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The catechism of our senses

Rich Heffern | May. 28, 2010

(Dreamstime)

Earth and Spirit

How sensual our world is. A lilac bush has spread its blooms outside my window at home while inside green beans simmer on the stove, as yeasty rolls bake in the oven. My wife crushes dried basil and oregano leaves harvested from our summer garden for a stew, wafting heady scent-detonations through the air. Out of good stereo speakers, Mexican cantina lyrics sung with a lusty, spine-chilling vibrato weave in and out of exuberantly melancholy mariachi trumpets.

?The world is mud-luscious and puddle-wonderful,? wrote poet e.e.cummings.

In the catechism of our senses we can taste and see that God is good. Even mighty Yahweh, in Exodus, asked Moses to please burn the sweetest incense he could find. Juliana of Norwich wrote: ?In our sensuality, God is. For God is never out of the soul.?

Do we all not store in our memory albums choice sense events in our lives? Our very first kiss, meals of new potatoes just dug from the garden served with fresh peas and asparagus dripping with melted butter, the fresh and biting relief of lemonade on a hot day, walks in woods fragrant from recent rain, the scent of new-mown hay in summer fields, calamine lotion spread over blistered skin, the delighted screams and shouts from a children?s playground.

Once an ice storm passed over the forest where I lived for a time. A thick coating of hard glittering ice lacquered every branch and sapling for miles. That night, after the storm passed, we took a walk. A nearly full moon gleamed through clouds that slapdashed across the skies the colors of spider webs. The world was utterly transformed into a twinkling dazzle, like a piñata full of stars had broken over the land and broadcast shimmering sparkle everywhere. Soft breezes tinkled ice-coated limb against limb like a hundred thousand wind chimes. Broken pine and cedar boughs scented the air.

That walk takes a whole page in my album.

The first gift to Jesus was incense. Builders of mosques used to put rose water and musk into the mortar so that the noon sun would heat it and bring out the aromas. In the holy Quran, the heavenly reward for the virtuous features voluptuous maidens who cater to every whim, create new cravings then ingenuous ways to satisfy them. My own Catholic upbringing was scented with candle wax, wine and incense. Good healthy religions have always held sacred the senses, both in sacrament and ritual.

Cultures, too, have centered themselves on sensing. The ancient Egyptians were cleverly sybaritic, using lavish quantities of perfume and incense in religious ceremonies. They invented bubble baths, perfume, herbal pomades, makeup, skin cream, tattooing and beer. In Homer?s Bronze Age, visitors were always offered a bath and aromatic oils. Alexander the Great never left home without scenting his clothes with mint, thyme, cinnamon and almond oils. The ancient Romans bathed in donkey milk and crushed strawberries. In 1492, the native peoples on our shore discovered Columbus, hell-bent after a new route for the spice trade. His first hint that a new land was near was the scent of sassafras trees wafting out to sea and picked up by his crew?s noses.

There is a rare medical condition called anosmia, wherein one loses one?s sense of smell and taste. One longtime sufferer reported a remission, during which she ate a banana ... and cried and cried for days. Sense scientists talk about synesthesia, where one sense mode is interpreted in terms of another, commonly experienced when we press on our shut eyelids and see an explosion of razzle-dazzle colors. One person with highly developed synesthesia abilities reported she tasted the complex sensory stew of baked beans whenever she heard the name ?Francis.?

Great artists feel at home in the luminous spill of sensation. They doggedly refuse the separation of matter and spirit that so plagues our religious sense. Pierre Renoir and Claude Monet, James Joyce, Vladimir Nabokov and John Updike, poets like Anne Sexton and Denise Levertov honor and celebrate our human senses.

No one writes better about it than e.e. cummings. He describes lyrically his love affair with ?sweet spontaneous earth,? noticing overlooked phenomena like ?the convulsed orange inch of moon/perching on the silver minute of evening.? He once described touching his lover?s arm as ?stroking the shocking fuzz of your electric fur.? He named her eyes ?big love-crumbs.?

Diane Ackerman, author of *A Natural History of the Senses*, wrote: ?We need to return to feeling the textures of life. Much of our experience in America now is an effort to get away from those textures, to fade into a stark, simple, solemn, puritanical all-business routine that doesn?t have anything so unseemly as sensuous zest.?

Praise our extravagant bodies, our mouths, our fingertips, ears, nerves and taste buds. Say thanks for tangerines, lemons, bird songs, watermelon, frail azure butterflies, wine, peppermint, garden loam, Miles Davis?s muted trumpet, the lick of a cat, flowers, fresh bread just from the oven, church bells ringing, fragrant breezes after a rain. Use your big love-crumbs to see, your nose to smell, your tongue to taste.

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