

## A Shift in the Ground of Perception

By David Kaetz

*This essay is dedicated to the memory of our colleague David Webber, developer of Seeing Clearly.*

“As every member of a couple, every parent, every child, and every member of every committee everywhere knows, it is possible to hear without listening. And it is also possible to listen—to attend, to be present—and to hear nothing. A practical example is fishing: you can fish without catching fish. Yet even if there are no fish biting at the moment, the quality of your fishing has a bearing on the ultimate catch. If you fish well, and if there are fish, you will eat more. Common sense confirms (as do brain-scan studies) that *when you listen differently, you hear differently* . . . .

“What I have called somatic or embodied listening improves hearing in a way that, for all its obviousness, is also elusive. It does not do so by manipulating your sense organs, nor by adjusting the input they receive. Rather, it does so by reorganizing your perception. To extend the fishing metaphor: rather than buying a new rod and reel, breeding bigger fish or restocking the pond, what we do is put the hook in the water.”

- adapted from Chapter 3 of *Listening with Your Whole Body*

In order to apply the tools of somatic education to the refinement of the senses, and through them, to personal transformation, we need to use language clearly. The way we talk about the senses affects the way we use them, and, perhaps more importantly, it affects the way they use us. Thus, the first part of this essay focusses on language; the second part points to where we can go once we know what we are talking about.

### I. Talking about the senses

The senses whose names we know are by no means as separate from one another as the English language would like us to think. Like the joints and the muscles, they are functionally interdependent, and a change in one sense is likely to produce change in all the others—because the ultimate sense organ is the neuro-plastic brain. Thus, when we work with a particular sense, it is useful to bear in mind that we are working with the whole web of perception.

It is also useful to be clear on what we mean by the various words we use for sensing. For example: *to hear* is not the same thing as *to listen*, and *to listen to* is not the same as *to listen for*, and *to hearken* is different again. Likewise, *to see* is not the same as *to look*, or *to look into*, or *to look at*, and *to stare* and *to glance at* are different again. The big difference here is between *sensing*, which goes on 24/7, regardless of any conscious involvement, and *attending*, i.e., how we use our conscious attention with regard to that sensing. Thus, we have the senses of *seeing* and *hearing*, and we have ways of attending to them, namely *looking* and *listening*, in their various varieties of intention and intensity.

For want of better words, we could call the senses we are born with, namely the sense organs and their corresponding neural circuitry, the sensory “hardware.” The way we engage with the senses, which is subject to learning, we could call the sensory “software.” One wouldn’t want to get carried away by this metaphor, as we are far more complex than our computers, and far less either/or. Still, the metaphor is useful to this extent: hardware can sometimes be repaired by outside intervention, but it doesn’t fix itself. Software, on the other hand, can be updated by the user. We call it learning, and it’s the secret of change.

Sensory hardware does its work without our help, as it were; it is hard to be aware of it because it is the infrastructure of awareness. We can see our eyes in the mirror, but we can’t see how seeing works; if we could, it likely wouldn’t work. The anatomy and neurology of vision is something we can only know about, so to speak, from the outside, from countless autopsies, dissections, operations and examinations (not to mention exhumed corpses and martyred rabbits) over the centuries. If we are lucky, in fact, we will never have to encounter our own eyes and visual cortex as objects the way a surgeon might. On the other hand, our sensory software is, with some practice (and with less indignity to the living and the dead), available for self-study. We can become aware of how we are using ourselves in the visual realm, and, as it does with movement, awareness produces changes and offers options.

Of these two ways of regarding a sense, one of them is “external,” “objective,” and speaks in terms of measurable, quantifiable objects, each with separate existence, and composed of other objects. The other is “internal,” “subjective,” and speaks of process within a system, of relationship, of doing, in qualitative terms. How does this play out in practice?

When there is an issue with either hearing or vision, what is the first thing that is recommended? Almost invariably: quantitative testing. From these tests numbers are obtained which are indispensable to creating devices (corrective lenses, hearing aids) that modulate the input to the ears or the eyes. If, along with modulating the input, you wish to change the way you use your whole self in the act of perception, such that you experience the world differently, another mode of observation is required, namely, awareness. An optimal approach to better perception, taking into consideration that each sense consists of both *sensing* and *attending*, of hardware and software, would find no conflict in integrating external assessment with conscious self-observation.

## II. A Shift in the Ground of Perception

As Dr. Feldenkrais notes in *On the Primacy of Hearing*, our senses evolved under altogether different circumstances from those in which we currently use them, and for very different purposes. All of our senses are far older than humanity itself, and immeasurably older than the sounds of the English language and the shapes of its letters. In this light it is worth noting that when we manipulate our perceptual hardware through hearing aids and eyeglasses it is generally not about helping our senses to serve their original purposes better. We are instead trying to adapt them to conditions that our distant ancestors in forest or savanna could hardly have imagined. This is crucial to acknowledge, because to recover the full use of our senses means going back to their roots in nature, the way we address walking by taking off our shoes and going back to the ground on all fours.

To follow listening in particular beyond the social uses we make of it has the potential to awaken forgotten dimensions of perception, linked to layers of our being that words, whether spoken or printed, cannot touch. These levels are more fundamental to who we are than our social persona, which is to a great extent a sort of *golem*, a non-being created by language itself. A listening practice, a form of somatic meditation, is capable of taking us out of habitual mentation and limited self-identification and into a more direct and less self-obsessed mode of experiencing. Such a practice can return us to our hearts, and to a heartfelt intimacy with the throbbing and supremely illiterate natural world. This return has never been more important than it is now, when nature is fairly shrieking for us to listen.

A client in her sixties, new to somatic work, had been wearing hearing aids for twenty years. These devices had helped her maintain social contacts, but they did not relieve the sense of isolation that sometimes comes with a hearing deficit. On the second day of a workshop in the countryside, she returned from the coffee break in tears. She had been out in the meadow behind the seminar room, where, for the first time in decades, she had been spoken to by the water in the stream, by the wind in the tall grasses, by the chirping and twittering of crickets and birds.

Where did this shift in perception come from? We had not touched her hearing aids, so that wasn't it. More likely, through a series of exercises, she had been enabled to recover something of her birthright as an embodied mammal, as a child of nature, and no longer as a diagnosis. While a perceptual shift of this sort does not necessarily show up on your audiogram, it can fundamentally alter the quality of your life. If you are interested in improvement and willing to learn, this is where somatic work with the senses can take you.