

“Coming into Our Senses”

I have often thought that Hedonism gets a bad rap. What could be bad about an orientation that encourages us to enjoy to the fullest our miraculous senses? And isn't true enjoyment an art?

I looked up “hedonism” in my Oxford Dictionary of World Religions, but it wasn't in there, so I went to the internet. My first click landed me at the Hedonism Resorts site, advertised as “lush gardens for the senses.” “Welcome to Hedonism,” the web site declared:

"Sleep in. Stay up late. Give up counting calories. Have a drink before noon. Give up mineral water. Dine in shorts. Don't make your bed. Go skinny dipping. Don't call your mother. Let your hair down. Be your beautiful self....

Hedonism is a sandbox for your inner child, nourishment for the mind, body, spirit and soul. Pleasure comes in many forms. Choose one. Or two. Or more. And with absolutely everything included in one upfront price you never have to think about money."

[www.superclubs.com/brand_hedonism]

I suspect there might be a price to pay upon return from that island of fabricated sensuality. In any case, Hedonism Resort wasn't exactly the kind of enjoyment of our miraculous senses I had in mind, so I dusted off a book on the ancient Greeks and read the following from Epicurus, one of the early thinkers in the Hedonistic tradition. He lived in the third century before the Common Era. Epicurus wrote:

"...Of desires, some are natural, others are groundless....One who has a clear and certain understanding of these things will direct every preference and aversion toward securing health of body and tranquillity of mind, seeing that this is the sum and end of a happy life.

For the end of all our actions is to be free from pain and fear, and, when once we have attained all this, the tempest of the soul is laid....

Pleasure is our first and kindred good. It is the starting-point of every choice and of every aversion, and to it we come back..... And since pleasure is our first and native good, for that reason we do not choose every pleasure whatever, but often pass over many pleasures when a greater annoyance ensues from them.

And often we consider pains superior to pleasures when submission to the pains...brings us as a consequence a greater pleasure. While therefore...not all pleasure is worthy of choice,...not all pain is to be shunned.

It is, however, by measuring one against another, and by looking at the conveniences and inconveniences, that all these matters must be judged.

Again, we regard independence of outward things as a great good...so as to be contented with little if we have not much, being honestly persuaded that they have the sweetest enjoyment of luxury who stand least in need of it, and that whatever is natural is easily procured and only the vain and worthless hard to win."

[Epicurus, Letter to Menoecus]

What common sense wisdom: "Of desires, some are natural, and some are groundless." I confess my senses are frequently enthralled by groundless desires. The writing of this sermon was fueled by coffee and chocolate, for instance. Fair trade coffee and healthy dark chocolate, granted, but groundless calories and high-flying caffeine, nonetheless.

But the blessed season of Spring, proffered to us faithfully every year, inspires and encourages us to get back to the fertile ground of our natural desires. All of our senses may be engaged in this season, not by some manufactured oasis of luxury sensuality, but by the simple reality of nature's profound beauty. The woods and yards hereabouts are themselves "lush gardens for the senses." I think of Martha's blue scilla blossom that she brought here for the Easter service. There is a large patch of these little blue lilies in full bloom now in the woods near my place - it's a rough oval, about 20' by 40'. My next door neighbor showed it to me with much excitement when the flowers first began appearing; she loves those blossoms, and looks for them with a sense of joyful anticipation every year. What a blessing it is to sit on a log next to their purple and green profusion; the colors are so deep, it seems I can smell them, taste them, feel them vibrating in the air. I desire to take them into my soul. "Of desires, some are natural, and some are groundless." Yes, and some desires even serve to ground us.

I noticed yesterday that some other neighbors across the street had all their windows wide open. Perhaps they were Spring Cleaning. When I Spring Clean, I start with the air. I, too, like to open up the windows and let the warm breeze blow through the house, clearing out the stale air from the months of autumn and winter gone by. I imagine you perform this understated ritual too. Some years, cleaning the air is about as far as I get with spring house cleaning. In those years, I hope my grandmother doesn't look in on me from the other side to check on my housekeeping. She was one of those rare folks who love to clean; in spring, her house smelled of vinegar, bleach, and lemon oil. She even whistled while she cleaned. Amazing. After the day's work, when she, herself, emerged clean from the bath, she moved in a cloud of Evyan's "White Shoulders" perfume - and she didn't go half measures with it, either. Her scented cloud of gardenia, jasmine and rose rolled through the house like a rosy fog.

In her book *A Creative Companion: How to Free Your Creative Spirit*, the artist Sark speaks of "The House of Perception." [pp. 44-46]

"...Imagine going into the 'room' of each sense," she writes..."and cleaning out any cobwebs in each imaginary room that may be preventing you from perceiving each sense clearly."

She provides a guided meditation, which I'll share with you in short form here in case you would like to try it later on at your leisure. After taking a few of those ubiquitous "deep, cleansing breaths,"

"...Imagine that you are walking down a street and you see a very interesting house. This is the house of perception, the house of your senses, and as you walk into the house you see that there are many rooms with doors and symbols on them.

The first room you come to has a large eye on the door. You open the door and realize that this is the room of vision. It is filled with junk, the garbage that you have put there over the years to prevent you from seeing as clearly as you might. In your mind's eye, see all the junk and cobwebs in the room, and begin to clean out the room of vision with cleansers, a broom, whatever you need.

When you have finished, throw all the junk out, open the windows, and let the room fill with fresh air. See it bright and shining. Look out the window and see the scene outside, noticing all of the colors."

The meditation goes on to progress through the five senses.

I have noticed in my self and in others that often, allot of cleaning is required in the room of hearing. How many noisy thoughts rattle around in our heads, preventing us from listening to the words and sounds of the present moment? And farther back in that room, there are often negative phrases in our inner hearing that get repeated over and over, cramping our style or even crushing our spirits. In her poem "For strong women," Marge Piercy articulates them thus:

"A strong woman is a woman in whose head
a voice is repeating, I told you so,
ugly, bad girl...nag, shrill, witch,
...nobody will ever love you back,
why aren't you feminine, why aren't
you soft, why aren't you quiet...."

Woman or man, we all may have voices like that inside our heads.

Spring cleaning in the house of perception gives us the extra powers of rejuvenating life to clear out those voices, which have already taken up way too much air time. Another poet, Emily Dickinson, speaks of Hope,

"that perches in the soul -
And sings the tune without the words
And never stops - at all - "

Once those negative phrases are bootied out, and the windows in the room of hearing are opened, life's tune becomes more audible in spring songs of birds outside, and singing hope within.

Similarly, in the room of touch, residual pains are cleared to make way for tactile pleasures offered in the present. Our bodies carry memories both painful and pleasurable. What is natural, and grounds us, are the experiences of touch that are creative. All the rest deserves to be thrown out. It can be work, if you have a lot of stuff to get rid of in that room of touch. But we are born with clear senses and we deserve to enjoy them. Even if we must labor to reclaim the sense of touch, we may be strengthened by the life-giving touch of the spring light on our faces, the cleansing green of the new grass on our bare feet, cool garden soil on our hands, warm air on our skins. Nature's healing touch is a powerful cleanser.

I leave it to you to continue Spring Cleaning the rooms of the senses in the House of Perception on your own, if you wish - including cleaning the room of the Sixth Sense, which we will be visiting a couple of Sundays from now. According to Sark, this room is located way up a spiral staircase in the attic.

Clearing out our perceptive faculties, and coming back into our senses, means coming back into our bodies. For whatever reasons we may have been exiled, whether because of the seasons of weather or seasons of the self, spring jubilantly invites us back into the grounding pleasures of nature. We speak often of the "interdependent web of existence, of which we are a part." The body we inhabit is not only our individual body, it is the greater body of nature. Each one of us is a participant in this body. It is easy to say this, but often not so easy to remember or sense it. Our perceptions originate from our individual selves. And yet, there are times when we sense our participation in the whole.

Once I went walking in a place in Colorado I know well. The Rio Grande river originates high in the southern Rockies, and flows down west to southeast through a wide valley between mountains in the San Juan range. Growing up, I spent summers in that valley, and one evening I went ambling across horse pastures, on my way to the river. In the distance, I saw a development going up, and the small airport which had been built a few years before. I said to myself - not so much in words, more as a longing - "I'd like to see this valley as it was before those houses were here." I could remember it when it was clear of habitation. And then in my mind's eye, I saw it - clear of any buildings. Then I thought "I'd like to see it before there was a road," and again, as if there was some responsive soul to grant my wish, I saw it. Caught in this wondrous momentum, without thinking, I said "I'd like to see it before I was here." In the same moment as the longing rose up, I, the separate self, was gone and there was only the valley. My local version of consciousness was dissolved and there was only awareness - not originating in me - only an awareness that was everything, and in everything. I was in and of the valley, the surrounding mountains, the river coursing through it cold and clean.

I don't know how long this experience lasted - maybe only a few seconds - but I have remembered it for years. Perhaps you have had similar experiences. It seems if we go deeply enough into the senses, and our longing is honest and strong, we may break free of the illusion that we are separate from other beings. We break through into the sense of being one in body and awareness with all nature - which is, as we know and affirm, fundamentally the case.

Diane Ackerman, in her book *A Natural History of the Senses*, writes

“One of the most profound paradoxes of being human is that the thick spread of sensation we relish isn't perceived directly by the brain. The brain is silent, the brain is dark, the brain tastes nothing, the brain hears nothing. All it receives are electrical impulses - not the sumptuous chocolate melting sweetly, not the oboe solo like the flight of a bird, not the tingling caress, not the pastels of peach and lavender at sunset over a coral reef - just impulses. The brain is blind, deaf, dumb, unfeeling. The body is a transducer (from Latin, to lead across, transfer), a device that converts energy of one sort to energy of another sort, and that is its genius. Our bodies take mechanical energy and convert it to electrical energy. I touch the soft petal of a red rose called “Mr. Lincoln,” and my receptors translate that mechanical touch into electrical impulses that the brain reads as soft, supple, thin, curled, dewy, velvety: rose-petal-like. When Walt Whitman said “I sing the body electric,” he didn't know how prescient he was. The body does indeed sing with electricity, which the mind deftly analyzes and considers....”

[pp 307-308]

The whole body of nature sings with the current of life. Its pulse invites us to renewal and commitment. The affirmation unfolding around us, and in us, is grounding beauty.
AMEN