

“Red Feels Like Red!”:

The Aesthetic Body in the Sensual World

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I have spent my time watching children. Joyous laughs, frightened shrieks, wide-eyed wonder, curious questions, and a frenzied energy to drink it all in typify their encounters in the natural world. More than their childish enthusiasm has captured me, however. Little bodies vibrate with excitement as they experience the newness of nature, yet at the same time, they stand in the world as if it is their own. A corporeal wisdom seems to run through them, as they know they belong in the water, on the rocks, and in the flower bed. Their heads are not full of questions about dichotomous splits, personal identity, and the impact of crass commercialism on the woodlands.

The joy of children responding to their environment has been made especially clear to me during excursions to a magical place called Hanging Lake. Children are the first to stand under Spouting Rock, a waterfall that sprays onto nearby hikers. They are the first to scramble onto the log that crosses the lake to look into the clear depths of the pool, all the way to the bottom, to the blue stone that shines back at them. And they are the first to show interest in the little details that are easy to miss in any environment that boasts such splendor. Familiar with the area, I take time to show them snails, an abandoned eagle’s nest, fox tracks, and a racer snake that has taken to hanging out near the boardwalk. Showing them the right way to hold a snake so it feels safe

rather than alarmed satisfies me that they are able to go home with at least one intimate encounter with the natural world.

Until Zach, that is. Zach and his family visited us one weekend in late spring. Nearly nine, a bright, funny and affable boy, he was just finishing third grade. He liked the idea of hiking, but I noticed as we walked up the trail that he seemed to take little notice of anything around him. He was a little more engaged when I loaned him my camera and he had a toy through which he could experience the wilderness. When we arrived at Hanging Lake, he seemed rather unaffected, even for an eight-year-old child. At one point, he pulled out his Game Boy and began to play video games. I called him over when I found the racer snake laying next to the boardwalk, and while three other children came running, Zach wandered over slowly, his disinterest palpable. He held the snake, but after only a few motions of “hand over hand,” he gave it back to me, seemingly unmoved.

Over the weekend, other behaviors disturbed me. Zach told me that he wanted a dog, and he showed me the dog he has as a “pet” on his Game Boy, yet he never once played with our dog, even though the dog eagerly approached him with toys in his mouth. He was notably unaffectionate with us or his parents, a trait that had not existed the year prior. I asked his parents what had changed in Zach’s life to shut him down so much, and the floodgates opened. Zach’s school had, the year before, adopted a “no-touch” policy for students. Zach had been in trouble twice and suspended once for violating it, the most serious violation being his comfort of a friend whose father was in the hospital. After that, said his parents, Zach avoided touching, believing it would get him into trouble. This reaction was alarming enough for his parents to seek help for him. While Zach’s reaction may have been extreme, it also may provide a vision of a future for

American children where healthy human touch becomes less and less the norm and the body is progressively demonized.

As part of the spiritual and intellectual heritage of the west, Judeo-Christian and Cartesian thinking have burdened us with the sense that the body is, at worst, laden with sinful tendencies and at best, illusory and secondary in importance. The sinful nature of the body is noted at the outset of Hebraic mythology. After Adam and Eve have eaten from the Tree of Knowledge, they experience shame about their nakedness; in other words, the first thing they reject is their bodies. Their punishment is to experience pain and suffering through the labor their bodies will endure. Salvation from the original sin of defying God will come in the body of Jesus Christ, who will die painfully on the cross for the sake of humankind. Through the suffering of the body, salvation takes place. However, in Christian mythology, it is not the body that is saved, but the soul. In fact, the body, in its “itch for lust and desire for gluttony,” as described by Pope Innocent III in 1215, can be the sole deterrent to individual salvation, distracting the soul from piety by its demands. The Seven Deadly Sins, driven by bodily desire, threaten eternal damnation for the soul. Christian asceticism strove to deny the body’s desires in favor of a life of piety, and hence, salvation. Ultimately, the psycho-spiritual control of the body became the penultimate goal of Christianity, next only to salvation itself, as one who can deny the body is one who can reach a spiritual state. The image of Jesus Christ’s incarnation reiterates that the most important human aspect is spiritual rather than physical.

This privileging of the spiritual above all else created the intellectual space for René Descartes to devise a proof for God that led to his popular dictum, *cogito ergo sum*, which posited “thinking” as the only reliable truth of human existence. According to Descartes, the senses could not be trusted to reveal knowledge or wisdom. As a result, one’s experience of the

physical world never can be trusted fully, and as a further result, the physical world becomes something one cannot trust. In the words of David Abram, author of *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World*, the material world after Descartes became a “mechanical realm,” rather than a living one (32). Over time, other philosophers—Immanuel Kant and David Hume, for instance—questioned whether objects had any intrinsic characteristics at all, negating the qualities of their existence and delegating their “meaning” to an observer’s subjective experience (Hillman, “Anima” 117). In fact, James Hillman, in his essay “*Anima Mundi: The Return of the Soul to the World*,” points to Cartesian and post-Cartesian arguments as influential in helping to “murder” the soul of the world by severing sensation and imagination from each other into two distinct functions (107-8). When subjective experience is dismissed as “imaginal,” then, the ability to sense the world’s being, says Hillman, “remains unconscious” (“Anima” 108). The danger in this, he believes, is that without the sensate experience of “particular, concrete events” and the imaginal understanding of those events, intimacy cannot occur (“Anima” 120).

For children, their intimacy with the world is through their senses, touch being the primary way by which they interact with their environment and with other people. The knowledge gained by touch is vital to understanding what it is to be human and to learning about the world of which they are a part, as well as how to place themselves within that world. Children do not question whether touch is a Cartesian illusion; they only know it for what it is—a sensate experience in their physical bodies. Studies on infant and child touch deprivation leave no question that physical, psychological, and social development are all profoundly impacted when touch is neglected. In fact, citing Dr. David Cross, a leading researcher on the psychology of touch, “So serious are the effects of touch deprivation, it is considered by researchers to be

worse than physical abuse” (Brunner 29). With knowledge like this, it is almost impossible to believe that schools would create rules that deny children the ability to touch.

“No-touch” policies at schools are not common yet, but they are becoming an acceptable norm in some districts. Teachers have long been held to no-touch rules, even in daycare centers where the only acceptable touch is the changing of diapers or the administration of medical aid. The new policies, however, apply to children not being allowed to touch *each other*, whether in contact sports, tag, hugging, a hand-shake, or a high five. The supposed goal is to prevent physical fights and inappropriate or undesired affection, but instead of laying out rules for such specific infractions, for the ease of administration, some schools have simply outlawed all physical contact between students.

Sensate intimacy in children is a wonder to behold. I watched in fascination as a friend’s three-year-old daughter touched everything in my garden to “learn” it. She walked around the yard touching everything that was red. Then she touched the red balloon on her shirt, my red necklace, her mother’s red lips:

“Why are you touching all the red things, Zoe?” I asked.

“So I can feel it,” she responded.

“What does red feel like?”

She shouted with glee, “Red feels like red!”

In his essay “The Thought of the Heart,” Hillman presents his theory on aesthetics, which he says is the “link between heart and the organs of sense” (47). Where the root of “aesthetic,” *aisthesis*, has often been translated as “sense perception,” Hillman argues that its etymology points to a deeper meaning: *aisthesis*, at its root, means “taking in” and “breathing in,” a “gasp” (47). The crux of his position is that “breathing in” the world means that in taking part in its aesthetic, humans experience the material world revealing “its particular aspiration within a cosmic arrangement” (47). What is experienced, then, is that an object’s image is intentionally

“substantive,” owning a “psychic reality, claiming but not requiring our witness” (Hillman, “Anima” 103). So, to experience the world internally through “breathing in” is to experience the world’s revelation of itself and to discover that there is a “self” out there to be experienced. As a result, says Hillman, when the object’s sensual image is perceived internally, “its imagination is activated (rather than ours), so that it shows its heart and reveals its soul” (“Thought” 48). When this happens, our “imaginative recognition, the childlike act of imagining the world, animates the world and returns it to soul” (“Anima” 102). In this way, the world outside of the human body can come to be understood as alive *on its own* bringing its own image to life in both the world and in the perceiver. As a result, says Hillman, “The aesthetic response saves the phenomenon” (“Thought” 48).

Zoe’s aesthetic response to red was to see it as itself, so that the feeling of “red” was nothing more than “red.” At three, Zoe’s undiluted aesthetic sense accomplishes a critical moment, knowing that “all soul has form, and therefore, all form has soul” (Hillman, “Thought” 61). The aesthetic sense is how humans come to know the world, and, says Hillman, the “aesthetic reflex is indeed not merely disinterested aestheticism; *it is our survival*” (“Thought” 63, emphasis mine). The importance of physically touching the world is that the life of the physical world engages the toucher psychically. Having an aesthetic sense is not about beauty, it is about having a response to stimulus that evokes the senses. Without the ability to trust the senses to give accurate information about experience in the physical world, the presence of that world cannot be appreciated. Disconnected from access to the senses, the aesthetic reflex is lost. If children from a young age are inhibited from the most natural forms of touch, human contact, how inhibited will their touch response become as they learn to keep their aesthetic sense internalized?

One would hope that “no-touch” policies in schools would be countered by children receiving positive physical contact at home. However, American children are shown to receive less physical contact than any other modern nation, points out Richard Thompson, Superintendent of Catholic Schools in Denver, Colorado, which is why he will not allow “no-touch” rules in his schools. Unfortunately, “no-touch” policies may be more of a result than a cause, meaning that social, cultural, or ideological support for the intimate, physical experience of the world may already be diminishing. With increased focus on the interior life, encouraged by technologies that psychically engage us, the importance of the exterior life begins to slip away. Abram fears the disappearance of the ability to know “the textures, the rhythms and tastes of the bodily world, and to distinguish readily between such tastes and those of our own invention” (x). He believes that “Our bodies have formed themselves in delicate reciprocity with the manifold textures, sounds, and shapes of an animate earth” and that “to shut ourselves off from these other voices [...] is to rob our own senses of their integrity, and to rob our minds of their coherence” (22). Without a sense of the external world and the ability to respond to it, the body risks being cut off from its aesthetic sense. Without the ability to see what Hillman calls “the soul of the world,” how can nature be tended to? Without it, what hope is there for saving that world, not just for humanity, but for the sake of the world itself?

Without the privileging of intimate touch as the sensate experiences that define bodily wisdom, keeping the natural world in sight is difficult to do. When an eight-year-old boy has no interest in holding a snake, why would he care if snakes exist at all? Abram’s concern that we have become “so deaf and so blind to the vital existence of other species” that we can “casually bring about their destruction” (28) is not without merit. He suggests that the body being denied its access to the world in a fully sensate way denies the very essence that makes us human, and

even without an affront to the right to have physical contact, our distractions are plenty: “Caught up in a mass of abstractions, our attention hypnotized by a host of human-made technologies that only reflect us back to ourselves, it is all too easy for us to forget our carnal inherence in a more-than-human matrix of sensations and sensibilities” (22).

With the Christian and Cartesian heritage behind us and industrialism and crass commercialism bolstering our interests, Americans have landed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century with little easy connection to the natural world. Certainly, archetypal patterns of nature exist, in architecture, personal relationships, even in the conduct that takes place in glass and steel skyscrapers and in front of computer screens. But without actual engagement in the natural world, its survival has become one of medial interest. One of the challenges, claims Hillman, is that matter is more demonized than ever due to the myriad threats that face us in our environment: from tainted food to polluted air to dirty water (“Anima” 111). In so many ways, humans must defend themselves against a world gone bad. Even as the 2009-10 school year headed toward the starting gate, schools all over the country put “no touch” policies in place to defend children against the spread of H1N1.

Disengaging from the natural world is easy when that world is viewed with enmity, a world that has been “disenchanted” due to the “inward turn” of the soul caused by the Christian and Cartesian threads of western thinking (Whan 29), and that more lately has been poisoned by disregard for the environment. As a result, says Abram, although “Humans are tuned for relationship,” in our disengagement with the sensual aspects of the natural world, “we participate almost exclusively with other humans and with our own human-made technologies,” even though he does not believe that is what makes us “human” (ix). What makes us human, he says, is engaging in the natural world that is *unlike* us and realizing through those differences the



qualities of humanness distinct from other qualities of nature (ix). Instead, engagement with “human technologies” is an inducement away from the physical world. The use of technology fosters interiority and can result in an inability to see the natural world, engage in it, understand it, or care about it, and this includes the body’s functioning within it. Privileging the interior self intimates that the body is not vital for a sense of self, nor for a sense of self in the world, thereby validating the psychic experience of isolation and narcissism inherited from the past. If, indeed, “We have already lost an awareness of ourselves as animals” and are drifting toward a mechanized future as Glen Slater suggests in his essay “Cyborgian Drift: Resistance Is Not Futile” (173), then treating touch as a punishable offense only serves to widen that gap.

The need for human life to interact with the natural world helps to explain the aesthetic sense that remains innate to the human experience. Although it may not be experienced as the joy of feeling “the red” in “red,” psychic sensitivity to the environment still garners psychological attention. Hillman hints at this in “Anima Mundi” as he discusses the inner state of patients he says display sensitivity to the degraded state of the external world: “distortions of communication, the sense of harassment and alienation, the deprivation of intimacy with the immediate environment, the feelings of false values and inner worthlessness experienced relentlessly in the world of our common habitation” (93). He believes that these patients bring in the “neurosis of the world,” indistinguishable from their own (93). The external world is in fact bearing down on patients, and perhaps through them, the world is speaking. Hillman seems to believe so, when he says that through these patients, he feels inundated with the “unalleviated suffering” of the world (99). The depth of his patients’ psychological responses may rest in his idea that “the soul of the individual can never advance beyond the soul of the world, because they are inseparable, the one always implicating the other” (105). If it is true then, that the

external world provides a subjective report of one's feelings, as Hillman claims (116), then the boredom of a near-nine-year-old boy indicates not only his retreat from the world, but also the world's retreat from him.

If this is the case, then how do humans and the world become reengaged with each other? The return to the sensate self as an activator of the imagination, that is the ability to see the world through the images it presents, be they perceived as ugly or as beautiful, reinvigorates the way the world comes to be known. Imagination, as Abram describes it, is a way "the senses themselves have of throwing themselves beyond what is immediately given, in order to make contact with the other sides of things that we do not sense directly" (58). In other words, through the image created by sensual experience, the world presents itself to be known. For this reason, if for no other, the sensate self cannot be abandoned. By watching children and the joy of "feeling what red feels like," one can witness the libidinal energy needed in order to keep the outside world alive (Hillman, "Anima" 121). However, children stand to lose this ability by the withdrawal of touch as a positive quality of their lives. Only through touch can we revivify ourselves as "organs of this world, flesh of its flesh, and [know] that the world is perceiving itself *through us*" (Abram 68). It is our individual awareness that keeps the world alive.

Touch animates this awareness, and in the associative relationship between one's own body and the other body it encounters, empathy develops (Abram 37). Without touch, without the experience of interiority *in relationship with* exteriority, how can one human being come to understand another who is like him or her, and more intently, without touch, how can one human being come to understand other creatures, biological organisms, rocks, or air? The fact is, the body is a "phenomenon that seems always to accompany one's awareness" (Abram 37), and this is an awareness that exists on many levels. For instance, Slater emphasizes that archetypal

patterns are experienced “through the body and through bodily participation in the phenomenal world” (182). Therefore, if the body is cut off from archetypal relational patterns, the psyche experiences such restrictions as well, which is likely damaging to psychic wholeness. According to Abram, “the body itself is the true subject of experience” (45); perception is “the concerted activity of *all* the body’s senses as they function and flourish together” (Abram 59), so without touch, neither that functioning nor flourishing can occur. Abram posits that the only way of knowing the self is through the information that comes through the body, so that “to touch is also to feel oneself being touched, [...] to see is also to feel oneself seen” (69). Validation of a sense of self, therefore, comes from a world that experiences us as much as we experience it. As a receptive organism of the world, if the body is refused contact, it has little access to the knowledge of the world that it needs in order to thrive. As a result, children whose sense of self is not valued as vital and necessary on a physical plane are not validated by the world outside of them. Without this validation via experience, how can children, and how can any human know, or care, about the world around them?

The sensate, aesthetic self must be developed for the salvation of the natural world and our relationship with it. To repress our sensual involvement with the world around us results in seeing what is outside of us as “inert” or “passive,” and we thereby “block our perpetual reciprocity with that being” (Abram 56). It is exactly that reciprocity that is needed in order to see the world in its context and one’s individual place in its context as well. It is only through body knowledge that this move can take place. “As we reacquaint ourselves with our breathing bodies,” says Abram, “the perceived world itself begins to shift and transform,” so that “unnoticed or overlooked presences begin to stand forth from the periphery and to engage our awareness” (63). Body presence is vital to this, and the body must be allowed to reach out to

touch and thereby imagine all aspects of the world. If “we simply persist in our reflective cocoon,” Abram warns, “then all of our abstract ideals and aspirations for a unitary world will prove horribly delusory,” and the cost may be “our common extinction” (271).

As for me, I will watch children in their grand corporeal wisdom. Red really does feel like red, Zoe assures me. If I watch her long enough, I am hoping that I can learn to feel it, too.

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