# My Two Brains

*The biology of when to trust your gut and when to think things through — as told through carrot cake*

I hated the florist at my wedding. They were the preferred vendor of the venue, and I had to practically chase them down for a response. My gut was saying, "Move on," and my brain was saying, "Give them another chance. They must be a preferred vendor for a reason!"

They finally called back, and I decided to sign the contract, despite everything in me screaming that it was the wrong choice. And, yep, there was one problem after another. The guy I met with apparently fled with all the client files, and they couldn't decide who I'd be working with, so I had to start over at least ten times. By the time we got to the wedding and I noticed the flowers were the exact color I told them I didn't want, I just shook my head.

I should've trusted my gut.

This was the first time I can remember really learning that lesson as an adult, but it's easy to override our gut with our brains. We out-think it. We overthink it. I know I'm not alone in this because there are a million articles about it. I've read a lot of them. Yet none of the ones I've read talked about why we should trust our gut from a biological standpoint.

At a doctor's appointment today, I learned the body has two brains. One in the head and one in the gut. My first thought after hearing that was: this would be a great Substack essay because apparently that's all I think about these days.

Now that I've spent a ridiculous amount of time falling down a rabbit hole, I've come to the conclusion that it's an excellent topic for a Substack essay. So strap in and take a dive with me through the nervous system. For those in the field, I'm sorry. I'm leaving a lot out and this is oversimplified, but I want to keep this accessible.

For our purposes, you need to know the central nervous system (CNS), which processes information, controls body functioning, and lives in your head. There's the autonomic nervous system (ANS)—it sounds like automatic and controls all the stuff that happens entirely on its own, like heartbeats, breathing, and the like. It lives all over the body. And there's the enteric nervous system (ENS). This is the one I learned about today. It's made up of somewhere between 100 and 500 million neurons that line your gut from esophagus to rectum and likely predates your brain.

I realize not everyone is as fascinated by this as I am—at least not yet—but I'll get you there. Because we've all heard, "trust your gut," and we all have opinions about why you should or

shouldn't. Often, the opinion is based on the outcome. If it doesn't work out, people roll their eyes and admonish you for not thinking things through. If it does work out, people think you're a genius.

What is not challenged as often is making decisions by "thinking things through," except it should be because it's not always the better choice.

**Sometimes it's the gut that knows more.**

About five years ago, I had to have abdominal surgery. I went to a doctor who was highly recommended by a family member. The first few visits, I didn't love him. Something felt off, but this family member swore by his credentials and kept telling me he was the best. The surgery itself went fine, but the post-op visits were problematic, and I was left with essentially paralyzed lower abdominal muscles. I had ignored the florist lesson and my gut, and I'm paying for it with daily back pain.

In researching this essay, I've come to learn exactly where I went wrong, and I'm going to use cake to show you.

We're in a kitchen and a delicious carrot cake is sitting on the counter. Amazing! Also, how did it get there? Why is it there? Can I eat it?

Metaphorical cakes don't appear out of nowhere, though. You need your nervous system to take you from ingredients to a delicious baked good. Your CNS finds all those ingredients—aka raw sensory input from your eyes, ears, mouth, etc.—so your ANS can organize them, or in this case, mix them into a batter. But as much as I love to eat batter, it's still not a cake, and it won't be without the oven's heat. That heat is the ENS transforming the data into something your brain can actually use.

And voila! A cake! One that I know is for my best friend's birthday, and I know that because my conscious brain has the context to tell me so.

Pretty cool right?

Okay, I told you that I would explain why I should've trusted my gut, and I just gave you a metaphor that makes it sound like you can only see the cake once it gets back to the brain.

The thing is, the vagus nerve (the telephone wire connecting most of your body with the brain) sends 80 to 90% of the information from the gut to the brain, not the other way around. In other words, it's the gut with all the tea—I'll leave out the obvious pun. You're welcome.

On top of that, studies have shown that when participants were forced to choose between options based on instinct alone, they made the right call up to 90% of the time. And in other studies, it

was found that people who trust gut instinct over logic in snap decisions tend to see their choices as a more accurate reflection of their true selves, therefore holding their choices with more conviction.

Now you're thinking, if all that's true, why would I make decisions with anything other than my gut? Wellllll….turns out, it's not great at everything.

It's exceptionally good when the decision requires pattern recognition. You need lived experience in a particular area for it to work. And don't worry, you don't have to know you know the pattern; your gut is paying attention even when you aren't, so it's got your back (or your stomach, I guess.)

Where it falls short is empathy, or understanding what someone else is feeling.

To bring it back to the metaphorical carrot cake, if I eat it, I'm happy and full. If I baked you a carrot cake and you're allergic to carrots, there's a problem. I need my conscious brain to understand the context to ensure I don't send you to the hospital.

**This is a lot of information, but the conclusion is pretty simple.**

The gut isn't the irrational one in the room. It's not some "crunchy" idea based on wishful thinking. It's a biological fact that, in certain cases, the gut is better to rely on than your thinking brain.

In short, if you take away one thing, it's this: if you're making a decision that uses your own internal experience or emotions, let your gut do the talking. If you're making a decision that involves someone else's lived experience or emotions, let your brain take the lead.

Now when I meet a doctor and something feels off, I'm out of there and never return. When I need to do business with someone and something tells me there's a problem, it's a hard pass, even if I can't articulate why.

I know now that "something" is my gut, and my gut is smarter than me when it comes to this stuff. So instead of ignoring it, I'm going to say thank you and maybe give it a slice of carrot cake.