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## The Underdeveloped Heart

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# The Underdeveloped Heart<sup>1</sup>

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Michael A. Conway

A fascinating feature of human life is our ability to change, to be transformed, and to grow. And this is irrespective of age. There is no doubt that in the early years of life our growing is accelerated, necessary and, to a great extent, imposed on us. It is at once physical, emotional, intellectual and to some degree spiritual. As we age, however, growth is less a matter of physical prowess and much more a concern of mind, heart and spirit. And as such, growth in adult life is increasingly voluntary and, therefore, grounded in our freedom. We need never stop growing! The horizon of adult growth is infinite; *we can always begin something new*. I know a lady who in her nineties began learning French! In his poem ‘Begin,’ Brendan Kennelly observes:

Though we live in a world that dreams of ending  
that always seems about to give in  
something that will not acknowledge conclusion  
insists that we forever begin.<sup>2</sup>

We are all familiar with the idea of our IQ, which is supposed to be a measure of our intelligence. And more recently we have heard about EQ, a measure of our ability to deal with our emotional world and with situations in which emotions have an important role to play. It would appear that some people are more able than others in handling their emotions, both in terms of their own and in terms of dealing with other people’s emotions. I believe that we can continue to grow throughout life, not just in terms of the learning of the mind, or even in terms of negotiating the emotional world, *but in terms of our whole person*. We are much bigger than our minds and our emotions; and we need to take this into account if we are to have a more wholesome sense of what it is to be a human being.

The mind with its ideas is, of course, very important in helping

1 A version of this paper was delivered at the conference, ‘Opening the Door of Mercy,’ organised by the *Council for Pastoral Renewal and Adult Faith Development* of the *Irish Bishops’ Conference*, 5 March 2016.

2 Brendan Kennelly, *Good Souls to Survive* (Dublin: Allen Figgis, 1967).

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us to negotiate the complexity of life. Our ideas accompany us and help us to find our way in life. We need them, for example, in making crucial decisions, in charting our future paths (to the degree that that is possible), and in simply enjoying life. If we did not have our mind with its range of ideas we would get lost; we would have no way of coordinating life, structuring our relationships, and finding our way forward and advancing in life (both in time and in depth). Not only that, but our thinking changes as we move through life.

### THE HEART HAS ITS REASONS

But for all its richness, the mind, our thinking, never captures the fullness of life. *You are always more than your mind.* This means that the mind needs to be complemented by a richer take on life. The seventeenth century French philosopher Blaise Pascal underlined most memorably that the mind cannot tell us everything about life. There are dimensions to our lives and particularly to our relationship with God, which go way beyond the mind. And, for Pascal, it is here that the ‘heart’ comes in: ‘The heart has its reasons which reason [or the mind] does not know.’<sup>3</sup> Indeed, there is a native American Proverb that says: ‘Listen to the wind, it talks; Listen to the silence, it speaks; Listen to your heart, it knows.’

I’d like to reflect a little bit on this notion of the ‘heart,’ not so much as an idea, but as *the very foundation of our person.* So when I say heart, I do not mean so much the physical ‘heart,’ but much more your entire embodiment in the world: the fact that your presence here is made up of body and bone, flesh and muscle, blood and guts, emotions and passions, thinking and feeling, and so on. When I say ‘heart,’ it stands for that rootedness, if you like, in the totality of life: being embodied and having a real presence. It is about being concretely available to others; being able to shake hands with someone, for example, is so much more than just saying ‘hello’ (say, on your mobile). It is also about being able to experience and enjoy life in a vibrant sense; when we laugh, for example, it is not just something that is limited to the head. Being embodied is about knowing, too, the pain and the tragedy of life; and above all, it is about being able to love in a deep and profound way (and really knowing what that is like). That’s how I understand ‘heart.’ In the scriptures – both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament – there is an extremely rich understanding of ‘heart.’ It describes the deepest foundation of the human person. It is much more than the mind or the emotions. In the Hebrew Scriptures the heart (לֵב, *leb*) is the core or innermost source of your person. In the *Book of Proverbs*, for example, we are told: ‘Above all else guard

3 Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, no. 26 (éd. Brunschvicg).

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your heart; for everything you do flows from it' (4:23). Likewise in the New Testament, the heart (καρδία, *kardia*) is the centre of human action, the foundation of physical, mental, and spiritual life. It is the very centre, the vital power, the source and spring for each person. In his *Letter to the Corinthians*, for example, St Paul observes that 'God makes his light shine in our hearts' (2 Cor 4:6); and in the *Letter to the Ephesians*, he prays that 'the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you might know the hope to which he has called you' (Eph 1:18).

### HEAD OR HEART?

Now I believe that in our Western World, for very complex reasons that go back to the Enlightenment and further back to a limited reception of Greek philosophy, we have inherited a mighty dynamic between two powerful dimensions of the human person. This, in turn, is reflected in various polarities: the mind and the body; the intellect and the imagination; reason and passion; or, more simply, *the head and the heart*. It is possible to trace a fatal conflict between these two dimensions in western culture that takes different forms at different times. Interestingly, the observation is attributed to Aristotle that 'educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all.'<sup>4</sup> In a way, we can all still be victims of this conflict; and we can easily get caught on one side or the other. Do I go with my head or do I follow my heart? Why are they in conflict for me? Do they have to be in conflict? These questions are not strange to us; indeed, we accept them as being almost inevitable! And we imagine that, at times, we will have to choose in a fundamental option. *Many people live lives in which they have walked out on their own hearts.*

Even in Christianity, in its historical journey, you find a certain prioritising of the mind over the heart and the body, subjugating life to the dictates of the mind, which, ironically, is at odds with the fundamental Christian idea of incarnation. Of course, the subjugation is never really successful. When we repress something – and it is usually the heart – there is eventually a powerful reaction (often sudden) that releases it from its dungeon to reclaim its freedom, its vitality, and its validity. And in all kinds of ways throughout the history of Christianity the heart has rebelled, so to speak, and re-asserted its rights again and again.<sup>5</sup>

4 This is not a direct quotation from Aristotle, but would appear to be an adaptation and laconic summary of what he says in book eight of his *Politics*.

5 Examples might include the Fathers of the Church ratifying the personal and the bodily over against an impersonal Greek philosophy; or, in the high middle ages, the rise of mysticism in the face of scholasticism; or, later, the emergence of the romantic movement as a counterpoint to the enlightenment; or, even, the reaction in the 1960s to the perceived oppressive world of the 1950s, etc.

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### MERCY

And it is, of course, now, both extraordinary and exemplary that Pope Francis is drawing our attention to mercy. I see this as a reassertion of the heart as being essential to our self-understanding; and I see it as an invitation to make this year a time of being concerned not just with mercy in a narrow sense, but with compassion in that wide, generous sense of the fullness of our humanity. This is about personal life, about communal life, and, above all, it is about how we live together as a Church and as a Christian community. In his exceptional book on *Mercy*, Walter Cardinal Kasper quotes St. Augustine in a very telling statement: ‘Many are only superficially in the church, but have their hearts outside of the church; whereas many who are outside of the church really have their hearts in it.’<sup>6</sup> It is the heart that is the real measure of Christian life and living. There is a wonderful section on prayer in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and there we read: ‘The heart is our hidden centre, beyond the grasp of our reason and of others’; and then it adds the extraordinary statement that ‘only the Spirit of God can fathom the human heart and know it fully.’<sup>7</sup>

Paying attention to the heart is long overdue in our Western culture in terms of how we understand ourselves, how we relate to each other, how we build community, how we celebrate together as Church and ultimately, how we understand and relate to our God. Cardinal Kasper speaks of the need for a ‘culture of mercy’; and he sees this as ‘a fundamental issue for the twenty-first century,’ that he says has been ‘criminally neglected.’<sup>8</sup>

The alarming thing is that our culture does not value or appreciate what I will call ‘a developed heart.’ And this is so despite the fact that the thrill of living, the fullness of relationship, the depth of meaning in life and the very reason for being, all depend *directly* on having a heart that is well, or fully, developed, and only *indirectly* on having a well schooled mind. You may be a brilliant mathematician, or a world-class nuclear scientist, or a Nobel laureate; this does not mean that you will automatically live a meaningful and enriching life. *Happiness in life is most directly an achievement of the heart, and only indirectly an achievement of the mind.* In our culture we put enormous energy into educating our minds to be successful; but we put little energy in developing our hearts toward simplicity, integrity, relationship and fulfilment. This is an immense imbalance and it takes its toll on relationships, on life energy, and on a sense of purpose and meaning – in the work place, in families, in society, and in wider culture. Not many

6 Walter Kasper, *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life*, trans. William Madges (New York: Paulist, 2014), 158.

7 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2563.

8 Kasper, *Mercy*, xv, 6, 9.

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people realize this with any degree of clarity: *being successful is not the same as being content in oneself or having a sense of fulfilment and a sense of meaning in life.*

The heart is the place of your soul. It is where your identity is fashioned, given substance, and expressed in the most wholesome of ways. A developed heart is essential in terms of living with integrity, in terms of flourishing as a human being, and in terms of finding an authentic expression of who you are.

When you meet a person face to face you get a sense of that person, which is far more substantial than just hearing about them from somebody else, or reading about them in a newspaper, or even seeing them on television. There are multiple layers to human encounter. I would now be very concerned that because of an over-reliance on technology and social media, we are losing, in a destabilizing way, our sensitivity to that fullness of human encounter.<sup>9</sup> It would be very interesting to stand outside a supermarket on a Saturday afternoon and ask people as they leave to describe the person who served them and give an idea of their form or humour. I suspect that many would not be able even to describe the person!

### LIVING IN OUR HEADS

Increasingly, we live *in* our heads; we relate to each other *from* our heads; when we have problems, we go *into* our heads to solve them; so that our sense of our very selves is limited to what goes on – or does not go on – in our minds. And this has a number of consequences. First, when we relate via our minds alone, our very relating is, only ever, partial. We dismiss too easily the richness that goes with the communication of what I'm calling the heart: the emotional, the intuitive, the moral resonance, and the subtle senses that we have of each other. And this includes even things like smell, breathing, skin tone, touch, personal rhythms. These, and other such phenomena, are powerful modes of communication that we are being 'taught' to ignore, to mistrust, to discount, and, sometimes, even to treat as unreal.<sup>10</sup> I think that this is a great loss when it comes to the dynamics of concrete relationship, and, above all, when this is a matter of love.

Secondly, and, perhaps, more seriously, when we dwell exclusively in our heads, we limit our very humanity in relating to others. We see ourselves and we see others as we see objects like tables and chairs, doors and windows. They are simply out there in

9 It is clear that modern technology and social media have made an enormous contribution to our human living space and are not *per se* destructive of that space. The issue is how and when we use them.

10 I suspect that the remote roots of this attitude go back to an extensive reception of Stoicism in western culture and even in Christianity.

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the world, and we have lost so much of our contact with them. We *objectify* persons and, in doing so, we disassociate from each other and in this diminish our living connection to others. It counts as nothing. A person can then easily fall into a simple category of the mind: a traveller, a homeless person, a refugee, a priest, a teacher, a student, a client, and so on.

When we see others only through the mind, we no longer need to recognize the concrete, singular person, who shares our living space, because we no longer 'sense' them; they are 'labelled' as simply being there. *But a human being is never simply there.* And when we do this, then, we've lost or we are ignoring what I would call our heart-connection to them. We do not encounter the concrete person, who is present to us, for us, and even in us. We do not sense their joy or their pain, or acknowledge their frustration or their hope, or recognize their anxiety or even their ecstasy. We forget the simple thing of how to read faces, and we don't even bother trying!

Undoubtedly, this is a way that we have learned of protecting ourselves, from others and to some degree from our own selves. And perhaps we need that protection, precisely because our hearts are not capable of meeting the other, 'heart to heart': *our hearts are underdeveloped.* We are not, yet, at that point in ourselves where we are able to sustain a more wholesome, concrete human encounter. Or we can do so only in a very limited way. It is little wonder that relationships are so difficult to maintain and to live in our contemporary culture. The world of ideas, the world of the mind, is threadbare when it comes to understanding what happens between two people; particularly when they love each other. So much gets lost, is neglected or ignored, or is even not acknowledged and recognized. And then when difficulties arise, what you find is a battle of minds, when what is required is a healing of hearts.

### DEPTH OF PRESENCE

There is something very disturbing about this realization; And with it, the recognition that, maybe, we are missing out on something fundamental. It puts a question mark over the quality of our engagement with others and indeed with our own lives. Is there depth to my presence in this world? Am I really able to meet another person? Or am I drifting along oblivious to the very world around me? In his extraordinary work, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel observes: 'The familiar, precisely because it is familiar, is for that very reason not known.'<sup>11</sup> We often fail to recognize what's staring us in the face. Thomas Merton affirms that

11 G.W.F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, Vorrede, *Werke*, vol. 3 (Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp, 1970), 35.

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the beginning of love is the will to let those we love be perfectly themselves, the resolution not to twist them to fit our own image. If in loving them we do not love what they are, but only their potential likeness to ourselves, then we do not love them: we only love the reflection of ourselves we find in them.<sup>12</sup>

And Pope Francis says that ‘the Christian heart is magnanimous. It is open, always. It is not a heart that is closed-in on its own selfishness.’<sup>13</sup>

And so, for this year of mercy, I would like to suggest that we might take a new heed of the heart. This is not to the exclusion of the mind, but in conjunction with it. In fact, I believe that it is vital that these two are kept together. On the one hand, a mind without a heart is indifferent, cold, and ultimately sterile. It does not encounter the other in an energising and creative way. And on the other hand, a heart without a healthy mind is pathetically vulnerable, manipulative and prone to the dysfunctional dynamics of command and control. *The ‘heart’ is the foundation; and it is the vital complement to the ‘mind.’* We need this complementarity if we wish to live life in a wholesome, healthy, enriching and creative way.

When you encounter another human being, it is not just a meeting of minds; it is a meeting of whole persons. We need to pay more attention to this. Not only that, but when we meet and engage with another person, we are, each of us, transformed by whatever happens between us. The encounter is just as much about your self, your own identity, as it is about the other person.

Let me finish with a very short poem by the Australian poet, Les Murray. This poem captures, profoundly, the expectation in human encounter. It is called ‘Visitor.’

He knocks at the door  
And listens to his heart approaching.<sup>14</sup>

– *Les Murray*

12 Thomas Merton, *No Man is an Island* (Boston: Shambhala, 2005), 177-78.

13 Pope Francis, Homily at Mass at Santa Marta, 28 January 2016, [http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2016/01/28/pope\\_the\\_christian\\_has\\_a\\_big\\_heart\\_that\\_welcomes\\_all/1204280](http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2016/01/28/pope_the_christian_has_a_big_heart_that_welcomes_all/1204280) (accessed 8 March 2016).

14 Les Murray, ‘Visitor,’ from *Poems the Size of Photographs* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), 38.