

## ESSAY

## Sense and Sense Ability: The Sensual and the Sensible

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I am sitting in the aromatic breeze on the balcony of a Bed & Breakfast over-looking the verdant mountain-ringed bay in Tofino, the international tourist destination on the west coast of Vancouver Island, Canada – one of the privileged, I know. Many of my senses are saturated, but earlier today they were all utterly awash during a whale-watching excursion three miles out into the Pacific Ocean. My white curls blowing in the wind, my old eyes shaded from the sun reflecting off the swells, my shivering lips salty with sea spray, my clammy skin encased inside a bright orange full-body floatation suit, my braced body bouncing with eleven others in a small pontoon boat – I was rocking, and being rocked. Twin engines roared and propelled, ocean waves heaved and crashed, grey whales surfaced and sprayed, sea lions clamored and barked, bald eagles soared and cried. I had gone out to sea to see, but I was also feeling, hearing, tasting, and smelling to the max. How could I possibly store for future retrieval all the stimulation my senses were experiencing, I wondered. Expecting pictures to capture the moment would be futile, I thought. What part of me is foremost in this moment, I pondered.

As I thought about my senses, trying to make sense of them by bringing cognitive coherence to them, I knew at the very least that I was more than my thoughts. Whether there was sensibility to my sense ability, or whether my sensuality was non-sense in the rational sense, I knew – no, since Descartes, knowing implies thinking – I experienced myself existentially far more profoundly than Descartes' dictum: "I think, therefore I am." My senses were all that I needed to know all that I wanted to know in the moment. Thinking was secondary, and optional, despite my habitual, often cognitively obsessive-compulsive reversion to it. Succumbing to thought would have been insensitive to the moment.

But sure enough, soon I was thinking about the self-validating, and often retentive and directive nature of my very physical senses. I thought about how sense memories trigger those who are traumatized in ways that reason cannot restrain, and how sense memories are used artistically by stage actors to call up emotions in order to perform a certain scene, despite those personal memories having nothing to do with the onstage re-enactment of their emotive effects. I thought about the myriad moments of my life when it would be more accurate to postulate that I see, hear, feel, taste, or smell, therefore I am. And I thought about the possibilities of a sixth, more spiritual sense, the pre-cognitive or retro-cognitive extrasensory perception sometimes seemingly present in life.

Of course, humans are not the only mammals blessed with these senses. These enablements of nature characterize our species, but they do not distinguish us. They are the methods of knowing employed by all creatures. In systematizing sense evidence into our scientific methodology, the empirical that takes us beyond the philosophical, we may have simply been returning to our senses. Yet in our self-flattering fascination with not just the consciousness that we share with other sentient beings, but the self-consciousness that we claim sets us apart from and above them, we have glorified the human mind and all its unique and marvelous capacities. Mere senses alone seem too untrustworthy, and frankly too animalistic, to us. So we indulge our sensuality only guardedly, often apologetically, and sometimes pathetically, but always preferably under the control of the sensibility of our minds. Cognitive meaning is the ultimate goal and measure of human life, we think, and meanings can be nothing but mindful, we reason. And so modern life impoverishes the senses.

Or does it, really? An argument can be made that Western culture is more sensual than ever, even if only unevenly. We have done all we can to eliminate natural, especially body odors, while proliferating what we ironically term fragrances. We have diversified our global ethnic food tastes, while strengthening and intensifying them to the point of losing the subtle savoring of natural, “unflavored” food. Feelings of the tactile type, in contrast to the emotional type – if the two can in fact be kept separate – are routinely created and controlled by psychosomatic drugs. We have turned sex, that definitive combination of touch and passion, into a performance, something appraised by how it is done and how it looks, not by what it does or how it feels.

The volume and variety of ambient sound has exploded with modern communication technology, described by Marshal McLuhan as extensions of our senses. Until a century and a half ago, the masses heard nothing but natural sounds and folk music. Only elites heard professional music, and then only live and rarely. Today, silence is rare, and uncomfortable for many in our wireless world. But no sense has been magnified more by communication technology than sight. With first electronic then digital technology, we have become a visual culture dominated and driven by images. We now inhabit a world of visual representations of reality, more so than reality itself. We are so busy taking pictures of landscapes to view later that we fail to experience them fully with our other senses, to hear and feel and taste and smell them. Our obsession with preserving one small, actually misrepresentative visual part of them prevents us from living them, from being fully present in them. We produce a few pictures to post on social media, but are left bereft of sense memory of the experience.

Meanwhile, jeremiads of the last generation have lamented our loss of vigor in thinking, decrying the stunting of our cognitive sensibility and our concurrent surrender to physical and emotional sensuality. Their titles alone say much of it: *The Closing of the American Mind* (Allan Bloom); *The Culture of Narcissism* (Christopher Lasch); *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (Neil Postman); *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains* (Nicholas Carr); and perhaps

most poignantly, *Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle* (Chris Hedges). Literacy requires thinking, and spectacles require seeing, but looking requires both. If we have ceased to be thinkers and become mere spectators – disengaged gawkers and voyeurs aroused from malaise only by the visual – then we are reduced to, and mastered by, a single haunting sense. And when the visual is merely an image, a re-presentation of the real thing, we are that much more pathetic, or more aptly a-pathetic.

I recently attended Catholic mass in the Notre Dame Basilica in Montreal, Canada's Gothic Revival counterpart to the medieval Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris. It too was an immersive sensual experience of human physical and social constructions, at once both similar to and different from the sensual experience of whale-watching among earth's wonders of divine construction. The architecture was literally awesome, with the deep blue and gold vaults, the hundreds of intricate wooden carvings, the ornate details of the sculpted statues, choir stalls, and altars, the picturesque, themed, stained glass windows, and the various vestments of priests all generating authentic awe in even the most jaded visitor. Add to these sights the sound of a mass choir accompanying one of the largest pipe organs in North America, comprised of four keyboards and 7000 individual pipes. Mix in the scent of burning incense, the solemn movement of processions and recessions, the kneeling and gesturing in prayer, the kissing of icons, and the touch and taste of the Eucharist, and the sensible was mostly lost in the sensual.

But my relentless thoughts intruded again and turned to the similarly physical character of native, animistic spirituality that sacralizes the earth in a manner Christian theology and tradition has not. In chagrined want of sense memories, I imagined being in the grip of multiple senses, dancing in ceremonial dress while chanting and drumming on sacred ground infused with juniper smoke – movement, sight, sound, place, and scent. I imagined partaking in smudging rituals in sweat lodges, where rites of healing remain physical acts, not merely cognitive prayers. It all remained so sadly foreign to me, but so exotic and alluring, a spirituality that I know only with my mind, not with my body, and therefore know very little.

Two hours later, I was sitting under a large canopy a few blocks away from Notre Dame Basilica on a pier protruding into the St. Lawrence River, absorbed in a performance of the Cirque du Soleil in its hometown Montreal headquarters. Like indigenous spirituality, this too was a very physical, non-Christian spirituality, though in this case a humanist spirituality that, instead of worshipping the transcendent by using the human body as an instrument of worship, was a worship of the human body itself, thoroughly embedded in simple Western consumerism. The Cirque du Soleil's creative and flamboyant combination of gymnastics, dance, dress, and storytelling is a celebration of the human body, and what it is capable of doing and being. It is playful, joyful, exuberant, and more amazing than awesome, precisely because it is not ecstatic in the original sense of the word. It is not an "out of body" experience,

but rather a completely embodied experience. It has no external referent, no notion of the transcendent, and worships creation instead of the Creator.

One week later, I was back home sitting in my Protestant church, struggling to maintain attention to the “services” being rendered to me, in part because it was such a minimal sensual experience. Save for the cross mounted on the wall behind the platform, the building is indistinguishable from conventional public auditoriums, much like the megachurch across town is indistinguishable from a commercial mall. Everyone is dressed as they are every other day of the week. We do occasionally stand to sing, but we mostly sit to listen. Being less than charismatic in style of worship, and fearful of the carnality of emotion and body, it is only the rare worshipper who raises a hand to sing or pray. We are white folks in the Anabaptist tradition, and no one really “moves.” The space is sensitively scent-free. We will taste nothing and touch nothing, expect perhaps the hand or arm of a same-sex friend in the foyer. Evidently, we are all here to think, and should the Spirit move, to feel, but only privately, in our hearts. The highlight of worship will be the exposition of the cognitive sermon, not the celebration of the physical mass. We are pre-occupied with rational, propositional, and exegetical truth-claims. We seek connection to the transcendent spiritual with our hearts and minds, not to the earthly physical with our bodies and emotions. We seek connection to the unseen, unheard, untouched referent of our sacred linguistic symbols, our Christianese. After all, that, in part, is why we Protestants trashed the cathedrals of Europe during the Reformation, so as to rid ourselves of the flesh.

Of course, the degree to which creature-likeness is embraced is no longer a significant Catholic-Protestant difference, if it ever was. The 20<sup>th</sup> century Jesuit priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin famously said that “We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience.” And the 20<sup>th</sup> century Protestant scholar C. S. Lewis famously said that “You don’t have a soul. You are a soul. You have a body.” This may just be Christian hyperbole for the sake of making a theological point, but it is also an artificial dualism and a false dichotomy that is inconsistent with the lived experience of real persons. Said Samuel Yemeogo of the Federation of Evangelical Churches, Burkina Faso, “If you want to preach only to our souls, go to the place of the dead. That is the only place where body and soul are separate. Here on earth, to reach my soul, you cannot neglect my body.” Indeed, in certain situations, the sensual and the sensible are equal, alternate routes to the spiritual.

To be fully human is to employ both our minds and our senses to their fullest capacities, recognizing that some situations call for more of one than the other. To practice the freedom and wisdom of “all things in moderation” requires all our capacities to be freely and fully present in all situations, none more or less than what they are, none precluding the other. Whether we currently tend to over-think or under-think our sensibilities, and venerate or neglect our sense abilities, remains an open question. But there are situations, such as the

sensuality of whale-watching, when Ralph Waldo Emerson had it right: “Moderation in all things, especially moderation.”