

The Sense of Life

— Astrid Lackner

The foundation of our waking day consciousness is built upon our senses. Rudolf Steiner indicated twelve interconnected senses that make up the human being. Through them we experience ourselves, our fellow human beings, and the world around us. These senses begin with the four “lower” or foundational senses, which include touch, life, self-movement and balance. These senses are directed toward and experienced in one’s own body and are also called physical senses. They are developed and nourished in the first seven years of life.

We experience the world around us through smell, taste, sight and warmth, the “middle senses.” Rudolf Steiner called the final four the “higher” social or spiritual senses. They are: hearing, speaking,

perceiving the thought of another, and perceiving the ego (the individuality) of another. The health of these higher senses depends on the health and development of the four foundational senses. As such, balance is connected to hearing; movement to speaking; life to thinking; and touch to ego perception of the other. While recognizing the importance of all senses, especially the lower ones in our work in the early childhood classrooms, this article focuses on the sense of life.

The sense of life can be the most elusive and mysterious of the senses described by Rudolf Steiner. How do we experience it and how is it connected to the sense of thought? With the sense of life we experience a feeling of well-being within our own

body: how did we sleep, are we hungry, feeling sick, too cold or too warm? We often don't notice this sense until something is not right.

If the sense of life is not developed in a healthy manner, a person's perception of pain is askew. My daughter is one of these people. Her sense of life is underdeveloped. She does not feel pain as other people do and I worried when she was small. When she was three years old, she had an abscessed root in one of her molars. She wanted to suck on a frozen tortellini each evening when going to bed, because it felt so good. It took us three months and two dentists to figure out what was wrong. A child whose sense of life is not functioning well needs to be observed closely, as she experiences no warning system within her own being.

Another aspect of this sense gives us the experience of ourselves, of us filling the space of our bodies. We feel ourselves inwardly; as Rudolf Steiner states in *Spiritual Science as a Foundation for Social Forms*, we feel that "we are we." How does this sense come about? Anthroposophy takes into account both the visible and invisible/spiritual aspects of the human being without neglecting findings of natural science.

And so it is with the twelve senses. Each has a material and a spiritual aspect. Rudolf Steiner gives some indications in his 1909 lecture series, *Psychology of Body, Soul and Spirit*, of the fundamental spiritual aspects regarding the senses. He defines the sense of life as "life feeling," "vital sense," or "life sense that makes itself evident in feelings of freedom, energy or faintness."

In these lectures, Steiner describes how the life sense has come into being in a way that is beyond the scope of this article. Yet a naturalistic, scientific illustration of the sense of life was described by Dr. Susan Johnson, an anthroposophical doctor in California who assists children with behavioral and developmental challenges.

Drawing from the work of Dr. Karl König, she identified the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems as the seat of the sense of life. These two systems belong to the autonomic nervous system and are responsible for "fight or flight" (when the sympathetic nervous system responds) and rest and digestion responses (as directed by the parasympathetic nervous system). The sympathetic nervous system will activate all large muscles (preparing them to either fight or run) and increases blood flow to organs used in intense physical activity. The parasympathetic

nervous system is responsible for slowing down the heart rate, stimulating stomach/bowel motility, and preparing us for rest.

Dr. Johnson described the parasympathetic nervous system as creating the "Buddha state." It is only possible for children to engage, to learn, to create new neuropathways in the brain when they are in this relaxed state. Children will not take in new information, retain, and integrate it when they are anxious and nervous. They need an environment that is supportive, warm, and calm. Here we find a connection of the sense of life to the sense of thought. We are only able to learn when we are in a place of trust and warmth, when our sense of life is in a place of wellbeing.

How can a healthy sense of life be supported in the classroom? Children feel comfortable and secure when they are exposed to a rhythmical, predictable morning and have enough rest, healthy movement, time outdoors, wholesome foods, and healthy relationships. Children need enough time to play; and they love to participate in practical work, like sweeping the floor, folding laundry, baking, gardening, etc. Artistic activities, such as painting, crafting, and listening to stories further nourish their souls. Warmth, love and humor provide the foundation upon which our children can flourish. ♦

Astrid Lackner has been inspired by young children and families for over 25 years in both Canada and Austria. She is currently an early childhood educator at Cedar Valley Waldorf School in Squamish, British Columbia, Canada. She has also recently joined the faculty of the West Coast Institute for Anthroposophy. In her free time she enjoys roaming the back country of the West Coast Mountains.

Resources:

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