

Reasoning Away Our Senses
Rev. Laura Shennum
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Take a moment, settle into your chair, for this exercise it may help to close your eyes, however, you are welcome to keep them open if that is more comfortable.

Take a breath,
picture yourself in the meditation garden on our church grounds,
What do you see?
The tall trees overhead, the rocks and water, and the grass.
what do you hear?
Is the water rippling? Are the trees shaking in the wind? Are there birds singing? Or is it silent with an occasional car driving pass?
What do you smell?
Do you smell the fresh smell of earth? Flowers nearby? Dampness of snow?
Exhaust from cars?
What can you touch?
The smooth stones, the rotted leaves, the trickling water?
Is there a taste to the air?
Have you brought some tea to drink? Or a piece of chocolate to savor?

When you are ready, open your eyes and come back into the building and join us here in the sanctuary.

We all just experienced taking a trip to our meditation garden using our senses. I gave you prompts on what you might see, hear, smell, touch and taste. However, even though we all listened to the same prompts and may have even thought of the same roses or chocolate, our individual experiences were completely different. This would be true no matter what experience we shared together. We could each explain what we see, hear, smell, touch, and taste in this room right now and each explanation would be different.

This unreliability on our senses to provide a consistent observation that all can experience equally is one of the major causes reason became so influential in our society.

As soon as Rene Descartes exclaimed, "I think, therefore I am" the senses were no longer to be trusted. Only rational thought was to be accepted.

If we look back at the historical events that led up to this dismissal of sensory information, we can start to understand why it happened.

Just before the Age of Reason or Age of Enlightenment, monarchies started to fail; books were being printed and knowledge was being disseminated to anyone; individualism was rising as a popular thought; as well as liberty and freedom; practices and theologies of the main churches were being challenged; an increase in religious tolerance happened; new theories and ideas were challenging the religious view of the world; and of course, with the accumulation of all of these ideas there was a need to create new societies, ones full of rational thoughtful people.

It is those rational thoughtful people who would create civil societies. They were not people who just took in the world around them and acted impulsively. They took their time, thought through their ideas, and then discussed them with others.

In addition, scientific thought exploded with Galileo, Einstein, and others. The world that was known before no longer existed.

Explorers set out and found new lands, which expanded ideas about culture, people, and ways of living.

This is the time Unitarian thoughts were coming together and becoming a strong force. Thoughtful arguments were made about the interpretation of the Bible and the authority it held. It was determined individuals had the ability to reason for themselves what they wanted to believe.

It was an exciting time for most. However, it was also a time of great fear, especially of the mainline Christian churches. In response, the church became more conservative in how much skepticism it would accept; in denying new scientific and religious thoughts to the point people were killed or discredited. This was a time when women were starting to be seen as having rights of their own and so again, the church's response was to take more control of women's rights as well as how they were seen in the family unit.

Reason gave us a means of control. It controlled our societies, our experiences, our churches, and our personal lives. Reason also gave us a basis to form new governments, educational systems, and eventually, increased human rights.

Reason separated not only the church and state, but the mind and the body. It placed our primary experiences in life in our mind and in our thoughts. It has helped us become objective observers of our world.

In addition to creating this emphasis on reason and intellect, we have also unfortunately created a vacuum when it comes to our sensory lives. Some us cannot trust what we see, hear, taste, smell, touch, intuit, or perceive. Or as some might suggest, we are not attuned to our bodies. In some cases, this has robbed us of experiencing the world fully.

Here's an example: you are at a concert listening to beautiful music, the lighting, stage are all set purposely for you to experience joy not just in the music but in the aesthetics of the place you are in; there are flowers set about full of scents that heighten the experience even more; maybe you are holding a glass of champagne as well. All of this is set up for your senses to experience. In the meantime, you are in your head thinking about a problem at work you need to solve or trying to determine where an author is going in a book you are reading.

Sensory experience requires us to shift our perception of our world. It requires us to be present in the moment and awake to the mystery and awe we are surrounded by. In some instances, sensory experience requires us to get out of our head in order to fully experience what is happening.

When I talked about the circles of sexuality in early January, I had a congregant approach me and tell me I completely forgot about how sensual sexuality could be. For that sermon, I wanted to create a foundation for what it looks like to talk about sexuality in a healthy way. When talking about our sensory experience, it is important to lift up how much our experience of sexuality relies on our senses.

In fact, during my research this week, I watched a Ted Talk by a designer who collected information over three years on how different experiences rated according to the five senses. He created a graph with the five senses on the bottom and a rating scale of 1-10 along the side. He rated things like riding a motorcycle or eating noodles. Each scored higher in some senses than the others. The one experience that rated the highest in all senses was sex.

What is important to understand is with the rise of reason and intellect, sensory experience was dismissed and along with that any experiences which relied on it became taboo or strictly controlled. One of the most highly restricted activities was and continues to be is sex. And what has that achieved in our society – I'll let you just ponder that for a moment.

As with any idea when we decide an absolute, such as reason is the only valuable way to experience the world, then we cause more problems than if we just allowed for there to be an evolving understanding of the world.

This is what Chet Raymo reminds us of in our first reading. Even though we have so many theories and understandings of the world through science, there is still so much we do not know.

We need both reason and sensory experience in our worlds. There will be times when one is more important than the other and there will also be times, if we are honest with ourselves that one can influence the other.

Why is this important to our spiritual lives? One of the main foundations for this series on the senses is to understand our senses are the building blocks we have to create meaning in our lives. Our sensory experience helps us to process the world around us and make meaning of it.

In order for us to be open and aware of those sensory experiences, we need to take time to just be in the world. Observe where the mystery and awe still exist. Experience the full understanding of what it means to be human.

Appreciate the beauty of the people and the world we live in. Remember this was one of the ways Viktor Frankl determined we created meaning in our lives, just by experiencing the beauty around us.

When we open ourselves to this new awareness, we can expand on how we envision God or Nature or Love in our lives. It can expand how we interact with others and the relationships we engage.

Mary Oliver reminds us of this in her poem:

At Blackwater Pond
By Mary Oliver

At Blackwater Pond the tossed waters have settled after a night of rain.
(pause)

I dip my cupped hands. I drink a long time. It tastes like stone, leaves, fire.
(pause)

It falls cold into my body, waking the bones. (pause)

I hear them deep inside me, whispering
Oh what is that beautiful thing that just happened?

Take the time to have your well thought out ideas and rationales. And also, take the time to experience the world, so you can say, Oh what is that beautiful thing that just happened?