Seeing Through a (Rearview) Mirror Dimly

Driving requires that I look forward through the windshield. This is generally a good idea. Were I to use my rearview mirror as a way to navigate my way forward, my traveling would be made more complicated. But the use of the rearview mirror is not without its merit. Moreover, by comparison, I typically use the rearview mirror as a means of increasing my sense of safety, whether guiding my parallel parking, judging what obstructions may be behind me when moving in reverse, or to be aware of traffic that might be overtaking me from the rear that will alter my speed or direction. Not that we never look through the windshield toward a view for safety, but we are far more likely to use our rearview mirror primarily to enhance safety along with helping us in our movements. Not to mention that we have all had moments in which, upon seeing something through our windshield that goes by us too quickly for us to make out, we will often use our rearview mirror as a last attempt to see what it was that we missed. What does all this have to do with the function of the mind?

It is a common experience that we come to understand the events of our lives more clearly after having traversed them rather than before. I wish life were different. I wish I could peer into the future, aware of it coming to me clearly through my windshield, making the proper maneuvers to avoid all potholes, oncoming traffic, and slow down and speed up accordingly while avoiding any head on collisions. In so doing, I would not worry because I would be able to control in advance for all those poor choices I could conceivably make, ensuring favorable outcomes. As it stands, the windshield of my life seems more often than not to be far less transparent that I would like. Unable to see through its opacity, I can consume a great deal of energy imagining any number of possible futures—many of them in which I don’t seem to include Jesus—predicting outcomes, working hard to do the right thing (worried that I won’t), trying to figure out what it will all mean in advance, and thereby enabling myself to know how to proceed. But despite all my effort in trying to look ahead, focusing my worried attention on my anticipated future, trying to read the pitch ahead of the curve, it still turns out that I am much more likely to make sense of my life when I look, not through the windshield, but rather in the rearview mirror.

The bible is replete with stories in which God told his people to trust him despite their not having a crystal ball, only for them to so worry about their future, tacitly suspecting God would be a no-show or late at best, that they either took action into their own anxious hands when instructed to wait or took no action at all when encouraged to move, creating more trouble than would have been necessary. It is only in the aftermath of the events through which they pass that they see clearly. And here is where what we are learning about the brain can be helpful.

We make meaning from events—“rational sense”—after first encountering sensations, images, and feelings as they come to us. The logical, linear thinking part of our life routinely follows what initially comes to us in non-logical form. Generally, we sense things first. We make sense of those things second. In other words, we “sense” things by looking through the windshield. We construct meaning from those very sensations nanoseconds to years later by looking in the rearview mirror. Although there are some exceptions, most of us do not experience “knowing” the future with the same degree of confidence that we do the past. The future is yet to come. I cannot be certain of what it will bring. But the past? I’m certain of it. I am certain that I had oatmeal for breakfast. That my father told me yesterday that he is proud of me. That I did not get into the school I wanted to. That I lost my job. That Jesus has healed my deep sense of shame that I carried about my sexual past. That I have suffered a stroke. We’re certain of what we see in the rearview mirror. Though I long to know my future—and expend great energy imagining it—it is mostly my past that I know and from which I learn.

Which brings us to an interesting place regarding the brain. Its inherent tendency is to function as one big anticipation machine, with us constantly working to predict—and control—the future. Part of our maturation and growth is about training our mind to be content with allowing that what comes to us from the future will be something that God will enable us to comprehend as we see it in our rearview mirror, as we reflect on what was just a moment ago our future that is now our near to distant past. And in so doing, we see the fabric that God is weaving into a beautiful tapestry that one glance ago we did not easily understand as it occupied our yet-to-be life. And if we are content in waiting to see the clarity of our lives in the rearview mirror, we will waste far less energy worrying about things we cannot see in the future.

St. Paul is equally helpful here. In 1 Corinthians 13 he reminds us that we now see “through a mirror dimly.” There are various English words and phrases that have been used to translate his meaning, but all are consistent in that the glass, or mirror that helps us see is “dim,” or “dark.” The mirror, for all of its helpfulness, is not perfect. And neither is our vision of our life experience. We need help. And that help comes directly in the relationships in which we are deeply known, those people with whom we are deeply connected and who create a flexible, resilient net that holds us even when we can’t see with absolute clarity.
In the end, isn’t it good to know that the road we see trailing out behind us is the story that God is weaving, using co-authors in our lives to assist in the polishing of our dimly mirrored minds. All in the service of inviting us to release our fierce and relentless pursuit of the future, choosing instead to live in this present moment where God is meeting us and inviting us to simply see all that he is doing, even if we need to catch what we think we might miss by looking in that mirror that is suspended in the middle of our windshield.