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Heart, Soul, Mind, & Strength

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When Mike May was three years old, he wanted to make mud pies. He needed something to shape the pies, so he climbed into the rafters of the garage and brought down a jar. The jar had been left by the some previous resident of the house.

In the jar was a caked powder. Silver City, New Mexico was a mining town; the powder was calcium carbide. When you mix calcium carbide with water, it forms flammable, explosive acetylene gas, which powers miners' lanterns.

Mike May wanted to make mud pies. He needed to clean out the jar, and so he went to a cement trough in the yard and filled it with water. There was garbage burning next to the trough.

When Mike May was three years old, an explosion nearly killed him. Instead, he received 500 stitches. Because of the shock to his tiny body, it took months before he could grasp that he was blind in both eyes.

When Mike May was forty-five, he was still blind, but sitting in an optometrist's office in San Francisco because his then wife's contact lenses were bothering her. Robert Kurson, in his biography of May, *Crashing Through*, describes May's accomplishments over the intervening forty-three years with this list:

> "three-time Paralympics gold medalist and current world record holder in downhill speed skiing; entrepreneur on the verge of bringing a portable global positioning system to the blind; co-inventor of the world's first laser turntable; mud hut dweller in Ghana; husband to a beautiful blonde wife…; loving father; former CIA man.

At forty-six Mike May had lived enough for several people. He accomplished much for many reasons, but one important one was that his mother refused to treat him differently than her other four children just because he was blind. So May had learned to ride a bicycle, he played on the playground with the other children at the local public school, he did the same chores that his siblings were required to do, he fell down a lot. He came to fear not knowing what something was like more than he feared the inevitable pain of finding out.

Once, as a teenager, May and a blind friend borrowed a motorcycle and drove it along city streets to the local high school running track in order to joyride unimpeded. The incredulous police officer called to put an end to their fun could scarcely believe that both teenagers were blind. He told them that he would have to report their actions and call their parents, but he never did.

Once, as an adult, May felt slighted when amputee skiers were invited to demonstrate their skills at the Sarajevo Olympics but blind skiers were not. He discussed this with his guide, who had helped him develop the new and more dangerous method of blind ski-racing that had previously propelled him to the three gold medals. They obtained press passes in order to get on the hill, and after filing their reports back to the States, they made their way—without permission—onto the Olympic downhill course and demonstrated that blind skiers could ski quite fast as well, thank you very much. Of course, May couldn't see the armed guard pointing his weapon at him as he raced past the finish line.

Many times as both child and adult, Mike May got lost. While his blind classmates were often afraid to get lost or hurt, May believed that unless you risk making a mistake, you cannot learn; that curiosity has consequences, but that finding out is worth it.

When Mike May was forty-five, an optometrist on a whim asked to look at May's remaining good eye—he lost his left eye to an infection acquired while living and building a school in Ghana. The

optometrist was intrigued by what he saw and called his partner, Dan Goodman, an ophthalmologist. Dr. Goodman offered Mike May his sight back.

May took six months to decide whether or not to *discuss* getting his sight back with Dr. Goodman because he didn't know if he really *needed* to see. Goodman explained the operation—actually operation*s*. One operation—the more risky one—involved replacing the epithelial or limbal stem cells that surround the cornea in each of our working eyes. These stem cells send a constant stream of cells that cover the cornea, keeping other cells in the eye at bay, keeping the cornea clear, and sloughing off—some every day—to make way for new fresh cells. Without these stem cells, a cornea transplant is wasted—the clear cornea soon grows cloudy, then opaque and worthless. May knew this—he had had three such transplants in his childhood, each a painful failure because the chemical explosion had destroyed his stem cells. The stem cell transplant would take weeks to heal. Only four hundred such transplants had ever been attempted worldwide.

The merely risky operation was a cornea transplant. May assumed that it would take weeks to heal as well. Then would come months of anti-rejection drugs, which carried their own risks—side-effects, sickness, increased risk of cancer. Dr. Goodman had performed six of these operations. The result for one of his patients was death, as a result of complications from the anti-rejection drugs. May wondered, *is it worth risking death in order to see*? *If your life is already full, do you really need to see?*

He made a list of the pros and cons of attempting to regain his sight. The list of cons was long. He was risking his business, his health, his marriage, and his life. The list of pros contained one entry. He was curious.

The day after the cornea transplant, May went to Dr. Goodman's office for an appointment. He expected Goodman to check the eye and replace the dressing. Instead, Goodman removed the dressing and carefully opened Mike May's eye. He could see.

When Mike May was forty-six, he regained his sight after more than forty-three years. There were two things that he could see immediately—color and motion. Objects took longer—he had to stare for five or ten seconds, and then he could only hold onto one object at a time. Paintings made no sense. Reading a word took minutes. He could see parts of faces, but each face held no identifying meaning as a whole. Shadows were only perceived through sudden realization—*oh, right, shadows make colors darker*; his depth perception was almost nonexistent.

But Mike May had always been able to learn to do difficult things, so he assumed that with time he would see normally. He had not yet read the accounts of the twenty-or-so other individuals over the last thousand years who have received their sight back after losing it in early childhood. He did not know that almost invariably the blessing of sight became a curse for these individuals, more often than not resulting in depression. In the worst cases, the patients appeared to lose their will to live. The problem was that when people recovered their sight, the world didn't look like they expected it to, and they couldn't make it right.

Months went by. May's vision did not improve. He visual acuity—the focusing ability of his eye—was good enough that he would in theory meet the criteria for driving in California, but his brain stubbornly refused to see even though his eye itself was working fine. Except for colors and motion, those were effortless, and his vision was better if he had tactile experience with the objects or was familiar with the room. But there was no real change from the first day.

One day, a vision researcher, Ione Fine, called Mike May and asked whether she could meet him. She was initially skeptical that he was really a case of vision recovered after forty-three years. But after many tests—published as an article, with May as a coauthor, in Nature Neuroscience in 2003—she was convinced that his case was a true case of regaining sight after losing it as a child—and that his

vision was different from normal adult vision. She also discovered why May's vision wasn't getting any better.

To understand Mike May's vision, you need to know something about children. I have two daughters. One, Lilianora, is four years old. The other, Annalise, is seven months old. Neither has a fully developed visual cortex. Lily is farther along. She has color and motion down without any problem—but then again, so does Anna—color and motion abilities develop quickly over the first few weeks and months after birth. But Lily also knows how to read depth in pictures far better than Anna does. She can find all of the objects on a page in a book—even the hidden ones—and she reads faces, and rooms, and objects without even trying. But she still is forming the area of visual cortex that will let her read words and numbers, and she will go on doing that and other things into adolescence, when her visual cortex will finally mature and connections between visual cortex and other areas will be strengthened. Anna, on the other hand, tries to pick the pictures off the page—she doesn't understand two dimensional representations of objects. But she has learned faces well enough to know that right now, she would prefer to be with Mommy over any other person. Lily moves a lot because she is four, and Anna can see that and thinks that her sister is the funniest person in the world.

Anna's vision is also a lot like Mike May's. If she wants to see something, she doesn't just look at it—she reaches for it. She touches it, and puts it in her mouth. Over the last couple of months, Anna has started to roll, and her ability to see has improved with her increased mobility. It will continue to increase as she learns to crawl and walk, and eventually, complex vision will be automatic and effortless for her too. But it never will be for Mike May—his visual system is stuck at the point where it last had input during development. May, after years of encountering the world through hearing and touch feels compelled to do much the same thing that seven-month-old Anna does—he has the urge to touch objects that he doesn't understand, including, like Anna, flat pictures. And when he touches objects that he knows, he can see them better.

What Anna can do, and what Lily can do, and what you or I can do after decades of visual input—and what Mike May can and cannot do after decades in the absence of vision—all of this tells us something about how we see. We don't see by decoding the world from photons and building up to objects, faces, and scenes; rather, we see by testing the image falling on our retina against what we know and expect, and we know only through experience. The problem for Mike May is that experience shapes our brain—all of it—and doesn't leave any leftovers that can be used later on if, for instance, you get your missing vision back after four decades. During those intervening years, every neuron will become a useful part of a network, or will be cut off from necessary growth factors and be removed. The myth that we only use 10% of our brain is just that—a myth. A brain is made to be shaped by experience—all 100% of it—and if the visual cortex isn't being used for vision, it will be repurposed for other things—touch, localization of sound, mental mapping. If an adult wants to learn something new, there are no unused neurons held in reserve, no blank canvas to paint on—there is already a masterpiece that must be painstakingly reworked.

When Ione Fine and her colleagues scanned Mike May's brain, this is what they discovered—major sections of his visual cortex were being used by his other senses. Thus, her prognosis was that his vision would never improve. A further study by Netta Levin, Brian Wandell and their colleagues supports this—at age three cells sensitive to fine detail in Mike May's primary visual cortex were still developing, and without input they did not survive. Many of the visual connections between his hemispheres shared the same fate, as neurons intended for visual processing were converted to non-visual processing.

Mike May despaired at the news that his vision was as good as it would get. But then he decided not to give up, but to stretch himself. Instead of trying to see by first looking, he decided to work from the foundation that he already had. He taught himself to see first by using his hands—he went to stores and touched all of the objects that he could, then looked at them for clues that he could use to identifying them by sight. Then he used his memory. He asked people what clues he could use to

distinguish things that he couldn't learn by touch—how to distinguish men from women, for example, or how to figure out what was in a box at the grocery store (because he can see two dimensional pictures or read well). All the things that babies and toddlers and children receive by exploring the world around them, he learned intentionally.

And vision became more bearable for Mike May.

I am telling you Mike May's story partly because it is interesting and memorable. His exceptional self-confidence and willingness to take risks is certainly compelling—although those same qualities have at times been his undoing. But mostly I am telling you Mike May's story because his ability to see and still not see is an object lesson for you as we prepare to send you out to change the world. The same object lesson is found in the book of Mark.

I like Mark's account of the gospel because it moves. Scarcely has Jesus fed thousands, confounding the disciples, but he is out on the sea confounding them even further. He has three and a half years to fit in a full degree, and the disciples are challenged to keep up.

There are nine times in the Gospels that Jesus heals someone who is blind, and two of them are in Mark. They bookend a section where Jesus predicts his death and resurrection three times. The second healing is that of blind Bartimaeus (Mk. 10:46-52), who is a little like Mike May in his persistence. When called by Jesus, he leaps to his feet and abandons his cloak. Were he to remain blind, there was no guarantee of finding his only possession and protection against the cold ever again; he risked all in his pursuit of Christ. But what risk is there in the face of a certain faith?

The first healing, however, is like Mike May's healing in a different way. It is, among all of the recorded healings done by Jesus, odd. What makes it odd is that Jesus doesn't fully accomplish the healing on his first attempt—it takes him two tries. [Mk. 8:22-26]

> [22] Then they came to Bethsaida. They brought a blind man to Jesus and asked him to touch him. [23] He took the blind man by the hand and brought him outside of the village. Then he spit on his eyes, placed his hands on his eyes and asked, “Do you see anything?” [24] Regaining his sight he said, “I see people, but they look like trees walking.” [25] Then Jesus placed his hands on the man's eyes again. And he opened his eyes, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. [26] Jesus sent him home, saying, “Do not even go into the village.”

I had probably read this passage a great many times, but it didn’t stand out to me until I read Ione Fine’s article while preparing for a lecture on vision. I thought that I would do a little integration of faith and teaching thing before the lesson, so I looked up all of the stories of the blind being healed by Jesus, and there it was: “I see people, but they look like trees walking.”

If you read Ione Fine’s article, or Robert Kurson’s biography, the description of vision after the first healing is almost identical to the reported experience of Mike May and his input-deprived visual cortex—motion with confused form and difficulty identifying objects. There it is, in the gospel according to Mark, the oldest of the gospels: the report of a two-stage healing from blindness consistent with cornea replacement, followed by a miraculous and instant retraining of the visual cortex, in the order that makes the most neurological sense. These are details that were not reported in the scientific literature until 2003, and there is absolutely no evidence that Mark had either a time machine or access to an academic library.

Well, that’s pretty neat. But so what? The Bible is not a collection of interesting trivia. No matter how similar the accounts, and how improbably accurate the descriptions, the *point* of the two-stage healing can’t merely be a little neuroscience nugget packaged up and waiting for the 21st century to roll around. I mean, it is remarkable, but we are supposed to be awed by the revelation of God in the Bible and His covenant with sinful humans, not by the accuracy of cognitive psychology details in scripture.

So what is the point? In the middle of this section of Mark, where Jesus is trying to get the disciples to understand many things, but most importantly that he will die and rise again, there is a pattern that appears over and over again—people understand a little, but Jesus challenges them to go beyond, to expand their understanding, to learn something new, to see not just with new eyes, but with a new mind.

In fact, Jesus declares—in our Scripture reading—that in order to enter the Kingdom of God, you must receive it like a little child. Jesus doesn't mean here that children are somehow more holy by nature than adults, but rather that our whole being must be directed to relearning what it means to see—to developing vision that can see the way to the Kingdom of God.

This is what Jesus is trying to explain to Nicodemus in John 3. Nicodemus replies, "How can these things be?" Nicodemus can see something—he could tell that Jesus had come from God. But beyond that it was confusing—he didn't have the experience necessary to make sense of what Jesus was teaching. And each of us must grapple with these questions and the limits of our vision: how can I be reborn? How can I receive the Kingdom of God like a child? What am I not seeing now? Will my vision ever get better?

The account of Jesus rebuking the disciples for scolding those who had brought the children is found in all three of the synoptic gospels: In Mark 10, of course, in Matthew 19, and in Luke 18. And it is always followed by the same story: the story of a *someone* identified as a rich young ruler in Luke's account. The ruler asks Jesus, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

And Jesus gives an expected response in Mark's account, "You know the commandments…" and then lists five commandments verbatim from Exodus and Deuteronomy and one with a slight modification, using defraud instead of covet. The New English Translation renders the ruler's response to this list in this way: "Teacher, I have wholeheartedly obeyed all these laws since my youth."

I like this rendering, because the insertion of *wholeheartedly* conveys the force of the verb—the ruler isn't just claiming to have followed the commandments unthinkingly, he has *kept* them, he has *guarded* them with his whole being. At least that is his claim.

In the research that my students and I have been conducting on Sabbath keeping among Seventh-day Adventists, we also use the concept of wholeheartedness—which we define as actions and motivations that have been incorporated into one's self—internalized—so that a person is no longer just carrying out an action, but is living in accordance with what they know in their heart to be true. We contrast wholeheartedness with external control—doing something because of reward or punishment—and introjection—doing something because you have internalized it just enough to feel guilt, or shame, or concern that others are watching you, or pride that you have been noticed (but not in the effort or accomplishment itself). External regulation and introjection are costly for human beings because they lead to unhappiness and stress—we see a wide variety of negative effects on the well-being of Adventists who have an introjected experience of the Sabbath or of Christianity.

And the rich young ruler *claims* that he is wholehearted. But his response is all the more poignant for what he does not say: "I have wholehearted obeyed all these laws since my youth, *but I am lacking something! What am I lacking?*"

Now, it is hard to be wholehearted and have a hole in your heart. Jesus reads the young ruler's unspoken question and looks at him. He loves the ruler, and knows the answer, but it is a hard answer, and one that goes beyond well-practiced actions: "You lack one thing. Go, sell whatever you have and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." This is the only time in scripture that someone is commanded to sell all that they have, but that matters little to the ruler. His introjection is brought into stark relief—he can't do what Jesus required because he was never really wholehearted; he couldn't see clearly, and he knew that, but he was not willing to try

absolutely anything in order to see the Kingdom of God with unimpaired vision. People walking as trees was good enough for him.

Real wholeheartedness, you see, invades your entire being. It stretches you in ways you do not expect. It is like seeing for a baby; a baby does not just look with her eyes, but commits to looking with her whole being—and that kind of wholehearted looking and seeking changes what she can see and know for the rest of her life. There are a few tragic cases in the vision literature of children who because of disease or abuse are never able to move around—they learn to see while immobilized. Vision for those children never progresses beyond what they can reach—things that are far away make no sense to them because they were never able as children to approach those things and learn about them with their whole selves. The faraway objects, like the Kingdom of God for the young ruler, remain at an incomprehensible distance—they can see *something*, but they cannot make sense of it or make it their own. They can't *know* it.

Where does that leave us? If you are graduating, you might not be rich—the cost of your degree has seen to that, for years to come, unfortunately. But you do have something—the power and respect that will come from being university-educated. Is the thrust of the rich young ruler's story that to enter the Kingdom of God, we must all throw away our most cherished accomplishments, no matter what price we have paid to obtain them?

It depends. If your most cherished accomplishments and the Kingdom of God cannot both be held wholeheartedly at the same time, one of them has to go. But that is a decision that requires you to first realize that entering the Kingdom of God is something being introjected into your life—although the Kingdom of God is forced on no one, sometimes people feel like it is. That decision also requires you to want to enter the Kingdom of God wholeheartedly. But there is also another way—you can cherish the Kingdom of God and allow it to transform what you think about your goals and your accomplishments.

Zacchaeus was a rich man, much like the rich young ruler, but Jesus did not have to ask him to give up his wealth because Zacchaeus' wholehearted love for the Kingdom of God had already begun to change the way he saw himself and all that he owned.

The rich young ruler's religious counterpart in status could be a Pharisee, an expert in the law. In Mark 12, just such an expert approaches Jesus and challenges him. If you don't identify with the rich young ruler, maybe you can identify with this educated expert—like you, he has done everything his teachers required, he has passed every exam thrown at him, and now he knows some *things*. So he challenges Jesus, to see what Jesus knows, since that's one thing you can do with a university education—challenge people on what *they* know.

He asks Jesus in verse 28 "What is the most important commandment of all?" and Jesus gives him two in verses 29 to 31: "Listen, Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength"—that's from Deuteronomy 6—and "Love your neighbor as yourself."—that's Leviticus 19. It's a good answer. Jesus knows what he is talking about. Matthew, who also tells this story, stops his account [in chapter 22] there, but Mark continues.

The expert's tone changes. He affirms Jesus' response, and then adds that to follow that commandment is "more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices." Unlike the rich young ruler, however, this affirmation of the commandments is not met with a further request, but with a commendation: "You are not far from the Kingdom of God."

What is the difference? Both are men of status. Both cite the central importance of keeping the commandments. Why is the rich young ruler asked to do more, but the expert in the law commended? There is a clue in Luke 10, where another expert challenges Jesus with the same question as the rich young ruler: "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus, as a wise teacher, throws a question back at

the expert, and the he answers with the same two commandments that Jesus cites in Mark 12. Jesus commends him, but then the conversation continues: the expert wants to know exactly who his neighbor is. Jesus then tells the story of the Good Samaritan—being a neighbor is showing mercy to your enemy. What Jesus is showing is that wholeheartedness towards the Kingdom transforms how you understand ideas like "loving God" and "loving your neighbor"—you find yourself doing things you would have never considered before; you see your enemy as a person, rather than a target. As Micah 6 notes, no amount of sacrifice can equal the power of a wholehearted life.

There is one more piece of evidence about what wholeheartedness means in the words that Jesus and the religious expert use. If you know your Deuteronomy really well, you know that Jesus doesn't quote Deuteronomy 6:5 exactly in either Matthew or Mark, nor does the religious expert in Luke. Deuteronomy lists *heart, soul,* and *strength*—although the English translation really misses the meanings of those words—while Mark and Luke list *heart, soul, mind,* and *strength*. Matthew includes *mind*, but leaves out *strength*. As theologian and neuroscientist Joel Green and others have ably noted, the Hebrews did not conceive of the human person as made up of separable parts as did some Greek thinkers. Rather, the list of *heart, soul,* and *strength* is a means for emphasizing and re-emphasizing that your whole being is to be directed to the love of God—C. J. H. Wright suggests the translation *Love the Lord your God with total commitment (heart), with your total self (soul), to total excess. Loving God should be 'over the top'!*. For the Hebrews as well, the heart was the seat of intellect, motivation, and the will. So, to avoid any confusion at a time when some strains of Greek thought were pulling the person apart and declaring that only some parts ultimately mattered, the gospels add a fourth term to clarify, not that we are now made of four parts in the New Testament, but that everything really means *everything*. That is, love must be wholehearted. To do otherwise is to be satisfied with partial vision; to be comfortable with half a healing.

So here is a lesson from children and men healed from blindness; to enter the Kingdom of God, you must learn to see wholeheartedly in ways that you have never seen before. Even if you think that you can see, pay attention to that voice that tells you, “This doesn’t look quite right, not yet”. You can’t learn those new ways of sight with only part of you—it will take everything you have, and it will change everything you know. Even if it has already changed you, the Kingdom of God will continue to change you, to stretch you, to transform your understanding, to exchange what you thought you knew for what you will know. I hope you have learned to see more clearly while you were a student here at Andrews University. But I also hope that you realize that whatever you and I have gained so far is only partial vision. Mike May’s healing was incomplete because of the limitations of brain development in this life. No amount of effort can turn back the neural clock and give him the visual cortex of a child again. But his story does not need to be our spiritual story. Christ promises that if we want to see with new eyes, to receive the Kingdom of God and learn again as a child, the way is open for each one of us.