

The Four Organs of Perception: Mind, Body, Heart, and Spirit/Intuition

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*The Secret Life of Communication:
Opening to Unlimited Love*

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Since perception is a major component of communication, it's much easier to understand what's going on beneath the surface when we use all four of what I call our 'organs of perception': the mind, body, heart and spirit/intuition. I'll show you how to do just that as we explore the four layers of communication. In each layer of communication, we pay attention to one organ of perception more than the others.

Please keep in mind that there is no real separation among your mind, body, heart and spirit. I'll describe them one at a time, simply to make it easier for you to recognize how each one functions.

Mind

In many modern cultures, thinking is highly valued and minds are very well developed. Even so, brain studies have shown that an average person consciously notices only about one out of every million sensory events. One out of every million! That means we are missing *a lot* of information.

This might surprise you, but the mind is much more than a resource for acquiring information and making decisions. In her book, *Trauma through a Child's Eyes*, Maggie Kline does a great job of explaining how our brains function in three distinct ways. We actually have three types of brains, (which you might also think of as three different minds).

Most of us think of the conscious mind, the neocortical brain, when we talk about the mind. That area of the brain is responsible for conscious thought, reasoning, language and planning. However, in order for our conscious minds to thrive, they have to communicate with the other two areas of the brain, what I call the emotional mind and the mind of survival.

The middle part of the brain, the limbic brain, is responsible for processing memories and emotions. This emotional mind helps us perceive intimacy within relationships.

The mind of survival, what scientists refer to as the primitive or reptilian brain, enhances our survival by making sure we eat, sleep, store information and respond to threat. It also is responsible for body sensations.

The mind of survival helps us keep ourselves safe. It prompts babies to cry when they're hungry and adults to fight, flee or freeze when they feel threatened. The mind of survival is

essential, and, if we constantly worry about our survival, then our ability to think clearly and process emotions will be diminished. When all three areas of the brain function in harmony, we experience true peace of mind.

Formal education has helped many of us become experts at rational thought. We go through each day deciding: “This means that,” “That happened because...,” or, “This is good, that is bad.” Rational thinking helps us make sense of our experiences and surroundings. It helps us feel secure, because it enables us to avoid or respond to threat. But, it limits our perception by leaving out body sensations.

Body

The images that run through our minds trigger responses in our bodies and emotions. I once asked participants in a workshop, “If there were one conflict or concern distressing you right now, what would it be? Who is involved? What happens when you think about this situation?”

I invited everyone to notice their responses to those questions, then I asked, “How do you feel now that you’ve brought this concern to your mind? What is different from five minutes ago?” Judy, a woman in the audience called out, “Five minutes ago, I was calm. Now I’m angry!” I replied, “Good, thank you! Can anyone relate to Judy?” Lots of hands raised and a few people chuckled as they realized they weren’t the only ones who felt worse.

When Judy said that she felt angry, how did she know she felt angry? Was it because in her mind she had that thought? Or, was it because in her body she felt something change? When I asked her to tell us, she said, “Well, I felt it in my body first. My stomach clenched and my chest got tight.” That’s because the body responds to information before the mind does, but we usually don’t notice it.

One reason we don’t notice what our bodies are trying to tell us is that it’s hard for us to interpret body sensations. Many of us were not supported by parents or teachers to notice or understand the language of the body. Instead, we might have been humiliated or reprimanded for responding to body sensations, so we learned to ignore them.

I always felt sorry for my classmate in elementary school who got into trouble for saying she was cold when everyone else felt hot, or for having a hard time sitting still, or for crying for no reason. Now, I understand that each of her actions might have been an expression of the language of her body: body sensations that needed to be expressed in order to help her process energy she could not rationalize.

For those who've experienced trauma or who were reprimanded like my classmate, body sensations can feel confusing, overwhelming, even threatening. This certainly was true for me. By the time I reached high school, I had convinced myself that my body was not safe, was not even my own. At age fourteen, I developed Bulimia, which enabled me to lash out against my body without anyone else knowing.

When I experienced a body sensation, like butterflies in my stomach or tightness in my throat, instead of pausing to notice what I needed or to allow the sensation to pass, I focused on controlling food, exercise, my outward appearance—the only elements of life I felt I could control. I didn't yet have the resources I needed to understand the language of my body and heal from trauma, so I did the best I could. That's what we all do, isn't it?

When I remember that, it becomes much harder for me to judge myself (or others). We're all doing the best we can, and today's "best" might be different from yesterday's.

Even if you haven't experienced trauma, you might have become used to dampening your sensitivity with things like caffeine, sugar, alcohol or tobacco. Each of these substances regulates our nervous systems—temporarily.

That's why so many of us love them, and it's why it can be so hard to give them up. It took me years to give up diet soda, even though it hurt my stomach. Over and over I would decide to give it up, but when I felt really stressed or anxious, the craving for diet soda consumed me and I would give in. Other times, I simply didn't want to feel anxiety, sadness or anger, so I would drink a soda, knowing the caffeine would help temporarily. That's the rub—the relief was only temporary.

If our bodies want us to pay attention, they'll call upon all their resources, and they won't quit. For example, when you use substances to distract you from weariness or an anxious stomach, what happens once the substances have left your body? Those sensations remain, often

feeling more intense than ever, right? Distracting ourselves isn't helpful. Eventually, if we ignore our bodies long enough, they might use illness or disease to get our attention.

We can choose to continue or increase our use of caffeine and other substances, or we can listen to what our bodies are "saying." In the short term, it might be easier to turn to the substance and suffer the consequences later. In the long term, it is much easier to turn toward the discomfort, because then we can move *through* the discomfort and gain wisdom.



Until very recently, I ate something for reasons other than hunger every single day. I ate to distract myself from worry or frustration, to experience sweetness in my life, to calm down strong emotions. In my world, food was rarely just "food."

Sometimes I wished I could be a baby again, discovering my wondrous toes, my busy hands, my "iny" belly button for the first time. I wondered what it would be like to sense hunger or thirst and make noise until someone helped me. When I saw a baby completely relaxed in her mother's arms as she napped, I wondered what that might feel like—to totally relax in sleep, rather than hold tension in my muscles, ready to act at any moment, waking at the lightest sound. At other times I longed to be in my teenaged body—slender, nimble, numb.

You see, during my babyhood and childhood, I gradually disconnected from my body until I could no longer hear what it said to me. I no longer recognized shallow breathing and a tight throat as signs of anxiety, or tingling in my chest as joy. It did not even occur to me to notice my body sensations, because by then I no longer believed that my body belonged to me. In fact, I wanted nothing to do with "it," because I believed it had betrayed me.

Even hunger and thirst became dull sensations. By age fourteen, I ate and drank according to either the habits of those around me, or the protocols of whatever diet I was on at the time. Food had become simply a tool for shaping my body or numbing emotions; eating had nothing to do with hunger or pleasure.

How does a person recover their sensitivity to the way their body communicates with them? I have been discovering my answer to that question for many years. My journey toward a healthy relationship with my body (and food) has included treatment for an eating disorder, in-depth counseling and spiritual healing. As I heal from traumatic events that were inflicted on my

body, I experience compassion for it, and am now able to see that my body never betrayed me; it was betrayed.

I know that my body belongs to me. I have intellectual knowledge about what and when I “should” eat to be healthy. But, I am so much more than my intellect! There is so much communication happening all at once—in my head, heart, body and spirit—that I can become overwhelmed. When that happens, I either a) escape by eating sugary, fatty foods, or b) pause, notice the body sensations I’m experiencing, and ask myself what I need in that moment.

I fully acknowledge that option a) is my automatic choice. In fact, when I have been highly stressed, I’ve eaten half a pizza before consciously noticing that I had even *ordered* a pizza. This is a journey.

One of the most helpful A-Has for me about eating unconsciously is that when I do that, I usually have something I want to say or ask, but for some reason I silence myself instead. Eating unhealthy food is the primary way that I silence myself.

When I realized that for the first time, I felt deeply sad for myself. It was like I was seeing a different person. I could see how much this woman wanted to be good, to do well, to please others. And, I could see that she had truths and feelings to express, which were being stifled—stuffed.

Once, I found myself snacking all afternoon at my desk at work. When I asked myself what I was silencing, I noticed that I felt disrespected by my boss and I felt nervous about telling her how I felt. During the following few days, I allowed myself to eat what I craved, while I also thought about whether or not to talk to my boss and what I wanted to say to her.

By the third day, I had decided I would talk to my boss, and I had become clear about what I wanted to say. That evening, I found myself cooking vegetables and feeling excited to eat them! (They were delicious.) Rather than trying to control my eating, I had turned my attention toward all the ways in which my body, mind and heart were communicating with me. As I prepared to express my truth, cravings for unhealthy—silencing—foods had gone away.

Today, when I notice that I am craving or eating unhealthy food, if I remember to ask, “What am I silencing in myself? Is there something I want to say or ask?” those questions help

me to notice my emotions, my sense of intuition, the thoughts in my mind, and my body sensations.

A whole world of communication opens up. It's like I can hear myself making noise like the babies who cry for attention. When I give myself the gift of responding to my thoughts, emotions, intuition and body sensations, then the urge to eat unhealthy food dissolves. Instantly. I'm often surprised when that happens, and I find it very comforting.



When we pay attention to our bodies' perception, it becomes much easier to move through discomfort. If we rest when we feel tired instead of drinking caffeine, or eat something really nutritious when we're hungry, we will feel nurtured and more balanced. Then, when life throws us a curve ball, we will have the energy and support we need to respond to it.

Heart

What do you normally do when you are at work and you're feeling angry or upset, but you have a job to do? Which one do you give your attention to, the feelings or the job? The job, right? And what do you tell yourself about the feelings?

If you're like most people, you ignore them, you push them away, you think, "It's not that big of a deal; it'll pass." When we do that to ourselves, especially when we say to ourselves, "Let it go," or, "I shouldn't be upset. This shouldn't bother me," we rob ourselves of the information that our hearts are trying to give us. And, we store up those feelings for our next reaction. "You're still angry because somebody betrayed your trust ten years ago? Let it go!" Does that work?

No. It never works. Why? Because the energy of those emotions is still stuck inside. So, the next time a similar event happens, you will refer to the history and have a stronger reaction.

If I had said to Judy, my workshop participant, "You shouldn't be angry," do you think her anger would have increased or decreased? Yes, it would increase, of course. That's because we cannot decrease painful emotions by focusing on logic or intellect.

Our emotions are connected to our minds and bodies, but they must be addressed in our hearts if we want to learn from and become free of reactions. Sometimes, it might seem like all communication is some form of reaction. That's understandable, since we are accustomed to living in reaction.

That's exactly what soap operas are all about; it's why we love them. People are reacting all over the place, and it's juicy! And, it's why family gatherings and work places often feel like soap operas. The more people ignore their own hearts, the easier it becomes for them to ignore other people's hearts.

That's why communication can become very painful. Two people who love each other can get to the point where they exchange hurtful words they would never say to a stranger.

How can that be? Well, over time, anyone can become disconnected from their deeper feelings. When that happens, they become disconnected from—even threatened by—other people's deeper feelings, too.

If I ignore or minimize my feelings when I am upset, or if I choose not to tell the truth about how I feel, reactions can become “normal.” The less I pay attention to my own heart, the more I blame another person when I feel unhappy, and it's easy to point the blame close to home. Eventually, I might stop relating to my loved ones in an authentic, intimate manner. When that happens, hurtful words can flow all too easily.

Communication can shift from painful to nurturing when we include what our hearts are “saying.” I'll show you how. As you move through the layers of communication, you will open up to more of what your heart has to offer you. I've found it to be much more and much better than I ever imagined. My friend Tom discovered this, too, one day when we were talking on the phone.

I felt somber and tired that day, so I was more quiet than usual. Tom and I had recently reconnected after years of separation, so we weren't used to each other's patterns yet. After a few minutes Tom asked me, “What's the matter? Are you upset with me?” and I replied, “No, everything's fine. I'm just feeling quiet today.”

That reply did not fit with Tom's mental picture. He was listening to his rational mind, which, you might remember, is designed to identify cause and effect. His mind needed to

identify a cause for my somber mood, and since he didn't know me very well, he naturally pointed to himself as the cause.

We tried for several minutes to resolve this tension. I told him again that nothing was wrong, and he asked more questions to try to figure out what I was hiding. Knowing that this mental investigation was not going to resolve anything (since nothing *was* wrong), I asked Tom if he would be willing to try an experiment. Cautiously, Tom replied, "Ok."

"Thanks," I said. "Right now, your mind is trying to figure out what is going on inside my heart. But, the only way you will really know what's going on in my heart is if you listen to my heart, with your own heart."

"Try to relax your mind for a moment," I continued. "Imagine that your heart, the area in the center of your chest, can radiate outward toward me, and that my heart is radiating outward toward you. Imagine that our hearts meet in the middle. Can you imagine that?" "Yes, I've got it," Tom replied.

"Good," I continued, "Now, notice how you feel. What is different from a couple of minutes ago?" Tom said, "It feels like everything's all right, like there's nothing to worry about." "Exactly!" I responded. "Your heart just listened to mine, and it perceived the truth that everything is all right. Now, your mind can catch up to this new information, even though it contradicts the cause-effect pattern you're used to."

Spirit/Intuition

In the April 2006 issue of *Spirituality and Health* magazine, Stephan Harrod Buhner offers a fascinating perspective of the connections among the heart, mind, body and spirit. I was amazed to find out that there are neural cells in our chests and in our bellies, which function very much like those in the brain. So, when we have a gut feeling about something, when we just "know" something, it isn't our imagination. Our intuition is trustworthy.



When I reached my final year of doctoral studies, it was no longer necessary for me to live near campus, so I decided to move home to Montana, to be near friends and mountains while I wrote my dissertation. In preparation for my move, I decided to see what would happen if I

stated exactly what I wanted, and then payed attention to every single thought that crossed my mind.

I wrote down every detail that I wanted to find in my next apartment: old, craftsman style architecture; original fixtures; warm community; near a park; not on the ground floor; in a corner; with lots of natural sunlight; and for an inexpensive rent. Was I asking too much? Some people thought so, but I figured I had nothing to lose. I decided to believe it was possible that such an apartment existed.

When I began calling apartment managers, a certain building came to my mind, which I had admired several times on visits home. I wondered if they might have an opening, then immediately I thought, “No, I’m sure they don’t have one. That’s a very popular building.” Now, in the past, I would have dropped it and moved on to other apartments. But since I had committed to pay attention to every thought, I decided there must be a reason why that apartment building had come to my mind.

I called the building manager and asked if he had a one bedroom apartment available. He replied, “No, sorry, I don’t.” My heart sank a little, until he continued, “But I will have one as of May 31.” It just so happened that May 31 was the first day I would need the apartment, so I asked him to describe it to me.

“It’s on the second floor, in the northeast corner. It gets lots of great sunlight and has all the original fixtures from the 1930s. We’ve got a real nice community here, just a block from the best park in town. Some tenants have lived here for decades.” And how much was the rent, I asked. “\$350.00”

“I can’t believe this!” I said to myself, then quickly followed up with “Yes, I can believe it. It’s perfectly natural, because my intuition is trustworthy.” I asked a friend to walk through the apartment to make sure it was nice, then rented it over the phone.

The next day, I was working on my computer when the question crossed my mind, “I wonder if I have to give notice on this apartment before moving out?” Immediately I thought, “No, surely not. It’s a university apartment, they must know that people leave at the end of the academic year.”

In the past, I would have believed my own assumptions and not checked. Instead, I again decided to trust that there was a reason for every thought that crossed my mind. I called the apartment office to ask if I had to give notice. “Yes,” was the reply. “You have to give sixty days notice, in writing.” “I’ll be right over!” I cried, then I quickly hung up the phone and ran to the office. It was five minutes before closing, exactly sixty days from the date I planned to move out.

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When we connect deeply with our spirit/intuition, all of the organs of perception come into harmony. We are aware of thoughts, but they do not dominate. We notice what our bodies are telling us, and we do not try to change it. We feel every emotion as it comes, without trying to hold on to the ones that feel good or ignore the ones that feel bad. We listen to our intuition, because we realize that it is trustworthy. And, if we have a spiritual practice, we feel a deeper connection to divine support.

I want to share my story with you, my spiritual journey. However, I’m hesitant, because my journey might be different from yours, and it might bump up against your spiritual ideals. Still, life-affirming communication is nothing if it isn’t honest and authentic, so if you’d like to listen in on my communication with the divine, read on. If not, it’s no problem; you can skip this section and go on to enjoy the following chapters.

Someone once told me that people from every culture who seek the truth will find it right where they are, and I agree. For some, the path is narrow and straight. For others, like me, it’s windy and broad.

I have been a spiritual seeker since I was very, very young. As a child in elementary school, I often walked to my neighborhood Episcopal church by myself for Sunday services. I enjoyed church, and I wanted to know God. I had a deep sense that God existed, that some “one” greater than me was always near, was loving and was watching (that part made me nervous).

I remember adults smiling at me with a look of curiosity in their eyes, as if they wondered, “What is this nine year-old girl doing in church, sitting so quietly, by herself?” The answer was simple: I felt comforted in church. I wondered who exactly God was and how I

could know Him. And, I wondered how I could be good enough to be loved completely; I wanted to learn the rules.

I'm aware that these might not be typical questions for a nine year-old, but they were persistent for me and, at that age, I felt no self-consciousness about my search. Over time, I attended Christian churches of various denominations. Joining friends and their families, I experienced Catholic, non-denominational, Baptist and evangelical faith communities. In each one, I found answers to some of my questions, but, no matter how fervently I accepted what a church taught me, a nagging discomfort remained. Rather than increasing, my sense of worthiness declined as I learned more of the rules and recognized my persistent imperfections.

By the time I entered college, I had firmly rooted myself in Christianity. Before my freshman classes began, I found a college group to join that I believed would protect me from my "sinful impulses" (like dating wild boys and partying). That group provided a fun, safe, friendly community for me, and it provided excellent training in leadership skills.

Unfortunately, it also provided strong reinforcement of my belief that I had to be perfect in order to be worthy of the love and forgiveness I craved. Their rhetoric matched my internal voice: "God's love is unconditional, but 'faith without works is dead,' so you'd better keep demonstrating more and better actions."

The church I joined emphasized what we members should be doing, always more and better than before. Of course I was drawn to that church, because their message mirrored my belief that I was not enough. When my heart was in pain, if I turned to a church or college group leader for support, they talked to me about thoughts and actions, not feelings or body sensations.

Over time, I believed I was a little more worthy than before, because I followed all the rules. At the same time, I felt more separate than ever, because of my past, my fears and my faults. This was a wretched way to live, yet until I reached my thirties, I could not open to another possibility.

Another snag for me was that, deep down, I did not believe there could be just one way to know God. I doubted whether a God who had infused his creation with brilliant, beautiful, limitless diversity would provide just one approach to knowing him.

Every culture around the world cultivates spiritual beliefs; that truth affirmed my sense that God did indeed exist, and it challenged the idea that Christianity was the only way to know God. I believed in Jesus, and still do, just not in the way my church described him.

Eventually I realized that, for me, the Christian path was too focused on mental processing and doing, and I could not agree with its exclusivity. I needed support and guidance to connect with my heart and learn the language of my soul.

During the first ten years after college, I lived in several different states, from New York to Texas. With each move, I started a new job and continued my spiritual quest by reading books and occasionally visiting faith communities. I felt very lonely, yet also very cautious. I longed to know God in my whole being, not just my mind. I wanted to know God through my own experience, rather than someone else's advice or interpretation.

Later in the book, you will read other stories from my life and learn how a perfect storm of crises propelled me into a life-changing relationship with a wonderful counselor. I was thirty-three and living in Austin when I began working with Rebecca. Not only was Rebecca a licensed counselor, she also was a master Sufi teacher and a student of Somatic Experiencing®, which is a very gentle yet effective approach to healing trauma in the body.

With Rebecca's help, I began to learn the language of my body, my heart and (thank God, finally!) my soul. I had worked with many counselors before, never achieving anything like the relief and peace I was beginning to know in my work with Rebecca. My progress with her was so gentle, yet so efficient, that one day I asked her what made the difference. Rebecca explained the Sufi principles that undergirded her approach to therapy and I became more and more intrigued.

Austin was a wonderful melting pot for healers of all kinds, so I had lots of options to explore. I attended workshops given by spiritual leaders and learned more about Sufi spiritual healing, as well as Jewish faith communities and Buddhist practices. I even attended a Pentecostal Christian service, to see what it offered.

After a year or so, I decided to attend the University of Spiritual Healing and Sufism. Before my first week of school, I set an intention to heal one of the major traumas I had suffered

as a teenager. I prayed and asked God to support me, to protect me, and to help me open to whatever He wanted me to experience. I felt nervous, but hopeful.

Each day of the week-long school session, I learned new healing practices, including Remembrance, which I will teach you in the chapter about the fourth layer of communication. Even though I felt nervous and uncertain about this path called Sufism, I felt I had nothing to lose—I had lived in emotional and spiritual agony for so long. I felt comforted by the fact that I did not have to become a Sufi in order to benefit from the healing practices, and, I was willing to trust, little by little, because of the profound healing I had already experienced in my work with Rebecca.

On the third day, I was paired with a woman named Kim to learn a new practice. I can't remember exactly what the practice involved, but I remember it was very simple. When she was the "healer" and I was the "healee," she simply sat with me and prayed silently as I asked God to help me know, really know that I was forgiven (at that time, I felt responsible for the trauma I had suffered). Neither of us spoke. Kim did not know what caused my suffering or of what I yearned to be healed. She didn't need to know, because God was the real healer; she was a support, a conduit.

As we prayed, each in our own way, I asked God to show me the truth. Over and over again, I asked, "Please show me the truth. Please show me the truth." While I prayed, images came to my mind. I saw myself as a sixteen year-old, after the trauma. At first, the scene was dim and I saw myself in grey silhouette, then it was flooded with golden light. I clearly saw Jesus embracing me and felt myself melt into his arms, sobbing from fear, despair and relief.

With my new friend sitting beside me, silently supporting me, I began weeping and could not stop myself, did not want to stop myself. Even when the faculty called the group back together to debrief the healing session, I continued to weep, my head resting in my folded arms, waves of grief being followed by waves of peace. No one asked me to stop; no one asked me to explain myself; no one tried to quiet my tears. It was exactly what I needed.

That experience left a permanent impression on my spirit, heart, body and mind. After that, I felt no doubt about whether or not God existed, no doubt about whether or not God loved

me, no doubt about whether or not Jesus was real. The “knowledge” had arrived through my spirit first, then as I wept, my heart, body and mind had integrated it.

That’s why it worked so well for me; my sharp mind had relaxed enough for me to bring in new information—information that changed the old cause-effect beliefs (like, “That happened to me because I did something wrong”). I had tried many times to change those beliefs by changing my thinking, but had never succeeded.

This time, my thinking changed in response to my spirit and my heart. Sufism is a path that accesses God through the heart first, allowing the mind to catch up. That worked for me, and I have continued on a Sufi path ever since. That does not mean that I now subscribe to Sufism as the only way to know God; that claim would be contrary to my intuition and Sufism itself. Rather, I have found a path that helps me to communicate with and from my soul.

I continue to read teachings from many spiritual traditions, learning and growing along the way. I embrace all people, and all paths that are paved with love, for I believe there is no separation in God’s reality.