

Preparation for Left Brain / Right Brain

Are you left-brained or right-brained? You may have been told by an internet quiz that you are more “left-brained” (logical, organized) or “right-brained” (creative, visual). Were you intrigued?

Scientists have long known that the brain’s physical division into left and right hemispheres reflects processing divisions – for example, language is processed in the left hemisphere, for most people. In the 1960s, scientist Roger Perry studied brain function in epileptic patients whose two hemispheres had been surgically “split” to reduce seizures. These and subsequent studies revealed surprising hemispheric differences, a physiological and a psychological dualism.

Our right brain processes vowels, follows contours, judges spatial relationships, is experiential, creative, and finds connections, while the left processes mathematics, time, consonants, creates stories and explanations, and moves strongly in direct lines. The left hemisphere is attracted to machines and abstract concepts, and prefers static relationships and a narrow focus. The right brain is alert for change and keeps a broad focus while remaining concrete and embodied.

Left-right brain dualism is common in pop psychology, perhaps because oppositions – typically “reason” and “passion” – are a theme in Western philosophy and religion. Plato described the soul as a charioteer trying to control opposing “horses” of reason and passion, an idea carried on in Christian theology and morality. Western notions of scientific progress also privileged logical thinking (“left”) over sensory processing or intuition. Research on right-brain strengths – creativity, intuition, spatial processing – seems to provide a welcome counterbalance to left-brain dominance.

Eastern philosophies acknowledge similar dualisms: yin (traditionally female, passive, dark) and yang (male, active, light). There is an important difference, however. In Taoism the yin/yang symbol, with black yin and white yang twirling about each other, each with a drop of the other in its center and together making a circle, is perhaps a better representation of how duality makes a whole.

Subsequent brain studies have shown that an oppositional understanding of left- and right-brain functions does not reflect our brains’ actual behavior. Both hemispheres are always active. Emotion and rational thought are more intertwined than opposed. Yet the oppositions have an intuitive appeal, and perhaps being aware of this dualism can help us think about ourselves and the world.

Consider a brief example – our UU principle respecting the interdependent web of all existence – an idea that works scientifically, metaphorically, and experientially. Our left brain can process data about climate change, computer models of sea level rise, and Gaia theory, and can correlate data sets for observations that tell us that spring is earlier each year. Our right brain can look at a photo of the Amazon jungle and see that the trees are literally breathing out the clouds that will become the rain nourishing that jungle; our right brain can remember sitting under a tree in a grove of trees with the sunlight and soft wind encircling. The left brain organizes the scientific details while the right brain perceives the embodied reality and the bigger picture.

We need both ways of knowing to address the reality of the interdependent web and our place in it.

There is no logical way to the discovery of these elemental laws. There is only the way of intuition, which is helped by a feeling for the order lying behind the appearance. *Einstein*

Close both eyes to see with the other eye. *Rumi*

Indigenous ways of knowing accept both the physical and the nonphysical realms as reality. In accepting the nonphysical, one must accept that reality cannot always be quantified.

Dr. Lynn Lavallée

You get your intuition back when you make space for it, when you stop the chattering of the rational mind. The rational mind doesn't nourish you. You assume that it gives you the truth, because the rational mind is the golden calf that this culture worships, but this is not true. Rationality squeezes out much that is rich and juicy and fascinating. *Anne Lamott*

We do not describe the world we see. We see the world we can describe. *Descartes*

The left-brain right-brain myth will probably never die because it has become a powerful metaphor for different ways of thinking – logical, focused and analytic versus broad-minded and creative.

Christian Jarrett

Duality is found in many belief systems, but Yin and Yang are parts of a Oneness that is also equated with the Tao. *Wikipedia*

Questions to Ponder

1. Try a left/right brain quiz. Search for “sommer-sommer brain test” or put this address into your browser: <http://braintest.sommer-sommer.com/en/>. You can also take a printed quiz at the Gathering, or get a copy from your facilitator beforehand.
2. If you tried a quiz, did you find yourself more on one side or the other? What activities might you engage in to explore some aspects of that “other” side?
3. Think of a time when you had an “aha” moment and everything just seemed to click into place, or you “knew” something without any rational data to support it. How did that moment feel?
4. Have you made decisions by gathering data, categorizing choices, and listing the pros and cons? How did that process feel to you?
5. Recall the “Amazon” example from the essay, and the ways in which both “left” and “right” approaches can be helpful in understanding. Describe another example in your experience where both “left” and “right” approaches might be useful to fully comprehend a situation.
6. Our education and our work life often emphasize “left-brain” activity – rational, organized, linear. Have you had any experiences with other cultures, groups, or activities that involve a more “right-brained” approach?

Words of the Day

Before coming to the gathering, think of a few words, phrases, experiences or metaphors that describe ways that you have experienced different ways of knowing. There will be two prompts:

“I use the ‘left brain’ (rational, organized, story-telling) when I”

“I use the ‘right brain’ (visual, creative, embodied) when I”