

The alchemy of attention

Charlotte Hastings writes about the importance of attachment as nutrition



As I write, the early signs of spring are bustling through the January blues, asking for some glad attention to help things along. This season's culinary reflection is all about attachment nutrition, the superfood of love. In *Why Love Matters*, Sue Gerhardt potently details how love is responsible for wiring the brain and how this begins in the early feeding scenario.¹ As profoundly social creatures, food is a relational experience – a deep communication across our inner time and space.

I type this column in the wake of BACP Spirituality division's 'Working with Soul' event, where I shared a presentation about kitchen therapy. This felt like a strangely disembodied affair – I delivered the content online and was unable to see the audience. This stood in stark contrast to the idea of using food, cooking and eating as a therapeutic arena, where our sensory, relational, spontaneous attention is key. You can't get a safe hug or a cup of tea online.

Our male-dominated worldview runs on the time plan of *Kronos* and focuses on food as a product, rather than feeding as a process which would fall within the feminine orbit of *Kairos*. In *The Master and His Emissary*, Iain McGilchrist considers this in terms of symbiosis between left and right brain thinking. He describes the jobs of the left and right brain as being like a bird picking grain from gravel. Narrow attention to detail is a left (masculine) brain task, which is necessary for life.² However, if the bird is not also openly scanning (right-brained, feminine) for potential predators, mates or the like, it may die. Life on earth is predicated on relational, quantum, reciprocal connection, reaching far beyond the specific grain or gravel of this moment. Hence this season's focus on attachment nutrition.

Nature's menu plan

The rapid synergy of growth in spring, with young seedlings, chicks and cubs needing helpings of tender loving care, speaks to

the alchemy of attention. We witness the quantum leaps neural connections make, triggered by practical, simply divine, love. And this starts with what developmental psychology understands as the 'maternal gaze'.

Being fed is our first taste of love in the world (or not). It is the bridge between one and the other. As milk fills the infant's belly, they lock eyes with their carer and with this look the vagal nerve pathway, from head through heart to belly, is fired and wired. Psyche and soma are introduced to each other over and over, creating what Winnicott called a sense of 'indwelling'.³

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But, just like the disembodiment I felt taking part in an online event, early experiences of attachment nutrition may not have been optimal for some of us. Or, due to our busy, outwardly focused lives, this sense of security may have become depleted. The sustenance of love is essential from cradle to grave, so let's return to the feeding scenario to generate some vital self-care. One way of understanding a kitchen therapy approach is to consider it an opportunity to re-parent ourselves and create the attachment nutrition we need.

Tuning in, tuning on, turning up

Kitchen therapy is an opportunity to attune to ourselves – to notice and delight in the role of caretaking. A small trick I use to adjust my frequency from head to heart is to imagine treating myself as I would a godchild upon whom I want to pour special attention. It is wonderful to be chosen for the role of fairy godparent, providing just what's needed in the moment so that you can turn the mundane towards the divine. ●

In the kitchen, let's start at the beginning of the day with tea. First comes a herbal blend to rehydrate. Ginger grated, lemon squeezed, rosemary and bay leaves picked – each one gently chosen. Time slows into the pace of tender loving care as you look out on the day and sip companionably.

And then it's time for the pot of tea itself. The maternal gaze knows just which vessel to use to transport the golden elixir that will take you to the place where all is well and all manner of things shall be well. After being rinsed and warmed, the tea leaves are added with generous precision, then left to gently brew, for an optimum five to seven minutes. Meanwhile, today's cup is chosen, lifted and warmed, ready to receive its charge: a dark gold brew, the colour of attention alchemy. Together we look out on the day and sip, reverently.

References

¹ Gerhardt S. *Why love matters: how affection shapes a baby's brain*. Hove: Brunner-Routledge; 2004.

² McGilchrist I. *The master and his emissary: the divided brain and the making of the western world*. New York: Yale University Press; 2009.

³ Winnicott D. *On the basis of self in the body*. In: Winnicott C, Davies R and Shepherd M (eds). *Psychoanalytic explorations*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press; 1989.

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