

This is an excerpt from

Life in Five Senses

by GRETCHEN RUBIN

How Exploring the Senses
Got Me Out of My Head
and Into the World

Life in Five Senses

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THE HAPPINESS PROJECT

CROWN

A few years ago, an ordinary event shook up my life.

I made a trip to the eye doctor.

One wintery Thursday morning, my eyes felt gummy and sandy when I got out of bed, but I paid no attention to them until I caught a glimpse of myself in the bathroom mirror. I was startled to see that the whites of my eyes had turned an angry pink, and my lashes were clumped together: the distinctive signs of pink eye. I ignored my condition for as long as I could, but eventually I found myself in my eye doctor's exam room, trying not to touch my face.

How many times had I sat in this chair and counted the certificates mounted against the light wood of the walls? To someone unfamiliar with bulky eye-exam equipment, the complicated shapes might look menacing, but I'd been facing off with those machines since third grade. I cried when I first learned that I needed glasses, but the minute I put them on and discovered that I could make out a bird on a branch and every face on the playground, I loved them.

Finally my doctor breezed in. He checked my (very pink) eyes, confirmed my amateur diagnosis, and prescribed some drops. As we said goodbye, he added casually, "Make sure you schedule a regular checkup soon. As you know, you're more at risk for a detached retina."

"Wait, what?" I asked, turning around. "Actually, no, I don't know about that."

"You're extremely nearsighted, which makes it more likely that your retina will pull away from its normal position. It's a serious problem that could damage your vision, so if it starts we want to catch it right away." He spoke as cheerfully as if he were giving me a standard reminder to drink enough water or wear sunscreen.

"I'm sorry," I said, "can you explain that again?" I flashed back to the fact that the nurse had referred to me as a "high myope" just before the doctor came in.

He repeated himself, and I listened with mounting alarm; I had a friend who had recently lost some of his sight due to a detached retina. I became so distracted by my anxiety that as the doctor talked I could hardly hear what he was saying. (I didn't take notes, and I always take notes.) He finished by saying, "So I'll see you at your next checkup, okay?"

"Okay, thanks," I said, stunned, and continued out the door. By the time I was outside, something in me had shifted. I felt frightened. My sight! Until this conversation, I had never given much thought to my sense of sight beyond making sure my contact-lens prescription was up-to-date.

As I headed home through the soft dusk, I realized that it had been a long time since I'd noticed the New York City streetscape that I loved. What if it dimmed or even vanished for me?

I turned a corner, and in an instant, all my senses seemed to sharpen. It was as if every knob in my brain had suddenly been dialed to its maximum setting of awareness. I gazed through

my sticky eyes at the luminous gray sky above the buildings and at the frilly purple leaves of the ornamental kale in the tree boxes. I picked out every sound in the weekday city racket of sirens, jackhammers, horns, and shouts. I smelled a heady mixture of car exhaust, marijuana, and honey-roasted peanuts from a Nuts4Nuts cart.

Never before had I experienced the world with such intensity—it was extraordinary. As I continued through the streets, waves of exhilaration made me want to laugh out loud or say to a passing stranger, “Look at the trees! Aren’t they beautiful?” For too long, I realized, I’d been taking it all for granted—the colors, the sounds, the feel of everything around me.

My walk home took only twenty minutes, but those twenty minutes were transcendent. I kept thinking, “This experience is now, it’s here; and it’s also past, never to be repeated.”

In that time, I woke to a profound truth: I had my one body and its capacities right now, and I wouldn’t have them forever. In college, I’d read a cheap edition of Henry James’s *The Portrait of a Lady* on a top bunk with no proper reading light; now I had to enlarge my smartphone’s font to answer my emails. One day I might no longer hear my husband Jamie’s loud yawns, or see our dog Barnaby triumphantly race through the apartment with his beloved Abominable Snowman toy in his mouth. Already, our daughter Eliza was out of the apartment, and we had just a few years left with Eleanor under our roof.

I was a dutiful caretaker for my body—careful to get enough sleep, to exercise, to eat healthy food, to get my checkups and vaccines, to wear sunglasses and a seatbelt. But was I appreciating my body and its powers? Was I savoring each day of my life as it was unfolding? Was I paying attention to the people I loved?

As I pressed the keypad to let myself in to our apartment building, I accepted the truth that, until now, I’d ignored: I was running out of time. Shadows had begun to slant eastward, over Central Park and over my life. I didn’t want to come to the end and think, “So many things happened to me. I wish I’d been paying attention.”

I came home to an empty apartment. Before long, I heard Jamie calling me from the front hallway, and I jumped up to greet him. “Hello!” I said, with a rush of love. “How was your day?” When I gave him a kiss, I noted the rough stubble on his cheek, and as we talked, I found myself gazing into his face with an intensity that let me register the green of his eyes and the gray in his dark hair as I hadn’t for a long time.

I waited for Eliza and Eleanor to return from dinner with their grandparents. When they walked through the door, they seemed taller than I remembered, as though I’d looked at them without really seeing them for months.

“Hello!” I said, as I gave each of them a long hug. “Hi,” they answered, with some surprise at my enthusiasm. As I pulled Eliza close, then Eleanor, I noted the scents of their different sham-

poos, one honey, one plum. When they were little, I'd been so physically engaged with my daughters, constantly carrying, bathing, feeding, rocking, and cuddling them. Now that they were older, I more often kept my distance. Too much time had passed since I'd held them tight.

I resolved to make a change.

My pink-eye infection cleared after a few days, but I couldn't stop thinking about what I'd experienced.

For years, I'd been studying human nature and reflecting on how we can build happier lives: the science of the soul. One of my most important realizations was that we can build a happy life only on the foundation of self-knowledge. The more my life reflected my own temperament, values, and interests, the happier I became, so I spent a lot of time trying to know myself better. Before starting this process of self-examination, I'd assumed, "How difficult can it be to know myself? I hang out with myself all day long!" But self-knowledge is hard.

To know myself better, I asked myself questions: "Whom do I envy?" "What do I lie about?" "What did I do for fun when I was ten years old?" "How do I put my values into action?" I also followed dozens of happiness-boosting resolutions: "Revive a dormant friendship," "Follow the one-minute rule," "Celebrate minor holidays," and "Choose the bigger life."

Despite all these efforts, over the past few years, I'd started

to realize that I felt stuck in my head—disconnected from the world and other people, and also from myself. I traveled all the way from New York City to Los Angeles to see my sister Elizabeth, but when I got back, I realized I hadn't once noticed her characteristic way of gesturing with her hands, and I had no idea if she was still wearing her signature circle necklace every day. Had I really looked at her at all?

I'd been trying to figure out what was missing from my life, and that unforgettable walk home from the eye doctor revealed the answer: I needed to connect with my five senses. I'd been treating my body like the car my brain was driving around town, but my body wasn't some vehicle of my soul, to be overlooked when it wasn't breaking down. My body—through my senses—was my essential connection to the world and to other people.

I knew, of course, that I could have a happy, complete life even if I lost some of my body's capabilities. My fear was that one day I'd regret all that I'd ignored. Today I might think, "I'm too busy to plan a trip to Death Valley," but if I lost my sense of sight, I'd think, "I wish I'd seen the desert." Some people love mountains, and others love the ocean, meadows, lakes, or forests. Maybe I loved a landscape of sand dunes, and I didn't even know it.

If I stopped to think about it, did I know the color of the inside of a blueberry? It took me years to realize how much I disliked the work of Pablo Picasso and loved the work of Thomas Cole, or that I preferred English Breakfast to Earl Grey tea. When my

mother saw me wearing my favorite pair of yoga pants, she commented, “It’s nice to have something navy blue, instead of more black,” but I’d never registered that my yoga pants were blue. I lived in New York City, but I never spotted any famous people.

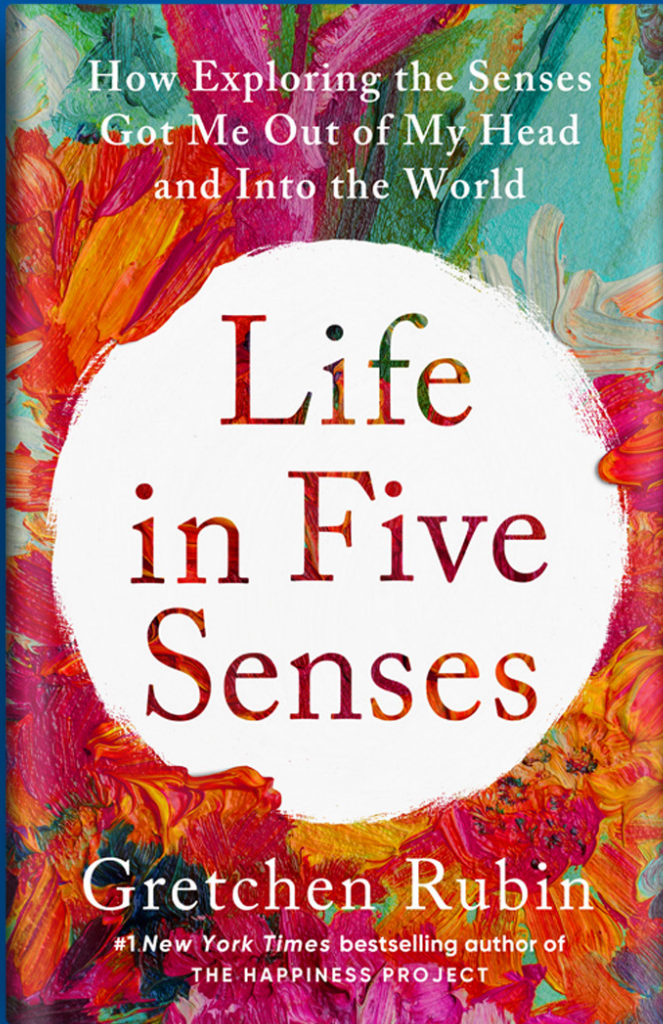
I wasn’t sleepwalking through my days. I spent hours reading, writing, and talking to people; I kept lists, made plans, and set goals; I tracked the number of steps I took. I existed in a constant process of self-examination: How do I grow into the person I think I could become? But while I valued the intensity, productivity, and structure of my life, that walk home had revealed that I’d been allowing the sensations of my life to slip away unobserved. If I focused on the experiences of my senses, what could I discover?

I hadn’t noticed when I’d started craving ginger ale or dreading the “Ripples” sound of my phone alarm. When had Eliza started wearing so many rings? When had Eleanor started blasting music while she took a shower? When had Jamie started eating so much Greek yogurt? My senses held the power to tie me to the people and moments that I wanted to experience and to remember.

That pink-eye afternoon had revealed three truths. I wanted to appreciate the moments of my life more fully; I wanted to get out of my head and into my life; I wanted to deepen my knowledge of the world, of other people—and of myself.

During that walk, I’d felt intense vitality because I’d paid such close attention to the sensations streaming through me, and that

experience showed me the way forward: I would study my five senses. I didn’t want to miss another minute.



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