

Celebrating the Senses

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At some point, quite recently as I recall, I asked Paul, who had a much better sense of how this service would look, or should I say, look, sound, feel, smell, and taste, how long the spoken message should be. He said "the shorter the better" and I latched on to that sentiment immediately.

But perhaps more seriously, or less seriously, depending on your interpretation of what I say, this is a service that is meant to be sensual, hopefully somewhat unusual, and fun. As summer is quickly drawing to an end, we want this time together to be a celebration of the joy of the season and our experience of it. In what for some is a less structured and less demanding time of the year, there can be a freedom to use and appreciate the senses in ways that we may not usually do so. In summer, some of us travel or spend time elsewhere in order to see, hear, smell, touch and taste that which we may not be able to in our regular environments.

So for just a few minutes this morning, I bring to you some of the thoughts that have come to me as I have contemplated the notion of the senses.

A sense of humour
A sense of propriety
A sense of timing

A sense of style
Common sense

A sense of reality
A sense of balance

The word sense itself is a strange one. It can be used to refer to something supposedly very logical and obvious (eg. Common sense) or something mysterious and somewhat undefinable (eg. The sixth sense) In Jane Austen's work called "Sense and Sensibility", the word sense referred to logic and sensibility referred to emotion.

Our senses connect us to the universe, to each other, and to ourselves. We have been traditionally told we have five senses but neurologists can't really agree on the number because it somewhat depends on the definition of a sense. What has been called the sixth sense seems to me to be some kind of catchment for all the other awarenesses that don't seem to come

through the other five. What does the sixth sense really entail? How legitimate, trustworthy, or important is it?

When our five senses are compromised, connections can become compromised as well and usually some kind of remedial or assistive devices are used. Hearing aids and glasses abound in order to sharpen or assist the sense of sight and the sense of hearing. Sometimes senses are so compromised, they cannot be assisted or restored. Other senses become doubly important or perhaps in some cases, more than doubly important.

When I was young, the schools provided students with the opportunity to belong to a kind of book club; periodically a brochure with age appropriate books would be sent home and we could buy books through mail order. So I recall reading the story of Helen Keller at an early age. This is a person whose senses of sight and hearing were completely lost when she was a toddler. Her life became a chaotic existence in which connection with her environment seemed to have very limited meaning. Until someone like Annie Sullivan, who also struggled somewhat with a limitation of her sense of sight, found a creative way to use touch to break through some isolation and communication barriers. Life opened up for a child who became one of the most gifted and inspiring women in history.

Our senses help us perceive and interpret and understand and enjoy, yet they don't define us. What defines us as individual human beings is the deeper core of being that has been called soul, spirit, psyche, personality, inner self or any number of designations for that dimension of us that is not clonable, repeatable, or certainly completely understandable. Ironically, sensory deprivation environments have been developed to give us a keener sense of who we are when we don't have access to the senses to which we are accustomed.

A resource that I used many years ago in a sermon to illustrate the depth of struggle, humour, and unique human experience is the script of a play written by Jane Wagner called *The Search for Intelligent Life in the Universe*. Through the numerous characters in the play, the senses are often invoked or referenced. But the way in which those numerous individuals interact with what they experience, creates the interest. The primary narrator of the in the play is a woman named Trudy; a street person who has an enthusiastic, undeterred, unique sense of reality. Trudy says:

I made some studies, and reality is the leading cause of stress amongst those in touch with it. I can take it in small doses, but as a lifestyle I found it too confining. It was just too needful; it expected me to be there for it all the time, and with all I have to do – I had to let something go.

Trudy is convinced that she is being visited by beings from beyond the earth's confines and shares some of her experiences of and with them. In talking about her visitors from worlds beyond she says:

. . .they love going through my shopping bags. Once they found this old box of Cream of Wheat. I told them, "A box of cereal." But they saw it as a picture of infinity. You know how on the front is a picture of that guy holding up a box of Cream of Wheat and on that box is a picture of that guy holding up a box of Cream of Wheat and on that box is a picture of that guy holding up a box of Cream of Wheat and on that box is a picture of that guy holding up a box of Cream of Wheat. . .

We think so different.

They find it hard to grasp some things that come easy to us, because they simply don't have our frame of reference.

I show 'em this can of Campbell's tomato soup.

I say "This is soup".

Then I show 'em a picture of Andy Warhol's painting of a can of Campbell's tomato soup. I say "This is art".

"This is soup."

"This is art."

Then I shuffle the two behind my back.

"Now what is this?"

*"No, **this** is soup and **this** is art!"*

In the finale of the play, Trudy has recommended that her space friends attend a Broadway play. They thought it was amazing, enlightening, and completely entertaining. But she discovered that they had been watching the audience rather than what was happening on stage.

Each of us takes what comes through our senses, processes the material, and makes meaning of our lives and of life itself. How we do it is part of the unique miracle that is each one of our lives.

The question I would like to ask myself and each of you today is one that I think is life changing with respect to our senses. Do we understand our senses as givens or gifts? I take this question seriously because it has implications with respect to so many other questions. It leads me to ask what responsibility we have as holders of our senses? Are we simply consumers of our senses or do we appreciate and value what they provide? There is something very life giving about appreciating what one has before it is lost. The most ordinary can become a wonder. The most routine can be a source of inspiration. It leads me to ask what we are called to do in relation to those who have limitations with respect to the senses? Gratitude can be sometimes feel elusive. But for those who are able or willing to embrace it consistently, there is a desire to pay it forward in a way that can have a chain reaction of positive energy and possibility.

Helen Keller wrote:

Once I knew only darkness and stillness... my life was without past or future... but a little word from the fingers of another fell into my hand that clutched at emptiness, and my heart leaped to the rapture of living.

Someone changed her life and in return she changed the lives of countless others. Of course each of us has limitations and each of us has the potential to effect change. Helen Keller wrote:

I am only one, but still I am one. I cannot do everything, but still I can do something; and because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do something that I can do. And she wrote It is a terrible thing to see and have no vision.

My hope for each of us gathered here today is that we look carefully and intentionally on the senses that allow us to participate in the fullness of life. They are sacred and beautiful.

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