

Nurturing the Body Senses

The Foundations of Childhood

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~ the foundations of childhood ~

West of Alice Springs, last October, Bettye and I stopped to look at the ochre-pits where the Arrernte people had gathered their ceremonial ochre for generations. We walked in from the road. The experienced world amazes, always... And this is sacred country. After marvelling awhile at the vertical striations of rich and varied colour in the stream bank, we decided to go on, up the track towards the ridge and its eventual juncture with the famed Larapinta Trail.

Walking along the stony creek bed, Bettye suddenly paused and exclaimed, "This is why I love the wilderness! It's so enlivening to walk on these stones..." Bettye has a wonderful smile, and it radiated at this moment across the space between us. We walked on in silence, making our way up towards the ridge. There's a deep well of attention, which envelops me sometimes when I'm realising something. *Thinking the body-senses...*

This is ankle-turning country, this must be snake country, I think, and I'm all alert. Sensing... Seeing and hearing, of course, but these are less important at the moment. Rather, I am living especially in the 'body senses' of *touch, life, movement, balance...* Underfoot, the stones keep my attention held there — we feel our way along the track — even my eyes are fingering the terrain, while my feet are sensing the securely embedded stone, the stone that slips and slides, the stone that's wedged amongst the others... Thus we *touch* our way onward...

Bettye had already mentioned the revelation in her of the sense of *life* — that sense of well-being that opens awareness to the inner condition of the body. "It's so enlivening to walk on these stones." It's true. A walk along a city street is much more tiring than this. We sense the body's health in the wilderness — that it is hale and hearty.

Then there is movement and also the sense of *movement*. Without this sense we would be unable to experience and monitor our own body's movements. Contemporary science refers here to proprioceptive awareness. Walking along that creek bed, climbing that track to the ridge, I am more self-aware of being in movement than when walking on a flat path.

And of course there's the sense of *balance*. Couldn't manage without it, clambering along that stony creek bed. The deep relationship between movement and balance suddenly becomes clear to me. Walking as the balance between impetus and the ability to pause — impelled out of balance, then catching oneself... Freedom is experienced in the poise between impulse and constraint.

I stand and sense my feet on the stones, noticing the dynamic relationship between ball and heel, side and arch. Touch, life, movement, balance — and the essential experiences gained through these senses on the trail towards being embodied — yes, to sense the wonder of this

particular homecoming. Of entering the home of the body. This body within the home of the world.

As I walk on, I'm thinking of Ghilgai, the Steiner school where I work. Of the playground, and its uneven terrain... Of the steps, varied, unpredictable. Perhaps it's a happy pedagogical accident that the drought, and then the rains, have eroded the Hill, as we call it. The children are truly being educated in their body senses as they run about at playtime. Maybe I can relinquish my vain dream of seeing it levelled off and made 'safe'... So much of our learning is incidental. It occurs through these incidents and instances of a good experience of being alive, registered through these body senses in which we are mostly unconscious.

These are the senses that enable us to know our place — in the body, in the world. They are sometimes called the 'lower' or 'inner' senses. We could call them the senses of orientation. The task in the early years of childhood is to exercise them, to live into the body through them, to know ourselves at home there. If we reflect for a moment on the lives that are lived by so many children in our society — lives spent indoors, or when outside on smooth lawns and even paths, inside cars, in front of flat screens, touching undifferentiated substances — then we will begin to recognise a childhood at risk.

Our senses are the doors and windows and gateways through which our experiences come to us — passages across two thresholds: inward, into our embodied self, and outward, towards the world and the other. Until about the age of 4½, these windows and doorways and gates stand wide open, and everything floods into the little child. Just recall your experience of being 'driven' around, blind... [At the beginning of this talk, participants were invited to find a partner and then submit to being pushed around the room with their eyes closed]. And now consider the baby or toddler being thrust at the world in a pusher, or in one of those chest harnesses that face them outward... When you imagine what it must be like being pushed through crowds of legs in a shopping mall, or at car exhaust level across the street, then 'pusher' is exactly the right word! These impressions from the outer world can overwhelm the inward encounters upon which the self is founded. My first comment therefore about the nurture of the senses is that childhood must be protected.

Children only gradually learn to filter their sense impressions. They shut off, or are shut off, by sensory assaults. There is much evidence that the senses are dulled by the 'full-on' nature of our contemporary world. Neurological science confirms Rudolf Steiner's early intuitions — the neuron pathways and networks are formed in children's brains through their sensory experiences and how they learn to integrate them through creative play. It is in this early phase of life that children establish the beginnings of the three primary relationships with which we are concerned throughout life — with oneself, with the other, and with the world as a whole. So clear, healthy senses are critical.

No one today thinks only of five traditional senses (sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch) — we all recognise the sense of balance as an authentic sense, and a number of others are now considered; for instance, temperature, the kinaesthetic sense (usually called *proprioception*), pain, and a number of internal or *interoceptive* senses that register the inner condition of the body (eg stretch receptors). Amidst the ongoing debate about what actually constitutes a

sense organ, I find it's useful to consider Rudolf Steiner's description of the senses. Early last century, he had identified ten, and ultimately twelve senses. Let's list them here:

touch
life/well-being
movement
balance
smell
taste
sight
temperature/warmth
hearing
language
thought/concept
ego

We easily recognise the commonly-known senses. We might readily accept that the *movement sense* corresponds to proprioception — and we also might be willing to connect the so-called interoceptive senses with the sense of *life/well-being*. Pain also is perceptible via this sense. Then we come to a halt with the senses of *language*, *thought*, and *ego*. Senses? What do we mean by this? Tonight I don't want to spend too much time discussing it, as our intention is to focus on something else, but I feel it's important to grasp the overall picture first before concentrating on particular aspects... So — let's just briefly sketch them...

The *sense for language* can be understood as being present within yet distinct from the *sense of hearing*. Via the latter we perceive sound — natural and artificial sounds and tones, including music, and also the acoustic element of words. Through the sense for language however we perceive the articulated form of words in succession — we recognise a language is being spoken rather than gibberish even though we do not understand it. However, to grasp what words actually mean, we need a *thought* or *conceptual sense*; we perceive ideas and concepts through this sense, just as we perceive light through eyesight. Similarly, we perceive another person as a self, as an ego — not simply as an object — via an *ego-sense*. We can begin to distinguish this perception from our basic visual, aural, or tactile awareness of the other by recognising that we sense someone even if he or she is invisible and silent behind us.

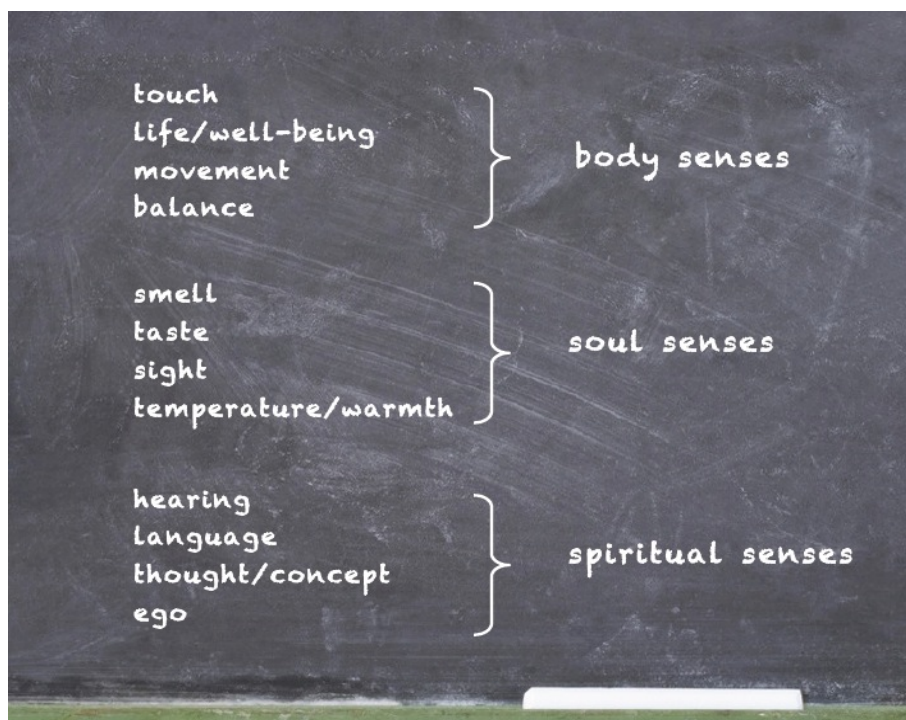
That's a quick, maybe inadequate sketch, which at least suggests that we can justify looking at these particular senses in such a way — and it is all I propose to say about them tonight, apart from the following observation in relation to the twelve senses as a whole. We can distinguish three groupings, connected to our threefold understanding of the human being. The senses we have just considered could be called *spiritual* or *cultural senses*, as each one is concerned with registering subtle, essentially non-physical elements in our lives. We include hearing in this regard, as it enables us to discern not just noise but the qualitative differences between sounds. Sometimes these four senses are called *higher senses*, but this may imply a

value judgment — that somehow they are superior. This isn't helpful, although clearly they have to do with 'higher' functions — we *could* perhaps call them *social senses*. Because they are not our focus tonight, I'll write them down here at the foot of the blackboard...

Then we can group together the four *middle senses* — I mean by this that they are strongly 'mediating' senses, relating outer perceptions to inner experiences. Just consider how, in addition to physical sensations, we ascribe emotional meanings to *smell*, *taste*, *sight*, and *warmth* — we 'smell a rat', or feel it's 'fishy business'; we refer to someone's 'sense of taste' or 'tastelessness' in relation to style or manners; we can 'see through' someone, we know that 'seeing is believing'; and we can either 'warm to the possibilities' or are 'left cold'. Because of this strong associative nature, we can call these pivotal senses the *soul senses*.

Now, we come back to the senses I highlighted anecdotally at the beginning of this talk — *touch*, *life*, *movement*, and *balance*. I've already called them the *body senses*, although often they are referred to as the *lower senses*. Sometimes they are also called the *physical senses*. They are in essence *foundational senses*. I want to talk about them and their fundamental importance, in detail, and also about how they can be damaged, and how they can be nurtured.

For all the senses can be damaged — for instance, we are to some degree concerned for the protection of our eyes and ears these days, but not sufficiently, and not in every aspect. Our other senses are also subject to abuse. The consequent damage goes in two directions — sensory overload, and sensory deprivation. We see this in our schools — children who are either too open, or too closed. Too awake, or too sleepy... Hyper-vigilant, or disengaged... But if we recognise that it is essentially through our senses that we know anything about ourselves or the world and the relations between the two, then we will readily conclude how important each of these senses are, and we will want to care for them. And the four body senses are the foundations — through them we anchor ourselves in our bodies.



Let's just pause for a moment and reflect... You might already understand the connection of this way of grouping the twelve senses with the predominant character of child development in the early years, in the primary school years, and in the secondary school years. Yes, that connection is real. You might just talk with your neighbour about this for a few moments, or about any other aspect of my presentation so far...

Now, before we go on, an advertising break! The theme of the final issue of my parenting journal { *parent-theses* } was the *Four Body Senses*, and you will find several interesting articles which cover various aspects of what I will say here. The journal, which is free, can be downloaded from my website www.johnallison.com.au, and you will also find other issues of the journal, some articles and lecture transcripts which may be of interest to you.

Let's first consider the sense of *touch*. It's an obvious sense, we would say — and yet its operations are mysterious. Think what it means to be 'touched', physically or emotionally. We say 'keep in touch' — this is such a marvellous phrase! Being touched is such a life-affirmative experience, when it is good. There is research that suggests that premature babies in incubators will gain body weight more rapidly if they are periodically, tenderly caressed. In one instance, elderly patients in a hospital were allowed to regularly stroke 'prem' babies — both the babies and their elderly care-givers thrived. Conversely, recent research in New Zealand has revealed that many young people felt unloved, un-affirmed in their existence, because their teachers were bound by regulations which ruled out informal contacts and touching in the classroom. And Dr Jeff Green, in an article printed in { *parent-theses* }, quotes from the movie *Crash*: "We don't touch, in this city we are so separate ... that the only way we touch is when we crash into one another..." We can also note the hyper-sensitivity to touch in those who are on the autism spectrum.

Clearly, there is wrongful touching — this is experienced as a violation of the self and one's self-worth. Rightful touch, however, confirms being.

Research reveals the extraordinary sensitivity to touch found in babies and children. Touch is registered through what are called Meissner's corpuscles, or tactile corpuscles, located in the skin. A three year old has 80 of these corpuscles per square millimetre, whereas a young adult has just 20. An elderly person has only 4 Meissner's corpuscles per square millimetre! A similar decrease in sensory receptivity is apparent in all our senses as we age, but it is most obvious in this particularly physical sense. It confirms the extreme sensitivity, and therefore vulnerability, of the baby and toddler. They respond to delicate touch, while rough touch is an assault.

In summary, think how fundamental this sense is... We know our boundaries via touch — what is the self and what is not-self. Without this experience, we would not come to know ourselves as individuals, separate from the world. The baby keeps bumping into things. It will be with the help of the other senses that he or she will learn to negotiate the terrain less painfully. But the sense of touch causes the baby to wake up. Ouch! In essence it is an inward sense. It tells us about the edges of ourselves, that we are separate beings. Yet, developing through life, in refining our experiences of touching another person, in moments of intimacy we also seem to divine a profoundly spiritual dimension.

Our inner physical condition is monitored via the sense of *life*. The other day, going about my business, I noticed I was feeling particularly well. It was a pleasure to feel thus. Coming to the end of the day, I was tired but not exhausted. Then, I must have eaten something that disagreed with me, and during the evening I felt most uncomfortable. We all know these sensations, and we can recognise how this life sense — I think it is a useful collective name for what contemporary science calls the various *interoceptive* senses — registers so accurately the condition of the body, the state of our bodily constitution.

Think of the marathon runner. Notice how the primary sense of sight seems to be utterly unimportant — the runner is not looking around at the scenery! Instead, all attention is turned inward, constantly monitoring the inner condition of the body through the sense of life. I must emphasize it is about life, not about pleasure and pain, which are the feeling soul's responses to sensations of well-being or ill-being. We have an awareness of being in a living stream of time, that to everything there is a season, that life has its rhythms and patterns and flow — through the sense of life, this sense for well-being, we monitor our health. We then attach to these perceptions our feelings of abundance or depletion, of pleasure or pain.

The little child responds directly to the perceptions of this sense — wailing or gurgling, the baby tells us quite clearly if all is well or not. The difficulty for a caring parent arises because this awareness is generalised at first, simply pervading the whole being, and there is no sophistication of language to differentiate what is actually happening, and where. Learning to interpret the child's reactions to its life-perceptions is a real challenge...

What we will discover if we are attentive to the child is the value of regularity and rhythm to this sense of well-being — eating well, sleeping well, working well, playing well... Living well. Gradually, through refined life-perceptions, the human being becomes able to imagine, and then perceive that he or she has a body of life-forces. We learn self-preservation, which forms the basis not only for the health of the body, but also for the heart and mind.

Now, observe the fulfilment and satisfaction of the small child getting on the move — I think the effort and focus expended on learning to stand up and walk exceeds all other labour throughout our lives... Desire motivates movement, but it is through a sense for *movement* — proprioception — that the child observes its ability to move, learning to estimate effort and impetus, ultimately to accomplish arrival at a chosen destination.

Remarkably, contemporary research in micro-photography confirms Steiner's assertion that it is the sense for movement, more than simply the sense of sight, through which we identify forms and shapes. The cones at the back of the eye register colour, but through myriad fine movements of the muscles around the eye in tracing out the shape of things, we discern outlines. When we read, therefore, we literally re-write the text through a combined activity of sight and movement. No wonder the muscles around the eye feel tired after a prolonged stint of reading! And when optometrists observe that the eye and this process of fine motor activity only mature around the age of 6½, we have ample justification for delaying formal learning based on reading.

The health of this sense is strengthened when the child can perceive the accomplishments that come through its own efforts, through achieving goals. The self is steadied and anchored

through being embedded in the body's self-movement. Walkers and bouncinettes, however, tend to create a disconnection between self-movement and the perception of movement. To do, and to perceive one's doing... I believe this is at the centre of our emancipation from gravity and helplessness. We find our way out into the world. Movement leads the child towards its destiny. This experience in self-movement, and realising it, arouses in the child a feeling of freedom, which then matures into consciousness of freedom, and ultimately, the possibility of accomplishing it.

The sense of *balance* and the sense for movement are intimately connected. Think of the child learning to stand and walk... Imagine being able only to career about — you would be lost. Movement and balance then are about losing and catching oneself.

Therefore, it is about self-possession. It is about establishing a stable standpoint, which is thus also a viewpoint. The sense of balance is physically located in the semi-circular canals in the inner ear — three beautiful structures are set at right angles to each other, and in function they are like a builder's spirit level. I think they are indeed the basis for a person's *spirit level*. A rational point of view requires both movement and balance. We establish our perspective and equilibrium through being able to stand and walk, and pause, poised. Our rationality and sanity are based on being well-anchored in the body senses. Our uprightness therefore is the structure for the experience of being an ego — an *I Am*.

That is a bold assertion. Yet I think it is true, and I invite you to reflect upon it. Consider now for a moment how alcohol affects these body senses. An initial experience of a little alcohol can be quite pleasant, a loosening of a maybe too-tight connection to one's body. But if we drink to excess, these body senses are profoundly affected. Our awareness of boundaries is diminished — the sense of touch is desensitised, and physical touching then easily becomes inappropriate. We are in fact no longer 'in touch'. Our sense of life and well-being tells us about the poisoning of the body — we feel dreadful. We seem to be reeling about. We lose the ability to observe and regulate the body's movements, and the sense of balance is also severely impaired. We stagger, lose balance, and fall.

At this point we have lost our essential humanity.

Now contrast this with what I told you of Bettye's and my experience in the country west of Alice Springs. "This is why I love the wilderness! It's so enlivening to walk on these stones..." Bettye exclaimed. And so it is.

On reflection, we can now call these the *will senses*. We recognise how essential they are in the business of learning through doing things, which is the special domain of the pre-school child. As parents and teachers, we will want to ensure that the child has manifold opportunities to thrive through the healthy exercise of these senses. Now, in the normal run of things, we do not have to consider stimulating the senses. It is not so much a matter of *quantity* — most children have more than enough stimulation — but rather the *quality* of the sensory impressions that will be most beneficial. In order to be less abstract, let's describe the life of a young child, let's say a boy called Joseph — to avoid some trouble with pronouns — and consider how his body senses are best nurtured...

Joseph has been lovingly held, cuddled and caressed from the earliest time. He is affirmed in all his experiences through touch — in being fed, in being changed, in being laid down to sleep and in being picked up, touch reassures him that all is well. As he grows towards the world, exploring and playing, he encounters a great variety of natural objects, or objects made of natural materials, everywhere in his play environment. His parents, convinced that plastics feel remarkably homogenous to touch, limit them. Natural objects, such as different kinds of stones, seeds, shells, beads, and wooden objects, and fibres such as wool, cotton, or silk, all with their distinct character, are their preferred choice. For the little child, they seem to *invite* touch, whereas plastics seem more or less indifferent.

His parents are watchful yet enabling whenever Joseph is outside. He discovers the manifold natural world of things and events. There is real risk out there, but he is always supported through a warm loving authority that administers the boundaries. His parents play with him, encouraging contact — gently pressing towards the limits, consoling him if he is hurt, while gradually letting him become more adventurous.

Knowing the importance of self-touching in becoming self-aware, they teach him simple finger rhymes (for instance, ‘incy-wincy spider climbing up the spout’). They do not become unduly anxious when his touching includes his penis. As a baby he was not ticklish, but as Joseph grows into the heartland of this first developmental period, he becomes so, and this gives rise to an intimacy that is fun because his parents never torment him with it. (By the way, it’s an interesting fact that we cannot self-tickle — we must engage in a relationship.)

Joseph is fascinated by practical adult work. He loves to handle his father’s workshop tools, or the garden tools. He emulates his parents in work. He wants to bake when baking is being done, he wants to saw and hammer when carpentry is happening... He is busy with the world and the activities that take place in the world. All his senses are in fact involved in the world of work.

It is more particularly his mother who in his infancy has nurtured Joseph’s sense of life. She has fed him and nursed him, bathed and changed him, and been involved with his everyday care more than his father has. She has gradually established a regular pattern of sleep and rest, slowly introduced solid foods at regulated mealtimes — wherever possible feeding him only biodynamic or organic products — and generally has him around her throughout the day. She recognises that child-care, while supportive of her autonomy, wearies him, and so she has decided to wait until he is a little older, and even then she will keep the periods of absence short. She also notices that Joseph is worn out by the end of their weekly shopping trip, and so she makes sure it is followed by a restful time together.

On those trips, he already clamours for sweets at the check-out counter, but only very rarely is he indulged, and never in that moment of demanding attention. She wants him to develop patience in anticipation, so he has to wait ‘till later’. Often Joseph forgets later... She ensures he has a healthy, balanced diet that suits his developing constitution. Eating is embedded in the rhythmical, ordered daily round — they never eat food on the move, and there is always a moment of gratitude. His parents know that even in the pre-verbal stage, the language of intent and acknowledgment is important. They also believe language is an environmental influence that needs to be moderated in his presence.

Both parents stopped smoking when Joseph was conceived, and they try to be mindful of other environmentally-adverse practices. Television is one thing they've definitely decided against. If you reflect again on these four body senses, you can readily see why. When asked whether they are doing too much, they laugh and say that they've now discovered that the quality of their own lives has improved... Parenting, for them, has become a *life-style*.

Walking and playing in nature is a part of each day whenever it is fine. Joseph is properly dressed for the weather. He experiences repetition and variation, sometimes taking the same walk daily, sometimes venturing elsewhere. His parents point out birds and butterflies and flowers as they walk with him. His life seems full of humour, delight, and gentle surprise...

Joseph is always on the move. He loves all kinds of simple creative play and games. His play is intent. Sometimes he expresses rage when unable to accomplish something, as if an adult consciousness is trapped inside his child's body. But he generally perseveres at tasks. His parents know that resilience develops from falling and recovering, failing and recovering, so they never placate him... Amongst the games, 'Peekaboo!' was a simple early favourite — sometimes he surprised himself when he slapped his hands across his eyes, hurting himself. But usually he recovers quickly and continues playing. And he is becoming more capable.

It is often his father who plays the more vigorous games with Joseph. He loves being picked up and tossed in the air and caught again. He loves adventuring and facing challenges. Physical activities requiring judgment, such as walking over stepping-stones, are more frequently wanted, even demanded. Perhaps it is due to the steady, rhythmical shape imparted to his days that he can sustain himself for increasingly long periods of time.

All kinds of self-engendered movement seem enjoyable. The experience of garden paths and bush tracks, of uneven terrain, of any opportunities to walk and run and climb and roll and tumble...

Already before Joseph was born, his parents had decided that his arrival was an opportunity to create greater balance in their own lives. They both had been absorbed in their careers, to the extent that there was a kind of nervous intensity in their lives. In changing this, they may not have realised how beneficial this would be for their son's life.

Rhythm and predictability as stable elements within change, and the experience of change as non-frightening variation, seem to have developed in Joseph a marvellous feeling of security. The world has its seasons, and so does life. They believe this patterning of existence will lead to self-composure in all kinds of life experiences, just as their changes have already done for them. They have a more simple view of life now, where previously there were complications — with this, they have found a way into proportionate humour and seriousness. Balance. Life is as it is... Funny, and grave. Complex, but it does not need to be complicated. They are learning with him.

Watching their boy learning to crawl, then getting up onto his feet and walking, has brought many moments of enjoyment and concern. Grazes and bruises, outraged cries of frustration and squeals of delight... He has banged into every stick of furniture, fallen down every step, and he's survived. Now, in gradually gaining balance, in learning to catch himself, as it were,

Joseph has greater assurance in his movement. His hands, initially essential for that tottering balancing act, are free for other things. He carries toys joyfully from place to place, solemnly arranges objects on the coffee table, is busy with the pots and pans in the kitchen...

Perhaps the greatest advance due to movement and balance is this freeing of the hands for creative activity. Joseph works at his play, and his mind observes his playing. He now enjoys stories of deeds, which will later become stories narrating steadfastness amidst turbulent change. This steadfastness is at the core of his parents' relationship. They quarrel, for they are human, but they try to avoid it when they are with him. They are not perfect, but they are committed to the journey together. They are committed to accompanying their son towards the world he will inherit. Touch, life, movement, balance... These are qualities instilled into the family, and their origins and organs are in the body senses.

Joseph could be your child. Perhaps he is...

In coming towards a conclusion, let's summarise some of the essential points I've tried to establish regarding these body senses. In some regards, it is just a way of saying the same thing yet again though slightly differently...

The *Sense of Touch* confirms our boundaries and allows us to sense many aspects of safety. We come to know ourselves. Amongst the qualities experienced through touch, we can find security and trust in the physical world, which establishes a base from which we can look out into our environment; and also security and trust in the social world, through which we are affirmed in our being and enabled to confidently engage with others. Thus, secure in body and soul, secure in our relating, we look trustingly towards life, perhaps even sensing the divine ordering of events.

The *Sense of Life* acts as a warning system for our inner condition — it also grants us feelings of well-being, that "all is right with the world and with myself"... We may then experience the whole of existence as a harmonious interconnected entity, for which we feel wonder and reverence. Supported by our well-being and aliveness, we knit together out of our digested experiences a capacity for resilience that enables us to grow through adversity.

The *Sense of Movement* is healthily responsive to all purposeful activity. As an inward sense it enables us to monitor the body's movement, and together with the sense of balance grants an awareness of statics and dynamics. In the young child the sense of movement is deeply connected with the desire for movement through which a child learns to stand up and walk, and to initiate activity. This leads towards a feeling for freedom which matures into a search for freedom.

The *Sense of Balance* enables us to experience outer and inner equilibrium; through it we find our orientation between the polarities — between impetus and poise, tension and release, concentration and relaxation, activity and reflection... In other words, we gain a developed sense for the middle ground, a sense of appropriateness, a measure for ourselves, for others, for the world. This is essential as a basis for all judgment — first in the physical world, and then in the social world.



This presentation tonight has been by no means comprehensive, but I've sought to indicate a range of possible approaches to the nurturing of the body senses. I would like to add here that as a moral basis for engagement with children, especially in their first years, the quality of enacted *goodness* supports each and all of these senses in their development. The child needs to experience the world as good.

Bearing that in mind, conduct an experiment: go for a walk in a wilderness area, or along a forest trail, or in a park... But do not walk on beautifully-formed paths — experience your engagement through the body-senses of touch, life, movement, and balance.

You might then choose to walk in an area sealed and bound by tar and cement. Is there a difference? Certainly there is stimulus in the city — it can be very exciting, but it also is exhausting. It is captivating. The soul is sold to sensory attractions projected by all those who want to enslave your desires, to own your pockets...

One evening recently I watched a little child walking through long grass across a hillside at the Hamer Arboretum near our home in the Dandenong Ranges. Her mother encouraged her, and occasionally helped her, but did not deprive her of the task — that wondrous task of making one's way in the world. Her joy seemed so obviously the result of her immediate sensory experiences. I thought about touch, life, movement, balance... And then I saw her older sister, standing still, looking and listening, seeing the wild flight of the cockatoos and their cacophony, enjoying the deep warmth of the sunshine and exclaiming at the wafting fragrance from the larches... But that is another story, one belonging to an older child and to the particular senses that awaken so strongly at that later stage.

My attention returned to the younger child, making her way resolutely into the world. I saw Bettye watching also, smiling that smile, her eyes shining, loving her life-work with mothers

and babies. It is so worthwhile. After you conclude your experiment, decide that your child's birthright is to make his or her way, supported in a wholesome, encouraging way, into life. Nurture the senses — for they are the doors, the windows, the gateways, those thresholds through which the soul enters the world.

Here, to complete our journey this evening, is a poem by Judith Wright. While it states it is about the traditional five senses, it provides a fitting coda to our theme:

Now my five senses
gather into a meaning
all acts, all presences;
and as a lily gathers
the elements together,
in me this dark and shining,
that stillness and that moving,
these shapes that spring from nothing,
become a rhythm that dances,
a pure design.

While I'm in my five senses
they send me spinning
all sounds and silences,
all shape and colour
as thread for that weaver,
whose web within me growing
follows beyond my knowing
some pattern sprung from nothing—
a rhythm that dances
and is not mine.

Note: this talk was given 3 days before the passing of Bettye Palmer, director of the Gabriel Centre. We had worked together on this theme during the previous year. Some aspects were earlier presented to parents at the Alice Springs Steiner School in late October 2010, and later to parents at the Ballarat Steiner School in August 2011. The first section has been developed from the editorial of the final issue of *{ parent-theses }*.