
Movement Toward Tolerance: Emphasizing the Four Foundational Senses as a Pathway to Healthy Social Life

~ Nancy Blanning

Our times call us to equally address two critical goals. We are committing ourselves to truly engage in practices of diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice (DEIJ). At the same time, we are committed to considering the gradually unfolding development and consciousness of the young child as we understand it in Waldorf education. Where and when is it our responsibility to explicitly present guidance to cultivate respect and tolerance for diversity? When and how do we hold the space for implicit offerings showing respect, kindness, and generosity through stories, puppetry, and artistic imaginations?

There is also a parallel question. What developmental experiences provide children a foundation upon which all these urgent messages can take hold? What prepares the human being to develop reverence, tolerance, empathy, compassion, and a sense for justice in social life? Child development viewed through the lens of anthroposophy offers an answer.

The first seven years of a child's life are dedicated to growing a strong physical body. This includes building healthy nerve-sense (thinking), rhythmic (feeling), and metabolic-limb (willing) systems. Rudolf Steiner described this in the first pedagogical lecture given in 1907, years before the founding of the first Waldorf school (Steiner 1907). While growth and development continue throughout life, what is developed in these early years provides a critical foundation for the unfolding of capacities and skills, not only physically, but intellectually and socially as well.

In 1919, Steiner extended this picture of the human being in lectures given to the teachers of the first Waldorf school (Steiner 1919). In briefly describing the human senses, he expands from the traditional five or six senses to a group of twelve: touch, life or well-being, self-movement, balance, smell, taste, sight, warmth, hearing, word or speech, thought, and sensing the ego of the other human being. In this ordering, touch is listed first, culminating in the ego-sensing of the other human being as the highest of the sensing capacities.

These senses can be divided into three groups as follows:

Highest / Social / Spiritual Senses

- Ego-sensing—Sensing the humanity and individuality of another; sensing the ego-being of another person
- Thought—recognize that words are sequenced to convey thoughts expressed by other people
- Word / Language / Speech—sensing that sounds, hand movement, or gesture in particular sequences convey meaning. Sense of word takes sound (or hand movement) and gives it meaning
- Hearing—experiencing sound through the mechanism of the ear

Middle / Feeling Senses

- Warmth—sensing external temperature as warmer or cooler in comparison to our own body temperature. Warmth is a transitional sense
- Sight—taking in visual impressions through the eyes; connected to light
- Taste—experiencing sweet, bitter, salty, and sour by taking in substances through the mouth with help of a watery element (saliva)
- Smell—experiencing outer world through airy element in smells, aromas

Foundational / Will Senses

- Balance / Equilibrium—sensing uprightness and body position in relation to the earth and gravity
- Self-movement / Proprioception—sensing the cooperative movements of one's limbs and coordination, learning body geography
- Life or Well-Being—sensing the health and balance of inner organic life
- Touch—learning boundary between self and world

Through the first four senses of touch, life, self-movement, and balance, we learn about the well-being and position of our own physical bodies and how we relate to the earth's gravity. These are often called the foundational or will senses and are the primary, critical focus areas in our early childhood education for the first seven years of life. These senses are primarily

educated through physical movement, as indicated by Steiner over one hundred years ago. The importance of movement is now being acknowledged and confirmed by neurological research. A motto these days could be that “movement builds the brain.” What is accomplished in neurological development through movement (especially well-ordered, purposeful movement) and the opportunity to explore the environment in the first seven years prepares the foundation for future cognitive, emotional, and social life.

The second, middle group of senses—smell, taste, sight, and warmth—gives us information about the nature and qualities of things external to ourselves in the world. These senses are described as the middle or feeling senses, as our experiences through these senses often result in our liking or disliking (forming sympathy or antipathy) toward what we encounter.

The third group of senses was new in Steiner’s time and identifies subtle sensing capacities as our birthright. These can be called the social and even spiritual senses, through which we recognize and come into relationship with other human beings. These senses are the well-known sense of hearing and newly described senses of word or speech, thought, and sensing the I-being or ego of other human beings.

Another important aspect that Rudolf Steiner shared is that the four foundational senses and the four highest, social senses have relationships with one another. In subtle ways these foundational senses, which are all associated with physically identifiable sensory organs, are the bases out of which the subtle realms of sensing other people and relationships in the social realm metamorphose. This is a very important point to be further developed.

In another lecture, Steiner gave characterizations of “soul states” associated with the senses of touch, life, self-movement, and balance (Steiner 1920). These “soul states” open the door to discovering more subtle qualities carried from the foundational senses to the highest senses in this “metamorphosing” relationship. In brief, the senses and the associated soul states are:

Touch—Permeated by the feeling of God; the sense of being “touched” by God

Life—Feeling of comfort

Self-Movement—Feeling of freedom or being free in one’s soul

Balance—Inner rest; feeling oneself as Spirit

From these brief indications, other anthroposophical researchers have expanded upon the picturing and understanding of the senses. Prominent among them are Karl König, the founder of the Camphill communities for special needs children and adults, and Henning Köhler, anthroposophical counselor and author of *Working with Anxious, Nervous, and Depressed* (2001) *Children and Difficult Children: There Is No Such Thing* (2003).

In building upon the soul states and his observations of children’s mood-dispositions and sensory development, Köhler takes another step toward explaining how the healthy development of the foundational senses prepares the pathway to reverence, tolerance, empathy, and a sense of justice in the social domain.

The senses are complex and deserve deep study. Rudolf Steiner reflected on the senses for decades before he made any public statement about them. The following are only brief characterizations of these foundational senses to facilitate our picturing of this sensory path to reverence, tolerance, empathy, and justice.

Touch gives us a sense of boundary. It tells where we stop and where the rest of the world begins. Other conventional views of touch say that it is through touch that we explore the world and learn about what lies outside of ourselves. While this is true, this is not the full picture. Steiner emphasizes that touch gives experience of “boundary.” Whenever we touch something outside of our body, we also have an inner experience. This inner experience, caused by something exterior, gives the first experience of boundary, of self and not-self, of self and world. It gives an experience of feeling enclosed.

Life is an organic sense. It provides for us with the experience of well-being. We are consciously aware of this sense when we are unwell with a headache or stomachache, or feel overly tired. When all is well in our organic and metabolic life and we are well rested and not under stress, we are quite unaware of this sense. The life sense can also be called the sense of well-being. A healthy life sense helps us feel secure and cared for, knowing that “all is well.” We have a sensation of comfort.

Self-movement is not the ability to move. It is rather the inner faculty that senses when we have moved. It is the sense that helps us to perceive the position

of our body parts. Through this sense, we develop body geography and understand how the body is organized. Self-movement allows us to know where the different body parts are in space and in relationship to other body parts without needing to see or to touch them. The sensory organs for self-movement are tiny receptors in the joints, called proprioceptors, that experience the pressure, tension, and angle and position of our limbs. This information is sent to the brain and informs us of body position. This sense is now recognized and confirmed by mainstream research as well.

Balance gives us our experience of uprightness. It informs us, on the one hand, of where the body is in relation to the earth and the force of gravity. The ampulla at the bottom of the inner ear senses this relationship. Another part of the sensory organ for balance is composed of the three semicircular canals within the inner ear. We must have accurate and consistent information from this sensory system to maintain our uprightness and feel secure in standing and moving on the earth. To achieve and maintain uprightness, the human being must have experience of living and moving in the three planes of space—above/below, forward/back, and right/left. The semicircular canals are themselves arranged in these directions and are like miniscule sensory compasses that inform us of where we are in space in relation to these directional pairs.

We usually have a dim consciousness of these lower senses unless something goes wrong through illness or injury. Stiff muscles, for example, can make us more aware of the limbs and their movement and position. Balance awareness is negatively affected by motion sickness.

Each of these senses has characteristic experiences that help build healthy strength in its domain.

Touch is made whole by many, many different touch experiences of texture, shape, density, size, roughness, smoothness, prickliness, squishiness, density, and so on. Exploring a great variety of touch sensations confirms that experiences are different, not good or bad. Children in our groups have daily encounters with natural materials, practical work, cooking, and exploring the natural world outdoors. Warm and comfortable clothing assures children that they have an enclosing, safe boundary around their skin. Gentle, secure, appropriate touching in the infant and

toddler years is the most essential experience for young children to gain security from touch—to subtly know that they are “touched by God” (see, e.g., Köhler 2001, 46–48). Another word we can use to describe being “touched” or “held” by God is trust.

Life / Well-being is nourished by regular rhythms, routine, and predictability in the child’s care. Babies may cry frantically when cold, wet, or hungry. But when response comes reliably from a warm and loving caregiver, the baby begins to develop a “positive peacefulness.” While gratification may not come immediately, the child learns that care will come and can be relied upon. Little by little, the child can tolerate delayed gratification in incremental stretches. A well-tended life sense “gives growing children the agreeable sensation of inner restfulness and the security of self-containment . . . of being sheltered and stable” (Köhler 2001, 27–29). One feels comfortable in one’s being.

Köhler goes on to describe how loving care provided in this way, coupled with the example of peacefulness and patience demonstrated by those around the child, along with the support of spiritual forces carried by the child’s angel, provide the groundwork for developing tolerance in moral and social life.

In speaking of tolerance, Köhler states: “It is possible to listen to and understand others in their individual difference, to accept them as they are, and take real interest in them, only if we stand firmly on our own ground while meeting them with inner collectedness and circumspection of a confident life sense orientation that has been built into our personality structure [which shows itself as a certain degree of selflessness.] We can forget ourselves only when we are firmly self-grounded; otherwise, self-forgetting begets fear, fear that [creates a hurried and intolerant mood], seeking refuge in our accustomed opinions and prejudices, sympathies, and antipathies” (Köhler 2001, 38).

“Active tolerance” is the goal. “Active tolerance means not only leaving others free to be themselves in all their individual differences, while taking a gentle and unprejudiced interest in them, but really wanting to understand them sufficiently to honor their ways of being and behaving without judging by one’s own standard” (Köhler 2001, 39).

The predictable rhythmic routines and schedules of our days, weeks, and yearly festival celebrations provide strong support to a healthy life sense. Nourishing foods; natural materials; clothing appropriate to the

season; carefully chosen colors to nourish and not shock the senses; and a warm, friendly, inviting mood in the classroom support the life sense on a daily basis. The more we more consciously carry the power and importance of these reassuring rhythms, the more powerful they become in supporting the children.

Self-movement finds its joyous expression in movement of the limbs. Self-movement educates itself by feeling the position of and pressure within the joints of the limbs. Whenever we push, pull, hang, lift, jump, stomp, hold our body weight on our hands and arms, wring water out of a towel, stir a thick batter, chop vegetables, knead a big portion of bread dough, hammer, saw, rasp, shovel, carry heavy objects, climb, and so on, we are supporting healthy self-movement. This sense is only educated through physical movement. Through self-movement we acquire body geography. The more the body moves in repeated, purposeful sequences, the more coordination and control the child acquires. In other words, the body does what the child wishes it to do with “a dreamlike sureness” (Köhler 2001, 84-85). Having this capacity “is what gives us, even in seemingly hopeless situations, the confidence to summon up a new impulse to move on in life, to change direction, to develop initiative” (Köhler 2001, 86). We have the perception of being free in our own mobility. Steiner’s connection of self-movement with “being a free spirit” captures this.

On a soul or social level, what does this capacity transform to? “When we have some gripping experience, we speak of it as ‘moving.’ What is being moved? It is the inner human being . . . Our ability to perceive our own inner stirrings also enables us to understand and participate in the soul stirrings of others” (Köhler 2001, 87). If we imagine this further as the child matures, being able to move into the inner experience of the other is the beginning of empathy and compassion, soul virtues sorely needed in our troubled and divisive times. Whenever we give the children opportunity for meaningful, sequential movement in circle imaginations, ring games, purposeful work, and all the things named above, we are paving the way toward social empathy and compassion.

Balance is the companion and complementary partner of self-movement. Henning Kohler states: “Our whole feeling of being at ease, our whole capacity for coordination, would be as good as useless if we were unable to keep our balance. In every sequence of

movements, in every moment of just standing upright, balance has to be continuously maintained” (Kohler 2001, 107). But while the body is in movement, balance provides the sense of inner quiet. With this inner quiet, the human being is always the same self no matter what time, space, or position the body is in. Steiner says that it is a sensing of oneself as spirit.

How is balance educated in the physical body? As with its partner self-movement, balance is also strengthened and matured through movement. Balance loves all movements that circle and spin, swing, twirl, rock, bend, sway/nod/rotate the head, and climb. Balance thrives on its practice through walking on beams, logs, wiggling rocks, uneven ground, and so on. As the body and balancing or vestibular systems go through all these gyrations, the “inner quiet” practices keeping itself steady.

The word “balance” brings forth another picture, too—the old-fashioned scales with weighing pans on either side to sense the relative weight of what one side holds in comparison to the other. We can balance our body physically to find a centered stance. When things are out of balance, we can readjust to re-create equilibrium through movement of body position. In the soul realm, this physical balancing becomes the capacity for judgment. “Making judgments means arriving at an outlook that resolves or rises above a problem, a process in which what at first seems insoluble is brought into harmonious accord . . . We try to restore symmetry in our thinking and feeling.” This is what we know as a sense of justice. “The sense of justice is simply a sublimation of the sense of balance coupled with the capacity for empathy transmitted by the sense of motion. Fellow feeling and compassion are indissolubly bound up . . . with the sense of justice. Far from a moral standpoint, a feeling for justice is feeling for symmetry, an inner impulse to bring restitution in restoring human dignity where it has suffered” (Kohler 2001, 115).

These descriptions provide a more complete picture of each foundational sense and what capacities—trust, tolerance, empathy/compassion, and justice—healthy development supports. The next step is to return to Rudolf Steiner’s insight that the four foundational and four highest, social senses stand in paired relationship to one another.

- Touch is related to sensing the I-being of the other
- Life/well-being is related to sensing the thought of another

- Self-movement is related to moving with the word or speech of another
- Balance is related to the capacity for hearing

A healthy **touch** sense provides experience of boundary. I am secure in myself and can approach another person with trust, sensing where I stop and the other person begins. Security from my physical touch rises to the social sphere in sensing the I-being of the other; I can trust our sameness and not be fearful or anxious of the other person's differences from me.

A healthy **life sense** provides a sense of well-being that supports development of tolerance. Other thoughts, attitudes, cultural experiences, religious orientations, gender expressions, and racial identities may be different from mine. Yet I can feel secure and comfortable in my own being through well-nourished touch and reliable life rhythms. I can not only tolerate this diversity but find it interesting.

Self-movement affects both our outward physical and inward social or emotional movements. My physical body knows how to move with coordination through self-movement. Through self-movement turned inward, I can do this within myself and I can also move inwardly with others, sensing how an experience may feel for them. This capacity opens the door to empathy and compassion with others. Through my feeling, I can sense my way into another's inner life in a respectful and tender way.

Balance provides an experience of equanimity, of symmetrical, even-tempered equilibrium of the physical body through finding a centered point of intersection in the three planes of space. Steiner described balance as affording an "inner rest." In order to elevate my hearing to listening, I must find the inner quiet that allows me to encounter the words, feelings, actions, and thoughts of the others. I sense my way to achieving an inner balance of what I observe. This expresses itself outwardly as a sense of justice. What I sense inwardly as a balanced and fair view, I can project outwardly into the social world in which we all live.

The physical and neurological development of the senses creates the foundation upon which important non-visible intellectual, emotional, and social capacities can grow. Attention to supporting the sense of touch, life or well-being, self-movement, and balance is foundational. In our times, this support is essential to the future years of growing, thinking, feeling, and willing as a full human being.

There are explicit DEIJ messages that we must stand for with bravery and moral integrity. And children also need a chance to dream into imaginations where they see themselves as being recognized, cared for, and safe and sheltered. Their souls crave to know that goodness is always present, even when we cannot see it.

For all of this to take root and flourish, children equally need dedicated support to grow robust, secure, reliable grounding in the four foundational senses as the preparation for the more compassionate, kind, and just world we all working together to manifest. ♦

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Additional Resources

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