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Going Dutch

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The Eyes of A Mother

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Recently, I returned from St. Petersburg, Russia where I visited with my son, Jonathan, daughter-in-law, Emily, and two-and-a-half month old grandson, Isaac. The first week after his birth, I had also been to Helsinki, Finland, but dedicated most of that visit to helping out in the kitchen. Emily needed all of her energy to get accustomed to this new living being now permanently molded to her side, as hands-free movement and restorative sleep had become less and less of an option.

By the time of my second visit, the newborn had evolved into a sweet, darling child with varied facial expressions and personality. The sight and feel of this baby produced overwhelmingly joyous emotions. As Isaac lay in his little reclining chair, mouth cooing, eyes dancing, legs kicking, I responded with silly rhyming songs that sprang directly from my heart, reinforcing the spell of our interlocking eyes. When he drifted off into sleep, I could feel him letting go and I also let go into near trance-like rapture. Believe me, it was an orgy of pure love. I even changed a diaper!

To me, it is not trite to say that mothering is one of the most challenging and important jobs on earth. Caring for an infant is such an organic function and more magical, in a sense, than you might expect. Dr. Allan Schore of UCLA has shown how the eye-to-eye contact of mothers and their babies is essential for the emotional stability of the child. Since babies do not yet have a sense of themselves as independent beings, they rely on this eye contact,

paired with the mother's affirming facial expression, to create their sense of well-being. We rely, as well, on their facial expressions to understand what they need. Dr. Schore believes that there is an actual electrical charge transmitted from the gleam in a mother's eyes to her baby, and that this transmission of energy is as necessary as the physical nutrients she provides. Those little bundles of joy need steady, positive, emotional feedback to grow.

It is also interesting to note how mothers and fathers (as I witnessed in my son's song and dance routines) naturally use rhyme and rhythm to soothe their fretting little ones or just to communicate with them. This intimate behavior, according to author Ellen Dissanayake, is the origin of art itself. Adorning life's everyday rituals with pleasurable rhythms and sounds creates positive feelings and can even promote healing.

Much of the interchange between mothers and infants involves right hemisphere-to-right hemisphere contact. Shore, once again, says that toddlers literally internalize their mother's face and the sound of her voice in this part of the brain. When they are troubled, infants can use these memories to "self-soothe." If a child has been deprived of this maternal input, abused or traumatized in some way, this lack of comfort will be sorely felt. Some researchers, along with Shore, see problems in right hemispheric development as a major source of later psychological problems.

Just as facial recognition and the ability to read another's facial expression for joy, pain, anger, or sadness are primarily right hemispheric functions, music and dance are also in the province of the so-called non-dominant sphere. Whereas language is mostly processed on the left, music and poetry spring from the right. Moving our bodies through space is also right hemispheric; so those little songs we sing, and the bobbing dances we perform to entertain and soothe our children, flow spontaneously from that side of our brains. Some researchers have even found that most mothers, whether left-handed or right-handed, cradle their babies on their left side to engage the emotional right side of the brain (which controls the left side of the body). I'm left-handed, so it works for me; right-handed moms and grandmoms will have to check this out for themselves.

Although, I love to tout the advantages of the right hemisphere, I'm obviously prejudiced in favor of my own state of dominance. After early infancy and childhood, when the right hemisphere is still the dominant one, the language-producing left hemisphere usually takes the reins. The right hemisphere, then, will specialize in negative emotions, letting the left radiate positive ones. It is my guess that this is because of the left's power of confabulation; that is, its ability to rationalize or put a positive stamp on things. MRI studies have shown that Buddhist monks lean left, perhaps because meditation calms the fearful elements in the right hemisphere, enabling the left to negotiate the world unambivalently. People who are overly

right-dominant, on the other hand, tend to be introverted and less likely to perform confidently in the world. Depression itself shows right dominance and, some say, a more realistic view of life as it actually is.

Before we write off the touchy right side, keep in mind that overly left-dominant people tend to be literal, paying too much attention to linearity and details, while neglecting the fuzzier, more poetic world where "love" can metaphorically equal a "red, red rose." Even a sense of humor marks an active right hemisphere because that sort of cleverness also requires the ability to hold simultaneous meanings together, like puns or plays on words, as well as framing individual, sequential events inside of one "big picture" context or recognizing a pattern.

Obviously, we need both sides of our brains as functioning adults; but, as research shows, the right hemisphere needs special attention in those early years that, in fact, prepare us for a lifetime of social interaction. Look into the eyes of your babies and grandbabies. Smile, sing, laugh, rock and bounce them. You can't fool them, either. They'll see right through to your emotional core no matter what your left-side language is saying to them. The U.S. Census Bureau says that "by 2030 the number of people over age 65 will have doubled globally." We need those babies, and, if we treat them right, the world will be a better place.