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AWAKENING THE SENSES

[By] re-awakening our senses and intentionally honoring subjective experience [we] return to our essential, animal selves, the selves that evolved in relation to the non-human natural world ... our sensory systems are exquisitely evolved channels for translating between 'in-here' and 'out-there.'

(Sewell, 1995, p. 203)

It is important to listen to nature because nature is so beautiful to look at! Why shouldn't it be just as beautiful to listen to? Nature can be so beautiful to all of your senses if you just take the time.

(Student, Learning Gardens)

With a goal toward bringing life to schools, we can advance an ecological perspective through awakening and using the senses, including sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch—not just the eyes and ears. Awakening refers to enlivening the hitherto dormant senses such as smell, taste, and touch, and sharpening senses such as sight and hearing that are conventionally used in schools. Opening up and accessing the full range of sensory capacity can have a transformative impact in bringing life to school; learning gardens are naturally rich sites for sensory engagement, as they are filled with fragrant blossoms, thorny and prickly vines, delicious fruit, rustling leaves, and colorful flowers. In this chapter we elaborate a number of contributions the senses make to bringing life to an ecological education inspired by living soil as central metaphor.

Sensory Experiences with Soil and Learning Gardens

One of the rich lessons we glean from learning gardens is the value of slow and protracted observation over time for learning: we have seen children and youth

engaged with the living soil and vibrant life of learning gardens listen deeply to silence, observe plants with great detail, touch worms with uninhibited glee, and smell herbs in dreamy repose.

The ecological and pedagogical implications are substantial, as such sensory and experiential learning is often effective over long periods of time, thus contributing to academic achievement and positive environmental responsibility. Bringing life to schools through awakening the senses unblocks sensory feedback loops, and encourages creative rethinking of guiding metaphors. Nurturing all the senses in the physical reality of learning gardens brings life to schools in the following ways: invite presence; support reminiscence and memory; ground otherwise abstract learning; and reinforce the idea of interconnectedness. Below we briefly articulate each of these contributions.

First, sensory awareness invites us into the present moment, the here and the now, which is the only place and time in which we can effectively act, feel, communicate, teach, or learn (Abram, 1996; Rosenberg, 2003; Tolle, 1999). Within the modern Western context, it is common to think and act from the mind alone without regard for the role of the body or of the embodied senses. Our senses live in the physical body. For instance, it is possible to taste fresh fruit here and now. While it is possible to remember how a fruit might have tasted in the past, or predict how a fruit may taste in the future, we can only really taste, feel, smell, see, and hear fruit in the present moment. The same can be said of teaching and learning. While it is possible to have an abstract idea about the future or the past, this kind of knowing is divorced from the now. Awakening sensory capacity invites a return to the present moment and encourages engagement with life. Second, because memories are associated with bodily senses, not just with the mind, the taste of certain fruits may bring back memories of childhood or family histories. The flavors do more than stimulate and arouse specific taste buds; they create physical connections that sustain personal memories and generate spontaneous sharing of stories with potential to create community. Meaning-making can be deepened through sharpening the role of the senses in learning.

Third, engaging the full range of our sensory capacity helps to center awareness, and grounds abstract concepts within physical reality. This aspect ties together the previous six pedagogical principles of sustainability education discussed in earlier chapters. Our senses are what allow us to make meaning of curious experiences in place. Though abstract ideas can describe general concepts such as “sense of place,” grounded individual intimate presence is required to actually make sense of place; curiosity and wonder originate at least as much from sensory stimulation as from intellectual awareness. Awakening the senses encourages perception of less obvious natural rhythms and scales, and invites deeper respect for and valuing of the diversities that abound in an interconnected world. Practical experience awakens the physical senses in the most literal way. Finally, sharpening the senses reinforces in a bodily way the theme of interconnections that is characteristic of all living things. All of these themes are

interrelated, as the physical body is naturally here and now, it is not abstract, and it forms interdependent relationship with mind and nature.

The full range of faculties complements knowing through the eyes and ears and integrates diverse components of lived bodily experience: our senses take us beyond intellectual understanding, opening a door that connects the living world inside to the living world outside. What escapes conventional “knowing” can be understood experientially through connecting with a complete palette of senses. For example, the rustle of leaves on a cold autumn night, the smell of coming rain, and the feel of a shovel parting soft earth are the types of sensory experiences that connect us with the living world and communicate critical information that cannot be codified or reduced to the intellect. Likewise, our physical bodies regularly provide sensory information regarding our state of being through signs such as a pit in the stomach, an itch at the back of the neck, or tightness in the knee. Tuning into our vibrant sensory capacity brings us into the present moment; listening, smelling, tasting, touching, seeing, and feeling are all activities that can only be done right here, right now.

Our senses alert us to the existence of layered relationships and multidirectional connections with all living phenomena. Indeed, even our sensory faculties themselves act in dynamic ecological interactions with one another. For David Abram (1996), one cannot help but perceive interconnections if one lives in the present moment and attends to information absorbed through all sensory pathways:

A genuinely ecological approach does not work to attain a mentally envisioned future, but strives to enter, ever more deeply, into the sensorial present. It strives to become ever more awake to the other lives, the other forms of sentience and sensibility that surround us in the open field of the present moment.

(p. 272)

In modern Western culture, all too often we close down this vital stream of information and rely on our intellect and mind alone for understanding. In much the same manner that modern industrial culture ignores the role of relationship in maintenance of healthy ecological systems, a privileging of the mind, eyes, and ears overlooks the relationship between these and all other bodily ways of knowing. Our rich sensory capacity is a fundamental aspect of what makes us human and connects us with the more-than-human world. This dynamic energy is blocked by lifeless mechanistic metaphors and industrial models of education. Awakening the senses is key to engaging with the life-giving abundance characteristic of the natural world. Learning gardens on school grounds are accessible places for engaging and sharpening the senses. By becoming present to our senses, as Abram describes above, we embrace our humanity as an ecology of experience.