

Sensing the World and Ourselves

By Jeff Green

Rudolf Steiner identified 12 senses – seven more than the normal five most people recognise - which he placed into three groups: Touch, Life, Self-Movement, Balance, Smell, Taste, Sight, Temperature/Warmth, Hearing, Language, Concept, Ego. In this article I will try to look at Steiner's ideas about the four bodily senses of Touch, Life, Movement and Balance that he grouped together in the context of events and experiences in today's world. Increasingly there is a tendency towards 'sense deprivation' – or at least a lack of 'sensory bio-diversity' – in our modern lives. These four senses are particularly badly treated. From my perspective as both a General Practitioner and a School Doctor, it is not only about the current needs of the young developing child that I have concern, but also the resulting deficiencies of teenagers and adults.

But first I would like to look at some modern advances in Neurology that have lent a new credibility to some of Steiner's ideas about early childhood.

Three ideas in particular have interested me in the last few years: the idea that there are twelve senses, certainly more than the classic five! The idea that, on a more refined level, senses are like a form of nutrition to the developing child, especially for the developing brain; and the seemingly incredible idea that organic forces of vitality (or 'etheric forces') are becoming released as the developing child develops mental awareness. This last idea is only possible by implication, as we live in a time and mind-set almost defined by its lack of a 'life body' concept.

Now to go a little further with these three in turn:

In 2005 the New Scientist published an article putting the current official count of senses at ten, with another eleven waiting in the wings.

When you look at some of these 21 different senses, they easily fall into Steiner's 12-fold model of the senses. Such things as 'bladder stretch' and 'cerebrospinal acidity' are part of a developing picture of the Sense of Life, while others contribute to a picture of the Sense of Movement, Balance and Warmth. The evolving picture shows that the way we become aware of our world is a lot more complex than the mechanical models of the past. Seeing is more than a camera, and hearing is more than a microphone.

Advances in brain imaging techniques such as PET scans and functional MRI's, have made it possible to study the developing brain without the messy task of removing it!

This has led to a whole new world of developmental neurology. Some remarkable facts have emerged, for instance that the brain of a child is affected by experience, both positively and negatively.

On the negative side, the brain of a child that has suffered severe neglect can be up to 30% smaller. On the positive side, a child who has learned a musical instrument (Sense of Movement) in early years will have a larger left temporal lobe than one who hasn't.

As Aric Sigman in his book *Remotely Controlled* said 'Experience becomes flesh.'

This has fuelled the debate for real play as against TV and computers. In fact analogies of nutrition are very common now. 'Play Malnutrition' or 'Experiential Junk Food' are phrases being used in the early childhood debate.

Another concept that has come into use concerning the early child's brain is that of 'Plasticity.' The incredible organic vitality of the brain which remains in the developing growth and sprouting of the nerve cells during the early years has been a surprise to the static picture that existed before. Descriptions of the brain as still being very living with 'windows' of potential which will eventually close, has added more urgency to what is right and wrong educationally for the young child. It only takes a small jump of imagination to see this as a sort of confirmation of the idea that there are organic 'life forces' within the brain, which are gradually being given over to the development of a child's mental abilities. But it is a jump not likely to be accepted for some considerable time, which is a great pity! This model of an 'etheric body' that connects organic and mental abilities offers a solution to both the 'body/mind' and 'nature/nurture' debates.

Putting these three ideas together gives a fresh insight into the role of the senses in early years. The 12 senses Steiner spoke about work as a circle, as it were, surrounding the human being, and are all present all of the time. The four lower or bodily senses in the early years, upon which I am concentrating, are of foundational importance in the child under seven years old.

These are again the sense of Touch, Life, Movement and Balance.

After the 'physical' embryology which precedes physical birth, there is an 'etheric' embryology that precedes etheric birth at about the age of seven. In this second embryology occurring between 0-7, the four bodily senses are like an 'etheric-placental' nourishment. The brain is an organ which most readily gives up its organic vitality for the purpose of mental development – in fact its whole form and function is like a permanent foetus! This picture explains why there is a variation in brain formation, for it is in proportion to how well it receives the sort of 'etheric nutrition' that the four lower senses provide in the early years. It is worth looking at these four senses in this light, not only in terms of an ideal healthy development, but also in the light of what we are seeing in young people and teenagers today, who increasingly have not had a rich etheric nutrition in these early years.

Questions arise: what are the particular modern experiences and changes that provide the 'junk food' of the senses? What are the sorts of sensory 'malnutrition' symptoms and signs starting to emerge?

But before that exploration, I think it is very important to add at this stage that 'healthy' sensory nutrition does not only come from 'pleasant' experiences. It's of course a natural wish that children should be bathed in a wonderful, positive world of sensory delights; this is of course what we all want for ourselves and our children. But it is a fact of the human condition that we all learn more quickly through 'unpleasant' experiences; this also counts as nutrition. This explains phrases like 'the school of hard knocks' or the Nietzsche quote 'what doesn't kill you makes you stronger.' Or 'no pain, no gain,' and 'practice makes perfect.' These are all about these body senses. All of these Victorian-sounding adages, which are not going to be popular in a 'consumer' model of health and education, are also part of the picture, so let us look briefly at these four bodily senses in turn.

Touch

Touch is easily recognised as a sense in its own right by science, and so needs little introduction.

Nature is the 'touch resource' par excellence; it provides an endless variety of touch experiences.

In the medical practice where I work, constructed as it is of plastic, glass and steel, a corner has been made to include natural things like a few twigs, acorns and leaves. This is like a 'tactile oasis' and children are instantly drawn towards it, for children are utterly consumed by their need to touch things. Imagine the pleasure of the baby as it breastfeeds or touches things for the first time. You can take children to some of the most dramatic views and culturally uplifting sights in the world and instead they will find a few old sticks, stones and some mud to play with – they want to get in touch with things.

But touch can teach through unpleasantness as well – the knock and bump that wakes us up; the fall that teaches us to be more careful. These are also important tactile experiences that children wrapped in a 'totally safe' world may not have. Recently an unlikely area of support for Touch came via Persil soap powder. They started a 'Dirt Is Good' (D.I.G.) study and advertisement. After years of stigmatising dirt, parents and children have become somewhat afraid of touching things - 33% of children will themselves avoid play for fear of getting dirty. Add to this a world made of and wrapped in plastic. We have become strangers in a strange land. Whilst there may be nothing inherently wrong with plastic, it is an example of 'tactile junk food!' It may apparently provide a huge range of possibilities – brightly-coloured animals, exotic machines, fantastic toys - but on a tactile level it is all the same, it is all plastic, all the same tactile experience. On a physical nutrition level this would be like feeding a child only on sugar. It can be made to look like all kinds of tempting foods, but in the end it's just more sugar. There is no bio-diversity of experience on a more profound level.

With some children today we find that there is the syndrome of being 'tactile defensive.' These are often nervous children who hate to be touched. Also in society we are seeing a bigger picture of a kind of cultural Aspergers, where people feel disconnected. In the film Crash, which won an Oscar last year, the opening scene has a character saying 'We don't touch, in this city we are so separate behind steel and glass that the only time we touch is when we crash into each other.'

The desire for touch is life-long. In a study of dying people, carried out through the Hospice movement, one of the things dying people really wanted was to be physically touched. When you see adolescents getting their skin pierced or tattooed, is this a way of getting a skin 'threshold' experience? The phenomena of people who cut themselves is an extreme example of a seeking for tactile experience. And when young people do extreme sports or throw themselves at hard surfaces (like the content of the TV programme) is this an attempt to create a compensatory encounter?

Life

This one needs a little more justification! There are metabolic 'senses' that are increasingly being identified within physiology - a diverse group from 'bladder stretch' to 'Cerebrospinal pH.' Presently they are a growing but disconnected group. Whether or not they will ever be seen as one whole sense that informs us if we are 'well' or not is another matter. Together these would become part of Steiner's 'Sense of Life,' and just like the concept of the life-body, it is connected more to the whole than the part. This means it senses the whole process in time within the human body and not individual steps. So time factors or 'process' begin to be relevant and important.

Again this falls on the cultural blind spot of our times ...the etheric body.

Only out of a connected wholeness is it possible to have a concept of 'enough-ness,' another cultural blind-spot! This is also the basis of a 'Sense of proportion,' a 'Sense of enough' or even 'Common sense.'

In Nature, a sense of connectedness and process is paramount. Anything that brings children into connection with the organic world can bathe them through the sense of the processes of the seasons... growth, fruition, harvest and decay. Also the routines of the day... routines of the week... routines of the year are all nutrition for this sense, as well as festivals, rituals and celebrations.

But unpleasant processes are also Life sense experiences. Waiting for something, the whole experience of 'delayed gratification' and endurance comes in here. Boredom itself is a very powerful (unpleasant) experience of the Sense of Life – an experience that is denied to the over-entertained.

Processes such as illnesses are also often processes that we want to be finished with quickly. There is a reason why those who were ill used to be called 'patients!' A lot of my work as a doctor involves parents who want themselves or their children 'fixed now' when my job is to tell them 'it's just going to take time' – it is often hard to hear this. Yet the biographies of many great individuals reveal that they have had a major illness in childhood or even prolonged stages of development before people at large could recognise their abilities. People like Isaac Newton, Winston Churchill and Albert Einstein come to mind. In our modern world of busy people and over-timetabling, a Sense of process is a rare thing. The whole world of DVD's, fast forward, rewind, skipping the boring bits, avoids any sense of process and patience. How often might we like the use of a remote control for life in the same way we have for the DVD? A world of instant gratification and abstraction from the cycles of nature does not easily lead to common-sense or patience. Wonderful old sayings like 'what goes around, comes around' were spoken in an age by people who had a deeper appreciation of the cycles of nature.

Whilst complex to understand, a child where this process has not been able to develop is the ADHD child. Here we find there is no ability to wait or observe a process and this leads to children who are often unteachable. On a wider scale, the malnutrition of this sense leads to a sort of nervous anxiety in people today. Lots of information about bits and pieces, but no sense for the whole process. And if you cannot sense your own life or etheric forces, you can have no trust in your own ability to heal and repair – no trust in the 'wisdom' of the world. No trust in your own body. This is very much a picture of our times.

Movement

Proprioception is the term given for one aspect of the sense of movement. The fact that you can make a decent attempt at writing your name without looking depends on a sense of movement independent of what your eyes are doing. And the eyes themselves are a tool of the sense of movement. If someone draws a triangle in the air there is no actual triangle to see! The way you know what you are 'seeing' is through the sense for the fine movements of the muscles around the eyes. When we read, the same process gives us the ability to recognise the difference between the letters on the page. Even the early learning of a musical instrument is all about training this sense.

This is a huge background awareness that we usually take for granted, and children are the world's greatest movers and shakers! They fidget, jump, skip, run, all to the intense annoyance of adults! Being asked to do a thing repeatedly until it is done exactly right, through more practice and repetition, may be unpleasant, but is also a very real education of this sense. Yet we are becoming the 'Society of Stillness.' Children are told to 'not touch and keep still' from an early age.

We send them to school early, were they are trained to sit still. They come home and passively watch television or play X-Box (it has been estimated that on average an estimated 12 years of life will be spent this way.) Then they go to University where they are lectured, and finally, if they are bright, they can get a job where they will spend most of their day staring zombie-like into a computer screen. Most of the muscular and back problems I see now are the result of these sorts of lifestyle, i.e. too little movement rather than too much.

The combination of a poor Sense of Life (where as with food, there is no sense of 'enough') and a poor Sense of Movement (where there is a blindness to the joy of one's own movements) can well lead to Diabetes. The epidemic of obesity and Type 2 Diabetes is a health disaster waiting to happen. The roots of that disaster are in poor, early, bodily sense development. Increasingly, I see teenagers who have been put on anti-depressants. My own impression is that often this is more a kind of 'woodenness of soul' - a kind of joylessness and 'stuckness' of the emotional life. It is through the joy of movement, as for example when we dance, that motion and even 'e-motion' arises. This would explain why exercise is as effective as anti-depressants in many cases of mild depression.

Balance

These four senses are connected to the four bodies of Steiner's understanding of the human being. Namely Touch to the 'Physical,' Life to the 'Etheric,' Movement to the 'Astral' and Balance to the 'Ego.' This means that this Sense of Balance is connected to our spiritual identity. This is more than simply another layer. As the Sense that is connected with the Ego, it is like a lynch pin that holds the other three together and weaves through them into an experience of 'bodily egohood.' Through this we become truly a 'citizen of space.' Again, most of the time we take this experience for granted - a foundational back-drop to being human and present in your body in space. Only if you have had an 'out of body' or 'near death experience' do you know what it is like to be without this experience. So this is more than a 'sense of balance' in the orthodox understanding of the term.

This Sense gives us the possibility of a 'point of view.' This is the basis of Attention, as well as a unique way of 'being there.' We are able to see the world in a unique and particular way.

Getting children to attend to a moment or task is a challenge. Entertainment is like the filling of that space with something else. Boredom is an unpleasant, but very educational experience.

It is a sense that is educated in children through focusing on a task with enthusiasm and especially through risk. This is not a popular idea in an age of 'risk aversion!' Watching that moment when a child is just about to jump, dive, cycle or try a new skill is an amazing and beautiful experience. On the other hand there is now a world of 'virtual reality.' When children are tested before and after playing video games, it can take hours for them to get their basic orientation and co-ordination skills back again. They are literally 'disembodied' for a time. In these electronic games, children experience a world where you can do amazing things, from war games to street crime, but there is no real risk involved. You are not really on that edge. It is 'virtual risk.' And the sense for this is another understanding of 'balance.' A child can be too fearful of life situations and therefore wanting always to control circumstances, or be foolhardy and reckless, forever hurting themselves. As parents, watching over our children, we have all had the playground dilemma....to let them go or to stop them.

Finding a right balance for the child in this is helping them in their 'education towards freedom' on the physical level. For the child, with this first meeting with the problem of risk comes a dilemma on a physical level. It will come again at around the age of 14 on a more emotional level, but this time fuelled by 'sex, drugs and rock 'n roll.' Then again at 21 on a more existential/vocational level - will life be very safe or very scary?

A lot of these sorts of ideas are actually becoming part of the mainstream debate around education and child development. Although there are a few semantic differences of language and terms used, concerns over diabetes, teenage depression, youth suicide and anxiety are 'societal' and affect us all. Whether the concepts of the senses shared here have something practical to contribute to this debate remains to be seen.

Jeff Green is a medical doctor, practising in New Zealand, where he lives with his family and three children.