Hearing and Seeing

Last week, my friend Col Jennings was finishing up his U3A Course for 2018; I joined them halfway through and we all shared light refreshments at the end. The moment I entered their space my mind-body was noticeably quietened and calmed (from previously visiting my doctor and then walking in the strong wind). There was a powerful sense of serenity in the low-lit room – such a peaceful, quiet atmosphere – that I marvelled at the way my own being changed into a more relaxed state so soon after I sat down. People were sharing quietly about their own experience, which is always powerful when it comes from the heart. I didn't need to join in; I felt thoroughly engaged – **seeing**, **hearing** and **feeling** the energy created by the people in that space.

Later, it made me think about the sense organs – especially eyes and ears – that connect us with our world. **We always hear more than the words that are spoken**. How do we do that? The science of perceiving tells us that we see only a fraction of all there is to see, yet what we see is what our mind **needs** to do its amazing work on our behalf. We also **see more than is there** at the time because we have the ability to conjure up images in our imagination and our dreams. One problem with Manzotti's theory of consciousness (see previous Blog) is: what happens in dreams? Excellent (but comprehensive) background reading around this topic is found in *Waking, Dreaming, Being* by Evan Thompson.

Our experience tells us that we intuitively know more than our sense organs are supposed to be able to detect. The term '**sixth sense**' is mostly studied under the name of extra-sensory perception (ESP).[1] It's a misnomer anyway because there are clearly more senses than the five that Aristotle originally proposed. And the 'sixth sense' could be more than one subconscious or superconscious activity that we all have as part of our intuitive mind.

Seeing and hearing are quite different channels of connectedness and our mind does not use them in the same way. **Seeing** is dominant, the most active sense, that takes us out into the world like an explorer on a mission of discovery. **Hearing** is much more passive and it brings the world into us, dramatically at times (with a sudden bang), but more often gently and soothingly. We can utilise either channel **intensely** by concentrating our attention or very **casually** such as vaguely listening to music playing in the background while we are doing other things. Seeing is more proactive in that we mainly see what we are looking for whereas to **listen** is a more open, receptive state of mind that is more conducive to right-brain activity and especially important for the most meaningful relationships – with others, with ourselves and with the unknown. Whereas seeing gives us the **outwardness** of our experience, hearing gives us the **inwardness** that we also need to be human.

There are some lovely non-scientific books about the subtlety of our visual sense. Alexandra Horowitz wrote *On Looking - About Everything There is to See* which describes a whole lot of 'walks around the block.' In a more discursive vein there is *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*

[1] Many years ago I had the privilege of spending several days talking on and off with Rupert Sheldrake, an English biologist who has researched ESP and written many books including *A New Science of Life* and *Dogs Who Know When Their Owners Are Coming Home*.

by Rebecca Solnit who also wrote *River of Shadows*. Oliver Sacks' feeling for what happens in the minds of people who are deaf is beautifully expressed in *Seeing Voices*.

A book I want to feature this week is *The Universal Sense - How Hearing Shapes the Mind* by Seth Horowitz. An experienced researcher into sound and the brain, he begins with the basic fact that **vibration** is everywhere and it becomes **sound** wherever a sense organ has the ability to hear, which covers a wide range of living organisms. Perhaps the idea of sound as vibration is even more fundamental than our limited knowledge of the physiology of hearing shows. In *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C. S. Lewis it was Aslan the lion who **roared** the world into existence (which sounds better than the Big Bang!).

Horowitz ends his book with a Chapter on brain measurements that scientists use to try to find the 'mind.' It is clear to him that '**the brain sings**.' Any electrical activity detected there can be heard as a sound. He points out that this sound isn't the mind – it is only one end of a flowing process of connection that creates, at the other end, such wonders of experience as **music**. He says, as I have done on this website for years, that seeking to understand more about our experience of music is a way of getting closer to understanding our mind.

Musicology (the study of music) is a huge field that includes mathematics, anthropology, acoustics, cognitive science, the psychology of emotions and music therapy. There are so many books I can only express my personal bias. The two books that have come closest to explaining the actual human experience of music for me were written more than 50 years ago by Victor Zuckerkandl (an American professor born in Vienna). They are *Sound and Symbol - Music and the External World* and its follow-up, *Man the Musician*. They are still available online, but are very expensive compared to the copies I stumbled upon in 1970 in a second-hand bookshop in Melbourne.

Music differs from noise in being tonal. The dynamic quality of **tonal images** (as distinct from visual images) is explained in detail by Zuckerkandl. It's impossible to summarise here, but, for example, the meaning in music is not like the meaning in language. Words only point to meaning (which remains separate from them) whereas tones create the meaning directly, which is felt. I guess this was one of the foundations of my long-held views about feelings as the primary source of meaning. Of all the sensations we experience, tones are the only ones that precisely identify the qualities we call **life**. Because music exists **we know that the visible and the tangible are not the limits of our human experience** – we know there is more.

Our mind's experience of time and space affects everything we do. Zuckerkandl explains how music portrays our sense of **time** through melody and rhythm, while the chord structure underpinning harmony gives us the sense of **space**. Composers use this to tell a certain kind of 'story' (thread of meaning) that depends on the wholeness of the music, not just the individual tones. The only thing I ever knew about this sort of thing when I was writing songs was that minor chords feel **sad** whereas major chords feel **happy**. I've written quite a bit more about this sort of stuff in *Mind and Love - The Human Experience*.

Last weekend I heard the Penrith Youth Orchestra playing an arrangement of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. Those first four notes ('the most famous opening motif in the history of Western music') are said to signify 'Fate knocking at the door,' but the ending becomes a **triumph** in our experience of mind. It is described in the program notes as 'a journey from C

minor to C major, darkness to light, struggle to victory.' We hear more than just the chord progression and the harmony – we hear the triumph. Its meaning is right there in our feelings.

A procedure called Integrated Listening Systems developed from **Stephen Porges Polyvagal Theory** is now widely recognised for its therapeutic value. It includes computer-modified sounds that apparently optimise the all-important activity of our Autonomic Nervous System. Highly psychotic conditions have been dramatically corrected when patients are exposed to these healing sounds for quite short periods of time.

When I am trying to 'get something across' to other people (that irresistible urge to transfer meaning is always there, even when we know that it's impossible) I look at the people concerned. When I want to connect with something within myself and, especially, to make contact with the unknown, I close my eyes to provide more space for my sense of **hearing**. It was our earliest sensory experience in the womb and is supposed to be the last to leave us before we die.