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*Poems through the Senses*

Paper and cloth book with vellum pages

Our ability to hear, see, smell, taste, and touch is fascinating because the perception each person has of life is unique, yet our sensory instincts bond us in our innate humanity.

I have been frequently thinking about the concept of comfort, wondering how in transitory periods of life we can keep a sense of home and comfort within us through positive associations to scents, tastes, textures, sounds etc. I drew inspiration from the universal experiences people derive from their senses and asked people in my life to share what senses bring them the most comfort, compiling their answers into a book. It captured an intimate lens into different people's delight in the simple things of life, such as chirping crickets, a warm hug, or the taste of bread and butter. I wrote each of their answers out in a poetic format and illustrated scenes that corresponded with each of the poems. Prior to starting the project I had read Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. His poetic prose with vivid sensory descriptions influenced my choice in writing style for this book. I was also inspired by a previous project here at Oxbow in which I made a cookbook zine filled with recipes from childhood and sent it to thirty friends across the country. The aspect of creative networking gave me the idea to include other people in this project. This book explores how each of us can feel comforted and present in the simplest ways by noticing what various sense experiences we appreciate from life.

Living Presently Through the Senses: in A  
Visually Stimulated World



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*Writer's note: Our senses are what make us intrinsically human. Without them, we would be feelingless entities. Our world today has grown reliant on visual overload to keep our minds occupied. We desire now, more than ever before, a constant escape from reality. The seemingly un-alterable political, social, economic and environmental inequities that surround us drive our collective desire to distract, and escape via external stimulation. This paper explores how we can use four of the less commonly relied upon senses to cultivate a sense of wellbeing wherever we are.*

We live in a world that tells us we must always be “in the know,” which makes us fear the unknown so much that we feel we never miss a moment of news, pop culture or media. Statistically, the average American spends around 8 or more hours a day consuming media. It's possible to get lost in the visual world while completely neglecting our other senses. How can we as humans tap into the full range of our senses in order to make us feel alive and present, rather than seeking and requiring visual overstimulation?

Yesterday I called my grandpa and he told me about his daily grounding methods: walks along the river and meditations via his new app. The day we spoke, he told me about a meditation he did on the five senses. As he walked along the river, the narrator's calming voice asked him to decipher something he heard, something he felt, something he tasted, something he saw, and something he smelled. This practice helped him get out of his head and into his body by having him focus on his current surroundings. He learned from this exercise that in noting the specificity of a moment through the senses, he was able to distinguish this particular walk from any other.

When researching the senses, the story of Hellen Keller's unique life continued to rematerialise. Keller contracted a high fever as a baby which left her relying solely on her senses

of touch, taste and smell. Keller could determine which building she was passing by from its scent. She once said “the atmosphere is charged with countless odors”. Wherever she went, every person she talked to, and every type of weather had its own heightened scent. She remembered people by the feeling of their faces and was able to read people’s lips by putting her hand on their mouth while they talked. Another theory Keller had was that when overstimulated by sight and all that comes with it, people may be left too exhausted to tap into other senses. Her differences revealed that most seeing and hearing people do not experience the full expanse of their other senses.

Sensory designer Jinsop Lee spoke in a Ted Talk on the importance of sensory design, expressing that the most memorable and intense experiences of a person’s life engage many senses all at once. Our main senses are: vision (sight), audition (sound), gustation (taste), olfaction (smell), and tactician (touch). As time goes on, more senses are being identified, such as thermoception (sensing temperature and cold), noniception (pain), equilibrioception (balance), and proprioception (body awareness) (Vibration Group, 14). Our five senses help us understand the world around us. The way each person responds to sensory information is unique; related to personal experience and preference tied to: culture, gender, trauma, etc. For example, wearing tight clothing might make one person feel safe and another feel constricted.

Emotional and physiological responses triggered by the re-engaging of the senses vary drastically due to these factors.

## **I. Sense of Touch: The Skin**

Our skin is responsible for sensations we feel, as it is the largest sensory receptor. We have temperature and pressure receptors to keep ourselves safe from danger such as being burned or crushed, as well as nerve receptors that sense pain. Touch is an integral factor in maintaining our well being from the time we leave the womb until we die. In the mid 90's, two scientists traveled to Romania to observe children in understaffed orphanages. They observed how the lack of physical contact affected them and concluded that these neglected kids had slower growth development (The New Yorker). Tactile researchers discovered that newborn babies in the Intensive Care Unit who received three 15-minute massages each day for 5-10 days gained weight 50% faster than those deprived of touch (Ackerman, 73). These two studies show just how important our sense of touch is for wellbeing.

There are two pathways by which we process touch. The first pathway is called the "sensory pathway." The sensory pathway informs us about sensations such as pressure, location, and fine texture. It takes in sensory input and gradually builds up tactile images to perform the recognition of objects. The second pathway processes the social and emotional information of the touch. As a kid, one of my favorite memories involved the "Tactile Dome" at the Exploratorium, a science museum located in San Francisco. The Tactile Dome is a darkly lit maze in which the participant relies on every sense besides sight to reach the end. The Tactile Dome was created in 1971 by artist and academic, Dr. August F. Coppola, who wanted to return people's focus to the importance of their sense of touch ([exploratorium.edu](http://exploratorium.edu)).

His inspiration for the exhibit was fueled by the idea of "perceptual prejudice," the idea that people overuse their sense of sight over others. This exhibit gives people the experience of relying on the senses usually taken for granted. In the 1960's, Japanese artist Takako Saito made

a series of chess sets that incorporated different senses. One used sound, one used weight, and one used spice. The participants must have skilled sense-perception in order to recognize which pieces to move. Takako Saito's invention once again brought up the notion of "perceptual prejudice," challenging the idea of vision as an over-relied upon sense, inviting people to use their other senses to play this visually dominated game.

## **II. Sense of Smell: The Nose**

In my opinion, the sense of smell is the most nostalgic of all the senses, with the ability to recover memories otherwise forgotten. The limbic system is part of the brain that plays a role in behavior, emotions, memories, and sense of smell (Queensland Brain Institute). When we inhale a fragrance, molecules of the scent enter our nostrils and dissolve through the olfactory system. Odors take a direct path to the limbic system, which consists of the amygdala and hippocampus. The amygdala helps process emotion, while the hippocampus is in charge of learning and memory. In my experience, the emotional component of memory is directly linked to scent. If your dad makes cinnamon rolls, you may have a positive memory association with the perception of cinnamon's scent. Many smell-driven memories are linked to childhood and early life, given the fact that our initial exposure to many of those scents occurred during that period ([psychologicalscience.org](http://psychologicalscience.org)).

I have a vivid sensory memory of childhood when my mom would draw me bubble baths and sprinkle thyme into the tub. I remember quite vividly the quality of light streaming through the window and the sound of rushing water. All of those sensory components used to make me feel so calm, so I decided to try to relive them years later. The more life experiences I accumulate, the more scents become attached to the new phases, and remind me of events both positive and negative- but entirely specific to me.

### **III. Sense of Sound: Through The Ear**

The ear provides the function of hearing and balance. It is one of the most delicate organs on the human body, composed of the inner, middle, and outer ear. Sound waves are caught by the ear canal, making the eardrum vibrate. The vibrations travel through three small bones in the middle ear; the hammer, anvil and stirrup. This causes fluid from the middle ear to move into the inner ear. The fluid in motion makes small hair cells "cochlear hair cells" bend, which turns the vibration into nerve impulses which are processed in the temporal lobe (Smith, 17). The sense of sound helps humans communicate and perceive noises in our environment. Sounds of gushing water or soft bird chirps can help us relax and up-tempo music can increase energy, while artificial sounds like honking horns can induce stress. Artist Mark Ware and researchers at Brighton and Sussex Medical School performed a study to find out the difference between listening to natural sounds versus artificial ones. The studied group listened to natural sounds while their brain activity was actively observed in an MRI scanner and the autonomic nervous system was monitored by measuring changes in heart rate. They found that when listening to artificial sounds, the brain patterns observed were similar to those noted in times of post traumatic stress, anxiety or depression ([www.bsms.ac.uk](http://www.bsms.ac.uk)).

A hospital in Wisconsin commissioned a sound installation for a surgical waiting room that involved the composition of synthesized German, Mexican, African-American, and Hmong lullabies in an effort to create an ambient soundscape for patients and staff. This installation not only benefited the work environment, but improved patient health as well ([CODAworx.com](http://CODAworx.com)).

### **IV. Sense of Taste: Through The Tongue**

The word “taste” is derived from the Middle English word “tastern,” which means to examine by touch, test, or sample. Also known as the gustatory system, the sensation of taste occurs when something in the mouth has a chemical reaction to taste receptor cells located on the tongue and in the mouth. The five main components of taste are sweet, sour, salty, bitter and umami. Umami is savory, associated with a fatty taste that we process as being rich. The sensory cells are split into two functions; one half responds to the five ordinary tastes, while the other half responds to a particular taste, or a combination of tastes. Some people, known as supertasters, can have up to 6 times as many taste buds as regular tasters. Due to their excessive quantity of taste buds, the experience of eating bitter foods like broccoli, coffee, or asparagus is unpleasant because the sensations are so intense (Scientific American).

Psychologist Axel Rudolph pioneered the idea of dining in the dark. Subtracting vision grants us the ability to focus more on the smell, texture, and taste of food rather than the sight of it. “You smell better, you are more receptive to differences in texture, consistency and temperature... it’s a holistic experience.” (Rudolph, cited in Read et al., 2011, p.16). Smell, taste, and memory are intriguing because they are all strongly interrelated with one another.

In his novel “Remembrance of Things Past,” French writer Marcel Proust defines “involuntary memory,” as a vivid memory brought on by the senses (taste, smell, or sound). He had just eaten some cookie crumbs soaked in tea when “immediately, the old gray house upon the street rose up like a stage set... the house, the town, the square where I was sent before lunch, the streets along which I used to run errands, the country roads we took.” (Proust). Sensory details like this help us create more vivid memories that last longer.

## **V. A blending of the senses: Synesthesia**



Synesthesia stems from the Greek verbatim “synth,” meaning together, and “esthesia,” meaning perceive together. Synesthesia is very rare, and according to one 2006 study done by PubMed, only presents itself in 2-4% of the general population. People with synesthesia experience a coexisting of the senses, giving life’s sense perceptions a whole other realm. For example, someone with synesthesia might assign colors to words or numbers, hear a song and see a shape, or taste broccoli and assign it the color orange. Many musicians and artists like Duke Ellington and Vincent Van Gogh had synesthesia.

## **VI. Being present through the senses:**

Being aware of sensations going on around us in our immediate environment can help us to live in the moment and reduce feelings of overwhelm that comes with being alive in the age of constant distraction and fast paced happenings. Doing mindfulness practices through the senses, -like the one my grandpa did- is grounding and reminds us how meaningful it is to be alive right here right now.

Sit in a comfortable way where you can relax. Take a deep breath and imagine your body is expanding and contracting like a giant balloon. Now, draw your attention from the top of your scalp, slowly moving down your neck and spine, your arms, your belly, legs and toes.

Now, spend one minute focusing on each of your five senses. The timing doesn't need to be exact, just spend a moment with each sense and try to notice new subtleties about them.

Turn your attention to your ears and pick out five things you can *hear*. Try to pick up *sounds* that you previously left unnoticed. After a moment, direct your attention toward your hands and *touch* different textures around you. Now, identify and pick out a few things you *smell*. Try to notice new observations about these sensations. Next, focus on your tongue and what you *taste*.

If you have some food nearby, take a bite and take note of the texture and flavors. If you don't have food nearby, try to taste whatever flavor that's already in your mouth. Lastly, slowly shift your focus to three things you *see*. Notice the color, texture, shape size of objects within your visual field. Do you now feel more present in your body?

I remember one of the first days at Oxbow taking a nap in the grass and just feeling the texture of the grass, smelling the earth, and hearing the birds. I wanted to preserve that feeling in a time capsule. It made me think about how, as humans, we can be at home within the body anywhere just through our five senses. It's helpful to notice how various sense experiences influence quality of life and what brings you a state of calm, so in times of stress you can reconnect and use your senses to gain ease again.

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