

## 9-6-13 Synaesthesia

Sometimes when I hear music, especially classical music, if I close my eyes and relax, I see colors and the colors change with the music. It is lovely and amazing! Mostly, I see warm colors, varying in hue and saturation, from deep burgundy and vibrant magenta to mellow yellow and satisfying squash. While there are people whose brains combine the senses all the time, seeing numbers as colors or hearing colors as sounds, for instance, most of us enjoy this experience rarely and fleetingly. (Or so I suspect.) In addition to the five senses of sight, touch, smell, hearing and taste, there is that other “sense” of time; another layer to our experience of life.

Lately, I’ve begun to wonder if this joining of the senses is something we had as children and we lose as we learn to compartmentalize. Even when the senses do not actually join, there are associations experienced by all; and, yet, we might forget them until some encounter of the senses propels it to the surface of our consciousness. You know what I mean; like when a smell reminds of us something particular from our childhood; even a specific day and event and it as though we can even taste those cookies our grandmother made.

I was recently reminded, on several occasions, of these associations of the senses and memory. People call in or, more usually, send an email, telling me about their concerns. Most frequently in the summer, those messages are descriptions of the green slime of the algae in the ponds, which does smell, but, interestingly, these callers also use language to describe their experience of the algae in terms such as, “This really stinks, that I can’t use and enjoy the water!” It brought back the musty, earthy smell of pond water from my early childhood and how I didn’t like it. I also remembered the crystal clear water of little quarries my father brought us to in Weymouth. Those are wonderful memories!

With all the burning concerns of the ruined waterways and stinking subject matters, residents are taking a closer look at the waters with a degree of concern and alarm previously not seen. That is an understandable progression: First, we take for granted; then we notice; then we care; then we examine; and then we scrutinize even more carefully. And some of us make discoveries along the way.

Here’s just one example: In this particular case, a man called the office, leaving a message about something he found in the pond. He wanted to speak to the health agent about it. When I returned his call, I could hear the concern in his voice. He told me he found a blob of something. Was it the algae, he wanted to know. I asked questions: Was it green? (No, kind of clear) Did it have little specs or dots in it? (He thought so.) Was it gelatinous? (Yes.) In what part of the pond did he find it? Near the edge? In the middle? Floating? (Near the edge, under some branches.) I told him it sounded like a mass of amphibian eggs; probably frogs’.

In my mind I could feel the slimy firmness and smell the pond water. I could see the transparent silvery grey. I remembered the sense of mystery the first time I found it and picking

it up, wondered what it could possibly be. When I found out it was a mass of frog eggs, I carefully placed back into the pond, hoping I had not harmed them.

I awoke from my brief reverie to hear the man asking, “So, it’s a good thing?” “Yes, it is a good thing. I am glad some good things still happen at the ponds!” He was going to carefully return it to its protected place, just as I had decades ago.

A poet can better describe than I can the wonders of a child and the mysteries of nature. Seamus Heaney could and he did time and again. He also experienced the discovery of frog eggs and perhaps was discovering even more about life when he watched them transform into tadpoles in his poem, *Death of A Naturalist*. There, after the sights, sounds and smells of springtime, he says that “best of all was the warm thick slobber of frogspawn that grew like clotted water in the shade of the banks. Here, every spring, I would fill jam-potfuls of the jellied specks to range on window-sills at home, on shelves at school, and wait and watch until the fattening dots burst into nimble-swimming tadpoles. ”

Seamus Heaney died on August 30, 2013. I never met him but his poetry keeps alive the human experience. That will never die. Thank you, Seamus.

Experiencing, enjoying, learning from and taking care of nature in all its colorful, smelly glory is public health, too.

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