vision correction for \$590 per eye. The price charged at most clinics is well over twice that amount. In advertising, this is called a "low ball offer". Car dealers use it all the time. They offer a car at a ridiculously low price, get a bunch of people to come in to look at it and then the people find out that it's the kind of car that has features that would not be of interest to most folk. For example, it might be a standard transmission only. But once they are on the lot and have made the investment of time and energy to get there, the probability of them buying a car at that lot as opposed to some other lot is high. That is why low ball offers and other kinds of silly advertising techniques have become so common.

D: Yeah, I have noticed how ridiculous some of that stuff sounds.

B: So anyway, the low ball offer gets me in the door of this laser clinic. Then I find out that because my prescription is fairly high, I don't qualify for the low price, but rather a higher price of \$790 per eye. That's still a pretty good price though. The difference between what they have to do for a person with a weaker prescription and me is a matter of only a few seconds with the laser. However, they do make that price available to some people with low level corrections required, and so they can't be accused of false advertising.

As part of my qualification exam for the laser vision correction, I have to fill out a questionnaire. The questionnaire causes me to focus on how important my eyes are, and get me to state whether saving money or having a really high quality procedure performed by competent doctors is important. Of course, I am going to indicate that saving a bit of money is not as important as that. A number of other questions are asked to get me to focus on the importance of doing the very best possible for my vision. Then I go through a series of eye exams, etc. that I thought were done in a very professional manner, and at the end, the optometrist who was examining me told me that because of the nature of my eyes, I could have the \$790 treatment, but that the \$1400 treatment, which involved using the latest upgrades to this particular piece of laser equipment, would also be advisable. The more expensive treatment would extract somewhat less tissue from my eye and therefore if a mistake was made in the first surgery, the options for additional correction would be greater. The optometrist indicated that the other relatively rare characteristics of eyes that would make the more expensive procedure very important for some people did not exist in my case. But that it was still worth considering in my case because of the fact that it would be slightly less invasive as far as my eyes were concerned. He said he would leave the decision up to me.

I had my exit interview with the people at the clinic and told them that I would make up my mind within a few days as to whether I would have the procedure. They wanted me to commit right then, and offered to book a reserved surgery

appointment for me "just in case". This is another well known sales technique – people who make the additional commitment of a tentative appointment are known to be more likely to buy the good or service in question.

During the exit interview, I was again advised of the potential benefits of the more expensive procedure, and offered insurance that would reduce what I would have to pay in the event a second corrective surgery was required because something didn't go right the first time. I thanked them for the information, and went on my way. The individuals conducting the initial and closing interviews were not of the same professional calibre as was the optometrist who did the exam. I thought he did a very good job.

During the next few days, I called several other clinics to talk to them about comparative technologies, pricing, surgery, time availability, etc. I found out that most of the clinics charged the same price whether they were using the most recent laser upgrades, or not. That is, the doctors at those clinics would assess the patient's needs, decide which technology worked the best for them, and then would use it and charge the same price regardless of the technology used. The clinic I went to, as a result of the ad they ran, was the only one that charged a significantly lower price for the un-upgraded technology, even though that very technology was often used by surgeons at other clinics in cases where it appeared best suited to their patients. It seemed clear to me that this was part of their pricing strategy. That pricing strategy had gotten me in their door, and now had me seriously thinking about paying for the higher priced treatment, which was somewhat above the price charged by the other clinics I called.

It seemed clear to me that the pricing differential at the clinic I attended was part of an advertising strategy rather than reflective of any difference in value offered for the various services. I also read the statistics with regard to failure with regard to various techniques, and it appeared that the statistical probability of having problems was the same with regard to the non upgraded technology as the upgraded technology. Therefore, the advantages provided by the upgraded technology with regard to what could be done in the event of a problem were extremely small. There are other possible future advantages that are speculative. That is, way down the road – 20 to 30 years from now – it could be that the upgraded technology would be more stable than the other. However, there is no way of being sure about that. This is a classic kind of environment in which uncertainty and therefore fear plays a significant role.

On the basis of all the foregoing, I decided to go to the clinic that had advertised and got me in their door, and have the lower priced (\$790) surgical procedure. I phoned the clinic and booked a time for surgery. They asked me what kind of procedure I had elected to have, and I told them the "regular" treatment. The receptionist with whom I spoke sounded a little surprised. I let that pass. I could feel the struggle between my reptilian core and my intellect. My reptilian core was fearful with regard to the possibility that someone was going to cut my eyes open, and inclined toward not taking any risk, no matter how small. My intellect

had decided that having the lower-priced surgery option was the smart thing to do.

A couple of days passed, and a call came in from the clinic. It was another person calling to let me know that the surgery time I had asked for was not available. We went through the options that I had to choose from, and selected a new time. She then asked me which surgical option I had chosen. My reptilian core immediately fired up, to my surprise, and I had to push through a little psychological resistance to confirm to her that I wanted the regular option. She also sounded a little surprised.

Several days later, another call came from the clinic. This time, they wanted to review with me a number of procedural matters that I had learned about at the clinic and in fact which I had to pass a test respecting before I was qualified for surgery. We did that review during a couple of minutes. Then, the lady asked me again which surgical option I had elected. Once again, I was surprised to feel my reptilian core fire up. I felt fear with regard to the possibility that I was perhaps making an unwise decision by saving some money in order to eliminate what seemed to me from an intellectual point of view to be a microscopic risk. I pushed through that psychological resistance and confirmed that I would have the regular surgery, and felt irritated that I was being forced to confront my fear yet again.

On the day of surgery, I was delayed for a couple of hours due to unspecified problems in the clinic. As I waited, my anxiety increased. My intellect was again struggling with my reptilian core. Finally I was told it was my turn. I was ushered into the office of the woman with whom I had the exit interview at the time of my original exam. She handed me a form to read that contained a typical exoneration agreement with the clinic. It reviewed the risks of surgery in great detail. I agreed that I knew that this might not be successful; I agreed that I knew that my vision might be impaired; etc. etc. Although I am a lawyer and understand these things, my reptilian core fired up again. I pushed through that fear and signed the agreement. Then, this nice lady said "When I last spoke with you, I told you that you qualified for either the regular or the most advanced types of surgery that we offer. Which have you decided to take?" I couldn't believe it. This was the fourth time I had been asked to make that choice. And this time I was asked to make it right after reading what for the average person, let alone a lawyer, would be a terrifying release form. I pushed through my fired up reptilian core and told her that I was going to have the regular surgical option. She took that without comment, and then asked me if I had decided to purchase the insurance that they offered. Again, in my most vulnerable moment, I was being offered insurance against risk. Having already decided that the probability of retreatment was extremely low, I declined the insurance. Insurance is something we should only buy when faced with a risk that we can't afford to deal with on our own. Canadians, as you might know, purchase more insurance per capita than any other people on earth. We are a naturally risk averse people, and all kinds of sales people from car dealers to appliance stores, and now I find out laser vision

centres, play on our risk averse natures.

So then I went and had the surgery, and I felt a huge sense of relief once it was over.

D: We sure don't use any of that stuff with the cosmetics I sell.

B: Are you sure? Some of the things you told me about the other day sounded like they play on a woman's fear that she doesn't look as good as the competition.

D: I suppose that's true. It is hard to keep up with the various colour stories we bring out.

B: Colour story?

D: Yeah, every few months we bring out a new set of colours and teach people how to use them. The Spring colours are just coming out now. That's what this seminar I'm going to today is about.

B: Are you telling me that every few months, some women change the colours they use?

D: You haven't noticed that?

B: No. I guess I'm just not very observant. It just occurred to me that I think I may know what's going on. These subtle distinctions in the colours that your company keeps bringing out are not designed to impress the male of the species who, like me, is too dumb to notice. Rather, this is a competitive thing among the women. If you don't have the latest colours, then you are not "with it". Am I close?

D: You're not as dumb as you look.

B: Another thing I forgot to mention before with regard to the laser clinic, is the parallel between the way those sales people at the laser clinic were working me, and how Mormon missionaries work their potential converts. I think the laser clinic stepped way over the professionalism line by asking me four times to make the same decision and then trying to sell me insurance in my most vulnerable moment. Every time they did that, they were firing up my reptilian core, and when you think about how much more profitable the procedure is for them at \$1400 an eye, I can't believe that it was a coincidence that I was asked four times. I bet a lot of people collapse at some point during that process and upgrade themselves to the more expensive procedure. The clinic incurs most of the same costs for either procedure, and would make much more money on the more expensive one. However, they were at least professional enough not to interpret my feelings for me. It would have been much worse if they had said "Mr. McCue, how are you feeling right now?" after having asked me what kind of treatment I wanted. If I was honest I would have had to say "I'm feeling pretty

nervous". They then could have said, "That means that you are making an unwise decision. Our psyches are designed to protect us through this kind of feelings – kind of a second sight. You should perhaps reconsider.". Had I caved in at that point and said "OK, I'll have the upgraded procedure at \$1400 an eye" I would have felt great relief, seeming to confirm that they were right when in fact it was just my reptilian core talking to me.

That is precisely what the missionaries do. Human beings fear death and fear separation from their loved ones, particularly at death. It would be unusual for a human being not to feel a sense of peace and joy if they could come to believe that on death they would leave behind what is often a difficult life and go to a place of great wonder and peace where they would live forever with their families. When an innocent young person like missionaries bears fervent testimony to the fact that this is what will happen on death, in many cases people are emotionally moved. That is the good old reptilian core firing up again. The missionaries then ask, "How do you feel about what I just said?". If the investigator answers, "I feel something wonderful, something peaceful, a kind of feeling that I don't recall having before", this is precisely the response the missionary hopes for. When that response is elicited, the missionary will say something like, "I testify to you in the name of Jesus Christ that what you are feeling is His Holy Spirit confirming to you that what I have just said is true.". That is, the missionaries interpret for their investigators what is going on inside their own heads. This is another powerful psychological sales technique. At least the laser vision guys didn't go that far.

The missionaries also use the low ball technique. That is, they only ask for a little bit of your time – just a few minutes to make a small presentation. And once in the door, they try to extract the largest commitment for future events the people will give, including reading things while the missionaries are gone, attending meetings at the local Mormon Church, etc..

And remember how I indicated that it bothered me that the laser people tried to sell me insurance at my most vulnerable moment? Guess who missionaries are taught to target with their lessons?

D: Who?

B: The people who would be most responsive to the fear the missionaries are using.

People who just lost a loved one to death; who have just had a baby born into their families; or how have just moved into a new community. These are the people who are most vulnerable from a psychological point of view to the fears on which the missionary discussions play.

And, a host of other well known persuasion or sales tricks are used by the missionaries. For example, if you can get a person to say that they believe something, even if they don't believe it, this helps to change their beliefs. The

missionary discussions are designed to cause the investigators to read things aloud, which amounts to the same thing. The investigator is encouraged to pray in whatever fashion they wish, because this amounts to much the same thing. And, vocalizing prayer itself often produces a powerful emotional reaction for people who kind of believe, but have not engaged in ritual behaviour for a long time. If this emotional reaction occurs while the missionaries are there, they can take credit for it and use it as evidence that the message they bring is "true" whereas others are not.

There is a long, long list of this kind of thing related to both the Mormon missionary program, and the way Mormon meetings are structured with huge numbers of opportunities for people to "bear testimony" to each other that Mormonism is "true". Each time this is done, a psychological groove is cut deeper that will protect the belief that has been stated, whether it is true or not.

D: Interesting.

B: I just remembered one more emotion v. reason thing that you might find interesting. This is something I read while I was sitting in the waiting room for those two hours yesterday. It's from a book by a guy called Harold Bloom, who is one of the foremost literary critics in North America. The book is called "How to Read and Why". I think you'd enjoy it.

D: Do you have it at home?

B: Yes, you can pick it up whenever you want. The book has a great introductory section with regard on how to read. One of the points I like best in it is that ideology of any kind, including religious ideology, tends to kill our ability to recognize and work with irony. Irony is at the core of a lot of good literature and other kinds of art. If you can't hold conflicting ideas up against each other without allowing one of them to win and the other to lose, it's hard to be a good artist. Ideology tends to always favour one over the other, and hence does not allow that kind of dramatic tension to persist throughout a work. Think of the Book of Mormon in that regard. There is always a clear winner in its stories. [editorial note: Here is a quote from Bloom's introductory section on how to read - Harold Bloom, How to Read and Why, p. 25 ... ideology, particularly in its shallower versions, is peculiarly destructive of the capacity to apprehend and appreciate irony ... the loss of irony is the death of reading, and of what had been civilized in our natures. ... p.27 [The appreciation of] irony demands a certain attention span, and the ability to sustain antithetical ideas, even when they collide with one another. Strip irony away from reading, and it loses at once all discipline and all surprise. Find now what comes near to you, that can be used for weighing and considering, and it very likely will be irony, even if many of your teachers will not know what it is, or where it is to be found. Irony will clear your mind of the cant of the ideologues, and help you to blaze forth ... p.28 To read human sentiments in human language you must be able to read humanly, with all of you. You are more than an ideology, whatever your convictions ... We read Shakespeare,

Dante, Chaucer, Cervantes, Dickens, Proust, and all their peers because they more than enlarge life. Pragmatically, they have become the Blessing, in its true Yahwistic sense of "more life into a time without boundaries." We read deeply for varied reasons, most of them familiar: that we cannot know enough people profoundly enough; that we need to know ourselves better; that we required knowledge, not just of self and others, but of the way things are. Yet the strongest, most authentic motive for deep reading of the now much-abused traditional canon is the search for difficult pleasure. ... There is a reader's Sublime, and it seems the only secular transcendence we can ever attain, except for the even more precarious transcendence we call "falling in love." I urge you to find what truly comes near to you, that can be used for weighing and considering. Read deeply, not to believe, not to accept, not to contradict, but to learn to share in that one nature that writes and reads. [endquote]

I'm only partway through Bloom's book. The short story section was great. One story in particular stood out. I can't remember who the author was now, we can look that up at home. The story is about a brothel. It explores the psychological landscape of the madame who runs the brothel and her girls. The centrepiece of the story concerns one evening when the brothel's regular customers are very upset when they arrive for their evening's activities and find a sign on the door that says "Closed – Gone to First Communion". The madam's niece is having her first communion, so the madam and all of her girls are off to the local Catholic church.

During the course of the communion, the madame and girls reconnect with their idealistic youths, and feel a great deal of remorse respecting their current circumstances. This results in an emotional outburst from them related to their inability to accept the consequences of their decisions. They are carrying a burden of guilt created by their religious ideology when combined with the decisions they have made in life. However, the rest of the congregation does not interpret their outburst that way. They interpret it as emotion caused by the Holy Spirit in that moment, and as a result the wave of emotion spreads throughout the congregation, making it a tremendously memorable evening. At the conclusion of the evening, the presiding priest thanks the madam and her girls for bringing God's spirit with them. The joy of the congregation soothes the pain that the madam and her girls feel creating for them a kind of emotional catharsis that lifts their spirits. As a result, when they return to the brothel to commence somewhat later than usual their nights' labours, they perform with a remarkable enthusiasm, much to the satisfaction of their patrons.

D: That's a pretty weird story.

B: Yes, it is weird in a sense. It was also very funny, apparently. I'd like to read the original. All I've read is Bloom's analysis on it. Humour is often created by the juxtaposition of things which are ordinarily not connected. Such as, for example, prostitutes who seem to carry with them the Spirit of God and so ignite a spiritual experience for an entire congregation, are ignited themselves in reverse, and

then ignite in other ways their clients back at the brothel. Wonderful irony.

D: I think I see it.

B: Anyway, what I really like about that story is how it shows the comedy of life. We all want certainty, so we tend to interpret events in a manner consistent with our own ideology and so that we feel comfortable continuing to do what we want to do anyway. Hence, the good Catholic people interpreted the prostitutes' emotion in a way that would support their own vision of reality – that any powerful emotions experienced at a religious event must be the product of the Holy Spirit. Of course, the prostitutes were experiencing something entirely different. This shows how untrustworthy our emotions are when it comes to connecting us with reality. We tend to see the reality we want to see, instead of what really is.

Have fun at work!

D: Love you Dad.