

Come to Your Senses



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Ideally our senses reliably inform us about the world around us, giving us feedback that our brains integrate and synthesize effortlessly. When our senses are off balance, however, we can feel overwhelmed or suffer from constant cravings. Maybe your child is hypersensitive to noise (easily overloaded) or hyposensitive to touch (constantly hands on). These are just two examples.

To keep our bodies in good working order, ideally we involve them fully in the activities of daily life. Nowadays, most people appreciate time-saving technological shortcuts and don't think about the physical toll they take. Most people don't give sensory integration a moment's thought.

Sensory imbalances are particularly likely to come about when we habitually use one or two senses to the exclusion of the rest of our bodies. Take laundry as a case in point. Instead of dumping it in the machine on top of some detergent and closing the lid, suppose you had to run it through a ringer, or stir it in a pot of boiling water on a fire of wood that you had cut, using soap you had made from lye and fat.

You agree, I hope, that the experience of washing (and maybe also of wearing) would be different if you were intimately involved with your clothes in these old-fashioned ways. (And just imagine if you needed to grow the flax, spin the thread, and—you get my drift.)

Bread is another example. At one time you couldn't make a loaf unless you had first tilled the soil, planted seeds, threshed and winnowed the wheat, dried the grain, and ground it at the mill. Only then could you take home the flour--and you would need to make starter, a yeast equivalent, before you could make leavened bread.

Back then you still needed to mix ingredients and knead the dough, but if you consider the total process--from soil preparation to consumption--you can see that before you could break bread you would have gotten a real workout.

I want to suggest that the context of your old-time washing or baking habits would have been different as well. Not only would you have been participating more fully in meeting your own basic needs but you would also have had a sense of being more fully in charge of your well-being and more fully connected to your environment.

Recently I met Ron Simmons, a dairy farmer in Connecticut, whose Guernseys receive visitors from nearby towns. He told me some of the children who stop by his farm think that milk comes from the supermarket. He also recalled an adult who wondered why you couldn't get milk from a bull.

Now, I'm not suggesting that we all need to quit our desk jobs (or consulting rooms, as the case may be) and move to farms or cabins in the wilderness. But I do believe that giving ourselves and our offspring a sense of place—at home, in the community, and in the natural environment—requires us to mobilize our bodies and our senses to explore, understand, and enjoy our surroundings.

Rise up against the onslaught of Game Boys, X-Boxes, television sets, and other gizmos that foster a solitary, sedentary existence. Technologically imposed isolation is guaranteed to cause muscles and nerves to atrophy until all that remains of our youngsters is bloodshot eyeballs and twitching fingers.

Take nature walks. Pick apples (or oranges or artichokes or mangoes). Choose low tech solutions to housekeeping over high tech. Live simply. Grow tomatoes, dig potatoes, and make your own bread (no machines, please). My own favorite bread recipe appears below.

MARCIA'S GOOD-AS-GOLD CHALLAH WITH HONEY

2 envelopes of dry yeast(2 tablespoons, or 30mL)	1-1/4 cups of canola or corn oil [.3L]
2 cups of tepid water [.48L]	3 eggs, beaten
4 teaspoons of salt [20mL]	about 7 cups of unbleached flour
1/2 cup of honey [.12L]	[about 1.68L]

Dissolve the yeast in the water in a large bowl. Let the yeast rest for a few minutes, then add salt, honey, and shortening, stirring. Blend in the eggs, leaving about a tablespoonful of beaten egg in the bowl to brush on top of the loaves before baking.

Stir in the flour gradually, and keep stirring until the dough is too stiff to stir anymore. Then sprinkle flour on a clean counter or bread board and turn the dough out onto the floured surface. Knead until satiny smooth, adding flour

gradually and watching to be sure the dough remains elastic and does not become too dry.

Wash out the bowl, dry it with a towel, and grease it lightly with oil using a paper towel or paper napkin. Place the dough in the bowl, cover with a clean cloth, and set in a warm place (but not a hot oven!) to rise until double in bulk. In the winter, the rising may take a couple of hours; on a hot summer's day, it may take as little as one hour.

When the dough has doubled in bulk, punch the air out with your fist, then turn the dough out onto a clean, lightly floured surface and knead until there are no bubbles of air remaining. Then lightly grease two bread pans with oil, divide the dough in half, form each half into a loaf (turn the sides under), and place the loaves in their pans and let rise.

When the loaves have doubled in size once again, brush the tops with the reserved egg mixture. Bake in an oven preheated to 350 degrees Fahrenheit [53 degrees Celsius] for one hour, until golden brown.

This bread is delicious warm from the oven with unsalted, whipped butter. When it is cool, loaves freeze well. It also makes very good sandwiches and French toast. Because there are no preservatives, be sure to refrigerate parts of loaves (if you leave them out on the counter for a few days, they will become moldy).

You can braid loaves if you prefer not to use pans. You can also bake this bread in an angel food pan, which will make a double-sized ring-shaped loaf, spectacular for parties, especially if the loaf is still warm when guests arrive.

Children delight in watching yeast magically come to life, and they love the experience of kneading warm, elastic dough. As the bread bakes, the kitchen fills with a divine aroma that promises goodness. The finished loaves are a creation in which any baker, young or older, may take pride not just by virtue of ownership but because the gift of hot bread is a time-honored affirmation of life.

I believe so strongly in the therapeutic value of bread making (panotherapy?) that I carry a large, lightweight mixing bowl in the trunk of my car in case I need it on home visits!