

12-6-19 Have you lost your senses?

The senses guide our brain in making decisions, both simple and complicated ones. Stay away from that and get more of this. Some are more layered, especially when memories are involved.

During Thanksgiving dinner with extended family and most of my siblings, of course the senses of taste and smell arose in conversations. Someone announced, "I smell popcorn; buttered popcorn!" Butter used as an ingredient and so-called Butterball turkeys were offered as an explanation. I missed out on the experience, as too many visits to moldy houses has pretty much reduced my sense of smell to zero and this has, in turn, greatly reduced my sense of taste.

While you might think, "Oh, that's a shame!", I have discovered that the brain still reacts to odors and flavors, with feelings. My body reacts to unpleasant smells, especially to mold and fragrances. When it comes to taste, memory steps in to assist. When recalling favorite flavors of my past, my mouth will water in response to a story of a favorite food, even if the last time I tasted it was sixty years ago.

I find this phenomenon fascinating and it happened often on Thanksgiving Day, as so many family stories were told.

The sense of touch was witnessed often. There were handshakes and hugs. There was food preparation, compliments of a scarf and touching it and saying, "Ah, silk!" There was a sixteen-month old, born with a rare and severe disability who discovers the world around her in her own way. She loves to reach out and touch long hair and people's mouths. At times she gave serious attention to her ability to stick her tongue out and blow raspberries, like nobody's business! That fun exercise used her sense of hearing, and touch and probably taste, according to what she last had in her mouth. She is a marvelous embodiment of determination!

At a large family gathering such as this, all is to be marveled and appreciated, as the wide range of ages meant that while some were gaining in use and expertise of their senses, my eldest brother was losing the sense of how to use his legs. He carried on with a sense of humor while he used his walker and there were scenes involving another kind of touch, that of helping and supporting in "touching" ways. Several men were needed to assist my tall brother out to and into the car. All along the way, I witnessed my nephew complimenting and encouraging my brother, with "You're doing great!" "That takes courage." "Well done!"

I patted my nephew's arm and thanked him.

My brother with the challenged balance and strength has developed a self-protective “sense” of his surroundings, a radar of sorts. “Who’s there? I need space to maneuver”, he would say as he was about to get up and “felt” a small person was behind him.

There is so much to see at such a gathering; the faces of loved ones, a child who has grown so much since last seen, pretty glassware, shiny mirrors, paintings on the walls, the cotton candy sky forming as dinner was ending. Those sights will be enjoyed again in the form of photos and videos. May they strengthen our appreciation of those sights.

Those appreciations are accompanied by the sounds of the day. There was the chatter and laughter, popping of wine corks, tapping of a glass to make an announcement and there were stories, so many family stories accompanied by heartfelt laughter! Everyone’s hearing is still good enough that no one was left out.

All these sense-full experiences will inform our memories and dreams. Isn’t it amazing that we can experience all the senses in our dreams?

While the senses of sight, taste, smell and hearing are being studied by scientists who have been learning they are more complicated than initially thought, and they also have evidence that they can overlap and sometimes be heightened beyond the ordinary. For instance, a blind person can develop a type of echolocation by making clicking sounds or by use of tapping his or her walking stick, thus feeling or “seeing” where objects are. Some people see colors when they hear music.

There is another sense I must mention, whether the scientists agree with me or not. That is the sense of intuition. My father often said my mother had this and over time he came to trust it. Sometimes it is that trust-worthy gut/ instinct feeling about a situation. Sometimes it is reading a person and concluding comfort and trust, or a we shall see feeling, leading to caution or a creepy/danger feeling, leading to staying away. I believe this sense of intuition is something our ancestors had and many of us have lost it, but it can be a life saver. Paying attention to all the senses and observing non-verbal communication strengthens this ability.

Then, there is the sense of common sense but that is a story and exploration for another time! In the meantime, let’s be sensible and appreciate our senses with awareness, for they bring moments to life, guide our decisions and deepen our life experiences.

*Cathleen Drinan is the Health Agent for Halifax, MA. She can be reached at 781 293 6768 or [cathleen.drinan@halifax-ma.org](mailto:cathleen.drinan@halifax-ma.org)*