

YOU FILL UP MY SENSES

God and Our Senses

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YOU FILL UP MY SENSES', the first line of 'Annie's song' by John Denver, came to mind when I began to write this essay. It suggests much about contemporary sensuous religious experience which unabashedly celebrates the body/mind/spirit unity that we are and which recognizes the positive role of the senses. The beguine, Mechtild of Magdeburg, describes a similar unity in her mystical experience. She asserts: 'The day of my spiritual awakening was the day I saw and knew I saw all things in God and God in all things'.¹ Likewise she taught: 'How does God come to us? Like dew on the flowers, like the song of the birds! Yes, God gives himself with all creatures wholly to me.'² Finally, she claims her body shares in the mystical experience: 'As love grows and expands in the soul, it rises eagerly to God and overflows towards the Glory which bends towards it. Then Love melts through the soul into the senses, so that the body too might share in it, for love is drawn into all things.'³

Spiritual traditions in both the East and the West have developed various strategies which enlist our psycho-physical reality as a partner in seeking transcendence and as a profound mediation of spirit itself. The most fundamental bodily rhythms of pulse, breath, waking and sleeping, walking and sitting still have all been combined with various types of sensory awareness and concentration focused on either internal or external sensing through the traditional five senses.⁴ Eastern methods of meditation practice have preserved centuries of teachings about these physical processes in more accessible ways than in the western Christian tradition. Similar processes, however, are buried throughout classical Christian texts in rudimentary or suggestive forms⁵ and in the experience of women mystics who practised embodied spiritualities throughout the Middle Ages.⁶ The Ignatian tradition is the most widely known example of spiritual practices which incorporate the inner and outer senses in prayer.

Return to the body is replacing flight from it, and appreciation for all forms of embodiment is rapidly becoming a hallmark of postmodern spirituality.⁷ A profound healing of the dismemberment of the western mind and psyche from its physical body, social body and earth body

appears to be a 'sign of our times'. Within Christianity we are witnessing a re-emphasis on and recovery of a fully incarnational spirituality, one which is dependent on new understandings of the relationship of the human to the entire cosmos and the inherent sacramentality of the earth which is our home.⁸ Contemporary spiritual experience is both harbinger of and response to these shifts in self-understanding. In this essay, I wish to include fully sensuous experience, our capacity for expanding it in imagination which bridges body and spirit, and the bodily and image-rich overflow of spirit which makes itself felt in our embodied consciousness.

Ignatian tradition

Within the Ignatian tradition, a strong emphasis on the interior senses remained both in the practice of imaginative contemplation and in the more passive and mystical 'application of the senses'. The three distinctive levels of this latter process begin by sensitizing the physical senses to the mysteries of faith; then follows a more inward process rooted in the imaginal senses, and finally a yet more interior, graced movement from God in which the interior senses register union with the Word in the depths of the soul in a sacramental way. Through this sensitizing of the total self to divine reality which permeates both creation and the self, the senses both interior and exterior enable one to 'find all things in God'.⁹

Considerable confusion and divergent interpretations of Ignatius' teaching on these methods of prayer exist. Ignatius left only sketchy annotations about this prayer because he presumed everyone understood what he meant. The 'application of the senses' is rooted in a long patristic and medieval tradition which posited a theory of the 'spiritual senses' as the primary faculty through which people experience spiritual reality.¹⁰ The subsequent history of the Spiritual Exercises, however, suggests that the Society itself suppressed knowledge of this method after Ignatius' death by allowing its retreat directors and novice masters to teach only the composition of place and not the application of the senses.

Imaginative contemplation often does simplify and move into a more passive phase, but not necessarily. Imaginative prayer can remain a form of expressive, affective prayer on the level of consciously directed fantasy without yielding to the infused contemplation more likely to occur spontaneously in the greater passivity of the repetition.

During the repetition, the retreatant returns to the place of greatest consolation. The 'application of the senses' suggests an openness to

resting in a simple image of great power. It encourages cultivation of a desire to taste and touch divine reality which reverberates through the being of the retreatant. These sensory images are triggered by the divine touch and illumination, emerging spontaneously into consciousness from the depths rather than being initiated by the retreatant's creative imagination.

Sensuous religious experience

All consciousness eventually appears to require the language of the senses and the experienced history of sensuous life in order to communicate anything about itself at all. Our senses – and there are actually far more than five if we count all those related to balance, spatial location, proprioception and kinaesthesia – are the way we experience, remember, feel and respond to that to which we are present and conscious. Recent commentators on neurology, sensation and imaginal experience agree that internal imaginative events are no less real than are externally sensed events.

The inner world of image, color, and kinesthetic feeling is also more apparent when there is no outer stimulation. The sensory parts of the brain that operate during dreaming are different from the parts used in conscious awareness, but the sensations they give rise to are real. These inner tones, gestures, and colors have become familiar to the mystic, to the contemplative listener, and to creative people. The awareness is deeper and more powerful than thought; it is an acute sensing in an awakened, powerful internal space.¹¹

In the 'postscript' to her poetic *A natural history of the senses*, Diane Ackerman says about transcendent experience:

There is a point beyond which our senses cannot lead us. Ecstasy means being flung out of your usual self, but there is still a commotion inside. Mysticism transcends the here and now for loftier truths unexplainable in the strait-jacket of language; but such transcendence registers on the senses, too, as a rush of fire in the veins, a quivering in the chest, a quiet, fossil-like surrender in the bones. Out-of-body experiences aim to shed the senses, but they cannot. One may see from a new perspective, but it's still an experience of vision.¹²

The same writer makes the distinction between 'sensuist' experience and 'sensual' experience. For Ackerman, the sensuist 'is someone who rejoices in sensory experience. A sensualist is someone concerned with gratifying his sexual appetites.'¹³ Charles Davis, one of the most brilliant religious commentators on sensory experience as religious experience, made a similar distinction. He contrasted sensuousness with sensuality:

Sensuousness accompanies a sacramental, mystical view of the world, in which the body and physical nature are mediatory of the spirit, whereas sensuality implies a destruction of the mediatory, symbolic character of the physical world and the reduction of that world to pure physicality . . . Sensuousness is when we participate in the spontaneous rhythms and responses of the body and are open to the joys and delights, the pain, suffering, and stress of bodily experience. It implies an ability to relax . . . Sensuality, in contrast, is what happens when the body is driven by the mind and used as an instrument of pleasure.¹⁴

Both writers, using slightly different language, recognize two quite different kinds of relationships to bodiliness and this earthly home we share with other creatures. We can live in celebrational gratitude, reverence and awe, rejoicing in the sensory revelation of the divine mystery disclosed in and through the mystery that is ourselves and our world. Or we can wilfully exploit and plunder the earth and its creatures, deaden our feeling responses, drive our bodies for pleasure or enslave them in punitive disciplines required by the gods of our over-achieving, over-consuming cultures. Most of us are perhaps a mixture of these two attitudes. For those who do experience God in the senses, however, the world of sense is multivalent.

Western cultures at the present time are in a process of healing the body/mind/spirit split. We are re-educating our senses and imagination in the service of fully embodied religious experience. According to Davis, this requires a new asceticism, new spiritual exercises, that restore to us the full range of human experiencing. Theologically, it embraces the 'sacramental principle', which Susan Ross describes as affirming 'that all of created reality reveals God. And because God has chosen to live with humanity in the flesh, all of human life has been transformed.'¹⁵ What might this mean? How does God fill up our senses?

Return to the senses

Most of us need to relearn how to experience our world in all of its richness, beauty, and even terror. Our reliance on mechanistic science, our modes of thought based on reading print, our more recent dependence on computer technology, and our preference for abstract thinking have dramatically detached us from immediate sensory awareness and experiencing. Although some people continue to maintain a preference for thinking in images or learning interactively with the environment, our educational systems largely do not cultivate these equally human and valuable ways of knowing and perceiving. Ask any visual artist or dancer what their experience was like in school. Although our

senses are greatly extended by instruments, such as microscopes, telescopes, ultrasound imaging and magnetic resonance imaging, we are largely oblivious to our sensing in ordinary life. And we are even more unaware of the psychic extension of this sensing.

As Charles Davis suggests, when we relax and let go of our 'time urgency' and 'driven' habits of pushing ourselves by ignoring the messages we are constantly receiving from the body, something else happens. We become actually present to ourselves. We arrive in our physical selves in a way that many only experience toward the end of vacation or during retreat. When we become present to and respectful of our bodily knowing and sensing, we become available for relationship with everything that is, including God. For many this requires slowing down the pace of life. Often this change of rhythm happens in becoming aware of nature when sensory attention opens on every level. We hear the patterns of natural sounds: bird songs, flowing water, wind in the grasses or leaves; we smell scents different from those in cities; we taste the air, berries along the path or an orange from a knapsack; we feel the unpaved earth beneath our feet, the sand between our toes, the subtle energy of a tree trunk supporting our back or the earth cradling our body; and we see the landscape open out or close in, colour and shade, plants and flowers, insects and animals, clouds and sky.

But our sensory experience is not limited to moments of solitude or shared times with others in beautiful natural settings. Even more clearly patterned in our sensory awareness are experiences closer to home – foods we taste and smell and associate with particular occasions; the feel of water in the shower or a scented soak in the tub; the refreshment of a drink of cold water on a warm day; the aroma of coffee which entices us out of bed; the smells and taste and touch of a lover; the touches and smells of any special relationship, cradling a baby, nursing an infant, embracing a friend, shaking hands with a colleague, comforting someone who is grieving, giving or receiving a massage.

Evoke the full range of internal sensing

When our sensing shifts from the external world to the interior realm of imagination, we do so on the basis of these remembered sensations. Placing ourselves in a gospel scene or in an imagined landscape draws on the personal history of our senses. Because we are so used to television, computers, cinema, radios and telephones, our habits of imagination tend to rely on the visual and auditory senses. Most of us need an invitation to evoke and notice the tactile, kinaesthetic, olfactory or taste sensations.

Diane Ackerman reports that smell is the oldest of our senses and more closely connected to memory than to language. This makes it hard to describe smells, yet a single scent can instantaneously release a flood of memories. In relationship to mystical experience, given through imagery, the senses of taste, touch and smell are the most intimate ones. In our external sensing they require physical contact. We must take in foods and process air through our nostrils in order both to taste and to smell. Touch is often combined with kinaesthetic senses of rocking, movement, muscular sensations in every form of intimate activity from giving birth to love-making. In the medieval philosophical tradition these were the senses most suspect, and they were neglected in favour of vision and audition, which do not require physical contact. Giles Milhaven makes the point that these preferences came largely from ascetic, male clerics who were far removed from the physical pleasures and contacts of familial life which every woman knew. Women tended to favour these more intimate senses in their mystical lives.

As a spiritual director, I have noticed the experience of God becomes more intimate when retreatants allow images to include touch or taste or sensation as well as vision. In John's Gospel, Jesus simply looks at Peter from a distance and that is enough to reduce him to tears, but at the last supper, Jesus washes the feet of the disciples, an act of touch which just about undid them. If these so-called 'lower' senses so easily evoke our earliest memories of care and our adult experiences of love, how much more are they required in the kind of mysticism fostered by the Spiritual Exercises, 'the mysticism of the historical event' as Ewert Cousins characterizes it?¹⁶ Imprinted in our memories of sense experience is a form of bodily knowing through which God often communicates and reveals Godself. This interior experience of God results in new and fresh images created from the storehouse of images accumulated throughout our entire history of internal and external sensation.

Contemporary descriptions

In my research with men and women whose spiritual directors judged that their religious experiences were consistently mediated through imagery, nature, symbols or sensation, I discovered an amazing variety of experiences of God in the senses. All of the people I interviewed described internal imagery of great variety. The vast majority described rich experiences in nature and with music. A good number also described bodily sensations which registered either their psychological and physical openness to God or a felt sense of God's presence to them or in them. Although some interviewees drew less on

internal imagery than on interpersonal events or experiences in nature, the majority also described the way that remembered places and experiences subsequently became incorporated in their imaged prayer. All of these people experienced three or more modes of meditation as frequent and important simultaneously.

One woman described the way prayer that occurred primarily in images and words led to an experience of God that was clearly experienced physically.

It would sometimes lead to another kind of experience. God's already present and then something would begin to intensify. I could feel it in my body [and] in the room. It's like some energy starting to gather and gather. I could feel something intensifying like sound when it comes from a distance. There would be a presentiment of God's presence. I'd be so overwhelmed by God's presence that was both wonderful and scary. I don't know what went on. I know I would sometimes feel so overwhelmed that I would kneel sometimes or just throw myself on the floor. I didn't know what else to do. The only thing that made any sense was to be face down to express in the body some inner posture of surrender. Being terrified, overwhelmed, thrilled and loved, at peace, all that at once. (F, S (div), 38)¹⁷

Another woman described very rich imaged prayer sequences which engaged multiple senses and in which the graces stayed with her for years. This example from a retreat also shows how the retreat director encouraged her to even greater intimacy.

I was very, very angry. I thought this is the desert that people have been talking about. I was yelling and screaming at God. And then I don't know how it happened, but in a prayer during that retreat, it was as though I was in a jungle. There was all this swamp. And the mud was human excrement, not just mud. It was my stuff. I was frightened and couldn't move. My heart was pounding, everything was happening. I tried to lean against a tree, and the tree moved because there was a snake around it. I was stuck there. Then out of the mud there was a dragon that was coming after me. It was getting closer and closer. (And see, Jesus has been away for years, like two or three years.) Jesus arrives just in the nick of time. There's a really big struggle with the dragon and they're twisting in the mud and they're getting all messy. And Jesus is able to take the dragon's mouth and snaps it, twisting the dragon's neck. But both of them go under and they didn't come back. They're gone. Now I'm crying and I can't move, I am so petrified. Then the jungle begins to dry up and the only thing that was left was the desert. So I was standing there and I wouldn't leave. And I was

crying. And at that moment the desert became a very holy place for me because I could see that was 'the combat of death' in the Easter sequence. I couldn't go away from there. Along came Jesus. I was looking over here and he comes the other way. And I looked at him and I didn't know what to say. He was caked in mud. And he had a streak that came from out of his ear, across his face like that. It was just awful. And the prayer session ended at that point.

I went to my director and he sent me back to pray and said, ask Jesus how you can minister to him. So I went back and said that. And Jesus said I want to have a bath. So I said oh, all right. So I go over and get the towels and soap, I bring it over, I'm ministering to Jesus. Then he takes them and all that and says, you know, you need a bath too. So he picks me up. And there was an oasis there and into the water we went. And I washed him and he washed me. It was really all right. (*crying*) So after that we just dried and rested. We ate a little bit and that was it. That was a real turning point in my relationship. (F, rel, 52)

Contemporary research verifies that vividly imaged sensations actually affect the physical body, often facilitating either healing or changes in patterns of muscular tension and a release of inhibition of movement.¹⁸ Conversely, patterns of physical movement and sensory perception stimulate the brain and neurological connections which facilitate internal imagery. It really does not matter whether experiences begin with external sensation or with internal imagery. The divine presence manifests itself both through symbolically transparent events or objects and through our internal imagery. In addition, experiences of God which do not appear to originate in either imagery or in the senses but which occur in the core of the spiritual self often overflow into a rich variety of images and sensations such as Mechtild, other mystics and contemporary people describe.

A vivid example of a sensuous experience opening to the divine self-communication came from a woman I interviewed in the preliminary stages of my study:

One morning, I was lying in my sleeping bag watching the light change and I kept thinking I had to get up and get to work. It was just so lovely because the shelter of the sleeping bag also became an image of God. I felt such warmth and safety in the sleeping bag. I felt I had to get up, get to work. I was fussing at myself and I heard, not a voice, but in my inner ear, 'Don't you know this is a gift?' And I decided somehow that this was indeed a gift and let myself enjoy it. (F, M, 62)

For this woman, who felt relatively unsuccessful at imaginative contemplation, it was quite typical that something she saw or felt in the outer world became an image for the way God was relating to her.

Mutual pleasure

God is apparently given pleasure by the variety of created forms which comprise the world we inhabit. The cosmos itself is the original sacrament of God's presence. The created universe discloses a sensuous God. Karl Rahner argued against a pure apophaticism which favours imageless mystical experience. He asserted that '[God] will one day reveal himself even to the pure mystic as the God of the transfigured earth because he is more than pure spirit'.¹⁹ At the very least, the historical fact of God's incarnation in Jesus suggests that God not only respects our embodied reality but perhaps wanted to experience its particular pleasure and pain. The mystical tradition consistently asserts that the incarnate Word or, as women so often found, the humanity of Christ, was accessible in a psycho-spiritual-physical process. They felt his body, tasted the food he offered, burned from his embrace. Could it be that God desires to give us pleasure as much as we want to give pleasure to God? This mutual pleasuring only occurs when we fully embrace ourselves not as angelic beings but as embodied spirits, whose senses God delights and fills up in the very process through which we become one spirit with the divine.

NOTES

¹ Sue Woodruff, *Meditations with Mechtild of Magdeburg* (Santa Fe: Bear and Company, 1982), p 42.

² *Ibid.*, p 36.

³ *Ibid.*, p 88.

⁴ Anthony de Mello has probably exerted the greatest practical influence in Ignatian circles through *Sadhana*, the first third of which presents practices of sensory awareness. William Johnston has done a similar thing for Zen; Dechanet for Christian Yoga; Abhishiktananda (Henri Le Saux) and John Main for the use of a mantra. Thich Nat Hahn, the Vietnamese peace activist, has gone beyond Zen practice, introducing a greater variety of mindfulness practices in a socially engaged Buddhism.

⁵ The *Praktikos* of Evagrius describes physical practices which evolved into the hesychastic tradition. The Eastern Orthodox tradition included Evagrius and amplified his fourth-century teaching in its later *Philokalia*. The Franciscan tradition taught a concrete devotionalism which used the way of the cross and representations of the nativity as ways of contemplating the mysteries of incarnation and redemption as well as vivid imaginative evocations of the episodes in the life of Christ. Monastic and Cistercian traditions emphasized an ordered rhythm of the day, long hours of vocal chanting, vigils and fasting, and monastic arts such as calligraphy and manuscript illumination. The Ignatian tradition adopted methods from a number of traditions, and the *Spiritual Exercises* themselves reflect concerns about posture, food, physical environment, emotional expression, imaginative contemplation and the application of the senses. The medieval tradition of woman visionaries was extraordinarily rich in bodily forms of knowing, physical manifestations of mystical experience, vivid sensual imagery and the use of devotional objects.

⁶ John Giles Milhaven, in *Hadewijch and her sisters: other ways of loving and knowing*, offers a phenomenological analysis of bodily, sensual knowing typical of female mystics and of women in familial experience. This was a fully mystical form of knowing that was neglected and devalued by the

masculine philosophical tradition. Caroline Bynum, in 'The female body and religious practice in the later Middle Ages' and other essays in *Fragmentation and redemption: essays on gender and the human body in medieval religion* (New York: Zone, 1992), describes with precision and detail 'the tendency of women to somatize religious experience and to give positive significance to bodily occurrences' (p 190). She claims that women developed a new literary genre of revelations whose purpose was 'to communicate and share a piety in which spiritual somatic experiences lie at the center' (p 191). 'Women's sense that Christ is body, received and perceived by body, is vividly reflected in a [vision by Marguerite of Oingt who] . . . saw herself as a withered tree, which suddenly flowered when inundated by a great river of water (representing Christ). She then saw, written on the flowering branches of her self, the names of the five senses: sight, hearing, taste, smell and touch. It is hard to imagine a more pointed way of indicating that the effect of experiencing Christ is to "turn on", so to speak, the bodily senses of the receiving mystic' (p 192).

⁷ See Joe Holland, 'A postmodern vision of spirituality and society' in David Griffin (ed), *Spirituality and society: postmodern visions* (Albany: SUNY, 1988).

⁸ See David Toolan, "'Nature is a Heraclitean fire": reflections on cosmology in an ecological age', *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* vol 23, no 5 (November 1991), and Andrew Dufner, 'The Ignatian Exercises and the new world view', *The Way Supplement* 76 (Spring 1993), pp 3-13.

⁹ Hugo Rahner, *Ignatius the theologian* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1964), pp 181-213. This treatment of the Application of the Senses is the best articulation of its phases.

¹⁰ See Karl Rahner, 'The "spiritual senses" according to Origen' and 'The doctrine of the "spiritual senses" in the Middle Ages', both in *Theological investigations* vol 16 (New York: Crossroad, 1979), pp 81-134. Ludolph of Saxony's *Life of Christ*, so influential on Ignatius, is clearly within the Franciscan tradition described by Rahner above, and the Franciscan Spaniard Francisco de Osuna, who influenced both Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, is one of a number who teach this process. See Laura Calvert, 'The exercise of recollection according to Osuna', *Journal of Religious Studies* 15 (1989), pp 52-69.

¹¹ Don G. Campbell, *The roar of silence: healing powers of breath, tone and music* (Wheaton, Illinois: Theosophical Society Publishing House, 1989), p 34.

¹² Diane Ackerman, *A natural history of the senses* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), p 301.

¹³ *Ibid.*, xviii.

¹⁴ Charles Davis, *Body as spirit: the nature of religious feeling* (New York: Seabury, 1976), p 42-43.

¹⁵ Susan A. Ross, 'God's embodiment and women: sacraments' in Catherine Mowry LaCugna (ed), *Freeing theology: the essentials of theology in feminist perspective* (San Francisco: Harper, 1993), p 186.

¹⁶ Ewert Cousins, 'Francis of Assisi: Christian mysticism at the crossroads' in Steven T. Katz (ed), *Mysticism and religious traditions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), p 166.

¹⁷ All of these interviewees gave written permission for use of their narratives in publications. The code indicates sex, marital status and age. Div=divorced, rel=religious.

¹⁸ See Jean Houston, *The possible human*, for descriptions of the kinaesthetic body and exercises developed from a variety of physical healing arts which reconnect and retrain the neurophysical patterns of experience and expand awareness (Los Angeles: Tarcher, 1982).

¹⁹ Karl Rahner, *Visions and prophecies* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1963), p 14, n 12.