

What You Do Becomes You

Introduction

by Daniel J. Bressler, MD

THE DOWNLOADING of a brain onto silicon is a popular theme in writings about the future. When thinking about this Frankensteinian possibility, I often return to the writings of neurologist Antonio Damasio. In a number of books, starting with *Descartes' Error*, Damasio dismisses the concept that a brain can be recapitulated by a sufficiently powerful computer. His perspective, as I understand it, is that a brain (and so too a mind) emerges from a continuous stream of unrepeatable experiences of a lived life that takes place in a physical body. These sensory and visceral experiences then weave into an inherited neural template a set of layer-by-layer, synapse-by-synapse changes that result in a unique entity that he calls the "embodied brain." In ordinary non-neuroanatomic experience, we would simply know it as the emerging self-conscious self.

Embryology and prenatal medicine teach us that there are periods when the fetus is particularly vulnerable to infections, toxins, and maternal stressors. So, too, childhood is not a flat track marked by bland chronologic milestones, but full of rises and falls, times of rapid and slow growth, of hardiness and weakness, of profound and lasting influences, and obviously variable outcomes.

We typically think of adulthood as a time of volition, of choice, of decision. Choice is a crucial feature of the modern doctor-patient relationship; we don't actually give patients orders, but rather advise them about tests and therapies. They choose. Volition is at the core of the bioethical principle of autonomy. It is the underlying legal assumption that calls for informed consent before a medical procedure.

An adult human life, as lived, consists of a countless number of choices. Whether we call these choices "free" is a philosophical and neuroscientific conundrum. That



we "make" choices, however, seems to be obvious. We are all at a particular place in life substantially due to the choices we have made throughout adulthood. To use a very practiced metaphor, we take the dealt cards of genetics, embryology, childhood circumstances, and random events, and use our lives to play those cards. Yes, there's the luck of the draw. Yes, there's the load of the deck. And yes, yes, there's our play.

Someday there may be a technology to determine which aspects of human behavior are freely chosen and which are determined. Such a technology will have great importance for social policy, particularly in education and the judicial system. But, for an individual considering his own lived life, it seems most empowering and catalytic to focus attention on the personal behaviors that feel free. I believe that this is where we are most ourselves, where we are most fully human. I have tried to celebrate this type of freedom in the poem at right, emphasizing that our whole lives, like Damasio's brains, are emergent and cumulative: moment by moment, day by day, action by action, choice by choice.

The double meaning of the word "becomes" (suits and also develops into) is intentional.

I hope the poem speaks to you. **SDP**

Dr. Bressler, SDCMS-CMA member since 1988, is chair of the Biomedical Ethics Committee at Scripps Mercy Hospital and longtime contributing writer to San Diego Physician.

What You Do Becomes You

It starts with how you take a breath
Do you let life rouse or numb you?
It ends with how you face your death
What you do becomes you.

A verdant forest burned to black.
Does the headline's bleakness bum you?
You search for signs when off the track
What you do becomes you.

Can you keep a steady pace
When what you love is taken from you?
You wear your life upon your face
What you do becomes you.

The road bends, do you turn the wheel?
The broken tarmac jolts and thrums you
With every mile and every meal
What you do becomes you.

Change arrives in fits and starts
Can you dance with the soundtrack's hum? You
Grow your day from bits and parts
What you do becomes you.

Parent, teacher, lover, friend
Tries to know, assess, and sum you
Is your heart concealed until the end?
What you do becomes you.

When all is lost and all is won
When the day of judgment comes, you
Look back on the race you've run
What you've done's become you.