

## *The Senses as Doorways of Relating*

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*This is a chapter from Steve's as yet unpublished book on relating and speaking with young children, tentatively entitled How To Listen So The Young Child Can Speak.*

*Now, this means that the first three years of life are those which prepare the child to become a member of humanity. Man is born out of the isolation in which he existed in the maternal womb, because there he was nothing else but an isolated, developing being; a being given up to cosmic powers; a being spun into its own karma. This however is a germ which unfolds and grows into walking, into speaking and communicating, and into thinking and imparting, thereby developing the prerequisites for a social life. . . We also know that something else develops out of walking, speaking and thinking. The sense of word develops out of walking and thereby speaking comes into being; the sense of thought develops out of speaking and thereby thinking emerges, while the sense of Ego develops out of thinking and thereby the knowledge, the immediate sensory experience arises that the other person is an individual. You see, walking, speaking and thinking are the prerequisites for a social organism (König, 38-39).*

Sense organs are the communication links between the organism and the world around. Through the senses we receive images, or information, by which we learn to relate to ourselves, the world around us, and each other. The senses are providing the information by which the *I* is able to be active and engage. Human beings perceive and experience the world through the sense organs. "Our sense perceptions provide the basis for the rest of our soul life," Rudolf Steiner wrote (*Anthroposophy*, p. 98).

The information, or images, received as sense impressions are taken into the human organism through the window of the soul leading to responses or reactions of thinking, feeling and/or willing.

*Let me put it this way: we are here; the world is outside us. We perceive this world, we take in what it has to give us, as it were, and we continue to carry this in our soul as we go about the world. The objects are outside us, the beings are outside us, and what they impart to us through our perception of them we carry with us in our soul. [as mental picture, as memory] (Steiner, *The Realm of Language*, 1).*

Young children, being primarily will-oriented beings, have an impulse toward imitating what they perceive, doing what they see. Adults may think about, or feel, or do something in response to a sense experience.

Adult bodies and souls are already formed, but young children are in a process of forming their bodies and developing soul response patterns that are affected by all of their experiences. Sensory experiences are part of what is forming them. The *I* interacts with the world through its own soul, and it is the soul and body that sense impressions imprint upon. Also at work are other levels of sense experience, not noticeable by most adults. Children before age seven directly experience moods of the adults in this environment, and what adults are feeling and thinking in their inner life. The young child is wholly a sense organ, quite a bit like a sponge, soaking in all levels of experience into the process of forming her physical body and her soul life.

All of these experiences, all of these sense perceptions and non-sensory awareness (of feelings and thoughts) relate to the developing child as formative qualities. The child receives myriad images from the natural world around him, from human adults in his world, and even in the light streaming towards him from the stars and planets, all as substance for his formative forces to utilize in forming the organs, and creating patterns of soul and personality.

It is important to consider the source of the images received by the child. Are they healthy for a developing being? Are the images truthful and

following laws of nature and cosmos? Are they images electronically created and crafted to create consumers? Adults have the responsibility to guide the young into the world, so a consideration of what images we want for our developing child, and what is the source of those images, must be part of our awareness.

There are at least twelve senses that are conduits for receiving images and perceptions of various kinds. It is through the senses that we relate to the world around us as well as to other human beings. All sense impressions are images of a kind: touch, sound, taste all are received by the human being as an image. One could say it is images that form the young child, images of all kinds including images of human activity in the environment, images streaming toward earth from the cosmos, and images from the world of nature. Human organs are formed and developed out of images received from the cosmos and from the human beings around them. We come from the cosmos, and cosmic images form our physical being and constitute our life forces

*The etheric body which develops in the human being is a world in itself. One might say that it is a universe in the form of images...It is of extraordinary significance that we, in our descent into earthly life, draw together forces from the universal ether and thus take with us, in our ether body, a kind of image of the cosmos. If one could extract the ether body of a person at the moment when he is uniting himself with the physical body, we should have a sphere which is far more beautiful than any formed by mechanical means—a sphere containing stars, zodiac, sun and moon. These configurations of the ether body remain during embryonic development, while the human being grows together more and more with his physical body...Indeed they remain right into the seventh year, until the change of teeth (Steiner, "The Human Heart").*

Steiner described the life senses, or the lower senses, as those that give experiences of one's own body. Through the sense of **Touch** one experiences one's own limits. The sense receptors are the skin, the covering around our entire body. We usually are not aware of our sense of **Life** because it is a general feeling of well-being, of physical harmony. We only experience this sensing when our life processes are out of balance, as sensed by the body's inner organs. Then we feel out of sorts and ill at ease. This sense

is connected to how well one is nourished by rest, nutrition, and immune system health. The sense of **Self Movement** is how we experience our own body moving in space and how freely we move through space. Nerve cells in the muscles and joints are the sense organs. The sense of **Balance** is both the equilibrium of the body in space, as well as inner balance and calm. The physical organ that senses balance is the inner ear. These four lower senses deliver the relationship of self to body; it is vitally important to support the development of these four life senses in the young child.

Babies need to experience loving, warm touch. They need to be held and cuddled. We need to be aware of how much touch any particular child needs; some have difficulty with the same type of touch that others enjoy. There are "touch-sensitive" children and we have to support them in getting the particular kinds of touch they need. Many babies and young children are calmed by gentle foot squeezing and massage, though for some their feet are too sensitive and ticklish.

A life of daily rhythms supports the developing life sense in the young child. Regular meal times and sleeping times including napping. A calm adult presence at the table at mealtimes is also a big help.

Young children need the opportunity to move freely! Activities involving free exploration of nature, and climbing, and rolling all support the developing sense of movement. Bodily experiences of freedom are the basis for the possibility of inner freedom in the human being. Hindrances in this development include time spent in car seats, baby walkers and bouncers, and in front of electronic screen entertainments.

The developing sense of balance is also aided by rolling and climbing, and spinning round and round. Walking on narrow surfaces such as balance beams, and hopping from one step to another are examples of balance development activities.

Through the "middle" senses of **Smell**, **Taste**, **Sight**, and **Warmth** we bring some of the world into ourselves and become aware of our relation to the world. Smell, taste, and sight are well known in our usual understanding of the senses. The less-familiar sense of warmth has to do with both physical and soul temperature, sensed *in relation to* one's own warmth. Warmth perception stimulates the human being to warm or cool himself to the degree necessary to meet the other.

Through the "higher" senses we find our

connection to other human beings, and these can be considered the spiritual senses. The four higher senses develop out of the foundation of the lower or life senses, each of which supports the development of a particular higher sense as the individual grows and matures throughout life. The life senses give information about the human being's own body; the same function turned outwards gives similar information about another person. When one is receiving information through the so-called higher senses, it could be termed an out-of-body experience.

The child's sense of balance, whose sense organ is the inner ear, is a foundation for the sense of **Hearing the other**—not the words, but the way the words are used, the musicality of sound and tone. Through this we experience not the content, but the intent of the words we hear spoken. Young children understand the meaning of what is spoken long before they understand the words of a language. Hearing is the only one of the higher senses that is based in a physical organ. Hearing the other requires an inner stillness and calm, an inner quiet, so that sound sensations can be received.

The sense of our own body's movement through space supports a sense for the **Speech, or Word, of the other**. Through this sense one gets an experience of how the words of another human being move. And to understand another's ideas we must hear them expressed as words. When one has freedom and flexibility of movement, it is easier to move along with the spoken words of another person.

The sense of life, an inner sense of one's general physical harmony and well-being, is needed for a sense for the **Idea, or the Concept, of the other**. This is how one can experience the thinking of another human being. What is the idea this person is trying to express? Just as the sense of life is a sort of gauge for etheric balance, the sense of thought of the other is also a sensing of the etheric world, the world where thinking lives. We relate to each other in understanding by means of the thinking which is revealed in speech. Hearing, Word and Idea senses work together when one says "What I hear you saying is this. Is this what you mean? Is this the idea you are trying to convey?"

The sense of touch is the other end of the spectrum of the sense of the **Ego of the other**. A developed sense of physical touch underlies the capacity to touch the very being of another individual human being whom one meets and experiences. Rudolf Steiner wrote, "The perception of another human being is

image sensation; as actuality, stands the fulfillment of what the sense of touch gives, so that, in this inwardness, the reality is given wherein the sense of touch is grounded" (Steiner, *Anthroposophy*, 203).

The ability to sense the Ego of another is based on a confidence in one's own awareness of self. "I can let you into my inner life, because I trust in my awareness of who I am."

*Man as far as he is at rest, as far as he is the motionless human figure which has so to speak the head at its center, is the organ of perception for the Ego of the other human being is the biggest organ of perception which we have and we ourselves are as physical man the biggest organ of perception which we have.* (Steiner, *Das Ratsel des Menschen*, quoted in König, 137)

The sense of Ego of the Other works in sleeping and waking—we "fall asleep" into the other, and then immediately reawaken back in ourselves. This is a sort of higher breathing process which works in a matter of seconds. Empathy is based on sensing the other, and falling asleep to one's self.

Another way to think about Steiner's depiction of twelve senses is to consider them as eight senses. There are the four middle senses of Smell, Taste, Sight, and Warmth, and there are but four other senses. These other four have both an inward aspect and an outward aspect. They are Touch/Ego, Life/Idea, Movement/Word and Balance/Hearing.

However one categorizes the senses, they are the conduits for the images that are the "food" for body and soul of the developing child. By means of the flow of sensation and information through the sense organs raw material is received for the building up of body and soul. These images form the developing human being, in his physical form and functioning as well as his soul constitution.

The healthy development of the life senses, the four "lower" senses, requires a healthy diet of images so those senses develop to their fullest possibility. Then a sound foundation for the much later development of the higher senses, the capacity for sensing the other, is in place. These are truly social senses, and are the basis for understanding and empathy for others. Attention to the development of the senses is at the core of an education attempting to renew culture and create a fertile ground for human connecting. These twelve senses are the doorways to relating the self to the body, the self to the world around, and the self to other human beings.

The human being has a hunger for sense impressions, which form us at a young age and can nourish and rejuvenate us later in life. The modern world is bombarding us with images from media of all kinds, from electronic screens to billboards and magazines and t-shirts. They confront us when we are walking down the street, in stores, and even in our cars. One can sense a sort of image craving in our world, perhaps because the human being is seeking images that are “healthy” in the midst of so much that is not. Life-giving, life-affirming images are vitally important for the young child. The development of the senses in the young child, especially the four “life senses,” is a full-time activity for the child. Images and sense experiences of nature, of other human beings, of nutritious and wholesome food are what nourish the child as she develops her own sense apparatus and the neurological structure to process those impressions. Electronically-generated images are in fact a hindrance to this development, as writers including Joseph Chilton Pearce and Keith Buzzell have argued.

*We can see the rise of what might be called cultural autism. The symptoms? Tunneled senses, and feelings of isolation and containment. Experience, including physical risk, is narrowing to about the size of a cathode ray tube, or flat panel if you prefer. Atrophy of the senses was occurring long before we came to be bombarded by the latest generation of computers, high-definition TV, and wireless phones....But the new technology accelerates the phenomenon. ‘What I see in America today is an almost religious zeal for the technological approach to every facet of life,’ says Daniel Yankelovich, the veteran public opinion analyst. This faith, he says, transcends mere love for new machines. ‘It’s a value system, a way of thinking, and it can become delusional.’ . . . In The Necessity of Experience [Edward Reed] wrote, ‘There is something wrong with a society that spends so much money, as well as countless hours of human effort, to make the least dregs of processed information available to everyone everywhere and yet does little or nothing to help us explore the world for ourselves.’ None of our major institutions or our popular culture pay much notice to what Reed called ‘primary experience’ —that which we can see, feel, taste, hear, or smell for ourselves. (Louv, 64-65)*

In sensing we have an experience of the thing sensed, the thing generating the sensation, but we do not

experience the sensing itself. We only experience that which is creating the sensation. The activity of sensing is below the level of conscious awareness. Young children, through their senses, touch the creator of the thing being sensed. They connect with the creator beings and living concepts that stand behind sense impressions. Images that are filled with life and that come from life nurture and nourish the young child. The child’s etheric body and his soul thrive through the experience of these life-enriched images, rather than a diet of electronically created images that have no origin in life.

If we allow the ego of the other to speak her ideas through her words, by truly entering into her being through deep listening, then our own ego stands naked, not judging, but open-hearted and vulnerable. If as adults we can truly stand freed of our me-ness, then our shining ego, truly ready to listen, allows the ego of the other to freely speak. Our ego gives strength to the ego of the other to free itself. Strength arises through being vulnerable and allowing another to be, and then we can experience truly meeting the other.

In deepening awareness of our own egoism lies the possibility of release from soul patterns and habits. We are freed for the connection with our higher ego. Then the one who meets the other is not our double, but our spiritual core. We truly live in the realm of the higher senses, which is the spiritual world. And our activity allows the other to connect with his ego as well, simply by our being present in that way. We give strength to the other by our allowing what is to just be. We learn to yield to what is. We give away our self, give away our power, in freedom and in consciousness, so our spirit-I can guide us. This conscious choosing to let go of the self is the path through the twelve senses to Love.

## References

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