Hadley Presents

Bringing Attention to Your Sense

Presented by Ricky Enger

Ricky Enger: Welcome to Hadley Presents. I'm your host, Ricky Enger, inviting you to sit back, relax, and enjoy a conversation with the experts. In this episode, New York Times bestselling author, Gretchen Rubin joins us to discuss, bringing attention to our senses, in order to deepen our experience of the world. Welcome to the show, Gretchen. Fantastic to have you.

Gretchen Rubin: Thank you. I'm so happy to be talking to you today.

Ricky Enger: I am really excited. You are a writer, you are a podcaster, and you've actually been an answer on the Jeopardy! game show, which to me is the highest accolade ever.

Gretchen Rubin: Me too. Believe me. That was quite a day when that happened.

Ricky Enger: So, before we get into talking about the subject that you're writing about lately, why don't you just give us a brief intro, an overview about the kinds of things that you like to write and speak about?

Gretchen Rubin: Yes. For more than a decade I've been writing and researching, and as you say, podcasting on my podcast, Happier with Gretchen Rubin, and engaging with people really about the subject of happiness and human nature. So, I'm interested in, why do we do what we do? How can we change if we want to change? Why do we frustrate ourselves sometimes or puzzle ourselves, or why do other people frustrate us or puzzle us?

So, I'm always trying to understand a human nature and really how we can have as much happiness as we can, given our circumstances and our nature. I started with my book, The Happiness Project, and the subject is so fascinating that I've just gone deeper and deeper and deeper ever since.

Ricky Enger: What led you then to start thinking about the senses, which is, I understand you're really into that lately and you're writing a book about that, so how did you come on that and decide to do that?

Gretchen Rubin: I was having an experience and I think it's not uncommon of having a feeling of being both absent-minded, and absent-bodied. I would go through an experience and feel like I hardly remembered what happened. I would eat food without remembering it. I was hyper stimulated with everything being very, very intense and processed, and heightened, but at the same time feeling thin.

I became interested in the five senses before the pandemic period. But of course, that also shined a spotlight on things in ways that I hadn't predicted. Like the way I have always been a huge fan of the sense of smell. I love the sense of smell. But for many people they took it for granted, and, oh boy, when that became a symptom of COVID people realized, I talked to so many people who had fortunately temporarily lost their senses of smell, and how that changed their understanding of their environment.

So, I became very interested in how to turn to the five senses for a greater sense of vitality, of appreciation for the ordinary moment, and also to engage with other people because we often do engage with other people through our five senses. In fact, that was one thing that surprised me. I mean, like, "Oh yeah, we all get together for a meal," but I hadn't realized what an opportunity there is to think about, well, how could I take a particular sense and organize an experience around it that would help me draw closer to others?

Ricky Enger: For our audience, and it's primarily people who are losing their vision or who have lost vision, one thing that happens a lot when somebody hears, "Oh, you're losing your vision or you lost your vision, there's this immediate sense of everything is so much better now for your other senses.

Like, you could hear a rabbit breathing from six miles away or whatever, and it's almost this expectation that the other senses become superhuman. And I'm just curious, has there been research or any hypotheses about what really does happen?

Gretchen Rubin: Well, it seems to be very much the case that the brain does start to rewire. And it will start to use parts of the brain differently. If one sense is not processing information and that brain power isn't needed, it will use that. The circuitry will start to change to try to make use of that resource.

But this idea that you get superhuman abilities, like, the rabbit breathing six miles away. Now that doesn't happen, but it is very true that people start to focus on it more and to recruit those senses maybe in a way that others do not need to. So, for instance, people who have vision loss may become more aware of how sound bounces off of surfaces in order to help them be aware that maybe there's something blocking their path. This is something that sighted people could perhaps do, but they don't draw upon that ability.

Ricky Enger: Yeah. And I think that's an interesting theme, right? Is that we could all do it, but we don't necessarily pay attention to what we could do.

Gretchen Rubin: Absolutely. And I think you've put your finger right on it. It's that, these capacities are within our reach, and I certainly felt this to be the case for myself, but I didn't bother to try to tap into them, or to try to explore their reaches, or to see what I could do, or even to just enjoy them on the ordinary course of life, because I just was not paying attention. So, I think you're exactly right that there's a lot more sensation that we can experience once we start paying attention to what our senses could offer us.

Ricky Enger: So how would somebody go about doing that then? So, if we understand that, okay, we would experience things so much differently and maybe so much in a more rich way if we paid attention to the senses, how then do we go about actually doing that? Because I don't know that it comes naturally.

Gretchen Rubin: That's a really interesting question. Of course, that was sort of central to my book. And there were a couple things that I found. One is just turning your attention to it, and really trying to say to yourselves, “I really want to pay attention to the things that I hear.” And sometimes the one way to do that is to stop periodically and really say, "Well, what do I hear?"

One of the things that's fascinating about the brain is the brain is it’s trying to help us by filtering out things that it thinks that we don't need to know or don't interest us. So, for instance, I was doing a podcast interview in my apartment, I live in New York City, and all of a sudden, the interviewer said, "Okay, let's pause for a minute then." And I said, "Why?" And she said, "Don't you hear that?" And I said, "What?" And then all of a sudden, I heard that there was a loud siren going right past my door.

And my brain had just filtered that out. I didn't need to hear that. And she said to me, "Oh, if you're in Los Angeles, people don't hear the helicopters." Because that's what they don't need to hear. So, part of it is trying to train... “What am I hearing right now? What am I smelling right now? I'm walking outside of my house, what do I smell? I smell leaves. I smell dirt. Did somebody just walk by?” I live in New York City, so I smell cigarette smoke, trash day. I know when it's Wednesday morning because it's trash day.

Another thing that I think is really interesting, and I'm trying to figure out how idiosyncratic I am. Is, for me, I realized I had certain senses that I was very attuned to. I mentioned that I've always been very attuned to smell. I love smell. I like even bad smells. I'm very interested in even bad smells. I care a lot about smells, but then there were other things that I didn't pay as much attention to. I'm not a very hearing focused person. So, there are people who spend hours and hours listening to music and they love it. And that really wasn't me.

And so, part of it was trying to bring more attention to my background senses, to try to find ways... Once I realized that I thought, well, what can I do to bring more pleasure and more attention to my sense of hearing? And I did get a lot more pleasure, and attention once I started looking for ways to amplify that. And you think, "Oh, how do I not know myself?" Right? I just hang out with myself all day. I didn't realize how touch-focused I was until I really started thinking about it.

I began realizing, wow, I really care a lot about how things feel. And I really am curious and I'm always sneaking out my fingers to touch things. When I go to a museum it's really hard for me to resist rubbing certain sculptures because I'm like, "Oh, I just want to feel that cool marble. What does that feel like?"

And so, I realized that I actually did love the sense of touch much more than I even had been consciously aware of. So, I think sometimes by saying to yourself, "How can I tap more into the things I love, and how can I find new ways to tap into things that I maybe ignore or don't pay as much attention to as I could and see if I could bring those more into the foreground?”

Ricky Enger: I love that. And especially the point about how we all have senses that we naturally pay more attention to just as part of our own personalities or what we're into. I had never thought either about sitting back and I know what my senses are, but do I really pay attention to how much I do certain things. I was sitting here touching my sweater just as a matter of course and realize, "Oh, I'm doing that."

Gretchen Rubin: Yes. Oh, but then I started talking to a friend of mine. I was like, "Well, how do you feel about silky?" He hates silky. How do you feel about being immersed in water? Doesn't like to be immersed in water. How does he feel about plushness? Loves plushy. He's like, "A thin robe is no robe at all." And I realized we got so into it, but this is something that you don't think about to talk about, but I'm not that interested in flavor and taste. And this is something that many people like really want to talk about.

And I mean, sure, I like something that tastes good. But when I think about people who are like super curious to go to a new restaurant, or love new cuisines or new recipes, or dying to try…if they hear about an ingredient they've never tried, they're really curious. Or if they see a movie and people are eating food, they want to eat it themselves, or they read a book and people are talking about something that they've never tried. They really want to try it. Yeah, that doesn't really happen to me. And other people are like, "Are you kidding? I thought this was just a basic part of human nature." I'm like, "No, not so much for me."

Ricky Enger: So, we all use our senses just as we communicate with each other. One thing that can happen though is, as people are losing their vision, let's say they're really accustomed to looking at the facial expressions, or these really subtle bits of body language. And suddenly those things are gone. They can feel like, "Oh, I am missing so many social cues." That can be overwhelming and nerve-wracking, but I guess we don't just communicate non-verbally, right? So, what are some other things that people can pay attention to feel those connections still, even without the facial expressions and body language?

Gretchen Rubin: Well, that's true. That is a big loss. Because the face is a user interface, and we do gaze into people's faces to try to... Even things like, what are they looking at? A lot of times, if you know what someone's looking at that tells you what they're interested in, it can give you an insight into their thoughts. And so of course it is a real challenge not to have those cues available to you.

Now, fortunately people's voices also contain a huge amount of information, much more often than we're aware of. Even with strangers, or even with just a few words, we can get really good insight into whether someone's sick, whether they're drunk, how educated they are, sometimes with regional accents, you can tell where they're coming from. There's lot of information that can come from that. And also just with intonation, how quickly people are speaking, how dramatically they're speaking.

My mother was saying how when she was watching TV and it was a foreign television show. And so, she couldn't understand what they were saying, so she had the subtitles on. But she said that the funny thing was is that she had to adjust the volume just as if she were listening to their voices. Because she said like, if she couldn't hear what they were saying, just knowing the words that they were saying, didn't give her any insight into what was actually happening.

So, if you read a book, it's like, "He whispered." “She said, angrily.” You have all these cues. But if you just see the words on the page, even if you see the people's faces and their body movements, are they laughing? Are they joking? Are they angry? Is there tension? You really don't know unless you hear their voices. Even if that information, the language doesn't have meaning to you, the human connection part of it, you can tap into.

And so, hearing what people are saying does convey a lot of information that can help you make sense of their thoughts and their intentions, and give a lot of clues, even beyond the content of what their actual words hold.

Ricky Enger: One thing I've noticed you and I have in common is that we're both smell-oriented and-

Gretchen Rubin: Oh, good. You're smell-oriented too. Okay.

Ricky Enger: Yes, very much so. I was thinking about this, I read one of your blog posts and I was like, "Oh, that is so true." I could walk into a room and smell Ralph Lauren ‘Polo,’ and go, "Oh, it smells like 1990." And suddenly be transported back into this period of my life. Can you talk a little about... And maybe it's not just smell, maybe other senses too. How are they responsible for triggering memory?

Gretchen Rubin: Well, this is one of the most fascinating aspects of the senses, is how they do tie us to the people, the places, and the times that we love. And claims are often made for smell that smells the most intense, or that creates the most emotion. And I have to say that I'm a little dubious of that. Not that I would diminish smell, which I think is very powerful in invoking memories. But I think that the other senses also can invoke memories.

So, if I said, "If I smelled my kindergarten classroom, or I ate what I ate for lunch in kindergarten, I think they would both evoke a lot of memories for me. I think all the senses have this power to evoke memories. And it is really fun to just systematically ask yourself how you can tap into sensory memories to conjure up a lost time. So, for instance, one thing that I did is I did a taste timeline. So I went back to my childhood, my daughter's childhood, my college days, law school, my first years of being married, and then today, and thought about, "Well, what were the typical things that I ate then that were of that period?”

And it was, when I was in law school, I drank Diet Peach Snapple all the time because my law school cafeteria didn't have any standard soft drink, so that was my favorite. And boy, I went out and bought myself a bottle of Diet Peach Snapple, and it came back to me with a rush, just like that law school feeling. Or I called my sister- and this is how we can use senses to engage our memories and then also to engage with other people- I called my sister, because of course she goes back almost the whole way with me. And I said, "What did we eat as kids, do you remember?" And she's like, "Yeah, remember how we used so easy that like, Colby Longhorn cheese that came in the wax. I was like, "Oh yeah." Or like, we'd always get Cheez-Its on our... We would go visit our grandparents in North Platte, Nebraska. And she said, "Remember how we always get Cheez-Its for the car." And I was like, "Oh I forgot about the Cheez-Its on the car ride.

I think you can try to paint a sense portrait of somebody. Think about, well, you and I both love the sense of touch, what senses of touch, with my husband, his hair is very bristly on the top of his head, or the feeling of his back when he's asleep at night. Paint a portrait of someone. What smells you associate with somebody. I mean, their own smell, but then also the smell of their shampoo, or their toothpaste, or their laundry detergent, or your dog smell. They have all kinds of smells. Some good, some not so good.

So, I think we really can use the five senses as a way to access memories that maybe we've forgotten that we remember. A lot of times there's a lot more there, we just don't go hunting for it in our memory banks.

Ricky Enger: That's fascinating. And it maybe in part explains why people are so nostalgic about snacks or foods that are gone.

Gretchen Rubin: Oh, yeah, well, there's this thing I saw where you can order, it's like nostalgic candy, and you can order 1950s candy, 1960s candy, 1970s candy. And you just see the label. So, I was just looking up Cherry Mash. A friend of mine was saying how he liked Cherry Mash, was very old-fashioned candy. And just seeing a picture of it, I mean, I wasn't even tasting it. I was just seeing a picture of the packaging, and I was filled with nostalgia for being in the grocery store when I was little and seeing it in the aisles. I think people do feel very nostalgic for the things that they ate at different times of their lives, or tasted, or smelled, or heard, or thought.

I mean, music. Think about the music of- the music you listened to as a kid in the car, or that your parents listen to. My father love listening to The Mamas & the Papas, and The Beach Boys. Whenever I hear that music I'm taken back to my childhood, just the way certain kinds of music takes me back to college, or children's music takes me back to when my kids were really little, and I was listening to The Wiggles or whatever.

Ricky Enger: Yeah. I think there's so much that we don't think about consciously, but then as we're talking about it, it's this, oh yeah, well, of course. It seems like a thing that, well, why haven't I been paying attention to that before? And it's not maybe so difficult to then sit back and think about how can I bring more attention to what my senses are telling me?

So, as we're wrapping up, you've done a lot of research. I know your book is not out yet, so you can't necessarily give spoiler alerts. What the most surprising thing that you discovered in your research, what just blew you away like, "I never thought about that."

Gretchen Rubin: Well, just so many facts about the body for one thing, I mean the body is so extraordinary. Of course, we all know, oh the body is so amazing, but I was like, "Wow, the body is so amazing. It is extraordinary" the powers of our bodies. But I think the thing that surprised me most, really was this way that I could tap into the five senses to really engage with other people. Because when I started this, I really thought about it as me being my own body, moving through the world and wanting to engage with the world more deeply. But what I found is that it actually ended up making me engage with other people more deeply. I did this thing just the other night with some friends, I had two couples over, my husband and I, because I had gone to Flavor University, and they would give us samples. Like here are three kinds of chips, let's taste them and compare them. Or here's skin milk, 2% milk, whole milk, and cream, and oat milk, let's compare and contrast. Everybody had such a fun time, we were laughing, and talking, and reminiscing, and it brought up a whole different way for us to engage with each other.

I felt like I got to know people in a completely different way, even though these were friends that I'd had for years. It got us talking about something in a very different way. And it was very fun and low stakes. It wasn't like, oh, now we're going to play competitive Trivial Pursuit or something. This was just like, "What do you think of this potato chip?" And it's like, "I think this is a pretty good chip." And somebody else will be like, "I think this is too salty." But for some reason this is fascinating, right?

Or, I stunned everybody. Everybody was like, "What is this mysterious liquid?" And I was like, "What is this?" "It's Red Bull". A lot of people had never tried Red Bull, which of course is a hugely popular beverage. But it was like, so this is what Red Bull tastes like, I did not know that. I gave them all a taste of ketchup because ketchup has all five tastes, sweet, salty, sour, umami, and bitter. Yeah, it's got a little bit of everything. And people were like, "This is amazing. There's a reason everybody loves ketchup." They were like, "It's so complex."

I was just very surprised that something as simple as sitting around talking about ketchup could be this actually feel like a really meaningful way to engage with people. But it was something that was a little different. A little bit unexpected, a little bit surprising. I just had not foreseen that at all when I was looking ahead to writing the book. I didn't imagine myself doing anything like that. So, it's been interesting that over the course of the research, I've been more and more drawn into those exercises, and seeing the value in that thing in terms of enriching our lives.

Ricky Enger: That is so cool. Our senses has just this amazing way to bring us all together, I love it. So as people are listening to this and saying, "Where can I learn more about what Gretchen does? I want to read all the blog posts, all the books and listen to everything." Where can people go to find out what's going on with you and what you have done and what you will be doing?

Gretchen Rubin: Well, as you mentioned, I have a podcast called, Happier with Gretchen Rubin, where every week I talk about concrete, manageable ideas about how to be happier, healthier, more productive, and more creative. I also have written many books which are available in print and in audio. Almost all my book, I think, except for maybe my first book, they're all available in audio except for one. I narrated them all myself. And then I'm online at gretchenrubin.com and that's a clearinghouse for everything that I've got. I've got a lot of stuff, but it's all gathered there.

Ricky Enger: Excellent. And we'll have that in our show notes. And Gretchen, I want to thank you. This has been so much fun, just chatting about our senses and really how much more they give to us than we think about.

Gretchen Rubin: Absolutely. Oh, I so enjoyed talking to you. Thanks so much.

Ricky Enger: Got something to say? Share your thoughts about this episode of Hadley Presents or make suggestions for future episodes. We'd love to hear from you. Send us an email at podcast@hadley.edu That's, P-O-D-C-A-S-T @hadley.edu. Or leave us a message at 847-784-2870. Thanks for listening.