

The nature of our emotions – Steve Midgley

These are Steve Midgley's notes from the talk that he gave at the first session of the conference. We're making these available because, due to a technical problem, we are not able to provide the audio of this talk.

Some of you will know, but most won't, that we have a disabled daughter – she's 23 yrs old and has profound learning difficulties. Which means there are all sorts of things that she can't do: she can't speak; she can't read; she can't plan a holiday or cook a meal; she can't really even understand the concept of time.

But she can and does feel

In fact, I suspect she has taught me more about emotion than anyone else ever has or ever will.

It began with her stirring such strong feelings in me that I couldn't help but bring them before the Lord. I don't think I'd ever got that before. That sometimes in deep sadness the right thing to do was simply to pour out my heart to God; not ask him for things; not articulate long and complicated prayers but just tell him how I felt.

That happened during the first few years of her life, as the depth of her disability became clear and my sadness for all that it would mean for her life grew.

But perhaps a still more powerful way that Ellie has taught me about emotion is through her own expression of it. For the thing with Ellie's feelings is that they are both undiluted and uncomplicated. Ellie isn't troubled by that confusing mix of social expectations and cultural etiquette that so often gets in our way.

Ellie just gets on and feels.

When she is happy, she is utterly happy. Her joy is unrestrained. It is a pure joy, an infectious joy, a joy that will light up a room and carry everyone with her.

But the same is also true of all her other emotions. Her sadness and frustration and anger – those are largely unrestrained too; and that produces its fair share of challenges;

My point is not that Ellie's feelings are perfect – far from it – but they are intensely rich and unquestionably real.

She does emotion in the raw.

And the final thing that strikes me about Ellie's emotions is that they don't seem to wear out. When something delights Ellie, it delights her over and over and over.

We sit on the floor and I act out a make story with a toy dog and a dolly and the moment it is over, she signs for it to begin again. More.

And when it is done a second time; she asks again; more;

On and on; more and more; and she will finally wear out my ability to persevere. For where she is content to repeat, something in me can't do it and I begin to long for novelty or change.

Yet when I read about the delight we will feel in glory when we see Christ's face, and behold his glory forever and how that will be our eternal joy....I can't help thinking that Ellie is ahead of me; that she knows more of eternal joy than I ever will, this side of glory.

In other words, in all sorts of ways, Ellie has taught me that my feelings are not enough. That there is more to my emotion than I have yet discovered. And that, in a sense, is what this conference is all about.

But let me backtrack

Cause it is a slightly funny thing: a conference on emotion.

Cause I can't imagine we will ever do a conference on thought

Or behaviour

So why this one: why a conference on emotion?

Here's a number of reasons:

First because in some quarters at least emotion gets neglected;

Second because in many quarters it is profoundly misunderstood; and we'll come to the reasons for that in a bit

Third, because emotion matters so much – life would be terribly dull without it

Fourth because when we struggle in life, emotion is so often the way that our struggles get expressed;

- it might be that we experience too much emotion – like the excessive fear of OCD;
- but sometimes our emotion is too little– like the terrible emptiness of a profound depression;
- sometimes an emotion lasts too long: that happens in PTSD;
- sometimes they don't seem to last long enough – like the couple who are convinced their marriage is over because the passion just isn't there anymore.

But the primary reason for having a conference focussed on emotion is because emotion is the currency of human engagement.

Tell Winston story of inviting friend round for a sports game... but them showing no emotion

There's just no connection; the experience is ruined; because we haven't felt able to relate...

We know human engagement is bound up with our emotion because all the significant moments in our lives are emotional

From the pride you feel at the achievement of someone you love

To the aching sadness you feel at the loss of someone close

Or the terror when a relationship you prize is threatened;

To the Heart bursting joy at the birth of a child

Waves of delight at a reconciliation

Anger at a wicked betrayal

Emotion is the currency for human engagement – it's how we do relationships; and not just relationships with one another

but also our relationship with God

which reminds me to offer a little overview of what's to come...

this talk is a setting the scene – helping us think what emotion is all about

talk 2 asks why and how emotion matters in ministry by showing how emotion is central to our relationship with God

in talk 3 we will ask: if emotions really matter so much – then should we and do we find them in God

and then in talk 4; we will set a trajectory for the future: by asking: what is it we are aiming for? What is the shape of the emotionally mature person?

But let's begin at the beginning by asking the obvious question:

What, exactly, is an emotion?

Turns out that this isn't nearly as easy to answer as you might think...

We know *what* the emotions are: anger, love, joy, hate, fear, jealousy, bitterness, dismay, delight, yearning, sorrow, loneliness.. the list goes on and on

But how do we define them, understand them...what exactly are they?

Here's one definition:

A fully personal (involving thoughts, beliefs and judgements made about the environment and oneself) and somatic response to internal and / or external experience, subjectively experienced as some kind variety of feeling, which prepares the body and mind for action.

Now immediately, you notice that emotion here is being distinguished feeling. Most of the time we use those words interchangeably and for most of the conference we will as well. But at the outset notice that there is actually a difference.

A feeling is a subjective experience; I feel hot; I feel cold; I feel angry; I feel sad

Emotion, as our definition suggests is rather more encompassing; it's a fully personal response involving all of me: my thoughts, beliefs and judgements and it gets me ready to do stuff

But emotional states come and go; they are often pretty fleeting

Which distinguishes them from the third term worth knowing which are the affections; that's what you might describe as the settled emotional and motivational drivers of my soul and life;

It's not really as simple as this, but you could think in terms of this kind of spectrum of settledness or comprehensiveness

Now I said earlier that one of the reasons for focussing this conference on emotion is because our emotions have so often been misunderstood; so let's consider some of the attitudes people have sometimes expressed toward the experience of emotions

1. Emotions need eradicating;

Those who take this attitude see our emotions as something annoying and troublesome, a lower form of human experience that interferes with more superior and sophisticated capacities.... like rational thought.

It's an attitude that found its sharpest expression in a Greek school of philosophy that came to be known as stoicism.

To the stoics emotion was mindless passion that disturbed rational thought and got in the way of good choices;

Emotion was unsophisticated; rational thought was the business

So rise above your emotions; don't let these based and bodily passions rule you; set them to one side so that the higher functions of the mind and intellect can take over

What do we make of those? Well, we might agree with the stoics that emotions are frequently experienced at a very bodily level

So you feel sufficient disgust at something – you may well feel physically sick

You feel enough anxiety, then you really can't sit still

You can catch the body / emotion connection even in the language that we use....

I feel anger and I say that something makes my blood boil

In loneliness, my heart aches

In feelings of joy – might say that it feels as if my heart is going to explode with happiness

Our language reflects our experience..

Emotion is closely tied to our bodies – and that means that sometimes our bodies can even mislead us because they mimic an emotional experience... so an over active thyroid can produce feelings of anxiety and panic

But even if there is a strong bodily element to our emotions, is that it.. is emotion just a bodily experience?

Not at all.. and today hardly anyone would argue that real maturity and godliness means resisting or even eliminating our emotions. We'd think that was an impoverished life.

Cause emotions are good.. aren't they?

Which brings us to a second attitude..

2. Emotions need to be expressed (or indulged)

If our forebears were all for repressing the emotions the pendulum has very much swung the other way now and it's expressing or indulging the emotions that is the more common attitude today.

It's an attitude caught up with the idea that: if it feels good, then we just ought to do it

Which means that my feelings become the ruling influence over my life.

So you might hear people justifying their actions in this kind of way:

Listen, I know you don't like it, but I can't help how I feel;

Or; there's no point arguing with me, that's how I feel about this and that's that;

It feels so right when we are together – I know God wants us to be happy;

I don't feel ready to cope with this disabled child – I know it wouldn't be right to go through with this pregnancy.

Emotions are given such prominence, such sovereign authority, that I cannot, should not and will not seek to resist them:

Emotions rule; and I march to the beat of their music.

Not hard to see how this is tied to the radical individualism of our modern age – when my view, my feelings and my perspective are supreme and I have to be true to me.

But, equally, it's not hard to see how incompatible such an attitude is with any kind of Christian belief in a God who speaks; and in speaking reveals his will for our lives;

Belief in a God who declares some things good and others bad

some things are right and others wrong

And where it's not me and my feelings that determine such judgements; but him and his word;

All of which brings us to a third attitude

3. Emotions need to be ignored

Now this sounds a little bit like attitude 1 – needing to eradicate emotion, but it's slightly different. In this approach to emotion, someone isn't saying that emotion is bad or damaging, simply that, because it mustn't be in charge, it is generally best simply to ignore it.

See if I know what is right, because God has shown it to me in his Word, then all I need to do is get on and do the right thing regardless.

Never mind what I feel; what does that matter; just do what is right.

Imagine a husband and wife whose marriage has been derailed by some significant failures on both sides, but as Christian believers they are determined to try and put things back together.

And suppose one day husband tells his wife that he's been doing some thinking and he wants her to know that he has made his mind up: he will do his duty and stay in the marriage, that whatever he feels he will nevertheless stick at it.

Now you can imagine that at some level this husband may think that what he is doing is somehow strong and brave and good; even that his wife should, perhaps, be grateful for the faithfulness this represents.

But do you imagine she would be?

How do you think it would feel to be married to a man who was with you only out of a sense of duty?

Remember our key idea: that emotions are the currency of human relationships

Cause what that means is that if we are going to do relationships well, we are going to have to engage our emotions;

Cause if I say I love you and yet never show you any emotion that seems connected with that at all;

No sorrow when I hurt you

No joy when I am with you

No longing when I am away from you

Then what does I love you really mean?

But, hang on, you say. Love is an action isn't it? don't we get into all sorts of trouble if we see love as a feeling; surely the point about love is that it does things, I show love not simply by what I say, but by what I get on and do.

Well, yes, but you can't separate out the two. Both are needed.

The Bible expects, even demands, right emotions...

In Romans 12 Paul says love must be sincere; and the clear implication of that is that love can also be insincere. Mere show that is not backed up by an emotion of the heart.

Isn't that the issue with the pharisees... they do so many of the right things – they fast and pray and tithe – but they do it all without the right emotional driver. Without any love for God.

Or think about 1 Cor 13 where Paul describes all sorts of dramatic spiritual activities – culminating in the most dramatic spiritual activity of all.. sacrificing your very life to the flames.. but says Paul, if it isn't driven by love it is nothing

According to the Bible, it's not enough simply to do the right thing, the Bible wants us to feel the right thing too.

OK – let's wrap up with two key concluding ideas and two corresponding attitudes.

1. Attend to our Emotions for they reveal the desires and priorities of our hearts

Here's perhaps the key issue as we go forward: which is to realise that our emotions reveal the true attitudes and desires of our hearts – they show what we value; they reveal what it is that we treasure.

Take a simple example first.

Imagine seeing a car accident – a hit and run; and suppose what the car hit was a cat; well you may well feel both sad and upset at seeing a cat run over; but most of us, I imagine, know that we would experience emotion of an entirely different intensity of emotion if what the car hit was a child.

Our emotions reflect and reveal what it is that we value; the worth that we attribute to something;

Sam Williams, who I quoted earlier puts it like this: Our emotional states are windows into our souls, revealing the allegiance of our hearts (Williams p72)

So when I obtain something that I value I feel joy

When something I value is under threat I feel fear

When something I value is lost, I feel grief.

And the intensity of those emotional experiences reflect the worth I attribute to that thing.

Mild feelings; mild worth

Strong feelings, strong worth

And one of the things that I learn from my daughter Ellie is that my feelings are often far far too weak.

I can see what she values because she demonstrates it in the intensity of the emotions she displays.

It is raw and immediate; I can see what she treasures;

But with me... my emotions are, by comparison, so weak;

Remember this quote from CS Lewis.. God's complaint is not that our desires (and therefore our emotions) are too strong but that they are too weak; we are too easily satisfied

And the implication... we should attend to our emotions... for they reveal what is going on spiritually within us.

And we should attend to the emotions of others as well. for they provide a window into the concerns and priorities of others as well

Well said that in any helping conversation whenever we encounter strong emotions, that's a place to camp out. Drill down there and you will discover what attitudes and desires are really driving a person.

And once we see that we will often see how to move forward.

So, first attend to our emotions for they reveal the priorities and desires of our hearts

Then, secondly, **express our emotions, for they are the means to relational engagement**

Bible study last Friday, someone talked about the death of a relative, then expanded that to explain that this was the fourth bereavement his family had experienced in less than a year. And as he did so, his emotions bubbled up and bubbled over. And in response another man

in the group began to thank him and to point out that this is what these bible studies were all about – about sharing at a deep level; about trusting one another with the hard things; so that we might connect over the stuff that really matters; and demonstrate the kind of community that God intends the church to be.

It was a moving speech. You couldn't be in that group and not feel the emotional punch of it; the way in which that expression of emotion – by both of those two men – had brought the group to a place of richer personal engagement with one another.

Cause that's what emotions do.

Which is why they need expressing: in our friendships, in our marriages, in our churches, in our bible study groups, and in our conferences as well. I hope we won't be afraid of emotion this week.

But it's not just any emotion. It's emotion that has been informed and directed by God.

Our thoughts and our emotions are not separate categories – they are intimately connected, like two sides of the same coin.

So if I say Jesus died for me: that this is my thought; yet I feel no emotion about it, no joy at his sacrificial death in my place; you'd be right to ask: do you really believe it at all?

The thought ought to have the emotion that goes with it; if this is something I value; something that really matters to me; then that ought to be reflected in the way that I feel

Or if I say that I love my church – and tell you that I can prove it with all the things I do for my church – yet I never feel any delight in doing those things; or any delight in the people I do them for, then my love for my church isn't yet the kind of love it's supposed to be.

And what was happening in that bible study group the other morning is that the expression of emotion helped us to think our thoughts more fully. Do you see that? an idea – the church is important to us – became a lived reality in relational experience and as a result the truth was more fully believed because it wasn't just a thought in our heads but a reality lived out in the emotional connectedness between us.

And what we are going to focus on next is the way that our emotions don't just connect us to one another but they also connect us with God.

Pray and then time for discussion...

Questions for discussion (bold are my top picks at this point)

- 1. Do you tend to be someone who is: i) suspicious of your emotions; ii) controlled by your emotions or iii) out of touch with your emotions? What do you think are the chief spiritual dangers in each?**
- 2. It's sometimes said that there are positive emotions (joy, peace, delight etc) and negative emotions (fear, sorrow, despair etc) and that we should cultivate the positive ones and resist the negative ones – do you think that's right?**