Balancing The Brain & The Power of Choice
by Tami Simon

Tami Simon: You're listening to Insights at the Edge. Today, my guest is Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor. Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor—called by many who know her "Dr. Jill"—is a Harvard-trained neuroanatomist who experienced a severe hemorrhage in the left hemisphere of her brain in 1996. On the afternoon of this rare form of stroke, she could not walk, talk, read, write, or recall any of her life. It took eight years for Dr. Jill to completely recover all of her physical function and thinking ability. She's the author of the New York Times bestselling memoir My Stroke of Insight: A Brain Scientist's Personal Journey.

Dr. Jill will also be a featured presenter at Sounds True's 2014 Wake Up Festival, August 20th through the 24th in Estes Park, Colorado. She'll be joined by singer-songwriter Carrie Newcomer, and they'll offer an evening called "Transformative Stories: A Whole-Brain Immersion Experience." If you're interested in the Wake Up Festival, you can visit WakeUpFestival.com.

In this episode of Insights at the Edge, Dr. Jill and I talked about the two hemispheres of the brain, their respective roles, and the work of integration. We also talked about how Dr. Jill maintains a balanced brain in the face of emotionally triggering and potentially upsetting situations. Finally, we talked about the importance of nurturing the right brain in today's left brain-dominant society. Here's my conversation with Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor.

Welcome, Dr. Jill! I'm thrilled to have you with us on Insights at the Edge.

Jill Bolte Taylor: Thanks, Tami. It's great to be here.

TS: I wanted to begin by talking about spiritual awakening. Of course, different spiritual teachers talk about awakening in different ways. But it seems that, in general, when people talk about awakening, they talk about a sense of oneness—unitive consciousness. A breaking down of all feelings and sense of separation.

In reading My Stroke of Insight and hearing your story—about how your left brain went offline during your stroke, and you were having only a right-brain experience—your observations of this right-brain experience seemed to parallel what I think many spiritual teachers would describe as an awakening. So, I'm curious how you see that—your experience with your stroke and spiritual awakening.

JBT: Well, I don't generally frame it as such because my entire thinking construct is very biological and very circuitry-based. So, I really am all about the brain and trying to understand how the brain builds our perception of reality.

When my left hemisphere went offline, and it shut down my language centers and any

ability to really communicate through language to the external world—in the absence of that noise inside of my mind was a shift into other circuitry that then came more online. Which was my right brain experience.

In the right brain experience, everything is connected. We are one with all that is. We require cells in the left parietal region in order to define the boundaries of where I begin and where I end. When those cells went offline, then there was no physical boundary. I was energy. I am energy. We are energy.

So, I think that what's happening is that the "spiritual awakening experience" is circuitry. At least, we are wired to be able to have that experience when [we bypass] enough of the other circuits that may be inhibiting it, overwhelming it, or demanding our attention instead of it. But I think that that circuitry of the spiritual awakening is always running and is always present. It just gets laid over by this other circuitry that gets in the way of it.

I think in many people's language, I did have a spiritual awakening. In my language, my left hemisphere circuitry shut down. It removed the inhibition and it stopped dominating my attention and awareness. In the absence of that circuitry, then I was actually able to experience the circuitry that does say I am connected to everything, because biologically I am.

TS: In your sense, there's the left hemisphere and the right hemisphere. I'm curious—is there another grand witness or soul or sense of the one who's experiencing both the left and right hemisphere? How would you explain this, and answer this query that I have here?

JBT: I think what you're describing is the consciousness of the right hemisphere. I think that there appears to be a "this and that," and yet a third who is observing it. But that's only because I have to use the left hemisphere language in order to describe the right hemisphere experience.

The right hemisphere is experience. It is what we are experiencing. For me, it is the consciousness of, "I am connected to all that is. I am observing everything. I am in an energetic dynamic with everything. I am a part of the collective whole." But then there's this left hemisphere that has to use language in order to define the experience, which makes it an "it" that I have to talk about—as opposed to the being that gets to experience it all.

So, a lot of people ask me that. Is there this third observer? It's like, "No." There's just no way for me to use language to describe the experiential ofbeing. To me, there's the experiential of being the awareness, and then there is the action of that into the circuitry of tools that we then use to interact with the external world.

To me, there's only two of those places of being—the right hemisphere consciousness and the left hemisphere consciousness. They care about completely different things. As a result of what they care about and what they value, they have completely different personalities.

TS: OK. I just want to keep taking this a little bit further, realizing you're a neuroanatomist and some of these questions may fall outside of your comfort zone. But I feel comfortable with you in that you'll tell me.

I think part of what I'm driving at is: if we didn't have any brain activity in either the left or right [hemispheres], do you think that there would be something like "consciousness" still alive and active?

JBT: You know, the only experience I've had with anything like that is on the morning of the stroke. On the morning of the stroke, as the left hemisphere shut down, there was this dance that was happening between my right hemisphere experience of all that is and my left brain, [which] was trying to save my life and orchestrate my rescue.

So, on the morning of the stroke, I had this "this and that." They were very clear "this and that." When I curled up into a little fetal ball and my mind is saying, "Hold on, hold on, hold on." And eventually, there's nothing left to hold onto, and I stopped holding on. I shifted into unconsciousness. I let go of all of my being, as far as I was aware consciously.

At that point, I succumbed to my death, if you will. And then I woke up, which was totally unexpected because I'd let go. I thought that if I let go, then I let go and I would be gone. When I first awoke and I was in that space of feeling that my body weighed a ton—and there was no way that I would ever be able to get it to move again, because there was no connection between what I had become and this entity that felt like lead—in that moment, I was still connected.

So, I don't have a real opinion about what happens when I'm no longer connected because I remained still connected—even though there was no control over my body. I was still there. So what happens beyond that level of pure consciousness, I can't really speak to. I wish I could.

If we are alive, it is not—in my opinion—appropriate to ever say that we died because we didn't die. We're still connected. As long as we're still connected, the experience will be of, somehow, experiential in the relationship to the tissue that makes up our body.

I will say that I evaporated—if you will—into a flow of energy that was peaceful love. Pure love. The feeling of love. I'm hoping that—when I do have that final disconnect and the thread of me finally is no longer tethered at all to this form—that it is that evaporation into the experience of love. But in that love, there is no thought. We have to—I believe—have the circuitry that contains the memory in order to be able to have any thought of this existence or of this realm. This is a way of being alive, and when we are no longer of this realm, alive with this tissue and these cells to hold the memory of a moment ago to a moment in the future to this moment, then there's not going to be a conscious concern at all about "this space." It will evolve into something else.

For me, based on how disconnected I was, it was just this feeling of incredible, pure love—which was lovely.

TS: Now, Dr. Jill, one of the things that's been most remarkable for me—this is now our second conversation together. I've never met you in person, but I'm looking forward to it at Sounds True's Wake Up Festival. But it's the second time that I've talked to you from a distance and what I've noted both times is you seem really joyful—really happy. I'm wondering: were you such a joyful, happy person before your stroke in 1996?

JBT: [Laughs.] Well, you know, I was fortunate that I was one of those people that was

born happy—if you ask my mother.

So, yes, I've always had an eternal optimism that I seem to have inherited from my father. With optimism—to have a mind that is constantly construing possibility always makes whatever this situation of the present moment exciting. When you have that level of excitement, drive, and passion, it becomes this enthusiastic ebullience that some people enjoy and some people, it really drives them crazy.

TS: Well, I'm enjoying it, just for the record.

JBT: I'm really glad about that!

TS: OK! But I am curious to know, then, if this "joy quality" is something that's just always been with you your whole life. How would you say that you are different—fundamentally different? If you are, do you think—post stroke?

JBT: Yes. I really am very different in that—from my perspective, I used to focus my mind on science, in the lab, in the cells, under the microscope, in theory, and ideas. That whole world was what drove me.

Now, I'm much more connected to the bigger picture of humanity and our relationship as human beings to the planet and the dance that we're doing on the bigger picture. I really shifted from having both hemispheres, but my left hemisphere was driving my character before in the doing world. I still valued my body. I still valued my presence. I still valued my own spirituality.

But now, I live it in a completely different way. My decisions are totally driven based on my intuition—if you will—about how things feel energetically for me. Is this something I want more of or something I want less of?

So, I'm not motivated by the same kinds of things that I was motivated by before. I think most of my friends would tell you I'm much friendlier this way.

TS: So, this intuition function and this intuitive sensitivity is part of the right hemisphere?

JBT: Yes. My value structure is based on what I would call "right hemisphere values"—which is the bigger picture of humanity. [It's] not so focused on Jill Bolte Taylor and what she is achieving academically or professionally in the world anymore. I lost Jill Bolte Taylor, really. She died on the morning of the stroke. The person whom I had been before—that portion of my brain never recovered.

So I got to be essentially born again at the age of 37 and begin rebuilding—restructuring—who I wanted to be. What I realized—in the rebuilding of my left brain—was that I had the ability to pick and choose which circuits could come back online or which circuits didn't really serve me at all. Or I didn't like the way that they felt in my body.

I got to consciously—essentially, as an adult—rebuild my brain in a way that I wanted it to be rebuilt, for who I now wanted to be in the world. Fortunately, no one had any expectations of me whatsoever, do I didn't have to grow up to be something or someone again. Instead, I was who I was. It was now a matter of, "Who do I want to be?" and, "What part of me do I want to bring into the world as the gift of what I am now?" Which was a completely different way of looking at myself.

TS: Now, you're talking about which aspects of your left brain circuitry—

JBT: Well, for example, my anger circuitry. I didn't like the way that anger felt in my body. When it first started coming back online, I didn't know what it was. All I knew was it felt absolutely terrible inside of me and I described it to my mother. She said, "Well, Jill, that's anger. What you're feeling is anger."

And I thought, "Why would anybody ever do this?" It feels like a total constriction of the body. I had become so open and so expansive in my right brain way of being that anything that brought that kind of constriction felt awful to me. So, that's not a circuit that runs real strong.

I do have the ability to feel that. I do have the ability to run that circuitry. But it's not something—I'm real clear that that's a circuit. If someone is stomping on that particular part of me, instead I go back to [being] the observer and ask the question, "You know, what is this relationship about? And what is going on here? Is this a dance I want to do?" Ninety-nine out of a hundred times, it's like, "No, I don't think so."

I'm in the present moment, evaluating what is going on in the circuitry between me and the person outside of me—and shifting consciously my response to that, because I have the power to do that. I certainly don't have the power to change your behavior, but I certainly have the ability to change mine.

TS: OK: So, a couple questions. I just want to clarify something one more time. So this "observer"—the one who's observing the anger. This left-brain circuitry that you don't want to plug back in. That's a right-brain function? The function of observing?

JBT: Well, for me I believe that that is who that is, because it's really all about energy. Anger is an energetic that we can feel intuitively. We know if we walked into a room and we just interrupted a fight. There's an energy about it.

Well, but at the same time there's a circuitry that is being run in our limbic system that is generating that. But, we have two limbic systems. The conversation of the brain has seemed to have gotten very simplified—where we have a limbic system, we have an amygdala, we have a hippocampus, we have a prefrontal cortex, and we have these structures. They respond to different kinds of stimulation in different ways.

The fact of the matter is that we have two limbic systems. We have two amygdalae—one in each hemisphere. They respond to different kinds of stimulation in different ways. They work together, but they respond differently.

Two hippocampi—one in each hemisphere, for learning and memory. But if the right brain is focused about the experience of the present moment, then that puts us in the field of energy and the energy dynamic of what is happening right here, right now. Then, the left brain comes online and it says, "OK, but I need more information other than the information of the present moment, because the present moment comes and goes. And if I just keep coming and going, then I can't learn anything." I have to have a left brain in order to be able to learn anything.

So, it's this dynamic relationship between our two ways of being. I'm a firm believer that the observer—for me, it is "observe instead of engage." If I'mengaging,

then I'm in my left brain.

TS: And if you're observing, you're in your right brain—?

JBT: If I'm observing, then I'm in my right brain. Because the right brain is right here, right now. It's the present-moment experience. So, part of observing in the present moment is the observer.

TS: Now, one of the aspects of the way that you talk about your experience that's so interesting to me is this "power of choice." You emphasize this in your book—that we have this power of choice. You're talking about choosing which circuitry "to have come back online" in your left hemisphere.

So, tell me more: where does this power of choice live? And, how do I strengthen my power of choice?

JBT: I think you strengthen choice by realizing that, OK, I have one of way of thinking about this situation, which is very detail-based, very based on me the individual. And then I can always look at the bigger picture of, "OK, well, how does this activity or this behavior or this engagement impact the bigger picture of things?" On an energetic level, how is it influencing my relationships in general or my relationship with the planet?

Moment by moment, we are constantly making choices. Most of the choices are not always conscious, though. We are just moving into "Automatic." I get up in the morning; I have a choice. Do I want to roll over and look out the window and take a few moments to actually watch this supple movement of the leaves or the pine needles as they move in space? And as I do that, I can shift into really being, feeling that that connection to movement and subtleness and calmness. Or I can boing out of bed in an instant and start my to-do list. I'm making choices.

Someone comes to me and they're feeling very upset. Rarrarrar! And I have a choice in that moment of engaging "rarrarrar" right back with them, or I have the choice of realizing that I have mirror neurons and I am feeling what they're feeling. And I can do that, but I don't have to engage in a "rarrarrar" way. I can engage with them by calming my own energetic, sitting back, observing, and validating what they're feeling without reflecting it.

I have that choice. You have that choice—because it's circuitry. Whatever circuitry we run, the thing about all of these abilities—every ability we have, we have because we have cells that perform that function. So, the more I exercise a certain way of being, responding, or behaving—just like sports or learning and reading material—compassion circuitry gets enforced and strengthened just as easily, as well, or in the same way as [the muscular system] does.

So, it's a matter of where we put our minds and what we want to grow—what circuits we want to get stronger inside of our brains.

TS: I think what I'm curious about is: where does the choice circuitry live in our brain?

JBT: I think that it's going to go to both hemispheres, because both hemispheres look at a situation very differently. So, my two characters inside of me are very different. One personality is very expansive, very open, very compassionate, very loving, very

connected, very very very big arms open, big love.

My left hemisphere is very functional. She's very doing. She's going to get to an interview on time; she's going to do this, she's going to do that. Her voice is different. Her furrow in her brow is different. How I hold my body is different.

But for me, because I know who my right brain is and I know who my left brain is, I know that I can be, in this moment, one or the other. I get to choose that. It's a negotiation between the two of them. In this moment, do I want to be more compassionate, loving, and open? Or in this moment, do I want to really be more functional and get my message communicated in a different kind of way?

So, I think it's a negotiation. I think we're constantly negotiating between our two characters. I was not so clear on who my two characters were prior to the stroke.

I think that the greatest gift that I received in experiencing the hemorrhage in my left hemisphere [was] that she went offline and she got quiet—because she's language, she's busy, she's accelerated, she's very smart, she goes a million miles an hour, and da-da-da-dadada. She dominated who I was moment-by-moment, pretty much. Then I would steal time away in nature, in my art, or in my music in order to find some right-brain pieces of me that could relax, could regenerate, could come to the present moment, and could really experience people, love, and all of that. When the left brain went offline and that character disappeared, then all I had was the right brain.

Then it was lovely, because I sat in a totally silent mind where there was zero language whatsoever. There was no little voice whatsoever. I had no language for five whole weeks. In that five weeks, I really could feel and learn and know and be this right-hemisphere character.

And then when the left [returned] after surgery and the blood clot was removed, then language—after two weeks—started to come back online. Then my right hemisphere was saying, "Well, I know that this is a good thing because it means I'm going to have language—which means I'm going to be able to communicate with the rest of humanity." You kind of have to do that in order to be considered remotely normal—if you ever want to grow up to be normal again.

But at the same time, there was the question of, "What is this going to take away from this experience that I have become that I really love?" So, then it became a negotiation of how much of my new way of being am I willing to lose or give up in order to reengage like a normal human being.

TS: Let's talk some about this negotiation. As I'm listening to you, it feels like the left and right—these two brains inside me; two beings as you describe it—are really quite separate. Two separate worlds. Is that correct?

JBT: When you look at the human brain, the cerebral cortices are completely separate from one another. They do not share any cell bodies at all. They communicate with one another through some 300 million axonal fibers so that the right hemisphere and left hemisphere know what the other [is] doing or thinking or feeling or being.

But they do not share any cell bodies. And if you cut that corpus callosum, the hemispheres will fall completely separate from one another. And if you wipe out half, then you can still function as a whole—especially if you're young. It's harder

because you'll have motor problems and all kinds of other things once we get older. But as children, we can function with a single hemisphere, completely—which means it has to be a whole brain.

There are some adults who actually never have two hemispheres. They only have one hemisphere, and they still function as a whole being.

TS: It seems, then, that the corpus callosum—and that this work of integration of these two hemispheres—is really so important. I'm wondering if you can talk more about how we increase the sense of positive negotiation, if you will, between the left and right hemispheres.

JBT: I think, first, realizing that you do have two ways of responding to any situation. I think we all know that when we are sleep-deprived—or for some reason we are feeling more anxious—then we respond to situations differently than we would have responded if we had had more sleep and we were less agitated or over-stimulated in one way or another.

So, we have different ways of responding to situations. Sometimes, when we're in a situation—OK, I think this is a good example: Let's say that I'm a mom and I'm married. My little boy comes running in and he's five years old, and he's so adorable. He's so unhappy. He's so upset. He's throwing a little temper tantrum and he's bringing in all this negative affect. And it's just like everything is wrong in the world and he's just like mad, mad, mad, mad! OK, well, what is my response to my beautiful little five-year-old? He's adorable even when he's angry! [I'm] just like, "Let me love you, honey! Let me just validate you. What can I do for you? I'm open to you."

OK. So, then let's say that my husband comes in—who looks just like this little five-year-old, but now he's 40. He's a big man. I have a different relationship with him. He comes storming in with the same affect. He's very unhappy. He's very mad. He's very this; he's very that. In that moment, I have a choice—that I can look at my husband and I can say, "You know, I can see his little five-year-old, I can come to him with open arms, and I can love him. I can just—all of that." Or I can feel a little anxiety, because he's a big guy, he's mad now, and he's bigger than I am. It's a different energy coming at me.

But I'm making choices here. This man is really no different in the affect and the circuitry that he's running than my little five-year-old. So, I'm making choices and decisions based on information that I have. But I can still approach my husband with the same open validation—or I can experience a little bit of anxiety and fear, and step away because my mirror neurons are now being impacted by the power of his circuitry.

That's a choice. We're making choices all the time. And I think it's a matter of the better I know my two hemispheres and who I am, then I become aware [that] in this moment, I can choose to be more expansive, more open. I can consciously bring my own mind to the present moment. I can say, "I don't need to feel fear. I am safe. My amygdala can calm down." Or can get caught up in that circuitry and I can feel anxiety, I can feel fear, and I can push away from—and I can aim for separation instead of connection.

TS: Now, Dr. Jill, you've mentioned the amygdala a couple of times. If I'm correct, you said that our right brain and our left brain each have their own amygdala?

JBT: They do.

TS: You know, I've never heard anyone say that before.

JBT: Yes. Well, when you look at the anatomy of the brain, the amygdala is actually deep up inside of the temporal lobe. The temporal lobe—we have two. One in each hemisphere. Deep inside, up underneath, there is an amygdala on each side sitting next to the hippocampi—one on each side. And then they loop around the back and loop forward [to] come as part of the limbic system.

So, yes. We have two amygdala, and we have two hippocampus. They're "amygdalae" and "hippocampi." It sounds like a song.

TS: OK! I saw on your website that you have t-shirts available that say, "I love my amygdala."

JBT: I do!

TS: Or we could say, "I love my amygdalae." I don't know. We could.

But in any case, why would I—well, I don't know if I would wear a t-shirt. It might be anything you say that would make me wear a t-shirt that says, "I love my amygdala." But why might someone wear such a t-shirt?

JBT: [Laughs.] Well, because the amygdala is—OK, so all the information right now [is] streaming in through our sensory systems. And all of that sensory information goes into our limbic system. The limbic system is the older portion of our cortex. There are certain structures in there.

You have the amygdala. The amygdala—all the information streams to the amygdala. The amygdala is asking the question moment by moment: "Am I safe? Am I safe?" And I feel safe in the external world when enough of the information coming through my sensory systems feels familiar. When the world feels familiar, I feel safe. When I feel safe, my amygdalae are calm. When my amygdalae are calm, the cells right next to [them] —the hippocampi—turn on and they're then able to learn and memorize new information about my experience in the present moment.

So, when something happens—and let's say, I'm in California. I hate to say this. And the earth starts to shake. I'm not used to that, because I'm not from here. So my amygdala goes, "Alarm! Alarm! Alert! Alert!" My hippocampus shuts down and I move into self-preservation mode.

The relationship between the amygdalae ("Am I safe?") and the hippocampi ("I'm able to learn and memorize new information") [is that they] are separate from one another. The amygdala has to be calm in order for me to be able to really feel that I can learn and memorize in the world. Otherwise, I'm in self-preservation mode.

The amygdala is so important because everything that has anything to do with my relationship as me—a biological, vulnerable creature in the external world, which really is quite a hostile environment. We think that it is not, but at any moment we could be gone. Then it has to do with our amygdala.

I'm always joking that I think we should all wear t-shirts that say, "I love my amygdala," because when I bring love to my amygdala and I help calm it consciously through other portions of my limbic system, then I'm calming myself. I'm calming my amygdala. I'm getting out of anxiety. I'm getting out of self-preservation. When I bring that love into my body, then I'm capable of really being present here. So that's what that's all about.

TS: I'm ready for the t-shirt.

JBT: [Laughs.] You know, [if] you want peace, then you really want to calm amygdala. From a biological perspective, we have to have a calm amygdala in order to feel peacefulness [and] in order to feel that we can have a healthy relationship with the external world. Of course, we want that because that's the way that I bring the magnificence of the gift that I am as a living being into the world.

Isn't that what my purpose is? I don't see my purpose as "being here as a little, jumbled-up anxiety ball." I'm not then able to express the best of what I am into the world. That's where I find my calmness, my peacefulness, my love—the gifts. I am a more fulfilled human being when I am giving myself to the world. Whatever my self is—what is my purpose? What is my passion? what is my love? What can I be? And when I exude the essence of what I am into the world, then I feel like I had a good day.

TS: Do you have personal techniques that you use on the spot to calm your amygdala when it's firing strong?

JBT: I do.

TS: What are those?

JBT: I do. Well, first of all I have a practice first thing in the morning and last thing at night. I do wake up in the morning. When I wake up in the morning, as soon as I am conscious that I am awake, I say thank you to the cells inside of my brain—my brain stem that actually flipped the switch and woke me up. I'm awake today because those little cells in my brain stem did their job and they woke me up.

So, I start with gratitude. For me, gratitude is the expression, the feeling, the experience of what I want to be in the world. If I begin my day with gratitude and I end my day with gratitude, then I find that my gratitude circuitry throughout the day is much more powerful.

It's a matter of exercise. It becomes habitual. I like the habit of gratitude. I like the habit of positive thinking for possibility. I like the habit of viewing the world optimistically. I like that circuitry. For me, all of these habits are brain circuitry. I have a lot of say in how I want my brain to be in the day. So I practice that.

In the instant of a moment, if there's something that is threatening to me, and I have expressed gratitude circuitry and I've kind of activated it for the day, then first of all it's harder to get me into an amygdala, alarm-alert, self-preservation. But it can still happen.

And if it does happen, I move into belly breathing. I move into visualizing the energy and the breath coming up through my feet into pelvis, and filling my pelvis. I start just squeezing all of my body parts right up my torso. So I'll squeeze my pelvis together

as I inhale and as I breathe in. Then I'll squeeze my belly, and then I'll squeeze and contract my diaphragm muscle. Then I'll squeeze my chest and imagine squeezing my heart. Then I let it exude, "Squeeze!" through my neck because everything's got to get through the neck to get to the head or from the head to the body. Then I squeeze it out and I just see this beautiful fountain of bright energy flow out of my head and down around my body like a beautiful waterfall.

That's what I personally do. It works for me if I do that twice. If I do it three times, the anxiety doesn't stand a chance. By the second time, it's pretty good. It is my simple little tool that takes less than a minute. And when that happens, I'm fully pulled back into the power of me and my consciousness and my choice.

TS: Now, once again, I want to ask you a question about this circuitry, because you talk about something like "gratitude circuitry." I'm curious: is that living in both the left and right part of my brain, or is gratitude circuitry only in the right hemisphere?

JBT: That I cannot answer. I think that there are different kinds of gratitude that happen. There's a lot of research right now on happiness and where happiness is in the brain. I think that happiness is very different from the experience of gratitude.

I cannot answer that question. The circuitry is not that clearly defined. What I can tell you is that when my left hemisphere went offline—because she's very analytical, the left hemisphere is all about analysis. It looks at this and it looks at that, it compares them, and it makes an evaluation of right and wrong, and good and bad. So it is our judgment.

Happiness is actually a judgment. It is one that is positive. For me, the experience of gratitude is more neutral. It's more of a feeling of contentment. It's a peacefulness. It is—hmmm. You asked me a tough question there, Tami.

TS: Well, that's OK. That's OK.

[Taylor laughs.]

TS: You know, I think I'm still trying to understand—really—the left and right hemisphere in certain kinds of ways. Because obviously, both sides of our brain are really important. Obviously.

JBT: They're very important.

TS: I'm wondering: in your own life, are you going for a balanced brain? Balanced between left and right? Or is it, "Hey—being right-brain dominant! More compassion!"

JBT: No! No. No.

TS: "Sweeter! Opener! More fluid! I'd like to be right-brain dominated!"

JBT: No. Well—I don't want any dominance in my brain. That's one of the things about the hemispheres—they do fight for dominance. Someone is always being dominant. One half is always being dominating the other circuitry.

But I want a balanced brain. I want all the skill sets of my right and my left brain. But I want to come to the world through the intention of the circuitry of my right mind, because my right mind is the collective whole where I am no longer defined as me.

It takes a small group cells in my left brain for me to be Jill Bolte Taylor—for me to even be aware that I am an individual. I have to have the left parietal region to define the boundaries of my body. I have to have the cells in my parietal and my language center to define, "I am Jill Bolte Taylor." As soon as I can define, "I am Jill Bolte Taylor," then the file on who I am gets bigger. What is my phone number? What is my address? What do I care about? What's my favorite color? Blah blah blah. The details of who I am as an individual. When those go offline, Jill Bolte Taylor doesn't exist anymore.

But I'm still alive and I'm still connected to everything that is. I'm still a part of humanity and I care about who we are as a collective whole. What is our relationship with this gorgeous planet? How do we thrive as the collective whole?

So, I want to come into my life as Jill Bolte Taylor through the choices—through the bigger picture perspective—and value structure of my right mind. When I use the detail of who I am as an individual toward that purpose, then my expression in the world becomes one using all the tools of both my right and my left hemispheres—but through the value structure and intention of my right brain.

If I had to choose a character for me, I would rather come in through the value structure of my right hemisphere. But I am all about the balance between these two beautiful hemispheres because without my left brain, I am totally nonfunctional. I exist in the present moment and I am essentially in a vegetative condition. I have to have both. I have to have a past. I have to have a future—in order to be able to grow; in order to be able to learn.

To me, it's all about the balance between these. The problem is that we are existing in a left hemisphere-dominant society that is based on the value structure of the left brain, which says, "I am an individual and I am all that is important. And oh, by the way, if there's a little left over for the bigger picture of the planet, then OK—I'll include the planet and the rest of humanity."

For me, it's a matter of I'd really like for us to shift back into a more balanced perspective of the magnificence of both of our ways of being in the world. I think that that is how we will evolve as humanity. We have a strong right brain. We have a strong left brain. And now, we are becoming integrated into being whole-brained humanity. That portion of us is the portion that will survive and really turn us into whatever we're supposed to become next.

TS: Do you think that many spiritual practices—I know you're familiar with meditation. What you described, you could say is a type of body-based meditation—when you were talking about the one-minute expanding and contracting different parts of your body. Do you think that meditation and potentially chanting or working with a mantra—that these are different techniques to help awaken more of our right brain and help our left brain quiet to some degree?

JBT: I think that what they do—anything that is language-based, whether it's prayer or meditation, visualization, mantra—all of these things preoccupy the left hemisphere's—what a lot of people will call "the monkey mind." Just the constant thoughts. The wandering brain. All of those ideas.

When we repeat a mantra over and over and over again, then it's preoccupying what our brain is saying to us or to itself. As it does that, it moves into a repetitive flow.

That kind of unleashes it from all of the distraction that it can be. Then, it allows us to shift our consciousness into the right hemisphere, which is the present moment.

You think about a quiet mind. A quiet mind really is not a "quiet mind;" it's not a silent mind. We're not asking the left brain to be totally quiet. What we're doing is we're asking the left brain to stop wandering all over creation in an undisciplined manner so that we can actually stop focusing on that portion of the circuitry that we're running. We can come back to the present moment experience and find that to be a peaceful and more calming place.

TS: So, when we're doing a meditation practice that's working with the body—that's working with sensation, expanding and contracting—are we activating our right brain in that kind of practice?

JBT: We are. We're paying attention to the experience of the present moment, our energetic, and the relationship that we're having with the energy around us—and opening ourselves to what is beyond us as the consciousness of "me." Not necessarily as an individual, but "me" as a living being.

TS: Can you imagine that there are going to be new, technology-oriented meditation interventions in the future that will help us stimulate our right brain [and] quiet our left brain just by—I don't know—putting on a special kind of helmet, listening to a special kind of sound, or working with some kind of neural stimulator? Something like that?

JBT: I think that these things are all in progress. All the kinds of things that you mentioned—right down to placing magnets on the brain (on the left hemisphere) to have essentially everybody fire and kind of hit a reset button.

Yes. Absolutely. I mean, this is a huge goal for so many of us because we have become so caught up in the language center of our left brain, and it is loud.I think that we are in the left brain-dominant society because that voice inside of our brain is so loud. If my brain says something to me and I hear it in language, then that's what I am. It's what I hear. It's what I act on. So how do we quiet that?

I think that when you look at how we got to this point in the evolution of humanity in just the last 300 years, the left brain has become a huge focus. We didn't all read before. When you consider that if we were existing in a time before where most of our days were filled with the prairie, then we had time to reflect and be. We weren't being constantly bombarded by stimulation in the form of language. Then, once we started reading as humanity and everyone was doing the reading instead of the priests doing all the reading to us, that was going to strengthen that circuitry in the brain. Then there's writing, and we're all writing. That's going to strengthen that.

So there's been a real push for us as humanity and what are we in the skill set that we have. The left brain has become more and more dominant naturally. Now, you look at our society, which is filled with technology. I've been on the phone with you for 45 minutes and I haven't checked my email or my text—which is remarkable in this day and age.

It's constant. It's this constant feeding now, which is becoming even more and more powerful. How are we feeding ourselves? What are we feeding? What circuitry are we feeding in our brain? And it is so left brain.

TS: Now, Dr. Jill, you're going to be coming this year to Sounds True's Wake Up Festival. You're going to be working with a singer-songwriter, Carrie Newcomer, to offer an evening of something you call "Transformative Stories." It's a whole-brained evening, if you will. I wonder if you could tell us a little bit about it and how you can Carrie Newcomer came together to create "Transformative Stories."

JBT: It's kind of interesting, because Carrie—I know Carrie personally. We both actually live in Bloomington, Indiana. So, we're familiar with one another's work that way.

But the interesting thing is that our message exactly the same. We just deliver it in totally opposite ways.

Carrie is a phenomenal singer-songwriter. [I used] her voice, her music, and her message during my process of recovery because she really sings at the essence of my soul—of what I find as true meaning. So, she hits my heart in just a magnificent way. Her voice is strong and low and she's powerful—a powerful artist.

So, we thought, "OK, well, since we are really delivering the same message about the essence of who we are in the world," we thought, "Let's try to do this thing together." We tried it, and it is—we call it "Transformative Stories" because we do it so differently.

But we share a stage. She is a singer-songwriter, so she is much more right-brained by definition. I am PowerPoint presenter, so I am much more left-brain in my delivery style. And so, we share a stage where she's on the right and I'm on the left. She will open to bring the energy of the collective whole to us. Then I start on in what that actually means from a neurological perspective through story. Then you go back to Carrie, and the energy shift is palpable to the audience. Carrie will then take you back into more of a right-hemisphere journey into this. Then she passes it back to me. By this point, the audience is realizing, "Oh my gosh—total energy shift." But you know? It seems to work pretty well!

So we go back and forth. Then, somewhere along the line we will actually shift to opposite sides so that I am more in the right brain and she is more in the left brain. As a result of that, it kind of is hilarious.

We each love each other, and it's just been—we've done this four times, and every time the audience walks away saying that it was "magical." That's the term that people say. They will come back to us years later, remembering this experience because it is whole brain. It wakes up all of what's going on inside of who we are. It is so empowering, and it is so beautiful.

So, that's why we enjoy doing it so much—because it's so empowering and it's so beautiful. Of course, when I'm talking about the brain, I'm not talking about my brain. I'm talking about "the brain." People care because—if you have a brain—then most of us want to know how to get our brain to do what we want it to do better or differently.

Then Carrie just lands it all at the level of our heart and soul. It's really beautiful. So, we're very excited about it.

TS: Now, Dr. Jill, you've mentioned that our society at this point in time—our Western society—is very left-brain dominant and that this causes certain problems. I'm curious if you were to wave a magic wand, and the society was to look different and be more whole brain, balanced brain—what kind of changes would have to be in place? How would it look different?

JBT: I think it would be a lot slower, for one. I think that—if I could wave my magic wand and change one thing in the world, I would change our attitude toward sleep. Sleep is critically important for the health and well-being of the organism. Our body craves sleep because it's downtime. And downtime allows—when you stop and you think that this moment—just this moment—we are receiving literally billions of bits of data through our eyes, through our ears, through our bodies. All of it. The sensory system is just—bam!—enormous volumes of stimulation moment-by-moment-by-moment.

We push ourselves and we push ourselves and we push ourselves. Things get very complicated. We're all over the map doing all kinds of different things. We have this incredible disrespect for sleep time. It's like we pride ourselves on how little sleep we can get and still function at a minimal level.

Sleep time is integration time. It's also time when the body comes in and all of the garbage—it's like the time to empty out the garbage. It files all the information that's come in, [as well as] all the waste and all the product of all the cells that have been working so hard gets flushed away. It's a cleansing time.

When we sleep well and then we wake up feeling refreshed, we wake up feeling refreshed because we have given our bodies and brains the time in order to integrate, organize, file all the information, make sense of it, and then let the garbage cleaners come in and flush out the waste.

If I could wave one magic wand, it would be our relationship with sleep.

TS: Dr. Jill, just one final question for you: Our program's called Insights at the Edge. I'm always curious to know what somebody's personal edge is. What I mean by that is: what might be happening in your inner life—in your world—that you might say is your growing edge at this point in time?

JBT: I think that my growing edge is indentifying—at this point in my life—what my purpose [is]. At least, what is my purpose for the next six months or the next six years? How do I use the voice that I've been given—the voice that I've been blessed with, the recovery, my story—how do I take what I have evolved into and move that energy and ability into the world in the most constructive and important way?

I think, for me, it boils back down to purpose. For me, I think I'm shifting more and more towards children. [I'm] realizing that when children understand that they have a choice—and the sooner we teach our own brains that we have that choice of, "In this moment, I can be reactive in the world or I can be compassionate in the world," that the sooner we really integrate that circuitry in our brains, then that's the kind of adult we will grow up to be.

I think that my "insight at the edge" is in helping children become more aware of their potential and the possibility within themselves, and the power that they have to choose.

TS: Just one comment about that that I think is so interesting: which is, I think for people

at the outside, they might think, "Oh, Dr. Jill—she's already fulfilled her purpose. She's done so much. She's made so much good use of her experience to help other stroke survivors and to help people understand how to bring forward more right brain activity. She's done so much! Wow! She's still having questions about her next phase of purpose in the world?"

I think someone might have a reaction to that. I'm curious what you think about that.

JBT: I think as long as I am alive, my life is a gift. One of the reasons why, when I chose to come back, I chose consciously to engage in the agony of recovery—the agony of trying to make sense out of chaos. That was painful. My process of recovery was a very long and arduous, constantly—a thousand times a day—deciding to face this challenge. Then to be able to write a book and share that—that was all what it was supposed to be.

But part of it for me was in knowing that I will return—in my heart, I believe—I will return to being eternal love when this body is no longer here and I am no longer connected to it to use it in whatever way I choose to use it.

So, I have precious little time here in this form, in this world, with beautiful people to share—as being part of humanity. Then I will be gone for an eternity, experiencing that eternal bliss of being loved. When that happens, it will happen, and I will embrace it—and wow, what a ride this has been! But while I'm here and I'm in this form, what am I doing? What are my decisions? What are my opportunities? How can I use what I have and what I am as this collective whole of 50 trillion beautiful molecular geniuses to be something or to do something in a positive way in the world, with humanity?

For me, I will probably go go go until I'm gone, and then I'm going to slide into home base going, "Wow!"

TS: I've been speaking with Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor, the author of My Stroke of Insight. Along with singer-songwriter Carrie Newcomer, Dr. Jill will be with Sounds True at our annual Wake Up Festival,August 20th through the 24th in Estes Park, Colorado. She'll be offering an evening called "Transformative Stories: Exploring the Wonders of the Human Brain." If you're interested in more information, you can visit WakeUpFestival.com.

Dr. Jill, thank you so much for the conversation and for all the goodness that you are.

JBT: Thank you, Tami. I so appreciate what you're doing and how you're doing it. It's a blessing to be able to be a part of the Wake Up Festival.

TS: SoundsTrue.com. Many voices, one journey. Thanks for listening.