

ENJOYING MORE QUALITY AND QUANTITY OF LIFE

"Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you suddenly like a trap."

St. Luke 21:34-36

The heart and the head are **interconnected**. We think as we feel; we feel as we think. The way we think and feel is expressed in our behavior. At the same time, **what you do (behavior), makes you**. The triad of **thinking, feeling, and doing** feed back on each other, creating dynamics of **personal progress or deterioration**. That **beware of yourselves** that St. Luke puts in the mouth of the Son of God is a call to create dynamics of progress.

Let us see how to do it. The place in the **head** from which decisions are made is the **prefrontal cortex**. It is our **major brain state** where decisions that precede behavior are made. It is also the place where **willpower** is articulated, the consequences of actions are foreseen, mistakes are corrected, attention is fixed, information is filtered, emotions are regulated, moral judgments are made, new ideas are generated, problems are solved creatively, etc.

In short, a **jewel**. A jewel, but a jewel that needs to be polished because it is plastic, i.e., improvable and deteriorable. A **fragile** jewel since it can **become "dull"** (partly because of the heart) and can generate self-injurious behaviors.

The head-heart connection is articulated, to a large extent, through the **amygdala** and the **nervous system**. The amygdala is activated when it senses danger (**life's worries**) and puts the sympathetic nervous system on alert. We have two nervous systems: the **sympathetic** nervous system, which can have a negative influence on the head and heart; and the **parasympathetic** nervous system, which does just the opposite. The key is to better manage the sympathetic nervous system, which can **"dulls"** the heart first and then the head, with habits such as better breathing, cold showers, walking, weaving good relationships, disconnecting from networks and politics, sleeping more and better, or exercising more gratitude.

Life's worries, to quote the gospel, activate the amygdala which in turn puts the sympathetic nervous system on alert, which in turn takes functionality away from the prefrontal cortex. The sympathetic nervous system can generate tunnel vision in the prefrontal cortex, which prevents a broad understanding of the circumstances and biases decision making towards the short term and egocentrism.



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The same is true of the "**revelry and drunkenness**" in the Gospel text. **The dopamine** (the hormone of pleasure and motivation) involved in these activities is linked to **sensations**. This dopamine is of **high intensity and low quality**. A danger! Low quality because it is not free (unless you are invited, but usually in exchange for something), it has a **detrimental effect on the prefrontal cortex**, and the pleasure is not sustainable over time. Many of the dopamines linked to sensations are a monstrous **deception: pleasure for today, pain for tomorrow**.

There are better **dopamines**, those linked to **sense**, which usually have no cost, enhance the prefrontal cortex and are sustainable over time. It is the pleasure and motivation that is felt, even with effortful or painful behaviors, when there is a reason that compensates the effort. Friendship with **God**, caring for **family** and **friends**, the effort to do **professional work** well, **or caring for personal health** can be an inexhaustible source of good dopamine; the one that generates **clairvoyance** in **thinking**, **widening** of the **heart** to be able to **love** more and better and, finally, **virtues** in **doing**.

Life can be **enjoyed** with dopamines that do not *dull* the heart and the head. We can use the head to achieve **quality of life** and the heart to achieve **quantity of life**. For that nothing better than to **take care of us**; of our head and heart.

Let us live with the awareness that **the day will suddenly come upon us**. By then it would be a great achievement to be able to look back and see that we have enjoyed an **intense life and at the same time full of meaning**; full of love and works of service to God, family, friends and at work.

Let us enjoy these days of Christmas. Let us allow the wisdom of the Gospel to **enlighten** and guide us to create more clarity in our minds, more capacity to love in our hearts and better virtues in our actions. Let us not allow the **worries** and wounds of the **past** to take away the quality and quantity of life in the **present**. Let us not allow low quality dopamines to rob us of quality of life.

I bid you farewell with my best wishes that in the year 2026 we will know how to **take care of ourselves** so that we can take better care of others. Merry Christmas.

Luis Huete



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