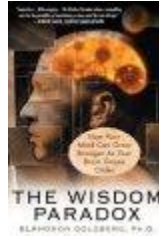


Book Reviews

The Wisdom Paradox: How Your Mind Can Grow Stronger as Your Brain Grows Older
by Elkhonon Goldberg, Ph.D.



reviewed by Larry L. Hickie

Goldberg, Elkhonon, Ph.D. *The Wisdom Paradox: How Your Mind Can Grow Stronger as Your Brain Grows Older*. Gotham Books (Penguin), 2005. ISBN 1592401872. Reviewed by Larry L. Hickie.

In recent years neuroscientists have turned attention to the healthy brain, with special interest in normal brain development through the life cycle. An important contribution to our understanding of the aging brain comes from neuroscientist Elkhonon Goldberg, Director, Institute of Neuropsychology and Cognitive Performance, New York. For those of us not trained in neuroscience, it's valuable to read work by a professional neuroscientist who writes in a way that is accessible to the non-specialist.

Recent developments in neuroscience indicate that our brains continue to add neurons throughout the life cycle, just as other cells in our bodies reproduce. We are not born with our full repertoire of brain cells. Our brains do begin to shrink in size in our later years, but the normal brain does not disintegrate.

In our later years we continue to learn new things and, perhaps more important, our settled learnings, accumulated competence and expertise continue to function—often functioning with greater ease than when we were younger. As Goldberg expresses it in what he calls his thesis statement: "That the aging of the mind has its own triumph that only age can bring...It is time to stop thinking about the aging of our minds and our brains solely in terms of losses and losses alone. The aging of the mind is equally about gains. As we age, we may lose the power of our memory and sustained concentration. But as we grow older, we may gain wisdom or at least expertise and competence, which is nothing to sneer at either."

Goldberg presents a different picture of the left and right sides of our brains from what most of us learned a generation ago. He emphasizes that there is lots of interplay between the two sides of our brains. From the perspective of the newer research, he says that we employ the *right* side of our brains in new learning experiences. By contrast, the *left* side of our brains is where settled learning comes to reside. Mature brains call on accumulated competence/expertise to identify the familiar in new situations. He uses the phrase "pattern recognition" to describe how we use what we have learned to solve problems more easily than we did when we were younger. Thus, when we are trying to learn things that are quite new to us, the right side of our brains will be especially active. When we are faced with situations that call on our settled competence, we will see the left side of our brains at work.

Of particular interest is Goldberg's study of people with high professional competence: doctors, artists, architects. He discovers that sometimes people who have developed skill in their professions can exercise that left brain competence, functioning at a high level, even in the early stages of dementia when they may be starting to have difficulty with ordinary daily tasks.

Goldberg says explicitly that he is not dealing with the moral or spiritual aspects of the aging brain. He does not see those features as within his professional competence. But our experience in the Spiritual Eldering movement calls us to add to the science of the brain a sense of the spiritual potential of the aging mind. One of the important contributions Reb Zalman has made to our understanding of healthy aging is an appreciation of the spiritual depths the aging mind can reach.

Elkhonon Goldberg's research has helped me understand more of the interplay between new learnings and accumulated experience in my own aging process, and I have found it useful to present his perspective to Sage-ing groups. I recommend the book to Sage-ing leaders.