

## Mary's Musings, thoughts on making a life...

### Come to Your Senses

*Sometimes, the most intimate conversations happen when you aren't looking ...*

When my children were babies, I loved to watch them learn about their worlds. Sometimes it made me cringe when their explorations involved smearing sweet potatoes in their hair or putting things they found on the bathroom floor (that I couldn't even see) into their mouths. I was amazed by how dexterous and useful their soft little feet were, how strong their chubby tummies were as they performed perfect curls while trying to sit up, and how much they loved being naked.

Babies are inherently and intensely sensual. They experience the world through their senses - without judgment, without censorship. Judgment and censor are learned as we "mature," taught to us by our families, schools, churches, and friends. As a result, most of us have lost our connection to our senses. We have learned to focus on and value the input of our rational minds over all else.

We can reawaken our senses. It is just a matter of tuning in.

Let me clarify. I am talking about rediscovering our senses as a way to add richness and depth and Technicolor® to our lives. I'm not talking about anything sexual here, although sex can be very sensual. The confusion between sensuality and sexuality has created a lot of grief. Many of us refrain from touching people we care about or we stop touching our children when they start to grow up or we even feel slightly ashamed when we indulge our desire for beauty because of this confusion. Sensuality does not

necessarily lead to sex and sex is not necessarily sensual.

I've been reading and re-reading the *Power of Now*, by Eckhart Tolle, for over a year. Tolle asserts (along with many other spiritual teachers) that the present moment is where all of life occurs. A common cliché that offers a similar message is "Yesterday is history, tomorrow is a mystery, today is a gift; that's why they call it the present." Our senses give us a ready-made path to the present moment. If you are ready for such a journey, if you would like to "come to your senses," read on.

- One of the fastest ways to bring your attention into the moment is to **become aware of your breathing**. Notice if the air entering your nostrils is warmer or cooler than the air leaving your nostrils. Is one side warmer or cooler than the other is? Does your breath travel all the way down to your abdomen? Are your inhalations the same length as your exhalations? Any time you feel tension, pause for a moment to notice your breath and its associated sensations. It will make a world of difference in how you move forward.
- Tomorrow morning, as you **take a shower**, pay attention. How does your skin respond to the warm water? Perhaps it prickles with goose bumps and flushes. Perhaps it relaxes and you find yourself sighing in response. What does the sound of the falling

water bring to mind? A stream? A rain storm? A locker room? What do you smell? Perhaps your sleep-drenched skin and the aroma of your soap and shampoo, co-mingled with the scent of shaving cream, brewing coffee, and hairspray.

Smell is an incredibly powerful sense. It can bypass cognitive understanding and take you directly to a memory or feeling. *Toujours Moi* (a perfume popular from years ago) invariably brings to mind my fourth birthday, opening a blanket made for me by my great grandmother. That box was filled with more than the blanket -- her signature scent wafted out of it, too. I never wanted to wash the blanket because I loved its smell and how real it made my great grandmother. My teeth still ache when I get a whiff of a certain medical soap combined with a certain after-shave. Three years in an orthodontist's office as a teenager with those particular scents created an indelibly imprint associated with having my braces tightened. Which smells have positive associations for you? You can choose to light a cinnamon-scented candle when you want to feel the intimacy of Sunday morning breakfasts in bed as a kid. Realize, too, that when you use calamine lotion on your child's poison ivy, you are creating a memory imprint for him or her.

Back to the shower: As few as one hundred years ago, it was a sign of incredible wealth to be able to bathe every day in hot water without spending a huge amount of time and effort getting the bath ready!

- **Treat yourself** to soaps, shampoos, and lotions that are a feast for your senses. Surround yourself with the

fragrance of peaches or herbs or mints. Massage your shampoo it into your scalp, just like your stylist does. Stimulate your skin with a washcloth, brush, loofah, or exfoliating salts or just enjoy the sensation of soap sliding over you. Luxuriate in and be present for this simple, daily ritual, instead of a million miles away, planning your day.

- **Choose clothes that feel good** against your skin and notice that they do. I shop as much by touch as by look. I walk through the store, touching things to see if I like how they feel - it's the first test anything I buy has to pass. I read once that the chorus girls of the Ziegfield Follies (elaborate Broadway productions from the early 1900's) wore only silk underwear because Mr. Ziegfield asserted that no one could wear silk panties without feeling gorgeous! Beautiful underwear is an affordable (and discreet) way to indulge your senses.
- Become aware of **what's happening outside** your window. Nature offers an ever-changing palette of beauty, color, shape, and texture 24 hours a day, seven days a week. In addition to listening to the Weather Channel or the morning news, step outside and take your first sip of coffee watching the birds, feeling the snowflakes, and smelling the earth.
- Now, **tune into the noise level** in your environment and make choices that nurture you. Turn off the TV(s) and allow silence to keep you company, even if only for 20 - 30 minutes a day. Open the windows to hear the birds and the breeze. Bring the sound of

water into your home or office with a fountain. Choose your music based on what you need in the moment - something loud and energetic when you are vacuuming, something mellow while you are working on a report, something soulful or even nothing at all while you are journaling, daydreaming, and so on.

(You might also make a mental note to listen to the lyrics. I'm often surprised by the messages I'm unconsciously internalizing as I sing along. This really hit home for me when I heard my nine year old and her friend belting out the lyrics to the Dixie Chicks song, "Goodbye, Earl." It's got a wonderful beat and catchy lyrics which offset a dark theme about an abusive husband. Here's a sample. "It didn't take them long to decide that Earl had to die. Goodbye, Earl. Those black-eyed peas? They tasted all right to me, Earl. You're feeling weak? Why don't you lay down and sleep, Earl? Ain't it dark wrapped up in that tarp, Earl?" Being aware of the lyrics doesn't mean to stop singing along, just to be conscious of the fact that these aren't your values, even though you like the melody.)

- If you only experiment with one suggestion from this list, try this one. **Drink in your loved ones** when you greet them. Too often, we only scan them, noting what is out of place or "wrong." So, we tell our husband that he needs a haircut, our daughter that her shirt is dirty, and our son that his face needs to be washed. Instead, try noticing (and commenting on, if you wish) the heart-shaped freckle on his cheek, the tendril of blond hair on her neck, the yellow flecks in his eyes

which can make them look green, depending on his mood. These observations, when truly taken in, can take your breath away and give you a strange, expansive feeling in your heart.

- You can **become a student** of all of the ways your loved ones (and friends and co-workers and relatives and . . .) communicate. Hear the sound of their voices as well as listening to their words. Observe their body language. Notice how they smell. Some people swear that they can tell when their kids are getting sick by how they smell!
- I once heard someone say that the most sensual thing she'd ever done was get fat. Our society is unkind to "fatness," so here's the best tip I know for anyone who wants to eat less or eat better. The next time you eat something, **eat with all of your senses**. Experience your food. Appreciate the vivid color and texture, the smell that makes your mouth water, the sound and the explosion of juice when you take a bite, and the sweet tang on your tongue. Use your fingers whenever possible or appropriate. Most importantly, just eat. Don't read. Don't watch TV. Don't plan your day. Focus only on what you are putting into your mouth. When you are present, a handful of chips or a few bites of chocolate hazelnut cheesecake are often just as satisfying as the entire serving.
- You can also **become a detective**. Our senses also provide clues about what we need, moment to moment. How many of us are guilty of ignoring our

need to go to the bathroom, trying to get one more thing finished before we take the two minutes necessary to answer our body's call? Or, overriding our headache until it becomes full blown? Or refusing to slow down for a day when our throats are scratchy and our sinuses feel full, so that we are out for a week with a nasty cold? If we persist in ignoring the smaller signals, our bodies have ways of making us pay attention!

Awakening our senses brings so many benefits. In addition to the obvious ones of becoming more aware of the world (outside and within us) and being more in the present moment, our senses can help us make better decisions. When we tune in to the environment, the people involved and what they are communicating (verbally and non-verbally), plus our own gut reactions, we have much more information to assist us in choosing what to do next.

So, if after reading this article, what you choose to do next is to become more sensual, then take a moment now to circle the suggestions you will experiment with for the next week. Reading about something is good. Acting on it is better.

Now, put down this newspaper and take a breath. Notice that fall is upon us. Revel in the changing landscape. Relish the crisp air and the crunch of leaves as you walk from your car into your workplace. Experience the caress of your favorite flannel shirt. Savor some apple pie fresh from the oven (your own or Sara Lee's.) Take to heart the people you love. Breathe and choose to be moved by the beauty and wonder of your life.

Delving deeper:

*A Natural History of the Senses*

by Diane Ackerman

*The Power of Now* by Eckhart Tolle

*Human Bandwidth* by Gunnar Nilsson

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"Come to Your Senses" was first published in the *Black Hills Arts Anchor*.

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