

# Mental Health – The Journey to Wholeness

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 10 October, 2021

A Reflection by Dr Jac Brown – read by Dave Cahilap

Pentecost 20B - Mental Health Sunday

Contemporary Readings from *Health and Wholeness* and from  
*Attention and Love* by Laurence Freeman; Mark 10: 17-31

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

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This morning, in the few minutes that we have, I would like to highlight just a few concepts that I believe are central to all of us, as we all confront our own concerns linked to mental health. So first of all we will focus on early emotional experience, and how that may influence mental health. Second, we will consider human behaviour and some of the complexities that are needed to understand it better. Finally, we will focus briefly on going inward to link us with wholeness in being present for ourselves and others. Over the years, I have found that for me, my students, and my clients that self-understanding and acceptance was one of the best antidotes to dealing with mental health concerns. Thus, I invite you this morning to think about your own interactions with important others as we go through these ideas.

We are all on this journey to wholeness, and we are all broken to some extent. We all need help sometimes. Over the years, I've seen therapists at several key points in my life as part of my journey, as I'm sure many of you have as well. They were key points where I confronted my past experiences growing up, and events that often signified turning points in my life. My hope for today is that I can present some ideas that may seem a bit academic, but that will help you put mental health into perspective, as we are all on a path of dealing with the hurts of life as we work towards wholeness.

I think the gospel reading for today provides an interesting introduction into some of the mental health concepts that I would like to talk about. An extremely wealthy man who has done all the right things according to the law, but still feels something is lacking. The comment that Jesus loved him is interesting, as it points to an empathic response, as Jesus pays attention to him. Jesus simply answers his question by telling him to get rid of his wealth, an idea we were all asked to think about last week when Patricia Gemmill challenged us to seriously consider voluntary poverty, and now we might review our lifestyles as a way to using less of the earth's resources. The wealthy man in the reading today was unable to radically get rid of his wealth. I suppose most of us would find this a difficult idea to grapple with in our modern society.

How did this wealth impact his understanding of himself and his life generally? I imagine being wealthy during the times that Jesus was living was an insulation—perhaps even a wall that prevented him from having any understanding of the less fortunate who lived in that society. I suspect that the division between rich and poor was extreme. I wonder if being insulated by wealth had protected him from any experience that would help him find

out who he was? He seemed to be simply focussing on the behaviour of living a good life that followed the law, and had never delved any deeper into his experience to discover more about himself. Yet he realised that something was missing and asked his question. Was this perhaps his midlife crisis? He thought there was something missing, and hoped Jesus could help him find it. Jesus saw the protective cushion around the man, and realized that a radical approach was the only way to deal with the question. Jesus' response wasn't really a direct answer, but it was an invitation to begin a journey of self-discovery.

This is a journey that all of us are on. There are various ways of managing this journey to wholeness.

## EARLY EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE

First, I would like to focus on communication from infancy through to adulthood. I believe that there are two important forms of communication during this stage of development: That of emotion and secondly, cognition. The interaction between these two, help each of us to create a sense of self. Emotion or feelings are the only form of communication available to infants early in life, prior to the development of language. As we become adults, we often rely much less on the communication of feeling, often to our own peril. These feelings are commonly called affects.

Psychologists have identified a range of feelings or affects that they say are present at birth. They have been identified by studying the reliable facial expressions of infants. This is one of several models that was identified by Tomkins' research:

1. Enjoyment-Joy
2. Interest-Excitement
3. Surprise-Startle
4. Shame-Humiliation
5. Distress-Anguish
6. Disgust
7. Fear-Terror
8. Anger-Rage

Each of these affects has a range of intensities. For your own interest, consider which of these affects you can most easily access, which ones are difficult to access, and which ones can more easily get out of control. Perhaps you avoid certain ones, or rely too heavily on others. These are things you may want to explore later on in your own reflections.

While most of these affects are present at birth, there is one that is not, and that is Shame, which emerges at about 9 months. Shame is commonly called the master affect. It is interesting that this affect is closely associated with the development of self. The experience of shame, which infants and young children frequently confront through their experiences growing up, can easily lead to a fragile sense of self. Shame is often central in organizing much of their adult experience if they are overwhelmed by it growing up. Thus, it can be very damaging.

We all need to learn to manage all of our feelings, not by ignoring them, but accessing them without becoming overwhelmed. This includes Shame. Interestingly, in our society, shame is often used as a form of punishment and it is common to hear the phrase "name and shame", as though that is something that is good. Few people learn helpful lessons by being

shamed, but instead learn not to value themselves. I'm sure we can all think back to when we were growing up and reflect on how shame was used to control us. A very unhelpful method of control!

There are a number of common patterns linked to shame, and I would like to point out one just in passing. This is the shame-rage cycle. I'm sure you have all seen this in others from time to time. These days we see the rage that emerges when someone is denied access to a shop because they refuse to wear a mask. Or the rage that emerges when a driver cuts another off with their car on a busy Sydney road. In this situation the offending driver may feel that someone has impacted their sense of entitlement. However, unfortunately one of the most common forms of the shame-rage cycle we see today is that related to intimate partner violence.

As infants can only communicate through their feelings, caregivers must respond by a range of non-verbal emotions, such as smiling back, calming and soothing, worrying and frowning due to anxiety, or demonstrating frustration and even anger when they feel exasperated and want the infant to calm down. As you can imagine these messages can easily be misinterpreted. Generally speaking, the child develops a healthier or stronger sense of self by reactions from caregivers and others that communicate soothing, or responses that recognise children's responses by validating rather than denying them.

The mature adult should be able to express all of these feelings or affects, as well as being able to control them. We have been witnessing in the latest protests around Australia, adults who don't appear to be able to control their anger, and thus would probably not be seen as having a mature level of self-development. When these affects and emotions cannot be accessed and contained, this is often related to mental health concerns.

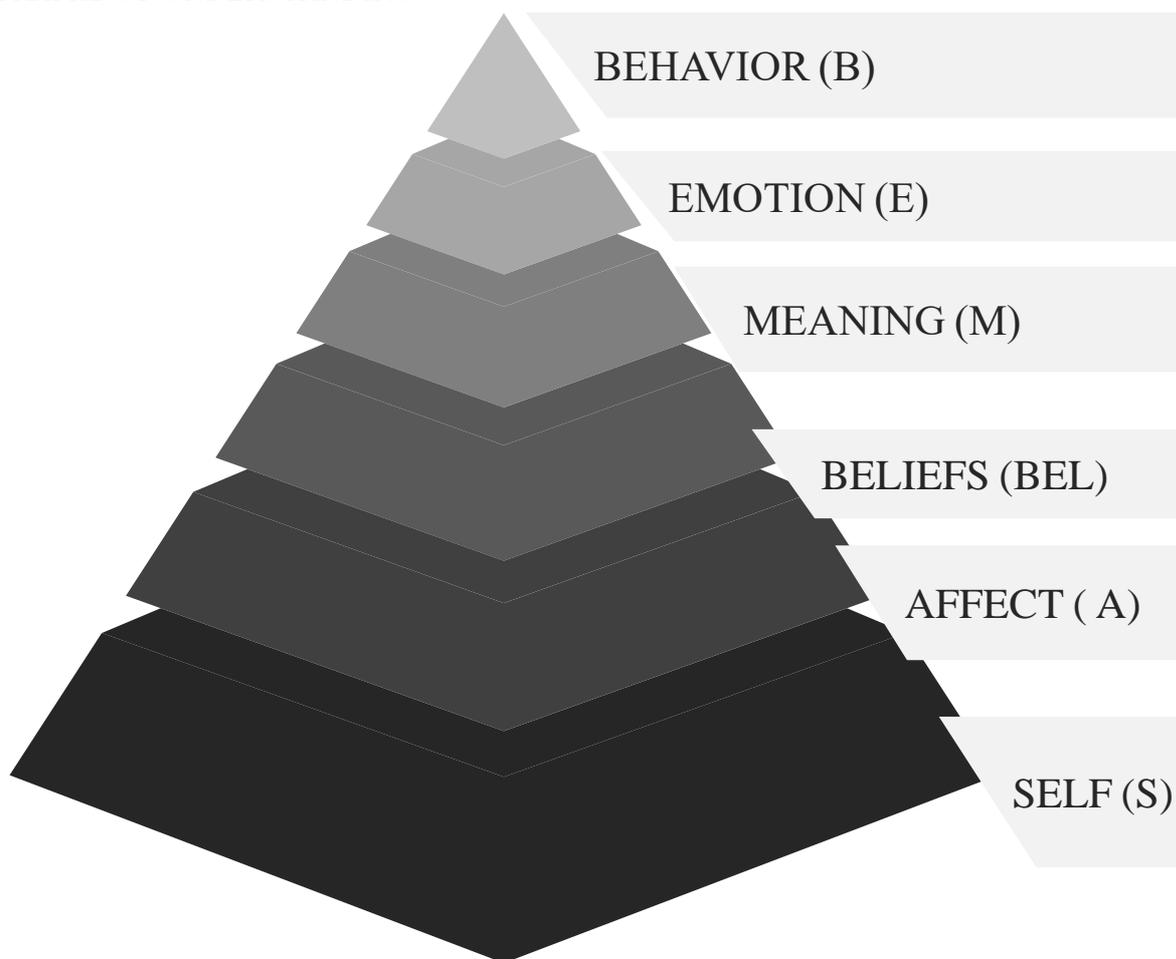
Of course, caregivers are not perfect at reading their infants responses, even though their intentions are usually the best. Fortunately, as a child grows up, other adults, such as partners, good friends, or therapists can provide this function of affirming our affect-laden experiences. Try to identify some of these people in your life. Thus, growth of the self can be a life-long process. I'm sure there are many people here in our community who have found others in the community who can help in this process.

Some of us may find it difficult to manage anger, or sadness, or anxiety. It often takes many years to arrive at a mature sense of self, or someone who can access and control the range of human feelings. As these feelings are integrated, and the ability to form good connections with others ensues, we develop confidence in our ability to manage ourselves and develop a strong sense of self. With a stronger sense of self, we become able to create relationship and meaning for our lives.

## UNDERSTANDING HUMAN BEHAVIOUR

I recall seeing a cartoon many years ago. There was a large hill or mountain where a person was standing with a huge telescope looking down at a crowd of people interacting on the plains below. There was one word written on the telescope in large letters. It was "UNDERSTANDASCOPE". I used to put that slide up in one of my first classes as an introduction to the unit I was teaching. Of course it wasn't that simple, as there are many ways that we all try to make sense of human behaviour. I'm sure you all have ideas about the causes of much of your own behaviour.

## PYRAMID OF UNDERSTANDING



Over the years, I have tried to help both clients and students understand human behaviour in a way that doesn't blame others. A model I like to use is a pyramid, with six levels as depicted above. Each of these levels can provide a different perspective for understanding the behaviour. The levels do not exist independently, but are interconnected. We explore them individually for the sake of clarity. The pyramid is a good metaphor-- as when archaeologists first discovered the pyramids in Egypt, they frequently saw the tip of the pyramid, the rest being covered by sand. Thus, various layers could be uncovered with increasing amounts of effort. I also like to think of the levels as becoming less and less conscious and perhaps more difficult to understand and are often more relevant in understanding behaviour.

As we go through the various levels, I encourage you to apply these ideas to yourself or to your interactions with others; perhaps a good friend, one of your children, or your partner. You won't have time to explore this deeply, but you may want to come back to it later to think about it. For some of us, we may have already been forced by our experience of life to unshackle ourselves from our "wealth", or protections. For we are all wounded and are perhaps at some stage of the journey towards our centre and towards wholeness.

1. **Behaviour.** Behaviour is the tip or first level of understanding. We see behaviour and try to make sense of it, often by looking at the behaviour of others or events that may have triggered the behaviour of interest. For example, the behaviour may include road rage, aggressive actions in a protest, family violence, crying, and cowering, smiling, or the invitation to do something together. On its own, the piece of behaviour may be unremarkable, but it is the context around the behaviour that helps us make sense of it.

Crying can be positive in the case of a friend who you haven't seen in a long time; or negative, if you are scared by some threat to your safety. In your own case as you reflect on your life experience, pick a behaviour, or perhaps an emotion, and reflect on the meaning you attribute to it. If you happen to pick an emotion or a belief first, then try to pick the accompanying behaviour. Painting the complete picture will help you make sense of the situation. Sometimes the behaviour or emotion of another will also play a part in the meaning of the scenario you have selected.

2. Emotion. Below behaviour I have placed emotion, as there is frequently an emotion that is inextricably connected to the behaviour. The individual may be aware or unaware of this emotion. Frequently an emotion is demonstrated on the surface, which is completely different than the emotion being experienced underneath. For example, rage may cover fear or anxiety that is not being expressed. In a situation of anger as you wait for someone to join you who is late, there could be many explanations. You could experience an underlying anxiety about being late for work beneath your anger or frustration. Emotion helps us make sense of the behaviour as we focus on meaning. In our example of the aggressive protester that we often see these days, the emotion they experience may be anger, but it also may be sadness or anxiety.

For your own reflection, try to identify the emotion surrounding the behaviour. Perhaps there is an underlying emotion that fuels the surface or observable emotion. Try to identify that.

3. Meaning. Below emotion, I have placed meaning. As humans, we attempt to create meaning in our environment to facilitate understanding. For example, anger or irritation at a friend not showing up on time for lunch may quickly be altered to concern or reassurance when we find out the friend was in a car accident on the way to the meeting. In our example of the aggressive protester, the meaning could relate to an underlying sadness, possibly related to not having meaning in their life, or despair about being isolated and not having any friends. As humans, we easily attribute meaning to behaviour, often with very minimal information.

To challenge yourself, you may think about the meaning you ascribe to a particular behaviour easily. Also try to think about how the other person might interpret that behaviour. Maybe you have never thought about the meaning of a particular behaviour. Try to think about that now.

4. Beliefs. Below emotion, I have placed beliefs, as I think we create meaning based on our view of the context, but deeper meaning is often related to long held beliefs that may relate to past experience. These beliefs are often unconsciously transmitted by family members and other early experience. For example, if we have a belief that white males are better at leading big corporations, (and I don't know where anyone would get that idea!), then there may be a tendency to blame any difficulties in the organisation on the race or gender of a leader who is a black and female. Categories of diversity, such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age, religion, and mental health, are often the first level of explanation used; as they are unthinking short-hands used to create understanding which we often associate with prejudice. Other beliefs might be more deeply held and are often difficult to recognize or contemplate. In the example of

the aggressive protester, the belief may not be related to the issue being protested, but could relate to a belief that they having nothing of value to offer anyone, which could be linked to feeling rejected or ostracized.

Maybe you have a belief about your own competence, or about how easily you are able to rely upon others, or how close you can get to another person and still feel safe and not overwhelmed. Try to identify some of these deeper beliefs, as they can frequently drive behaviour.

5. Affect. Below beliefs, I've placed affect, which links to beliefs and self. These affects may be linked to early memories that are recorded by feelings that we experienced in infancy or childhood, as discussed previously. To reiterate, these early experiences can help create the initial sense of self reflected in beliefs about self, that seem very resistant to change. In my experience, people can struggle with these issues for much of their lives, as these experiences are very deep and often not easily accessed. Perhaps our protester grew up with their feelings never being accepted or affirmed. This experience can be very invalidating.

In your own explorations, you may find that early experiences that you clearly remember, are linked to positive or negative feelings. Pick one of these and try to explore why this memory is important to you and how it has impacted your life.

6. Self. The self is at the bottom of the pyramid as it is the most inaccessible part of a person. It is a collection of the experiences throughout life that have shaped the individual into the person that they are. Many of the components of self are created unconsciously prior to language or when you are very young. For example, early caregivers may unconsciously give positive emotional reactions that conveyed self-confidence or negative reactions that conveyed self-doubt. While the particular incidents are not often remembered, the effects may last for a life time. For our protester, their past experience may link to never feeling good enough, or learning not to value themselves as they are worthless. Getting to this level of understanding of our protester cannot then simply be dismissed as an angry act that could easily be linked to our own stereotypes perhaps based on appearance. Furthermore, this level of understanding could take several hours to elicit and understand.

You may have experiences that had a long-term impact on you. Try to identify how these experiences may have impacted the way you currently feel about yourself and how this may have influenced the decisions you have made about your life.

I've outlined this pyramid to point out how easy it is to offer a very superficial explanation for a behaviour that we do not like or that irritates us in some way, making it easy to quickly form negative judgments about others. It brings to mind Jesus' words: "*Judge not, that you be not judged*". This suggests that one often judges themselves in forming an opinion about the behaviour of another. For you see, your judgment can easily point to your beliefs and elements of your own sense of self. Carl Jung, the famous psychoanalyst, reflected this when he wrote about the shadow which he hypothesised that we each have. He said we can quickly judge another person negatively for some aspect of behaviour that is really something that we don't like in ourselves. Thus, our shadow side can easily become apparent, and we

are in fact judging ourselves. It is always helpful to think about a range of explanations for the behaviour of others that don't seem to make sense. Becoming less judgmental is rarely a bad thing!

## MENTAL HEALTH AND WHOLENESS

These psychological models presented don't take into consideration many aspects of the physical or spiritual self that can contribute much to who we become as people. In addition to our past experiences growing up, our journey to wholeness may involve a range of activities designed to help us understand and accept ourselves, including further reflection, contemplation, meditation, journaling, dream analysis, and retreats focussed on these activities.

It is interesting that modern psychology has discovered meditation, which is usually called mindfulness, and is recommended for a range of mental health concerns. Jon Kabat-Zinn, an American professor was one of the first people to go to the East and study meditation with masters, and introduce it to the West as a form of treatment. It's great to see that more of these opportunities are being offered here by our church. The Reflect and Connect, Morning Prayers, Taize services, Retreats, and there is an Intensive Journaling workshop that is about to be offered—all of these activities help us develop greater self-awareness, self-acceptance, and awareness of others.

The readings this morning, written by Lawrence Freeman, a Benedictine monk, point in this direction. These readings come from an app that is sponsored by the World Community of Christian Meditation, another helpful resource. Thus, there are lots of ways to journey inwards. Meditation can be central to providing a meaningful way to extend our inner journey. Through this technique, we can learn to focus on the present moment, learning not to judge ourselves when our minds wander. This ability to pay attention to ourselves also helps us to learn to pay attention to each other. Our modern world of chaos and disharmony needs a lot of listening, and that is not always an easy task, particularly when we have strong ideas of what other people should think or do.

Furthermore, when we can attend to ourselves, and our divine centre, we develop the fruits of the spirit that allow us to attend to others. Thus, meditation can help us in our journey towards wholeness that facilitates our ability to be present to ourselves, to accept ourselves, and to then to be present for others. A final Lawrence Freeman quote:

*“Meditation is about relationship. This is not how it is often packaged or presented in the media. In a hyper-individualistic culture like ours, health is seen to be a very individualistic thing...One of the very first areas in which we experience the changes of meditation in our life, is in our relationships, beginning in our relationship with ourselves.”*