

AN AS-BIG-AS-LIFE THEOLOGY¹

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I am who I am. With my body, and my mind, and my soul. For the better and for the worse. I am who I am. But I am not only who I am. I also am who I want to be. I am who I want you to look, whom I want you to hear, whom I want you to smell, whom I want you to feel, even who I want you to taste. I am who I am. But I am also the ‘me’ you perceive. I am who you see, whom you hear, whom you smell, whom you touch, even whom you taste.

Let me briefly remind you about the diversity of our sensorial identities. And let me briefly remind you how our sensorial diversities can make us love or hate each other.

SEEING YOU, SEEING ME.

Of all our senses, the view is the most developed. We can recognise a person among thousands, just by looking at them. And we get about 80% of our information through our eyes.

Before you say one word, even before you open your mouth, I already know a lot about you. The place where I meet you, the way you stand, your skin tone, your gesture, your style, your clothes, your shoes, your haircut, your make-up, your jewellery tell me about who you are, man or woman, old or young, police officer or artists, Evangelical or Muslim, rich or poor.

¹ Bauer, O. (2011, March 13). *More Than Narrative, an As-Big-As-Life Theology*. Narrativity, Identity and Diversity, University of Toronto.

And if I can use my eyes to perceive, I can also use them to communicate.

When we look at each other, our eyes tell a lot about us. It is amazing how much you can put in a glance: love and hate, kindness and anger, indifference and passion! Maybe that is why some culture requests to look right into the eyes and some other strictly prohibits it.

Of course, the image of you I built is not always right. Sometimes, even often, it is completely wrong. You can fool me by showing me the 'you' you want to be. And under any circumstances, you are always more than I could ever see. But the very first impression does exist. And it is important. And it says something about the 'you' you are. Even if I always shall verify if the 'you' you look is really the 'you' you are.

SMELLING YOU, SMELLING ME.

If I cannot stand your odour, I probably cannot live with you or near you. Of all our senses, the sense of smell is the most 'instinctive', the most 'primitive', the most 'animal'. One odour gets me sick, another gets me mad, and another gets me happy. It is hard to confess as long as we pretend to be educated and reasonable people, but it is known for a fact: love story and hate story often begin with a single tiny perfume.

If you produce an improper odour or if I feel your odour inappropriate, manners request me not to respond, to act as if I did not notice, wait until the odour vanishes into the air, discretely open the window or temporarily go away. If it is a passing odour, perspiration after sport, last meal's whiff, a fart or too much perfume, I can try to make you aware of it. It is not so hard to tell, because you will be able to correct it.

But if it is your odour, your body odour that bothers me, what can I do? On one hand, it is bad to ask you to change it! But on the other hand, it is true that your body odour is enough to prevent me from having relations with you. So what can I do?

I must remember that others are not the only ones to smell. I smell too! As clean, as urban, as educated I am, I smell too. And my odour can also bothers you, exactly as your odour can bother me. If I believe to be odour free, it is only that I smell with my own nose. Regarding to the body odour,

we are different, but we are equal! Diversities in identities. Equality in diversity.

TOUCHING YOU, TOUCHING ME.

Touching you is never innocent or insignificant. It is always penetrating your intimacy. But your intimacy is not limited simply to your body. It includes a part of the space around you.

Therefore, coming too close to you can already make you uncomfortable.

All around oneself, we build a kind of invisible comfort zone. In Western culture, this comfort zone is traditionally set to one arm length. When we shake hands, we respect our comfort zone. But hugging you or kissing means penetrating your intimacy. And for that, I shall ask you for permission.

Of course, there are special circumstances: relatives have a kind of 'licence to touch'; to be in a crowd makes physical contacts more acceptable, as long as we keep them furtive, as long as we avoid face, breast, thighs and genitals.

Things are getting more complicated when we understand that two people do not always have the same size comfort zones. Comfort zones change according to genders, to ages and to cultures. To make it short, the southern you go, and the shorter the comfort zones become.

If I come from a Swiss culture and you come from a Hispanic culture, you will need to be close to me, you will need to touch me in order to show your feelings and feel my feelings. It can provoke some funny or irritating misunderstanding. I will go backward because I will be afraid of you touching me. But you will perceive me as running away, and, you will come closer to me. But I will feel your behaviour as inappropriate, maybe even threatening, and one more time, I will go backward to keep you at distance. The result of our cultural diversities could be a kind of ballet, a never-ending dance that will never allow a fair communication.

HEARING YOU, HEARING ME.

Talking of the senses of sight, and olfaction, and touch, is talking about the relational aspect of communication. Sometimes, this aspect is so important that communication is all about the quality of a relation, any relation, love, or friendship, or professional relation. Having the good fortune to spend some good times with you can be enough for me.

But most of the time, communication asks for much more: to present content, to show envy to discuss, to share ideas, to compare and contrast worldviews, to explain and to convince.

In order to succeed, we have to exceed the images we have of each other; we have to go beyond our stereotypes. I have to forget your look and what it reminds me; I have to neglect your odour and what it provokes in my brain; I shall agree when you are coming close to me; you shall agree I stay away from you. We have to deal with our differences of taste. In order to succeed, we shall use our ears, listen to each other, understand our mind, and try to agree, and agree to disagree on our ideas.

To be honest, it is impossible to strictly distinguish between content and relation. The relation qualifies the content, since the meaning of the same sentence can change according to who, when, where and how it is said. And the content qualifies the relation, since one word can destroy an old friendship.

But we shall not to mix up content and relation. What I say is not who I am. Except for a very extreme case, I should be able to like you even if we disagree. And we should be able to agree on a lot of topics, even if we do not like each other.

TASTING TO LOVE.

When we welcome visitors, we are used to giving them something to eat or to drink: wine, beer, bread, salt, or doughnuts. Each culture has its own tradition, but everywhere meals make a meeting nicer and a discussion easier.

In general, to please you, I will give you the best food I have, the most typical... And it is where things are getting difficult. Because my dream food is maybe the food of your curses: poutine, haggis, garlic, blue cheese, root beer, or peanuts better.

Down to earth, foods are useful to feed the body, but they also have social and symbolic function. Food embodies a group's soul, my group's soul, and your group's soul as well. And they serve to know who is an insider and who is an outsider. Everyone who does not eat what I eat, everyone who does not like what I like is a foreigner and must be treated such as!

Offering some strange food to visitors is always a good experience.

Sometimes it is even funny. It could be offered as a challenge, as a joke or as a rite of passage: 'Eat what I eat and you will be who I am!'

It seems a little bit too much to ask for! Consider this: even if I do not like the food you offer me, I cannot refuse to eat, without upsetting you. The most I can do is to look like I eat by nibbling in my plate or to pretend I am not hungry any more.

In fact, I should dare to say no. To dislike a meal, a food, a drink is never shameful! It simply reminds us we are different. Our taste is different because we are different! And a shared meal shall always consider as an opportunity to be honest and. If needed, to say to each other: 'Irremediably and definitely I am not you; irremediably and definitely you are not me!' But of course, never it is forbidden for me to like what you like, and for you to eat what I eat...

DIVERSE IDENTITIES. IDENTICAL DIVERSITIES.

You are who you are. With your body, and your mind, and your soul. For the better and for the worse. You are who you are. And you are constantly telling me who you are: with your look, and with your voice, and with your skin, and with your odour, even with your taste.

There is the 'you' you are, and the 'you' you want to be, and the 'you' I perceive, and the 'you' some other perceives. These 'you' are not exactly the same 'you' as you are, not exactly the same 'you' as you want to be.

In my eyes, your look does not look exactly the same as in yours, nor in his/hers. In my ears, your voice does not sound exactly the same as in yours, nor in his/hers. In my nose, your odour smells not exactly the same as in yours, nor in his/hers. On my hand, your skin does not feel exactly the same as on yours, nor on his/hers.

You are who you are. But in my brain, you are someone else. Slightly or deeply different! Your look has a different valour for you, and for me, and for him, and for her. Your voice has a different valour for you, and for me, and for him, and for her. Your odour has a different valour for you, and for me, and for him, and for her. Your skin has a different valour for you, and for me, and for him, and for her.

You are who you are. But the 'you' I perceive is not the 'you' you are. And for me, the 'you' I perceive is more important than the 'you' you are. For me, the 'you' that matters is the 'you' I see, and the 'you' I hear, and the 'you' I smell, and the 'you' I touch. Because it is the 'you' I perceive that I know, that I can love, like, dislike, hate.