

To See and Be as a Child

by almaerrante

Though we are not free to choose existence—it is too late for that—HOW we are "to be" in this world is our choice. ~ Bernadette Roberts

I have this arresting memory from my youth when I was working as a delivery driver in Colorado. I was headed to Aspen and winding through gently sloping green hills when I rounded a curve and my eyes were immediately drawn to a lone white horse in a pasture, nose to ground feeding. I experienced one of those stop still moments of



rapture, mixed with some envy, at the horse's tranquil and contented being, offsetting my general state of nervous tension, dissatisfaction, and craving, which at that time was represented by a nicotine habit I'd been trying hard to break. And to this day I am mesmerized by the statue stillness and composure of horses. On my walks in the countryside I am fortunate to have them around, sometimes stopping to greet them up close, neck to neck.

It has been a slow evolution getting out of my head and back into my body in its element of being. A few years ago, someone gave me a mindfulness exercise for anxiety which makes use of the physical senses. "Mindfulness" is fast becoming a too loosely applied term for me to stomach much longer. So instead, I'll say this very simple act of perception is better described as a beingfulness exercise. It can be tailored according to your own liking and comfort, and expanded upon. But I can tell you that if you do give yourself over to it, you will gain a more direct access to the precious stratum of being-ness. That is why I have dubbed it the "Seeing as a Child Exercise."

I practice it mostly when I walk or hike, but you could do it with other forms of exercise, or activities like gardening, watching your children in the playground, as long as the activity doesn't require your attention for safety such as driving or wingsuit flying. By employing this way of looking, rather than drifting off into senseless loops of rumination and imagination, I am given the means to turn my attention to the

immediate environment, and enhance the natural pleasure of the body in motion by opening the gates to my senses, one at a time. So it is an intake of the external environment's impressions and sensations. There is also the option to alternate each external survey with an internal one of whatever bodily sensations you're experiencing as you shift from one sense to the other, but I prefer sticking with just the external.

The main thing I endeavor to avoid is forcing or selecting what I am to sense, but rather to absorb what meets my senses in the spontaneous way of a child who is always being surprised. I let the parts or whole of the scene flow into me as if each sense is a pipeline or aperture, diffused or focused. It's important to avoid as much as possible any naming of what is sensed, and falling back into thoughts, memories, or associations which may arise.

I begin with my eyes, with seeing. I relax my gaze and notice what's before and around me as it appears in a cornucopia of shape-color-pattern-design-contrast-outline-context, whether close up, middle distance, or far away. A geo-mosaic of twigs and pebbles. The staccato breaks of a yellow stripe down the middle of the road. Black asphalt abutted by gravelly shoulders and goat head weed. Grass and brush and trees in cross profiles to each other, their colors offset by a painter's palette of greens and browns, sprinkles and sprays of yellows and reds. I close in on a tree or tall flowers against a fence and observe the intricacies of their micro-universe, or pull back in wide screen for the macro daubs and strokes of cloud formations and contouring landscapes. Signs and billboards no longer are intrusions but jumping out eye candy. There can be a riveting effect of unusual or discordant beauty of things out of place, like the bright colors of junked barrel drums set against a muted desert landscape. For there is no judgement when looking as a small child. And if I can let the eyes meander freely and spontaneously, and resist labeling what they see, I experience a soothing of nerves, a feeling of lightness and spaciousness within my body as I begin to perceive things afresh.

After a few minutes, or if the time just feels right, I shift my attention to the sense of hearing, more visceral than seeing. I tune my receiver to the ambient sounds of whatever setting I'm in, many of which I am usually oblivious to. The Doppler effect of approaching and receding trains, of automobile and truck tires as they whoosh over the asphalt. Bird songs bursting in and out of silence—the distinctive plaintive sounds of the

killdeer bird and the mourning dove; one piercing, the other cooing. The humming and droning of machinery and airplanes. And I almost forgot...my feet are making crunching noises on the ground. If there aren't many sounds to hear at the time, I listen to the sound of my breathing or heart beating.

Next I take a few sniffs and start smelling. I love smells for their heady and primal reach-back to memory, infusing the somatic mind with nostalgia and sublime feelings. The country exudes a most potent medley of verdant aromas; grasses and dust and manure and soil. The gas and diesel fumes wafting off the roads. And the towns and cities are overflowing with a plethora of cocktails. If it so happens there aren't any salient smells at the time, I just become aware of the sensation of air flowing in and out of my nostrils as I breathe, and sometimes experience a pleasant vertigo.

And lastly I turn to the sense of touch or tactility. What is the temperature, mix, and flow of the air (sunshine, rain, breeze) on my exposed face, neck, arms, and sometimes legs? Since I'm walking, I can relish how the ground feels against the bottom of my feet. Feet love the feel of themselves. The way they are squeezed and comforted in their shoes. And how the rest of my body parts slide and conform within the clothes I'm wearing. I touch and brush my cotton shirt sleeve, my denims, my pocket coins and keys with fingertips, feeling the texture of the material, or simply rub my fingers together. Touch is exquisite.

Once I got the hang of one sense at a time, I found I could mix two senses at a time, and sometimes after going through the sequence, I'll allow all four senses to mingle as close to simultaneity as my attention will permit. I believe for some that synaesthesia might occur. One thing I've consistently found with attending to only the senses, is that if I relax and allow the interaction to happen on its own terms, there is a palpable change to how I experience this self and the outside world as they cross over into each other. Thoughts subside or are supplanted by a featureless but quickened presence. There have been some supreme finales when all sense of familiarity was gone, in a most welcome way, and for a spell I couldn't even recognize myself. I was so content-free, sugar-free, additive- and preservative-free, which feels like the only way being can be.