

Study Guide: Lisa Miller's *The Awakened Brain*

Session 1 – Chapters: Introduction, 1, 2

Introduction. Anything True Can Be Shown pp. 3 - 10

- a) Describe and discuss the MRI scans of people who identified as low spirituality and those who identified as highly spiritual. pp. 6-7
- b) Miller asserts that each of us has an “awakened brain.” What does she mean? p. 7
- c) What is spirituality? p. 8

1. Nothing Could Have Been Done pp. 11 – 26

- a) Miller came to view the patients at the psychiatric inpatient unit in Manhattan as “victims of institutionalization rather than patients getting the care they needed.” What concerns did Miller have about the way mental illness was being treated?
- b) Describe Miller’s alternative approach to patient care. p. 18
- c) What are your thoughts regarding how Esther Klein’s death was handled by the hospital staff? pp.22-23

2. The Empty Kitchen pp. 27 – 39

- a) Discuss how Miller and her husband were suffering from choices made through their “achieving brains.” p. 29
- b) The patients who participated in the Yom Kippur service demonstrated behavioural changes. What were they and why do you think they occurred?
- c) Share a time when you experienced the Olympian state that Miller describes on p. 38.
- d) On page 39, Miller describes a praying man on a train whose face was “full of joy.” She asks, “What inner mechanism fueled his joy?” How would you respond?

Session 2 – Chapters: 3, 4, 5, 6

3. Stars in a Dark Sky pp. 41 – 52

- a) When Miller was 19, she struggled with some of the big questions in life. Looking back on that time, she wished that her therapist had asked her, “It sounds like you can argue both ways, yes and no, about whether there is meaning in life.

Is there a part of you that has a deeply felt answer? Is there a time in the past when you accessed or authorized your inner knowing?" What is your response?

b) How did Miller's observation of the grandmother and granddaughter on the train impact her research? What did she discover? How can knowing this impact how you live?

4. Two Sides of the Same Coin pp. 53 – 62

a) Miller shares some of Harvard professor Dr. Kenneth Kendler's important research. How does Kendler distinguish between "personal spirituality" and "personal conservatism?" How do you make sense of that distinction based on your experiences?

b) Kendler's research showed three correlations between spirituality and mental health. What thoughts come to your mind as you read about his findings?

c) According to Kendler, humans have an innate genetic capacity for spirituality. How might knowing that a person's degree of spirituality is determined 29% by heredity and 71% by environment change how you regard spirituality and spiritual practices?

d) Kendler and Miller discovered, through different methodologies and among different data sets, that when we cultivate this innate capacity for personal spirituality, we are protected against depression (p. 59). Miller states, on p. 61, that, "No other mental health intervention, clinical or pharmacological, for adults or adolescents, had anything close to these prevention rates." What is the importance of their findings?

5. Someone Watching Over Me pp. 63 – 80

a) Illiana came to feel that, despite the fact that he had died, the thread of warmth and joyful relationship she had had with her father was still alive and she had the experience that she wasn't alone, her father walked with her. How did this awakened knowing impact her mental health and her life?

b) In his introduction to Miller's presentation, Dr. David Shaffer, chair of Columbia University's Division of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, stated that in his research the only variable inversely associate with adolescent suicide was strong personal spirituality. Miller's research agrees with this finding. What are the implications? Why was the research not well received by some of their colleagues?

6. A Knock at the Door pp. 81 – 89

- a) What do you make of the unusual events that Miller describes in the chapter: her dream about her miscarrying the night before her ultrasound p. 85; the TV in the hotel room being stuck on the documentary about an orphan in a garbage dump p. 88; and finding a dead duck embryo on her front porch and then a mother duck with a worm tapping at her door p. 89?
- b) The last paragraph of chapter 6 reads describes Miller's sense of being guided by something and feelings of oneness and hope. How do you understand her experience? Describe a time when you have had a similar experience.

Session 3 – Chapters: 7, 8, 9, 10

7. When Inner and Outer Align pp. 91 – 105

- a) Miller describes many experiences of synchronicity. What causes synchronicity to occur? What makes our inner and outer realities align in what seems like random improbable coincidence?
- b) According to Miller, how are people both particles and waves?
- c) How does Miller use quantum physics to explain synchronicity and how things seemingly at a distance are connected.
- d) On page 105, Miller describes feeling a presence and sensing that she was being asked an important life question. Ponder and discuss transcendent experiences.

8. Calling All Lost Sons pp. 107 – 115

- a) Miller's cousin, Big Jane, is a trail angel who leads her into a new and profound experience in South Dakota. Miller engaged in a healing ritual focussed on spiritual rebirth.
- b) Read the second paragraph on page 114. How do you understand the experience that Miller describes? Do you think the healing ritual, the locating of a suitable adoptive child, and Miller conceiving are related? How?
- c) What changes for Lisa that when she was asked the same question by the presence she gave a different answer (p. 115)?

9. The Castle and the Wave pp. 117 – 135

- a) Read the first full paragraph on page 120. Miller describes an awareness of being in a relationship with life. Is this a new idea for you? What resonates with you about Miller's description of how her way of being has altered?

- b) What does Miller mean when she says it is not really the carrot we need but the journey (bottom of p. 124)?
- c) Read the last two full paragraphs on page 133. Describe how Kathleen's thinking and actions have changed. What is her aha!?
- d) As she healed, she began to experience the presence of love in the fabric of life, and to feel life acting with her on her behalf p. 134. Ponder this.

10. A Different Life pp. 137 – 145

- a) Read pages 138 to 140 and reflect on the research findings related to adolescent rates of anxiety, depression, and substance abuse and spirituality. Miller concludes, "A strong spiritual core gave these young people a whole different life."
- b) Explain the proactive benefit of spirituality described on pages 141 and 142.

Session 4 – Chapters: 11, 12, 13, 14

11. Wired for Spirituality pp. 147 – 154

- a) Columbia University Professor, Dr. Brad Peterson, used neuroimaging techniques to examine brain structures. The brain's cerebral cortex, the area responsible for reasoning, planning, and mood, was much thinner in people at high risk for depression. Dr. Myrna Weissman and Dr. Lisa Miller's MRI study showed that high-spiritual brains (red brains) had broad and pervasive areas of cortical thickness. The magnitude of thickening was even greater among people at high risk for depression. Using EEG's, the researchers showed that subjects with strong personal spirituality gave off a wavelength from the back of the brain that measured as high amplitude alpha. The parietal region at the back of the brain is essential to engaging spiritual awareness. Depression and spirituality appeared to be two sides of the same coin. Some types of depression may be a craving for spirituality. Spirituality is a consciousness for which all brains are wired, and spiritually engaged brains are healthier than non-spiritual brains. What interests or surprises you about these research outcomes?

12. The Two Modes of Awareness pp. 155 – 166

- a) Research had shown where spirituality lives in the brain and the structural benefits of spiritual (awakened) brains. In this chapter, Miller focusses on fMRI imaging that measures blood flow in the brain. Blood flow increases in areas of the brain that are in use. Yale researchers, Marc Potenza and Rajita Sinha had

shown that when people retell a personal experience in rich detail, describing the experience elicits the same neural correlates as the experience itself. They worked with Miller to design a study that included young adult participants describing stressful, relaxing, and spiritual events while in the scanner. The spiritual experiences are described on pages 156 and 157. What were the similarities related to the spiritual experiences described by participants? What meaning was attached to the spiritual experiences?

b) On page 161, Miller provides a three-point summary of how spiritual experiences are visible in the brain:

1. an involuntary reorientation of attention
2. a sense of love or embrace consistent with intimate attachment or bonding
3. a sense of self that is both distinct and part of a greater oneness

Spiritual awakening involves both self-transcendent awareness and relationship. In spiritual experiences, people go from being a point to being a wave (p. 162).

The sites of connection to awakened awareness (wave):

| | |
|---------------------------|---|
| Ventral attention network | Where we see that the world is alive and talking to us |
| Frontotemporal network | Where we feel the warm, loving embrace of others and of life itself |
| Parietal lobe | Where we know that we matter, belong, and are never alone |

Discuss the implications of this research on people's lives.

c) On page 163, Miller points out that the same brain can be used for stress or for spiritual engagement. Discuss the factors that may impact a person's choice.

d) Miller discusses the difference between "achieving awareness" (driven by goals and success) and "awakened awareness" (open to connection and meaning). Which of these feels more familiar to you in your daily life? How do they affect the way you see the world?

13. Integration is Key pp. 167 -174

a) Miller asserts that integrating achieving awareness and awakened awareness is important to our well-being. She specifies the positive impact of engaging neurological and perceptual capacities in a state of Quest. Read her description of

Quest Orientation on page 170 and the outcome of the DTI study that openness to exploring one's religious and spiritual views correlates better connected brains than those who were less open to change. On page 171, she states, "Some of the same networks of the brain that are highly connected in Quest are dysfunctionally connected in depression," and on page 172, she asserts, "The questing brain integrates our achieving and awakened awareness." How does this impact how we perceive the world?

14. Awakened Attention pp. 175 – 190

- a) To engage our innate capacity for awakened attention, we first quiet the "little me," turning down our achieving awareness so that our awakened awareness can emerge." How do we think meditation might create space for awakened attention?
- b) How does being in nature impact awakened attention?
- c) One way to engage our awakened attention is noticing synchronicity in our daily lives. When we are open to synchronicities we are visited by them. Share a time when this has happened to you.
- d) Try the Three Doors exercise on pages 180 and 181. What was that like for you?
- e) Read the summary paragraph on page 190. Ponder.

Session 5 – Chapters: 15, 16, Conclusion

15. Awakened Connection pp. 191 – 211

- a) Dr. Larry Dossey asserts that, "Our consciousness is actually part of one field of consciousness that he calls one mind... The non-locality of consciousness, paired with what we understood about quantum entanglement, non-local consciousness suggested that just as tiny particles can become bonded and interconnected, so can minds or awareness." Can you think of a time when you felt that connection to someone else?
- b) Read the paragraph on page 201 that describes Dr. Jeanne Achterberg's study on how love's healing power can be transmitted remotely. What spiritual practice might we use to enable this? Discuss.

- c) Try Dr. Gary Weaver's Holding Council exercise on page 203. Consider the importance of knowing that we are in relationship with our ancestors, our loved ones, our higher selves, and our higher power at all times.
- d) On page 209, Miller says, "Life and lab were revealing the same thing: that we're bonded in a network of love, that life itself holds us in a loving embrace. Rest in this awareness"

16. Awakened Heart pp. 213 – 238

- a) Read the long paragraph on page 215 and the first 2/3 of page 216 that discusses Schumann resonances and high-amplitude alpha wavelengths. Miller explains that, "The same wavelengths of brains in meditation or prayer, and shared by men and women holding hands in times of pain, is the wavelength of the oneness of all life," and that, "when we awaken, we resonate at the same frequency as all of nature on earth." How does the knowledge that an awakened heart is the seat of our unity with all life resonate in your being?
- b) How do our relationships change depending on whether we approach them from achieving awareness or awakened awareness?
- c) On page 220, Miller lists the five common spiritual phenotypes that emerged from her research study of the universal dimensions of spirituality:
 1. Altruism
 2. Love of Neighbour as Self
 3. Sense of Oneness
 4. Practice of Sacred Transcendence
 5. Adherence to Moral Code

What does it mean to you that the spiritual heart of all faith traditions is the same?

- d) Relational spirituality interventions focusing on altruism and love of neighbour benefit people at high risk for depression. In the second and third paragraphs of page 223, Miller suggests reasons why altruism – lived actionable service to fellow humans – can prevent against the downward spiral of recurrent depression and then concludes, "This is perhaps the biggest revelation of the awakened brain: that it's in our innate nature to build a better world. That what's good for everyone is also what's best for each one of us." How does this connect with Jesus' teachings?

c) Tim Shriver describes his insight into sainthood (bottom p. 225 and top p. 226). How do you respond to the idea that all saints, including us, have to do is to let our hearts be open and do the work of love and justice that is given to us to do?

d) Steven Clark Rockefeller told his Middlebury College students, “You have a choice. All over the world in every culture there are visionary women and men doing beautiful work in the effort to build a better world, and they are making a real difference. You can sit here feeling helpless, overwhelmed by the bad news. Or you can go out and join these courageous people.” Discuss.

Conclusion. Isaiah and the Geese pp. 239 – 243

a) In the last paragraph of page 242, Miller outlines the choice of how we see ourselves and the world. What choice will you make?