Where Do Jackal Voices Come From?

by Stephanie Bachmann Mattei, CNVC Certified Trainer

The human brain is a conservative organ that comprises different systems with varying degrees of conscious awareness, which evolved in three basic stages of human history (the lizard-squirrel-monkey brain.) In my understanding, we could say, the brain has strong needs for understanding, order, predictability and meaning. In fact, one of its key functions is *to process experiences,* and predict what the world is like, in order to maximize survival. In its attempt to define, and organize experiences, the brain creates internal representations (templates) of the external world, which get consequently stored. All future sensory input is then matched against those already formed patterns of neural activation (filtering models).

While the brain processes and stores experiences, experiences shape the brain's structure (how the brain organizes.) "*Brain structure shapes brain function. In turn, brain function creates the mind.*" Explains child psychiatrist Dr. Daniel Siegel. In fact, neurologically we know (Donald Hebb, 1949) that neurons that fire together (experience) wire together (structure.)

In other words, the brain is use-dependent. We are born with 100 billion neurons (brain cells,) but the synaptic connections that will join these brain cells together, are dependent on the experiences a child lives. The more often a neural system is activated, the stronger that neural network becomes (which is the basis for development, learning and memory.)

This can be good news and bad news: for one thing, it means that early experiences in life, when a child is totally dependent on his/her caregiver/s for -his/her survival as well as thriving needs, play a fundamental role in how we process future experiences. Early experiences have a greater impact than experiences later in life, and mold most of our worldview. In fact, 90% of brain growth happens in the first few years of life. Just imagine: the rate of neurological change in the early years is 10.000 times faster than in adolescence! Research has also shown that the brain develops sequentially (somehow like the rolling, crawling, standing, walking stages) making again the first few years of life crucial to any later stage of brain development. (For more info please refer to Dr. Bruce Perry and NST –Neuro-Sequential Therapy).

Another interesting piece of brain-science research is that information comes in first from lower more primitive areas of the brain, so many of those stored templates are not readily available to conscious awareness. Early foundational, but not consciously available memories actually program our genes and our brains to face a particular type of world.

Findings in neuroscience are actually pointing to the womb as the very first shaping environment. According to Mitchell Gaynor, author of *The Healing Power of Sound*, the human embryo, as early as three weeks, "starts to develop the structure that will ultimately evolve into its ears." And a fetus gets accustomed to his/her mother's soothing heart beat and will show signs of distress when exposed to a much higher heart beat recording. Pre-and peri-natal psychiatrist Thomas Verny (*The Secret Life of your Unborn Child)* explains how during the second trimester the fetus is able of psychological processing; at twenty weeks the fetus shows a response to speech patterns, and at six months the unborn baby can understand the subtle shifts of his/her mother's emotions. At eight months prior to birth, a specific part of the brain (the amygdale) is mature enough to associate a fear response to a stimulus. We begin to cry at seven months. This means that the unborn baby is somehow processing (making sense of) his/her experiences inside and outside the womb. This is, in my assessment, crucial information for all parents, especially for those of us who have chosen to adopt a child –even a newborn baby- who may have been exposed to less than an ideal pre-natal environment.

A second environment that strongly influences our brain's structure and processing function is our family of origin. Luis Cozolino, author of *The Neuroscience of Human Relationships,* writes: "We can say that caretaking transmits the childhood experiences of parents to their children, *making a parent's unconscious a child's first reality.* (Emphasis mine.) So, here the notion comes in that our parents' unacknowledged and unprocessed beliefs about themselves, others and the world, find their way into our unconscious minds, and create more patterns of neurological activation.

A third influencing environment is the social structures we are raised in: extended families, schools, culture etc. Subliminal as well as deliberate messages that are absorbed without conscious awareness and self-inquiry become part of our subconscious internal belief system.

It is my understanding that jackal voices stem from a few foundational jackal beliefs ("templates," "internal representations of the external world," "neurological activation patterns" "fear-based neuro-circuitry) that were created/established as an adaptation when, as very young children -or even at the pre-natal stage, we attempted to make meaning out of experiences that were painful for us. A new template or pattern of neural circuitry got established. On a spiritual level, we disconnected from our own authenticity in order to ensure psycho-emotional "survival."

Another way to look at jackal voices is the childhood tendency to equate the experience of "feeling hurt" with the idea of "being bad/wrong." Dr. Andrew Newberg, author of *Why We Believe What We Believe: Uncovering Our Biological Need for Meaning, Spirituality, and Truth* explains that humans are born to trust the people they are

attached to, and to believe what they say. As the painful experience was processed and stored into a template, this childhood core-wound gave rise to the core jackals which became part of our unconscious internal point of reference. And the more and the longer we have been using that particular set of neurons, the more those neuro-connections strengthen.

Emotional and physical traumas (overwhelming events perceived as threatening our survival, thus activating the fight/flight system or the alternative dissociative state with its freeze response) also profoundly influence the creation of subconscious patterns of neural activation. Trauma -especially developmental trauma- actually does not only affect the mind, it ultimately affects brain structure and function. In other words, trauma is built into neuro-connection, and is biologically stored in our body/mind system.

Unpredictable, prolonged and extremely stressful experiences (trauma) gave rise to a foundational belief about myself, relationships and life. From that core meaning-making effort, the mind gives voice to its own jackals. (Examples of trauma: loss of caregiver - which therefore includes adoption; domestic violence; physical, sexual and emotional abuse; natural disaster; war; bullying etc.)

The unhealed, wounded part in us -which in my understanding is the essence of our experience of shame, expresses its pain the best it can. Bringing compassion to the wounded parts in us (our deepest fears, our shame, our sense of guilt,) and hearing the call for love and healing behind those jackals' words, is a way to reclaim our authentic self, fostering whole brain interaction.

Meeting our jackal voices with empathy and compassion creates new neural patterns of activation based on love rather than fear. As C. Sue Carter, an internationally recognized expert in behavioral neuroscience, known as the "mother of oxytocin (the so-called "love hormone")research" has demonstrated, love is physiologically designed to conquer fear. The pre-frontal-cortex soothes our hyper-aroused amygdale.

And we are able to develop empathy by receiving it and witnessing it. In other words, while the brain is designed for empathy and compassion, this does not mean that we are born with those very skills. We do need one another to experience and learn those crucial skills for emotional regulation and wellbeing, and this is where interdependence comes into play.

Now, the older the organized neurological pattern, the more repetitions are needed to change that pattern. The brain is reluctant to changing beliefs, because it is a historic organ. And changing beliefs entails recognizing that we do not understand the world.

So, it does take plenty of repetitive experiences of extending patience and love to the un-integrated parts of our mind, to the jackal voices that stem from our childhood stressful/traumatic experiences.

Relationships can produce stress and ultimately bring harm and they can relief stress and bring healing.

When we welcome our jackals without believing their messages, we stop being unconsciously driven by them. We create a new neurological map, and our cells literally expand from the previous state of contraction.

To sum it up, underneath the jackal message variations, there is a fundamental template (neurological map) that my brain created to make sense of some painful childhood experiences. Examples of core beliefs are "I am not lovable", "I am not good enough," "The world is a dangerous place," "People can't be trusted," etc.
Welcoming our jackal voices empowers us to slowly put the puzzle pieces together, and get to the core messages (or default neurological mapping) that up to now we were unconsciously recycling through our mind.

By patiently making the unconscious conscious, we differentiate our belief from our consciousness and bring healing to ourselves. And when there is nothing that I am unwilling to love about myself, my authenticity and my power are fully reclaimed.

About Stephanie Bachmann Mattei

Stephanie Bachmann Mattei, the mother of 3 children (biological and adopted), was born and raised in Italy, where she earned her Bachelor in Languages and a PhD in Philosophy. Stephanie moved to the USA in 1993 after marrying her husband.

Stephanie's core intertwined themes in life are: spirituality, parenting and healing.

Stephanie is passionate to share her understanding of NVC as a process to empower oneself and others to celebrate the humanity in one's own being, and to encounter the humanity in the other person. In the words of Dr Bruce Perry, "Being born human does not ensure being humane." NVC offers maps to support the journey from human to humane by providing clear tools for healing and reconciliation of warring parts within our psyche, of emerging into our wholeness, to consistently re-connect with our authenticity, and to practice the gift of mindful and compassionate presence for ourselves and others.

Parenting is Stephanie's niche. Parenting, being a major way of transmitting our unconscious wounds as well as our conditioning to social and cultural blueprints,

becomes a powerful and far-reaching tool for social transformation. As Gandhi proclaimed: "If we want to change the world we shall start with the children." On the practical level, this led to Stephanie's serving for over 10 years as a volunteer leader with La Leche League International, graduating from the "Parent Peer Leadership Program" in 2006 and staying involved in this BayNVC program as an Assistant first and then as a co-Trainer since 2009. Additionally, Stephanie has served both at the "NVC and Diversity Retreat" and the "New York Intensive Residential Training" as the Children's Program founder and trainer for three consecutive years.

Aware of the specific challenges and joys of raising an adopted child, Stephanie further became a BCI (Beyond Consequences Institute) Certified Parenting Educator facilitating NVC-based telecourses and coaching adoptive families through the Consciously Parenting Project.

Finally, in Stephanie's experience, parenting inevitably ends up being a call to integrate our unprocessed experiences and to bring healing to ourselves. To that respect, Stephanie loves tying NVC with mindfulness-based neuroscience to support self-understanding, healing and wholeness.

