



Photo by Natalie Brinkley

*Kindergarten children help their teacher put dried aromatic herbs in jars.*

A century ago, Rudolf Steiner proposed that the human being has twelve senses. In an article in the Fall/Winter 2016 issue of *Renewal*, we discussed the first four, the “foundational” senses: the sense of touch, the sense of well-being, the sense of one’s own movement, and the sense of balance. Steiner also referred to these as the “senses of will.” He held that they are related to the limbs (arms and hands, legs and feet) and to the metabolic organs. What Steiner called the “middle senses” or the “senses of feeling” are the senses of smell, taste, sight, and warmth. These are related to the rhythmic system of the body based in the heart and lungs.

While the development of the foundational senses is central in the first seven years of life, between the ages of seven and fourteen the senses of feeling dominate. The first four senses relate to the inner workings of the physical body; the next four relate to the quality of the connections between the individual and the environment. The final four senses, which will be discussed in a later article, relate to the potential for our development as social/spiritual beings in connection with other people.

### The Sense of Smell

The sense of smell involves stimuli (odors) that come to us from the environment. Unless we hold our nose—and thus stop breathing—we must simply accept the stimulus, which, borne on the air, enters the nose and reaches the olfactory sensors high in the nasal cavity. An experience of a smell is transitory. We can experience an odor only when it is present. We easily get used to a persistent odor

# The Four Senses of Feeling and Their Cultivation in Waldorf Education

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and can stop being aware of it. Once we do smell something, we either like it or we don’t. There’s not much gradation between these two extremes.

A substance or place that is not healthy for us reveals itself through an unpleasant odor. Thus, we know instinctively that putrefied food with its telltale stench is not to be eaten and that a room that smells of propane gas is dangerous. We often use the term “smell” in a metaphorical way. For example, when we say “I don’t like the smell of this situation,” we mean that we are uncomfortable with the moral or ethical direction things seem to be taking. We metamorphose our ability to judge an odorific substance as wholesome or not into an ability to judge the moral quality in our immediate environment.

### The Sense of Taste

The sense of smell involves what comes to us unbidden from the environment. The sense of taste involves choice. If we want to taste something, we have to decide to put it in our mouth. The sense of smell involves myriad possible odors that are difficult to classify or group. The sense of taste deals with just five tastes—sour, bitter, sweet, salty, and umami, a savory taste described as brothy or meaty. The human tongue, locus of the sense of taste, has receptors for just those five tastes.



*The scent of a rose reveals its essential character.*

Most people will agree that certain smells,

such as that of a rose, are pleasant and that others, such as that of rotten meat, are not. Preferences for tastes, however, are highly individual and very



Photo courtesy of Etheca Waldorf School

*These kindergarten children, unperturbed by cold and snow, enjoy their mid-morning snack.*

unpredictable. Our response, positive or negative, determines whether we will eat something or not, both in the moment but also in the future. Our taste experiences thus determine our dietary choices and hence also affect our health. Taste is directly related to digestion and the transformation of food into the substance of our bodies. Throughout the entire process of digestion, we are unconsciously judging the quality of the food and its nutritional value, as well as whether or not it is serving to build up or renew the body.



*Taste areas of the human tongue*

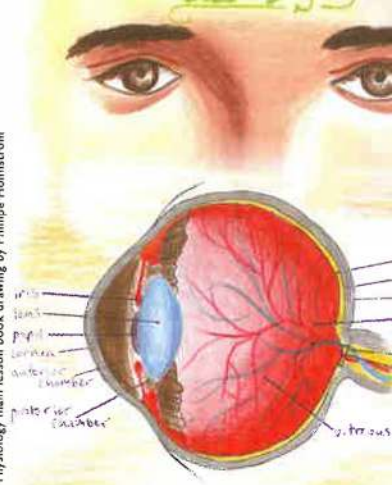
### The Sense of Sight

The sense of sight is dependent upon our two eyes, which are embedded in the skull and connected to the brain by the optic nerve. However, as Steiner points out, our eyes function as two additional limbs. Constantly in motion, they reach out into the world and bring us information about what is happening around us. They analyze this information in conjunction with the information contributed by our senses of life, self-movement, and balance. Our sense of sight allows us to perceive the stars, millions of light-years in the distance, as well

as the dew-covered grass at our feet.

The sense of sight involves the perception of movement, form, and also color. Color reveals something about the essence of a substance. Colors also convey and influence mood. Red, for example, bespeaks movement and energy, while blue is more a color of quiet and inwardness. Ideally, the colors in a child's environment should be colors from nature and represent something true about the objects perceived by the child.

Physiology main lesson book drawing by Philippe Holmstrom



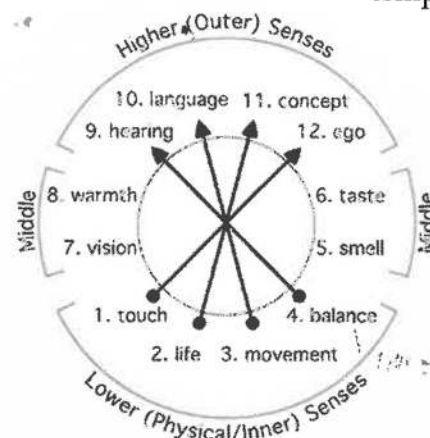
*The miracle of the human eye makes us aware of color, form, and movement in our surroundings.*

### The Sense of Warmth

Another of the senses of feeling is that of warmth or temperature. This sense is not located in any particular part of the body. Thermoreceptors, the nerves that react to heat or cold, are found in the skin of the entire body. Some areas, including the face, cheeks, nose, and fingertips, are more sensitive to warmth or cold. Others, such as the calves and thighs, are sensitive, but less so.

The sense of temperature is essential to our well-being and survival. It warns us against picking up a hot frying pan or immersing ourselves in an icy stream. It also helps us maintain an appropriate

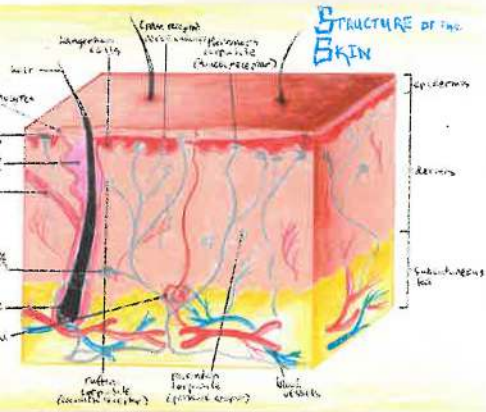
temperature in our immediate environment. Human beings function optimally when the environment and the body are neither too warm nor cold—the “Goldilocks” area of the spectrum of temperature. We should strive for balance between



*The twelve senses of the human being as described by Rudolf Steiner*

hot and cold. When exposed to either extreme for any period of time, we become lethargic.

The perception of warmth and coldness is often used metaphorically. We speak of someone being in the “heat of anger” and being “frozen with fear.” Warmth in a human relationship denotes interest and conviviality. Cold denotes avoidance, as in “giving someone a cold shoulder.”



### The Senses of Feeling and Waldorf Education

Waldorf class teachers may not be consciously asking themselves every day, “How can I pro-

*Structure of the human skin, from a grade-eleven anatomy main lesson book*

motivate a healthy sense of smell, or taste, or sense of temperature?” However, the typical Waldorf school environment and many aspects of the curriculum do encourage the wholesome use and development of these senses of feeling.

In the Waldorf classroom, all artificial scents are avoided. Virtually all schools use natural, organic cleaning agents. Potted plants, seasonal flowers, and beeswax products—crayons, modeling material, and candles—bring pleasant, natural smells into the daily experience of the child. In addition, the children are outside in all sorts of weather, experiencing the smell of rain, of freshly cut grass, of the earth as they plant seedlings, of the mud as they tromp through puddles. Thus, the sense of smell is well served.

Preparing and eating wholesome, natural food is an important part of the daily life in a typical Waldorf school. Schools that serve lunch typically provide vegetarian, organic meals. Kindergarten and lower grade teachers often make and bake whole grain bread from scratch. For teachers in the middle grades, the changing seasons and the topics of the main lesson blocks offer opportunities for cooking. The grade school curriculum, focusing on various world cultures, is rich in possibilities for classroom cooking. In the third grade, the Jewish festivals of Sukkoth and Pesach and the foods



Photo courtesy of Sarah Baldwin, Bella Luna Toys

*Playing outdoors, rain or shine, develops adaptability and resilience.*

related to them can be experienced. In the fourth grade, there might be a Scandinavian feast; in the fifth, Middle Eastern and Greek foods; and in the sixth, Roman and medieval banquets.

All these provide a variety of wholesome experiences of the senses of smell and taste. Also, typically, Waldorf students eat lunch together in the quiet of their classroom, often clustered into small groups rather than in a noisy, crowded lunchroom. Enough time is allotted so that the students can eat their food in a relaxed, appreciative manner.

The Waldorf curriculum also provides for the rigorous exercise of the sense of sight. In the study of science and nature, from the early grades through high school, careful visual observation of the phenomenon is always the starting point. The children are trained to focus on something—a cloud formation or a particular plant—and to discern it as a whole and as a collection of small characteristics. In addition, throughout their Waldorf careers, students are intensely involved with the visual arts—painting, drawing, and modeling. They are daily immersed in the world of form and color,



Photo by Linette Kialinski, courtesy of Philadelphia Waldorf School

*A typical Waldorf lower school classroom full of color and light*

both actively/creatively and passively/appreciatively. They learn the emotional qualities associated with the various colors and the relationships between the colors.



Photo courtesy of Kimberlon Waldorf School

*Gardening engages the senses of sight and smell of these Waldorf high school students.*

The regular, daily experience of nature—rain or shine, snow and cold, or sunshine and heat—gives Waldorf children an experience of the extremes of warmth and cold. It also teaches them how to effectively deal with those extremes. Usually, children are able to take care of themselves in relation to heat and cold from about the age of twelve. Until that time, the teacher makes sure they are appropriately dressed for the weather and for the activity. Below 55 degrees Fahrenheit, children need enough clothing to protect them from cold. When children are dressed in multiple layers, the teacher can easily allow the removal or addition of a layer to avoid too much or too little warmth. If a child's hands are cold, a layer can be added; if the hands are hot, a layer can be removed. It is crucial that the core of the body be

kept warm, as this is where the vital organs are located.



Photo courtesy of Berkshire Waldorf High School (Mass.)

*A high school student drawing from nature and refining his observational skills*

It is very important that relationships characterized by warmth are consciously and intentionally cultivated within a school: among the children, children and teachers, teacher and teacher, teacher and parents, among parents, and between the school and the community. This does not mean a lack of conflict,

but rather that when conflict arises, it takes place in an environment of mutual respect and caring. Developing such an atmosphere starts in the classroom, as teachers pay careful attention to the interactions of the children, as well as to their own interactions with the children. Warmth grows in the children's relationships with one another as the teacher models acceptance, humor, understanding, and the setting of reasonable human boundaries.

Of the middle senses, Rudolf Steiner says that they take one on a journey of increasing penetration of

the external world and of the multiple phenomena in it. The sense of smell can reveal to us something of the inner nature of a substance. The sense of taste, requiring physical union with a substance, reveals yet more. The sense of sight makes known the form and movement of an object, whether it is opaque or transparent, and also its color—the type of light the object can reflect. Finally, the warmth or coldness of a substance unveils its inner nature because if something is warm, it is warm throughout.

How marvelous it is that we possess these middle senses, which connect us ever more strongly with the world outside our physical bodies! It is very important that these senses be consciously considered, particularly between the ages of seven and fourteen, when they are most available for shaping and educating. ☉



*Drawing of a dill plant from a fifth-grade botany class*



**VIVIAN JONES-SCHMIDT** discovered Waldorf Education when her daughter was ready for kindergarten and has never looked back. She was a class teacher and specialty teacher at the Charlottesville Waldorf School and the Richmond Waldorf School for over twenty years and has served on the editorial advisory board of *Renewal* for over twenty years. Originally trained as a preschool teacher, Vivian now substitutes in preschool classes in Charlottesville.