

## **Embodied thought of the Month: February 2017**

### *Families, bodies, touch and the transmission of emotion*

**By James Brighton**

When I attempt to teach some of the fundamentals of existential phenomenology to undergraduate students, I often provide the example of how a baby, pre-language and pre-socialisation is able to interact and navigate their way through the physical and emotional environments around them from the embodied experiences they have. This 'embodied consciousness' as described by Merleau-Ponty (1945) helps babies to avoid painful situations (for example if they crawl into a wall they will learn not to do so again), and 'feel' for those around them for nutrition and comfort. These embodied experiences are mainly made through more visceral senses such as touch and taste, providing the baby with perceptions of the world undiluted by subsequent experiences they have. This, I hope, is a way of helping students to attune to the primacy of embodied human existence and encourage them to challenge dualist ways of thinking constructed through what Merleau-Ponty termed 'intellectualism'.

Up until this week however I had never truly considered or appreciated the power of senses in transmitting meaning and emotion in experiencing death. On Friday, my ninety-three Granma was admitted to hospital suffering with an infection and virus. Although she initially responded well to treatment, sadly her condition quickly deteriorated and she was unable to eat or drink anything and her skin too fragile to support an IV. By Monday we were told by the consultant to say our goodbyes to her as she lay motionless on her bed. What made this situation particularly distressing for my Sister, Brother and I who were caring for her was that our parents were away in Asia and unable to return in time to be by my Gran's side. It was not just our Granma we were worried about, it was also our Mum.

Mum was an only child and had a close relationship with my Granma and had lovingly looked after her for the last 25 years since my Grandad died. We were able to get in contact with her via e-mail and on Monday afternoon and she was able to Skype in from Hanoi. "I know there are three people in that room who love you Mum, but there is someone on the opposite side of the world who loves you very much too". Unable to talk or move her body, Granma's slight facial movements communicated that she acknowledged the message. As my Sister, Brother and I held her hands and stroked her head our Mum continued "Thank you for being such a wonderful Mum, I will never forget everything that we used to do together, especially sitting on my bed reading whilst eating chocolate every Sunday afternoon after you had prepared dinner". Her face visible on the small screen, it was hearing Mum's words that made it feel like she was actually in the room with us. The

only difference was that it was her children's touch that was transmitting her love to her own mother's body.

Mum and Dad were unable to get an early flight home, but were due to arrive at Heathrow airport on Thursday morning. The hospital staff told us it was unlikely that she would make it through the night, but somewhat miraculously she held on giving us all hope that Mum would be able to say goodbye in person. For the following two and half days and nights my siblings and I stayed by her side, checking her breathing, keeping her comfortable and making sure she knew we were all there. Still unable to communicate, and unsure if she was conscious or unconscious it was our touch that transmitted our love and reassuring presence. It sounds odd to say, but living in a small room with Granma, unable to talk but just lying next to her body detached from the outside world, I don't think I had ever felt closer to her.



Although she was courageous in hanging on as long as she could, at 7pm on Wednesday evening, just hours before Mum and Dad were due home, Granma's breathing quickened and then became faint. As my brother and I held her closely, we felt her body relax and she quietly and peacefully passed away. Although very sad, the moment was also tranquil and serene. Her face looked restful, free from the pain and anxiety she had experienced in the previous few days and the latter years of her life where she had intermittently been in and out of medical institutions. A member of the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF) in World War II, a woman with low expectations who used to get a horse and cart to school, Hazel Bennett died surrounded by her grandchildren, in the knowledge that her family loved her very much.

And so, in some ways similar to how a baby makes sense of the world through feeling their way around, unable to talk or move, my Granma's final moments were constructed through an 'embodied consciousness'. It was the touch between our body and hers communicating our love and

comfort. Although none of us had been so explicitly tactile in relationship with Granma prior to her admission to hospital, we all agreed that these carnal interactions felt *natural*. By this I understood that it was the 'lower sense' of touching that was more instinctive and intimate beyond the visual and auditory that predominates contemporary rational scientific thinking<sup>1</sup> (Stoller, 1989).

On their return, Mum and Dad drove straight from the airport to the hospital to see Granma's body. Entering the chapel of rest they saw her at peace and kissed her goodbye. My parents, sister and brother reunited, we all hugged and cried and headed home for the first time in a long time. My sister joked that the last week had been like the days when Mum and Dad used to take us camping as kids and we all used to sleep and eat together. We reflected that it was perhaps the first time we had all been together for about twenty years before meeting our partners and having our own kids. In death therefore, Granma's last gift was, if only fleetingly, bringing our bodies closer together and reminding us of our shared corporeality.

#### **References:**

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1945) *Phénoménologie de la Perception*. Paris: Gallimard.

Sparkes, A. C. (2009a). Ethnography and the senses: challenges and possibilities. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health* 1 (1), pp. 21-35.

Stoller, P. (1989) *The taste of ethnographic things*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

---

<sup>1</sup> As Sparkes (2009) highlights, this is also the case in the construction of knowledge in sports based degree programmes, where although the body and its performance is analysed, 'embodiedness' is often absent by failing to pay attention to all the senses available to us