



# Putting the Sense into Sensuality

**W**arning to word enthusiasts and keen Scrabble players, you may find what I'm about to write difficult to believe: You can't always trust a dictionary or thesaurus.

Case in point: the word sensual.

sensual *adj*

1. *PHYSICAL, carnal, bodily, fleshly, animal.*

2. *VOLUPTUOUS, sexual, sexy, erotic.*

- *OPPOSITES spiritual.*

So according to the trusty Oxford Thesaurus, the opposite of sensual is spiritual. Wow, really?

Now either my dictionary is considerably outdated (it was published in 2003), or, we have some pretty confusing beliefs and religious bias around the word sensual. Most notably, what it means to be sensual without it needing to be sexual.

Although the two words sexual and sensual are often used interchangeably, they are, in my view, distinctly different. I understand how people can confuse sensuality with sexuality, because being physically intimate can be a highly sensual experience, yet it is certainly not the only way to experience or express our sensual selves.

It's time to put the sense back into sensuality. And when I say sense, what I really mean is senses.

I'm often recommending that clients 'slow down and be sensual' in their day-to-day activities. Am I telling them to eat their office lunch or do their clothes washing with a "sexual, sexy, erotic" undertone? No, not at all. (What an interesting, if not politically incorrect, work/home environment that would create!)

Rather, I am suggesting a person switches from functioning on autopilot (where every action is a means to an end) to being as present as possible in everything they do.

For example: Do you really taste your breakfast - taking the time to chew and savour the individual flavours combining in your mouth? Or, are you gulping it down while juggling your mobile phone and opening the car door?

Do you take a moment in the shower to feel the temperature of the water on your skin - feeling the water bead and trickle down your back, arms and legs? Or, are you hurriedly splashing water over your body while running through your mental checklist?

Essentially, returning to your senses is all about being present, and asking yourself: In this moment, what can I feel, taste, see, smell or hear? It's all about connecting with your body, engaging with your senses and transforming the seemingly banal into the surprisingly beautiful.

When we view sensuality in this context, then even the most mundane of tasks, such as brushing your teeth, can be a sensual (i.e. sense-enriched!) experience.

While writing this article, I started to question whether the word sensuous would be more fitting for what I'm trying to describe, as it doesn't have the sexual connotations of sensual. (Interestingly, both sensual and sensuous are Latin: related to SENSE.)

Sensuous is defined as "of or affecting the senses, esp. aesthetically rather than sensually" (Oxford Dictionary). But for me that really doesn't encompass it. When I engage with my senses, I don't just see the beauty in my eye, I feel the beauty in my body.

And that brings us to the contentious issue of the body, particularly in relation to spirituality. How did a word like sensual become so sexually loaded and, according to the Oxford Thesaurus, termed distinctly un-spiritual?

Perhaps the answer dates back to a time when the body and spirit were considered distinctly separate from each other: the body the domain of the doctor and scientist; the soul/spirituality the exclusive domain of the priest and church.

The word spiritual being defined as "of or concerning the spirit as opposed to matter" (Oxford Dictionary). In other words, the eternal soul was sacred, but the ephemeral physical body - made of flesh and prone to carnal desires - was most certainly not. Through this religious lens, anything associated with the physical body could be viewed as potentially sexual and sinful in nature, hence considered completely un-spiritual.

Today, many people share a new-found respect and appreciation of the human body for the extraordinary sensory organ it is. The physical and spiritual are no longer on opposing sides, endlessly counteracting each other; rather, they are inextricably linked, forming a unified field of intelligence.

In my opinion, the best way to access the ethereal, intangible and otherworldly spiritual plane, is to use your physical body as the access point. In this way, the body - particularly through meditation, conscious breathing and being 'sense-aware' - acts as a gateway or a bridge to experiencing our deeper and eternal spiritual nature.

Unlike the words neatly arranged on a Scrabble game board, the world around us can't always be clearly defined; sometimes things need to be sensed and felt. Perhaps the word sensual also highlights how our use of language can expand and evolve over time, reflecting our current state of awareness. So, contrary to what the Oxford Thesaurus says, being sensual is indeed being spiritual.

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