

We Are Born as Feelers and Raised to Become Thinkers

Reflections on survival, experience and the art of being human

Human beings enter the world as feelers.

Before we have words.

Before we have ideas.

Before we can explain ourselves.

We experience life through our bodies.

Through sensation.

Through emotion.

Through contact.

Feeling comes before thinking.

Experience comes before understanding.

We do not first think about life.

We first live it.

Only later do we learn to describe, analyse and understand what we experience.

Emotion sets life in motion

The word emotion originates from the Latin e-movere.

To move.

Emotion is movement.

Something touches us.

Something matters.

Something affects us.

And that movement does not only influence the body.

It also sets thought in motion.

A feeling arises.

Attention shifts.

Questions emerge.

Thought begins.

In this sense, feeling is not the opposite of thinking.

It is often the beginning of it.

Emotion moves us.

Thought follows.

Two ways of thinking

Not all thinking feels the same.

Sometimes thinking requires effort.

We analyse.

Compare.

Calculate.

Evaluate.

We actively direct our attention towards a problem.

This form of thinking is valuable.

It helps us organise, understand and navigate the world.

But there is another form of thinking.

Thought that seems to arise naturally from experience itself.

An insight during a walk.

A sudden understanding in a conversation.

A creative idea that appears unexpectedly.

A solution that emerges when we stop searching for it.

This kind of thought feels different.

Less produced.

More discovered.

Less forced.

More received.

At such moments, it almost feels as if:

You are not thinking. You are being thought.

Ratio and reason

Both forms of thinking belong to human life.

Neither is better.

Neither is worse.

They simply serve different purposes.

Rational thinking allows us to create distance from experience and reflect upon it.

Reason grows out of experience itself.

Out of what moves us.

Out of what touches us.

Out of what matters to us.

Reason is not the opposite of feeling.

It grows out of feeling.

The challenge is not to choose between them.

The challenge is to allow them to work together.

Survival comes before experience

Human beings possess two fundamental capacities.

The capacity to survive.

And the capacity to experience life.

Survival always comes first.

Biology makes sure of that.

When we feel threatened, attention narrows.

The body prepares.

Resources are directed towards protection.

This is not a mistake.

It is how life preserves itself.

Only when sufficient safety returns do we regain the freedom to fully experience life.

In that sense, the capacity for experience rests upon the foundations of survival.

We cannot fully attend to life when we are fighting simply to endure it.

Modern life and the physiology of survival

Paradoxically, many people in modern societies live in conditions that are safer and more prosperous than ever before.

Yet countless people remain chronically activated.

Not because they are facing immediate danger.

But because they live under continuous pressure to perform, compete, adapt and prove themselves.

The physiology of survival is repeatedly called upon.

Not by predators.

But by deadlines.

Expectations.

Comparison.

Uncertainty.

Disconnection.

The challenge of modern life is often not that we experience stress.

The challenge is that many of us rarely leave it behind.

The role of our personal history

The experience of threat does not only come from the outside.

It also emerges from within.

Two people may encounter the same situation and respond very differently.

Part of that difference lies in their history.

Particularly in the degree of basic security that developed during childhood.

When a child grows up feeling welcomed, protected and supported, a deep sense of trust often develops.

Not merely as an idea.

But as a lived experience.

As a feeling.

When that foundation is less secure, the world may more easily be experienced as threatening.

Even when no immediate danger exists.

What trauma really means

Trauma is often understood in terms of what happened.

Yet the event itself is only part of the story.

Two people can experience similar circumstances and be affected very differently.

The essential question is not only:

“What happened?”

But also:

“What happened inside the person when it happened?”

Trauma lives less in the event itself than in the impact it leaves behind.

In the meanings that were formed.

In the expectations that developed.

In the ways a person learned to protect themselves.

The past lives on

Deep experiences do not disappear.

Whether painful or beautiful, they become part of us.

They leave traces.

In memory.

In expectation.

In the body.

A smell can awaken childhood.

A song can bring back a lost love.

A touch can evoke safety.

A glance can awaken old insecurity.

We remember with our minds.

But we also remember with our bodies.

The goal is not to erase these traces.

The goal is to learn how to live with them.

Therapy and the present

Many of the ways people respond today once made perfect sense.

They were often intelligent responses to difficult circumstances.

Ways of coping.

Ways of adapting.

Ways of surviving.

The problem is not that these responses existed.

The problem arises when circumstances change but the responses remain.

That is why I often say:

Therapy is about allowing the past to interfere less with the present.

Not because the past disappears.

But because it no longer needs to determine every response to today's reality.

Feeling more before feeling better

Throughout my years as a haptotherapist, I have worked with people from many different backgrounds and with many different complaints.

Yet a remarkable number of them share the same wish:

"I want to reconnect with my feelings."

What people often hope is that reconnecting with their feelings will immediately make them feel better.

Sometimes it does.

But often there is an important step in between.

I have never met anyone who lost contact with their feelings because it was such a pleasant place to be.

More often, people lose contact because certain feelings became too painful, too overwhelming or too difficult to carry.

Distance then becomes a way of surviving.

Which means that reconnecting with feelings often begins by meeting the very experiences we once moved away from.

This is why feeling more can sometimes precede feeling better.

It is not about feeling good.

It is about feeling well.

Development as unfolding

Development is often understood as adding something that was not there before.

More knowledge.

More skills.

More confidence.

More success.

Yet some of the most important forms of human development move in the opposite direction.

Not adding.

But uncovering.

Not becoming someone else.

But becoming more fully who we already are.

In Dutch, there is a beautiful word for this:

Ont-wikkelen.

To unfold.

To remove the layers that have wrapped themselves around us.

To reveal what was already present.

Perhaps the deepest forms of growth are not acts of construction.

But acts of discovery.

The Art of Being Human

We are born as feelers and raised to become thinkers.

Both are necessary.

Both belong to being human.

The challenge is not to choose one over the other.

The challenge is to remain connected.

To our feelings.

To our thoughts.

To our bodies.

To each other.

To life itself.

Perhaps this is what haptonomy ultimately explores.

Not merely health.

Not merely therapy.

But the question that lives beneath them all:

What does it mean to be human?

And how do we remain fully human while living a human life?

Roel Klaassen, Juni 2026